

# Using a Multisensory Approach to Help Struggling Adult Learners

Gladys Geertz

*I have been a teacher for about 25 years. When I taught elementary school, it seemed that most kids learned to read almost by osmosis. But what about the children who didn't? I spent many hours working on ways to help these special children, sometimes finding a technique that helped, other times passing a child on to the next grade in hope that another teacher would find the key. What happened to these kids? They are the adults I work with every day at the Anchorage Literacy Project (ALP) in Anchorage, AK. Because no one ever found the answer, eventually many of them became frustrated and dropped out of school. Some of them graduated, but they still could not read.*

Eight years ago, I observed the Slingerland technique being used with children in Slingerland classrooms in the Anchorage schools and with adults at ALP. The Slingerland technique uses multisensory teaching techniques from Orton-Gillingham that were adapted for the classroom by Beth Slingerland (Slingerland, 1996). Orton-Gillingham developed their teaching techniques working one-on-one with dyslexic children and those with specific language disabilities. A colleague and I developed a program that uses these techniques in classroom settings with adult, low-level reading students. What differentiates our method from the Slingerland method is that we move through a lesson more quickly, teaching more concepts in a day than would be taught in an elementary school class.

## **Our Program**

The ALP multisensory classes consist mostly of students who have gone through the school system in the US. Some are dropouts; others are high school graduates. They range in age from 18 to 75 years. Our classes are limited to 15 students, but some classes have fewer. All of our teachers are trained in the Slingerland method. We have three instructors in the multisensory program teaching nine multisensory classes. Each class meets 3 days a week for 1 \_ hours per class. Our quarter lasts 10 weeks.

Our classes are not open entry. We continue to accept new students for the first two weeks, but then we close the classes because it is too difficult for new students to catch up. Each group tends to become close-knit, and we foster group development.

We have expanded and modified the Slingerland techniques for use with adults with and without language disabilities. Since they are familiar with the letters, we require them to trace a letter only three times. We also proceed more quickly to paper and pencil tasks. We also introduce three or four letters during each class session; an elementary teacher may only introduce one or two letters a day. At the beginning, we discuss our teaching procedures with the students, explaining that because they have missed some of the educational experiences necessary for learning, we are starting over.

## **A Success-Oriented Program**

The multisensory approach is a success-oriented program. We only expect students to know what they have been taught. We *provide* instruction, *guide* the students through a successful learning experience, and then *reinforce* this successful learning experience. We make sure that all students leave the classroom feeling that they have experienced success.

We begin with a single unit of sight, sound, or thought, and then proceed to the complex combinations of these units. We use the sequence in *Angling For Words* by Carolyn G. Bowen (1983). The time involved in teaching the letter sounds depends on the needs of the particular group of students.

Once the sounds are learned, students move on to the more complex tasks of reading and spelling words, putting these words into sentences, and then mastering paragraphs. With these basic skills, students are able to handle more complex reading and writing material.

### A Sample Multisensory Lesson

The multisensory technique makes use of all modalities and combines them into one simultaneous procedure. It requires learners to see, hear, speak, and do at the same time. We follow a set pattern of seven steps in every lesson.

From the first day of class, we begin class with **oral language skills**, because the spoken word is much more comfortable than the written word to a low-level reader. First, we, the teacher and the learners, talk, using complete sentences.

In the second segment of the lesson, we introduce the **sound - symbol relationship**. We introduce a letter while writing it in the air: kinesthetic movement. If the students need instruction in writing the letter, we also do the writing procedure. We teach them cursive writing.

In the writing procedure, we write the letter on the board, while communicating to the students exactly how the letter is made. We then make the letter in the air, explaining exactly how it to make it. Next, the students make the letter in the air, very large, using their pointers and index fingers as their writing tools.

#### Typical Lesson Plan

##### Components

Using oral language skills

Learning a sound-symbol relationship, and using cards to review the sound-symbol relationship

Decoding

Vocabulary enrichment

Phrase reading

Structured reading

Story reading using comprehension skills

After making the letter in the air, each student receives a 12 X 18 inch sheet of newsprint, which has been folded to create lines. We write a cursive letter in crayon on this newsprint. The students trace the letter with their fingers, "feeling" it and saying it. We trace the letter at least three times with our fingers, three times with the blunt end of a pencil from which the eraser has been removed, and three times with the pencil point. Learners then move on to the next box on the paper, using the same procedure. This is the Slingerland technique used for teaching writing. It involves seeing, saying, feeling, and doing simultaneously. We repeat it every day for every lesson.

After saying the name of the letter and writing the letter in the air, we show the class a picture of a **key word** beginning with that letter, such as turtle for /t/. Next, the sound of /t/ is made as it is heard in the key word turtle. After the instructor demonstrates the procedure, the class follows the procedure as a group, then each student does it. "Write the letter in the air, say the keyword, say the sound of the letter." They have felt the letter, spoken the letter, heard the name of the letter and letter sound, and said the letter sound.

We review this sound-symbol relationship by displaying flash cards of the letters. This both enables the learners to feel success and allows the teacher to ascertain whether everyone has learned the

relationship. The students write the letter in the air, speak the name of the letter, hear the name of the letter and the sound of the letter, and then say the sound of the letter. Every lesson has a review of letters using this sound-symbol relationship.

