

Techniques for Teaching Beginning-Level Reading to Adults

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I have been teaching beginning-level reading (equivalent to grade 0-2) at the Community Learning Center in Cambridge, MA, for the past eight years. The majority of students in my class have either suspected or diagnosed reading disabilities (dyslexia). The difficulty they experience learning to read is as severe as the urgency they feel about mastering the task

Little research is available on the most effective methods for teaching reading to beginning-level adults. My continuing challenge has been to determine how reading acquisition research conducted with children can be applied to teaching reading to adults. In this article, I describe the techniques I have found most useful; I hope other teachers working with beginning readers will find them helpful.

Our Class

This year our class includes nine students. Three are from the US, five are from the Caribbean, and one is from Ethiopia. Their ages range from late 20s to late 50s and all are employed. Their educational experiences range from completing 4 to 12 years of school; one student has a high school diploma. One student has documented learning disabilities (LD). Students typically enter my class knowing little more than the names of the letters and a handful of letter sounds. They are usually only able to write their name and, in most cases, the letters of the alphabet.

Typical Lesson Plan for a Three-Hour Class	
Component	Time (min)
Phonological Awareness	10
Word Analysis	20
Word Recognition "Sight Words"	10
Spelling	20
BREAK	10
Oral Reading (Accuracy)	20
Oral Reading (Fluency)	35
Comprehension	25
Writing	30

Our class meets two evenings a week for three hours each evening. Because skilled reading depends on the mastery of specific subskills, I find it helpful to teach these explicitly. I organize the class into blocks of time in which, with the help of two volunteers, I directly teach eight components of reading: phonological awareness, word analysis, sight word recognition, spelling, oral reading for accuracy, oral reading for fluency, listening comprehension, and writing. These components embody the skills and strategies that successful readers have mastered, either consciously or unconsciously. My curriculum also includes an intensive writing component.

Over the last 30 years, a significant amount of research has compared the effectiveness of different approaches to teaching beginning reading to children. It consistently concludes that approaches that

include a systematically organized and explicitly taught program of phonics result in significantly better word recognition, spelling, vocabulary, and comprehension (Chall, 1967; Curtis, 1980; Stanovich 1986; Adams, 1990; Snow et al., 1998). For this reason, I directly teach the structure of the English language using a phonics-based approach.

I draw from a number of phonics-based reading programs, including the Wilson Reading System, the Orton-Gillingham System, and the Lindamood-Phoneme Sequencing Program (LiPS). The Wilson Reading System is a multisensory, phonics-based program developed specifically for adults. Unlike phonics-based programs for children, the Wilson system is organized around the six syllable types, which enables even beginning level adults to read works with somewhat sophisticated vocabulary. The Orton-Gillingham program is a phonics-based program similar to the Wilson Reading System but designed for dyslexic children. Students learn about syllables much later in the program. I find particularly helpful the Orton-Gillingham technique for learning phonetically irregular sight words. The LiPS Program is useful for helping students acquire an awareness of individual sounds in words. This ability, referred to as phonemic awareness, is a prerequisite for reading and spelling.

Phonological Awareness

Phonological awareness is the strongest predictor of future reading success for children (Adams, 1995). No research exists that describes the affects of phonological awareness on reading for adults. However, I have found that teaching phonological awareness to my beginning-reading adults improves their reading accuracy and spelling, especially for reading and spelling words with blends.

Three phonological tasks that I use with my students, in order of difficulty, are auditory blending, auditory segmenting, and phonemic manipulation. Phonemic manipulation, which is the strongest predictor of reading acquisition, is also the most difficult. The student must recognize that individual phonemes may be added, deleted, or moved around in words.

Word Analysis

Word analysis, or phonics, involves learning that the graphic letter symbols in our alphabet correspond to speech sounds, and that these symbols and sounds can be blended together to form real words. Word analysis strategies enable students to "sound out" words they are unable to recognize by sight. Explicit, direct instruction in phonics has been proven to support beginning reading and spelling growth better than opportunistic attention to phonics while reading, especially for students with suspected reading disabilities (Blackman et al., 1984; Chall, 1967, 1983). Beginning readers should be encouraged to decode unfamiliar words as opposed to reading them by sight, because it requires attention to every letter in sequence from left to right. This helps to fix the letter patterns in the word in a reader's memory. Eventually, these patterns are recognized instantaneously and words appear to be recognized holistically (Ehri, 1992; Adams, 1990).

I use the Wilson Reading System to teach phonics because the six syllable types are introduced early. This enables even beginning-level adults to read words that are part of their oral vocabulary and overall cognitive abilities. After learning the closed syllable rule, students are able to read three-syllable words. Reading multisyllabic words provides my students, who have acquired a history of reading failure, with an unexpected sense of accomplishment and opens possibilities for them.

I have found that the Wilson Reading System Sound Tapping technique is a particularly effective way to teach decoding. In this technique, each sound in a word is represented by one tap. Students tap the first sound with their index finger and thumb, the second sound with their middle finger and thumb, the third sound with their ring finger and thumb, etc. If the student runs out of fingers, he or she

returns to the index finger. Digraphs (/sh/, /ch/, /th/, /ck/, /ph/) are represented with one tap. This technique helps students to hear all the sounds in a word.

