

Forum: Improving Service to Adult Literacy Learners*(Part 2 of 3)*

What We Can Do Now to Improve Literacy Services for Adult Learners

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Pickard introduces her piece by discussing the hypothetical Daryl, whose needs are not met by the program in which he is enrolled. While Pickard discusses this issue from the perspective of broad policies, I think that for adult learners like Daryl, who are seeking to improve their reading skills and persist until they reach their academic and personal goals, adult basic education programs must implement evidence-based reading instruction (EBRI).

What is EBRI? EBRI refers to “practices for teaching the components of reading, grounded in research and professional wisdom” (SABES, n.d., para. 2). EBRI strategies support students with struggles, challenges, and learning difficulties-like Daryl. EBRI requires explicit and systematic instruction of reading in the four components of alphabets, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

The Research on Adult Learners and Reading

While there is little experimental or non-experimental research that evaluates the effects of assessment on reading achievement for adults, it is widely assumed, however, that assessment of learner strengths and needs is an important aspect of instruction. To teach reading effectively and efficiently, a teacher must accurately assess an adult learner’s ability in one or more areas of reading instruction (alphabets, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension). Reading assessment may be used to diagnose specific strengths and needs in reading for individual adults or for adults being taught in groups (Kruidenier, 2002).

While Pickard includes PIAAC and ProLiteracy literacy

statistics, she does not address what we know about teaching reading to adult learners and EBRI. Research tells us that mid-level readers, in ABE NRS levels 2-4, and often the largest percentage of adult learners, have extremely varied reading needs, and although they have learned some word identification skills, they often do not make effective use of these skills when reading. Some learners may come to a word they do not recognize or may use the first few letters and/or context clues to guess rather than decode the word (Davidson & Strucker, 2002). Nearly all learners at these NRS levels need to increase fluency, build vocabulary, and/or improve comprehension skills.

The EBRI Process

The first step for teachers and tutors to provide EBRI is to administer individual diagnostic assessments to adult learners to assess their skills in the four reading components. The two purposes of diagnostic assessment are to determine which reading components are instructional priorities for each student, and to determine the readability level of the text which is best to use for instruction.

To begin the diagnostic assessment with an adult learner, teachers and reading tutors should explain to the learner why the diagnostic assessment is being administered. Teachers and tutors may want to build rapport with a student first by asking what students enjoy doing in their free time, where they work, and what subjects they enjoyed in school and which subjects were more difficult. Additionally, it is important to provide assurances to the adult learner that the diagnostic results will be kept confidential, and not released to others except for

reporting purposes, and will only be used to set goals and plan for instruction (McShane, 2005).

Building rapport with a learner may also reduce their anxiety and help the learner feel more comfortable during the diagnostic process. Many ABE students already understand they have struggled with reading, in the past and currently, and may appreciate the opportunity to share their experiences.

After the diagnostic assessment is completed, review the assessment results with the adult learner in plain language. Be specific, give examples, discuss their strengths, and identify areas for improvement for instruction. Avoid providing assessment data using grade-equivalent (GE) scores. Using GE scores may not only be discouraging, but they are also not a good baseline for adults. An adult learner reading at the GE 3.0 level in comprehension is not equivalent to an eight-year-old reading at the third-grade level.

Providing EBRI Instruction and Resources

After the assessments have been administered, the next steps for a teacher or tutor are to analyze the results to determine the learner's instructional priorities in reading. Students may receive instruction one to one or may participate in small group instruction in the specific reading component identified by the assessment. For example, the learners who need fluency instruction are grouped together, the learners who need alphabetic/phonemic awareness are grouped together and so on.

Each of these groups of students receive explicit instruction in their priority instructional components. The explicit teaching methods include a gradual release of responsibility through explanation, modeling, guided practice, and application. In addition to using the gradual release of responsibility model, teachers and tutors should focus on the five fundamental elements of instruction of:

- active student engagement
- numerous practice opportunities
- time for students to reflect on the usefulness of what they are learning
- a way to monitor the effectiveness of the instruction
- motivation to persist based on instruction and feedback

The next step in the instructional process is to select the curricular resources to be used for instruction in the reading components. When selecting instructional resources, it is essential that teachers and tutors use resources developed for adult learners. The Penn State College of Education website has an extensive list of adult education resources and links at https://ed.psu.edu/research-grants/centers-institutes/goodling-institute/goal-2-professional-development/AE_Resources_Websites

Professional Learning for ABE Teachers and Reading Tutors

Despite Pickard's assertion that it is an important strategy for improving reading instruction, it is not practical for WIOA programs to require pre-service certification for ABE teachers or tutors. The adult education system and WIOA Title II programs are significantly underfunded as it is, and adult education teachers are not compensated for pre-service certification prior to being hired in a WIOA Title II program. However, there is a more practical pathway for teachers and tutors to be successful in providing effective reading instruction to adult learners. Programs need to provide the professional learning opportunities to include the administration of diagnostic assessments, EBRI, and explicit instructional strategies. The professional learning should be incorporated in the onboarding process and through recurring professional learning and job embedded activities focused on EBRI.

These professional learning opportunities are available through self-paced courses at LINCS, a free repository of community, courses, and resources for adult educators and ProLiteracy, a leader in the advancement of adult literacy in the U.S. and throughout the world.

In addition to the self-paced courses and EBRI resources, teachers and tutors could collaborate to create reading communities of practice focused on effective reading instruction, administering diagnostic reading assessments, reviewing, and discussing score results, and comparing interrater reliability. In programs that employ multiple teachers and tutors, professional learning should include peer observation, coaching, feedback, and reflection using student data on student progress.

Conclusion

In summary, the issues that Pickard identifies seem secondary to the more basic issue of not implementing EBRI. Assuming effective professional learning for teachers and tutors on EBRI, let us revisit Daryl's student journey in an adult education program. Daryl arrives at an adult basic education program, ABC Learning Center, eager to learn to read but without the knowledge and skills in foundational reading. The student intake specialist, reading tutor, or teacher spends some time getting to know Daryl and speaking to him about his personal and learning goals, his past learning experiences, and explaining to him the next steps that will include a reading assessment to help identify the reading areas to focus on for instruction.

After Daryl has completed the diagnostic assessment, the teacher or tutor shares the results with him. The assessment indicates that Daryl has done well in the reading components of alphabets and phonemic awareness; however, the areas of fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension will be the focus of his instructional priorities.

Daryl begins to receive explicit EBRI with two other adult learners who also have the same instructional priorities. He rapidly makes progress and improves his skills in the targeted reading components, along with the other learners in his group. For the first time in his life, Daryl is hopeful that he will be able to achieve his personal and academic goals, and eventually earn a high school equivalency diploma. He is well on his way.

References

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