The third lesson segment involves the **decoding of words**. We decode, or sound out, a list of words every day. We use words that incorporate the sounds taught in the second segment of the lesson. We begin with one-syllable words, progress to two syllables, three syllables, etc. We usually decode 20 to 25 words in a lesson; one third are nonsense words. To decode a word, the student underlines the vowels, divides the word into syllables, shows what each vowel "says" by writing above each vowel a diacritical mark, pronounces the word, and then defines it. We teach this entire procedure, one step at a time, with each step modeled by the teacher.

The fourth segment, after we decode several words, is learning **vocabulary**. When introducing a story, we teach the definitions of new words and the learners put them into sentences. One of the reading series that we use with low-level readers is *Early Reading Comprehension in Varied Subject Matter* (Ervin, 1999), which has four levels. Written for the older elementary school child, the series seems to be successful with adults. We also use the Kim Marshall (1999) series for readers above the fourth grade level, which is targeted for adults. Newspapers or *Reader's Digest* are other sources of informational stories. Our students tend to find nonfiction more interesting than fiction.

The fifth lesson segment is **phrase reading**, or reading by ideas. We put 5 to 8 phrases on a chart, read a phrase, and the students repeat it. All phrases are read once with the teacher modeling and the students repeating. We discuss new vocabulary, hyphenated words, or grammar. Then a student comes to the chart at the front of the classroom. We say a phrase, the student underlines the phrase with a yard stick, reads it aloud, and the other students repeat the phrase. All the phrases on the chart are read twice using this procedure. During this phase, we build comprehension skills, lengthen eye-span, make functional use of word attack skills, make predictions, and build cognitive skills.

**Procedure for  
Phrase Reading**

The teacher puts the following on a chart:

*a very lazy cat*

*in the shrubs*

*cold and snowy*

*He would moan*

*and eat them*

The teacher might ask the learners to:

"Find the phrase that tells **where**"

"Find the phrase that has a word that means the **opposite** of warm"

"Find the phrase that begins with an **article**"

"Find the phrase that is the **beginning** of a sentence"

"Find the phrase that begins with a **conjunction**"

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*Taken from Early Reading Comprehension, Book A, "The Lazy Cat" Paragraph 1, by J. Ervin.*

The sixth segment, after phrase reading, is **structured reading**. The first paragraph of the story is read aloud using structured reading (see box below). Each sentence is read in sequence using the same method. Eventually, the first paragraph - and only that paragraph - is read using phrase reading designed by the teacher.

<b>Structured Reading</b> Students read directly from the book using the phrases the instructor indicates to them: <b>Toby was a wild cat who lived in a city park. He was a very lazy cat. He also liked to eat. Even when it was cold and snowy, he knew how to get his meals without ever leaving where he slept. He would stay in his snug den in the shrubs.</b>	
Instructor says:	Read the first five words that tell <b>who</b> .
Student 1 says:	Toby was a wild cat
Instructor says:	Read the next two words telling <b>what</b> .
Student 2 says:	who lived.
Instructor says:	Read the next four words that tell <b>where</b> .
Student 3 says:	in a city park.
Instructor says:	Read the complete sentence using that same phrasing.
Student 4 says:	Toby was a wild cat (pause) who lived (pause) in the city park.
Instructor says:	Read the next two words that tell you <b>what</b> .
The procedure continues until the end of the paragraph. To conclude, a student reads the entire paragraph using good phrasing. <i>Taken from Early Reading Comprehension, Book A, "The Lazy Cat" Paragraph 1, by J. Ervin.</i>	

In lesson segment seven, each student gets a turn to **read orally**. Each student reads aloud a different paragraph in the story. This enables us to hear the learners' decoding, expression, and fluency. We discuss every paragraph for comprehension.

### Challenges

Finding appropriate reading materials for adults reading at a low level is difficult. Another challenge is time. Every day we struggle to include all 7 steps in our 90-minute class. We may modify the lesson by making steps shorter, but we do not continue the lesson the next day. Repetition of the 7-step sequence provides useful structure, freeing learners to focus on content rather than methodology.

### Results

I have witnessed success using the multisensory approach. During the winter and spring 2000 sessions our learners improved their skills in word reading and word attack at a statistically significant level as measured by the WRAT3 and the Woodcock Johnson-Revised (word attack) tests. But more than statistics, the successes come from the students. They are now willing to pick up a newspaper and they can joke about their reading, because they have experienced some success. They tell us that the structure and continuity of the instruction and the interactive teaching methods were particularly helpful. They have discovered that they are not the only people in the world with reading difficulties and know that, with time and diligence, they can achieve their educational goals.

Summarized by Bella Hanson. This page is located at: <http://www.ncsall.net/?id=277> See this page for references.

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## **About the Author**

*Gladys G. Geertz* has her master's degree in Learning Disabilities and is certified as a Slingerland instructor. As multisensory coordinator for the Anchorage Literacy Project, she teaches four reading/writing multisensory classes, serves as demonstration teacher for the Star School's Adult Literacy Program, and is a teacher trainer of multisensory techniques.