

Report from the Field

Learning to Teach Reading

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Abstract

This article conveys one practitioner’s career-long journey related to teaching reading. The author gained valuable information from relevant research reports regarding the keys to effective reading instruction and has learned even more while implementing a systematic approach to teaching reading as a volunteer tutor.

Keywords: reading instruction, teaching reading, reading research

I have fond memories of Elena (a pseudonym), a grandmother who attended my ESOL class one summer. Elena retired after working for many years at a meat processing plant. She spoke English fairly well and told me many stories of growing up in a rural part of Puerto Rico. As a young girl, Elena helped her mother pick coffee beans and sell beautifully hand-embroidered hankies on the street. Elena never had the opportunity to attend school, and she never learned to read and write in Spanish. In my class, Elena’s goal was related to reading and writing in English.

The summer I met Elena, her church was offering a day camp for kids. Elena volunteered to cook for the program. She would come to class in the afternoon after spending all morning preparing breakfast and lunch for the children. In this class, we were writing stories about our everyday heroes. Each learner wrote a story and shared it with the class. Elena’s everyday hero was her daughter. In my story, I wrote about Elena as my everyday hero.

I think often of Elena as well as Chi from South Korea, Phillippe and Hellen from Haiti, Samuel from El Salvador, Zahra from Afghanistan, and many other immigrants in my adult basic education classes who did not have the opportunity to attend school much or at all. In fact, I almost always had a few learners in any ESOL class – regardless of the English level of the class-- who had limited reading skills not just in English, but also in their primary language. I knew Elena and many other learners wanted to learn to read and write; unfortunately, I was ill-

equipped to help them since I had had no training in how to teach reading fundamentals.

By reading fundamentals, I mean alphabets which includes phonemic awareness and decoding. Phonemes are the smallest units of sounds in spoken language, and phonemic awareness is about understanding that spoken words are made up of distinct sounds. “Decoding ... involves using letter-sound correspondences to recognize words in print” (McShane, 2005, p. 40). Fluency is also considered a foundational reading skill. When learners are fluent readers, their oral reading reflects an understanding of the text they are reading. As expert Timothy Shanahan (2023) put it, fluency is “making the text sound like spoken language.”

Research Reports on Teaching Reading

The many learners I’ve encountered motivated me to learn as much as I could about how to address the needs of adult English learners who want to learn to read; thus, I looked to the research. The National Reading Panel’s (NRP, 2000) meta-analysis of reading research with children identified four essential pillars of reading, i.e., alphabets (i.e., phonemic awareness and decoding), fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. I am sure that I was not the only adult basic education practitioner who wondered what -if any- of the NRP findings and recommendations

might be relevant for teaching adult learners, including those who were also learning English. After all, there is clearly a world of difference between a young child and an adult learner!

Soon after the NRP report, the National Institute for Literacy convened a group of experts to explore the NRP research synthesis through the lens of teaching adults. The result was the publication *Research-Based Principles for Adult Basic Education Reading Instruction* (Kruidenier, 2002), which stated that focusing instruction on the four pillars is also important when teaching reading to adults. A bit later, another expert panel, led by Diane August and Timothy Shanahan, was directed to examine what the literature suggested about teaching reading to children and youth who were also learning English. This report, published in 2006, similarly concluded that teachers should focus on the same four components of reading but emphasized that vocabulary development was even more critical for English learners.

While research with immigrant adult emergent readers has been limited, an important article by Martha Bigelow and Robin Lovrien Schwarz (2010) summarized the extant research. These authors emphasized the need to assess learners prior to instruction (ideally in English and in the primary language) and to address reading fundamentals (i.e., phonemic awareness and decoding) when needed.

The organization Literacy Education and Second Language Learning for Adults (LESLLA) is devoted explicitly to adult learners who have limited print literacy who are also learning an additional language. At the LESLLA site, one can access papers presented at the international symposiums held yearly since 2005. A paper by Jennifer Christenson (2021) has been especially relevant to my own search for guidance. Christenson summarized key research in K12 focused on the science of reading and offers numerous practical implications for teaching adult English learners with limited print skills. The author expands on what these findings suggest for adult emergent readers who are also learning English. Christenson joins the chorus of those who affirm the need to teach reading through a systematic approach as outlined in the science of reading literature.

Importantly, a joint statement of The Reading League and the National Committee for Effective Literacy (2023)

affirms the growing consensus among experts that teaching reading to English learners should be aligned with what the research has shown is needed for all beginning readers as well as supporting English learners to expand vocabulary and deepen knowledge in the content areas. Also essential is to design instruction to build on the assets learners bring to the classroom including drawing upon their oral skills in the language they already know.

Teaching One-on-One

Three years ago, I retired from my local adult education program after 30+ years as a classroom teacher and teacher educator. My teaching experience covers nearly every type of class offered by adult education programs, including HSE, ABE, family literacy, workplace, citizenship, career pathways preparation, and all levels of ESOL. Upon retirement, my hope was to volunteer as a tutor with an adult learner who wanted to learn to read. While I have looked to the experts to expand my understanding of the reading process and how to teach reading, it was obvious to me that learning about something is not the same as knowing how to do it.