"Sight Word" Recognition

Since many of the words that appear most frequently in print are phonetically irregular, even beginning readers must learn to recognize some words by sight. Students with reading disabilities have typically relied almost entirely on their ability to memorize words. In most cases, however, their strategies for remembering the way words look in print have proved ineffective. I have experienced some success in teaching sight words using the Visual-Auditory-Kinesthetic-Tactile (V-A-K-T) method that is part of the Orton- Gillingham program. The VAKT method, which emphasizes memorization through visualization, involves asking the student to say the name of each letter in a word and to trace each letter with his or her finger in the air before covering the word and attempting to spell it on paper. The VAKT method may be used to help students with both the reading and spelling of phonetically irregular words. To avoid unnecessary frustration, it is best to tell beginning readers which words they should decode and which words they must recognize by sight.

Spelling

Spelling is an effective way to reinforce both word analysis skills and automatic word recognition. Research consistently indicates that fluent, skilled readers (both children and adults) make use of spelling patterns when they read and, conversely, reading itself reinforces knowledge of spelling patterns (Adams, 1995). Spelling for practicing word analysis skills and spelling for promoting word recognition (usually of phonetically irregular words), however, involve different tasks and call for different teaching techniques. The VAKT method, described earlier, is a process for teaching learners how to spell phonetically irregular words. When dictating phonetically regular words, include only those words that include letter sounds and spelling rules that have been taught directly.

An especially effective technique for the spelling of phonetically regular words is the LiPS technique. This involves asking students to put down a poker chip for each sound they hear. After identifying the correct number of sounds in the word, students locate the vowel sound and place a different-colored chip over the chip that represents the vowel sound. Only after they have identified the sounds and isolated the vowel sound are students asked to select the letter symbols that represent the sounds in the word. This places a lighter burden on short-term and working memory.

Oral Reading

Oral reading builds accuracy and fluency, both of which contribute to improved comprehension. It is also the most practical way for me to monitor a student's progress. It gives a student an opportunity to practice applying word attack and word recognition skills in context. Because reading for fluency and reading for accuracy involve different objectives and require different materials, I find it useful to teach and evaluate them as two separate activities.

Oral reading for accuracy gives students an opportunity to use the word analysis skills they have been taught directly, so I choose reading selections from controlled texts. During accuracy reading, the emphasis is on using word analysis knowledge to decode unfamiliar words. The goal of fluency reading, on the other hand, is to encourage students to read smoothly and with expression. Because it is difficult to find materials that are easy enough for a beginning reader to read fluently, I often address fluency in the context of rereading material students have first read for accuracy. The Wilson Reading System describes a technique for promoting fluency called penciling that I have found

particularly useful. I encourage the student to read more than one word in a breath by scooping a series of words together with a pencil. First, I model how the sentence should be read. For example: "The man with the hat is big." Eventually, students are able to pencil the sentences for themselves but, at the beginning, I scoop words into phrases for them.

When working on oral reading for either accuracy or fluency, I divide the class up according to ability. Sometimes I pair stronger readers to act as student teachers with their less skilled classmates.

Before being paired with a less skilled reader, however, student teachers receive explicit instruction in providing decoding clues and handling errors. By teaching someone else, the more skilled student teachers consolidate their own knowledge and become cognizant of their own relative progress. Also, the more-skilled readers become a source of inspiration and support for the less-skilled readers.

Comprehension

For readers at the 0-3rd grade level, I teach higher-level comprehension skills using materials other than those the students can read themselves. In my class, critical thinking usually takes place in the context of a classroom debate. Topics I have found particularly conducive to a heated discussion include "Why do you think it is or is not appropriate to hit your children when they misbehave?" and "Why do you think there is so much crime in this country?"

Using photographs is also effective in building higher-level comprehension skills. I ask questions such as "What do you think the people in the photograph are feeling?" "How can you tell? Open-ended questions encourage students to make inferences, draw conclusions, and express opinions.

Conclusion

Progress can be excruciatingly slow for beginning-level adult readers. Each class follows the same routine (see the Typical Lesson Plan) and a significant amount of class time is spent reviewing previously taught skills and rereading texts. For beginning-level readers, and especially for those with reading disabilities, a predictable routine helps to alleviate anxiety. The volunteers are surprised that students do not feel insulted or embarrassed working with the letters of the alphabet and reading texts that may appear babyish. On the contrary, after years of only using a hit or miss approach, my students are relieved to discover that reading involves patterns of letters with predictable sounds.

One student describes his early experience with reading: "When I was in grade school, I would listen to the other kids read aloud and I had no idea how they knew that those letters said those words. When it was my turn, all I could do was guess. Now it makes sense! It's like I found the key."

The challenge of teaching reading to beginning-level adults can be daunting. In my opinion, however, teaching at the beginning level is also the most rewarding. It is extremely moving to witness an adult who, after years of struggling with the sounds of individual letters, is able to read a letter from a family member or a note that his or her child brings home from school.

Summarized by Bella Hanson. This page is located at: <http://www.ncsall.net/?id=280> References are listed in the full article.

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