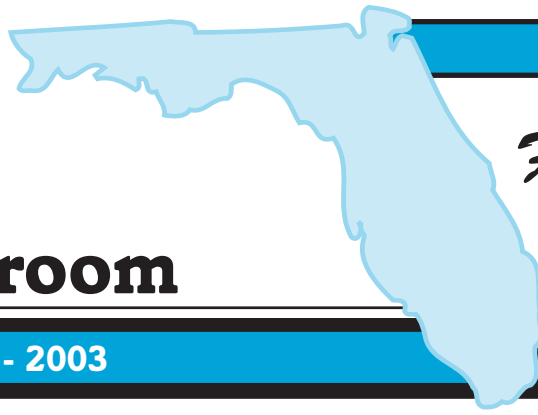


The

Adult Basic Classroom



For Florida Adult Basic
Education Practitioners

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**If I am not a reading specialist, how can I teach reading?
The majority of my adult students come to me with below
average or non-existent reading skills. How can I help them?**

Start Where They Are

Many adult educators are a bit intimidated by the task of teaching adults to read. With media and government emphasizing literacy, it is easy to wonder what is so hard about teaching others to read. Dr. Joseph K. Torgesen, Distinguished Research Professor in the Psychology Department at Florida State University and Director of the Florida Center for Reading Research, reassures adult educators that teaching reading is indeed doable: "[Teaching reading] is not an easy task because many adults have limited time available, limited patience with their rate of learning and limited energy after dealing with other circumstances in their lives... However, most adults don't start from zero in their reading skills, so your task is to start where they are and help them move to the next higher level."

Exposure to the Basics

The competition for adult students' time and attention is nothing new to adult educators; it affects every aspect of the classroom and is perhaps the first obstacle adult educators and students learn to overcome. Adults have been exposed to the basic components of reading most of their lives; they speak English; they hear and comprehend others' use of English. They see English in print on a regular basis whether or not they can decode it. Think how much more exposure this means your students have to reading than to higher math. Even if an adult student cannot

read, he has been exposed to many basic tools that will help him learn to read.

Five Basic Reading Components

According to the Florida TechNet's website workshop on reading, there are five basic components in the reading process: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension.

Phonemic Awareness

Let's begin with the least familiar of the terms, phonemic awareness. If your student speaks English, he can already use phonemes. Phonemes are the sounds that make up English, and research has shown that an awareness of the sound segments in words is necessary for a person to be able to read. Phonemes enable students to sound out or identify new words and to read words out loud, which helps students associate them with words heard, and perhaps understood in conversation. A quick way to determine a student's knowledge of phonemes is to quiz her: show her a letter and ask her to make the sound(s) the letter makes.

Phonics

An understanding of phonics allows a student to see how sounds relate to written words. *Put Reading First* identifies the difference between phonemic awareness and phonics like this: Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear, identify and manipulate individual sounds [*phonemes*] in spoken words. Although phonemic awareness is a widely used term in reading, it is often

misunderstood. One misunderstanding is that phonemic awareness and phonics are the same thing. Phonemic awareness is **not** phonics. Phonemic awareness is the understanding that the sounds of **spoken** language work together to make words. Phonics is the understanding that there is a predictable relationship between phonemes and graphemes, the letters that represent those sounds in **written** language. So, knowing how to spell one's name and how to read one's address and other family members' names is a practice of both phonemic awareness and phonics.

See, your adult students have already begun the process; now you can build on what they know. Introduce more phonemes and more words. Have your students practice blending: ask for the sound of "m" and then the sound of "a" and then the sound of "t"; work with your student to blend these independent sounds into "mat." In addition, working on "mat" brings to attention the pattern of the short "a" sound; adding the silent "e" to "mat" and creating "mate" shows the student a rule of long vowel sounds.