In the summer of 2023, I was able to begin working with a young woman from Honduras who had never attended school before coming to the United States 3 years ago. Marta (a pseudonym) is now 19 years old and has been attending high school. When I met Marta, I observed that she could understand and produce some English, but her ability to read in both Spanish and English was almost nil. Even so, I witnessed Marta's skills with technology, so I made a goal to integrate the use of technology into our tutoring sessions. While I recognized that teaching Marta to read in Spanish would be of great benefit to her, I initially thought that my lack of fluency with Spanish made this impractical. Nevertheless, we do a lot of translating, and I often draw Marta's attention to the similarities and differences in English and Spanish words.

At the outset, I was eager to find instructional materials suitable for teaching Marta to read. I recognized that it would be important to do some diagnostic assessment early on. Initially, I assessed Marta on the names of the letters of the alphabet, and she was easily able to name them all. I used Sylvia Greene's (2015) Informal Word Analysis Inventory, which is designed to identify which

letters and sounds a learner has mastered and which they still need to learn. Marta was able to read the first two words on the list, *fan* and *sal*, which showed me she had some understanding of the short a vowel and the consonant sounds in these words, but she was unable to read the word *hag*; nor could she read any of the next eight words on the list, so I stopped the assessment. These results suggested that it would be wise to start from the beginning, by introducing one vowel sound and a few consonants to make short words.

In my search for appropriate resources, I hoped to locate materials that featured decodable text to give Marta practice reading fluently. It was essential that the stories be designed for adult emergent readers, and not for children. I sought materials that regularly recycled the letters, sounds, and words that Marta was learning to offer multiple exposures. I wanted to teach the sound system of English in a systematic way and give Marta lots of different activities to practice and demonstrate fluency and comprehension. Since encoding is also essential, we include dictation in every lesson, too.

We use lots of color photos in our lessons since it's critical that everything we do makes sense to Marta. I locate pictures that I copy onto an interactive online whiteboard for Marta to match pictures and words. Early on, we started using the whiteboard to practice sounding out 3-letter words with short vowels referred to as CVC (consonant-vowel-consonant) words. I discovered that Marta was able to make progress in decoding when she had the opportunity to practice reading CVC word families.

A word family is when we add a different beginning consonant (the onset) to the same vowel and consonant combination (the rime). For instance, we can add several onsets, **c, h, m, p, r, s** and **v**, to the rime **at**, to make **cat, hat, mat, pat, rat, sat, vat**. It did not take long for Marta to be able to independently read the list of rhyming words in this word family. Using the whiteboard to enable Marta to manipulate the various onsets to make different words has been highly effective. Being able to read word families was an important breakthrough for Marta. Rather than trying to memorize the words presented to her, she was learning to make the connection between the letters in the words and the sounds those letters represent in speech. Marta can now independently read most CVC words as well as many that have two consonants at the

end with only one sound, such as **cash, duck, bath, pill, miss**, etc.

Instructional Materials for Teaching Reading

When searching for connected text, I sought stories featuring words aligned with a recommended phonics scope and sequence to give learners practice reading the graphemes (i.e., letters) and phonemes (i.e., sounds) and words they have been taught. The text *At the River and Other Stories for Adult Emergent Readers* by Shelley Hale Lee (2016) worked well for our initial lessons. This text gradually introduces letters and sounds through CVC words in stories and accompanying exercises. I next introduced *City Stories: A Book for Adult Beginning Readers* by Larissa Phillips (2017), which offers practice with CVC words through engaging stories about adults. The freely available teacher's guide supports lesson planning, and the online workbook offers more reading practice and comprehension activities.

Recently, I came across abcEnglish, a site online developed by Jennifer Christenson (n.d.), that offers a wide range of instructional resources for teaching adult emergent readers who are also learning English. Drawing from these materials has expanded my ability to address Marta's needs. Through use of an assessment tool provided on the site, I was able to confirm the specific skills Marta has learned and what to focus on next. Though Marta is still reading at Level 1, as defined on abcEnglish, she is making steady progress.

I learn more about teaching reading every time we meet. It's significant that I am now engaging Marta in reading both in English and in Spanish. As noted, it's essential that Marta understands everything I present to her in class. Since her communication skills in English are still developing, this often requires translation. It's been exciting to see Marta embrace learning to read in both languages.

Final Thoughts

Over the past year, I've actually been learning to teach reading. My work with Marta brings my career in adult literacy education full circle, which started with Elena and so many others. I am grateful to have the opportunity

to teach Marta one-on-one. I want to affirm what many experts know about how to best address the needs of adults who are emergent readers. Placing these learners in regular ESOL classes with other students who have already developed print literacy is not a best practice. These learners need their own class with a teacher who knows how to teach reading. I've been pleased to observe that there is growing awareness about this need among adult education programs, and this practice is starting to change. Moreover, I'm hoping that high-quality training on how to teach reading to emergent readers can be provided to

accelerate the changes that are needed in our field.

Reflecting on my experiences as a teacher, I've often looked to the words of Miles Horton and Paolo Freire (1990) for inspiration. In *We Make the Road by Walking*, Miles Horton talked about the three things that make for a "good education" – first "loving people" ... "next is respect for people's abilities to learn and to act to shape their own lives" and finally "value their experiences" (p. 177). My hope is that I am part of a cohort of teachers who is able to offer all adult learners a "good education."

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