More complicated patterns of plurality and the pronunciation demanded by the order of certain phonemes are building blocks to reading you can introduce as your students read. The Florida TechNet workshop suggests that if your students "can consistently sound out single syllable words, but struggle with multi-syllable words, you will need to help them with strategies to break down these more difficult words into manageable parts." Now would be a good time to begin an introduction or review of rules of syllabication. For

example, when a word has two consonants together in the middle of a word, divide between the two consonants. Using the word “rabbit,” have the students divide the word between the two consonants that are together, then sound out each syllable. Once this is done the students can blend the two syllables and read the word.

When a word has one consonant between two vowels, divide after the first vowel. An example of the rule is the word “paper.” The word “paper” would be divided “pa-per.” Recognizing consonant and vowel blends, the pronunciation of common suffixes and prefixes, and smaller words within larger words are other common ways readers figure out how to pronounce new words.

Dr. Torgesen assures us that “there is no reason, and no evidence, to believe that there are any real shortcuts to this process. Phonemic awareness and phonics skills are essential so that readers can be reasonably accurate in identifying new words they have never before encountered in text.” It is not insulting to teach your adult student phonemic awareness and phonics; it is essential. You can teach it with adult texts in which they are interested, but teach it you must or your students will never move on to fluency in reading.

Fluency

Fluency is reading “with accuracy, speed and expression, and it is important because it allows the reader to break free from the tedious process of decoding each word along the way” (www.floridatechnet.org). Fluency means your students are using phonemes as they recognize and employ the rules of phonics to put together strings of words for meaning. Fluency implies that readers have words they now recognize by sight, and that they do not have to sound out each time. One way to help increase the number of words a student recognizes by sight is to “have [him] read and re-read short passages several times, each time trying to read a little faster. This ‘repeated reading’ is one of the best methods to increase reading fluency” (www.floridatechnet.org). It is important to note that silent reading alone will not reveal students’ fluency needs. Reading scripture in church, singing hymns in a choir and reading out loud to a child are

all natural ways adult students practice fluency.

Vocabulary Development

Developing vocabulary is a major confidence builder for adult students. The most direct way to teach adults vocabulary is to teach words that they find themselves using. Job related reading, current event articles, and family and health information are all good sources of relevant vocabulary. Teaching students how to read context clues to decipher the meaning of the word is helpful. Allow students to check their conjectures with the dictionary definition, but teach them to first make educated inferences. Model for them the thinking you do when you come across a word you do not know or are unsure of. This both teaches your students a skill and lets them know that readers of all skill levels come across words they do not know. You can also acknowledge that there are different levels of vocabulary. There are words we know and can define and even give examples of; these words we have mastered. Then there are the words that we can generally categorize but not define: amorphous has something to do with changing. Finally, there are words we have heard but can’t place in context to determine their meaning: egregious sounds negative. Exposing students to new vocabulary helps them understand how words enter their consciousness and are eventually mastered.

Comprehension

As you can see, the basic components of reading are related and need not, perhaps even cannot, be taught in isolation. Consider the Double Entry Diary exercise offered in the Florida TechNet workshop. After dividing a paper into two columns, students are asked to record on the right, direct quotes with page numbers and on the left, their thoughts about those quotes. This tool serves to develop comprehension. It could also be used to develop the earlier components of reading. The quote could include an unfamiliar word and the comment could include an inference about the definition. Alternatively, the quote could contain a word the student can’t pronounce and the comment section could include recognition of that or a thought about which

rules of phonics apply. As long as students feel comfortable commenting on all aspects of the reading process in this diary it will enhance mastery of all reading components.

Putting It All Together

All students, whether learning disabled, ESOL, teenagers or senior citizens need to master reading. In order to master reading, all students must master phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. There are no shortcuts, but you will have students who fly through instruction or who come knowing more than they think. Never miss an opportunity to remind students how much of their lives are immersed in writing. They see it on billboards as they drive down the interstate; they see it on CD covers and on prescription bottles, on television ads and on bills. Though much of that writing may not be understood, it can be used as a building block to teach reading. Awareness of letters, the sounds they make, that letters’ sounds make words and that words make meaning is more than a child knows when she begins to read. Adults will learn reading like they learn everything else in your classroom, at their own pace and in relationship to their own concerns.

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