



NetNews

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The Importance of Word Study

The vast majority of American-born adults are exposed to written language from a very early age. Most Americans live in a print-based society where letters and words are everywhere! Drive, walk, or bike down any American street and you will see numerous eye-catching billboards, signs, and storefronts. Our towns, cities, neighborhoods, and homes offer many sources of written or electronic information. In addition, most American-born adults have received formal schooling for at least eight to nine years due to nationwide mandatory public education. They have experienced “educational opportunity” if not educational achievement.

“Word study” is planned and directed instruction of English sound, word, or syllable patterns and vocabulary development.

So, it may be surprising that a certain number of American-born adults still cannot read well enough to access or use print-based information. And it is very challenging when these adults enroll in ABE programs and are expected to make “level change” as measured by silent reading comprehension tests. They arrive with low literacy skills frequently complicated by low self-esteem and life-long feelings of failure, shame, and defeat.

According to findings from an adult basic education research study called the *Adult Reading Components Study* (www.nifl.org/readingprofiles) completed by John Strucker and Rosalind Davis of the Harvard School of Education:

1. Low level/Beginning ABE students (11% of the research participants) have poor phonemic awareness and/or word recognition skills that existed in childhood and persist into adulthood.
2. Intermediate ABE students (56%) appear to have learned some word attack skills; they know basic phonics, but don't make strong use of those skills.

It is the professional opinion of this author that an important instructional activity for all Beginning or Intermediate level adults is “**word study.**” Word study is defined as planned and directed instruction and practice of English sound, word, and syllable patterns combined with vocabulary development.

At Beginning levels, word study includes sequential reading and spelling practice of one-syllable word lists; at Intermediate levels, it includes reading and understanding multi-syllable words with prefixes and suffixes. Word study for both levels needs to be linked to word reading assessment and authentic contextual materials.



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5354 Parkdale Drive, Suite 200 ■ St. Louis Park, MN 55416
(952) 922-8374 ■ www.ldaminnesota.org
Learning Disabilities Association of Minnesota

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Assessing Word Recognition Skills

CASAS and TABE Reading tests measure life skills knowledge and silent reading comprehension, respectively. They do not inform the teacher or student about decoding or word recognition skills. Research says that readers must be able to decode and understand 90% or more of the words in text in order to comprehend. If students are not able to read most of the words or do not know the meanings of just a few words, they will likely struggle with comprehension.

It is the opinion of the author that determining word recognition levels is important for Beginning and Intermediate adult students *in addition to* mandated CASAS or TABE reading tests. Word recognition tests measure the ability to analyze sound patterns or decode words. They typically involve progressive word lists that a student reads aloud to a teacher or tutor. The responses provide information about sound/letter knowledge or a derived grade equivalent score. This information can be presented as a “word reading level” (rather than a grade equivalent) and combined with CASAS or TABE scores to better plan for reading instruction.

Examples of word analysis tests for Beginning ABE students include:

Roswell-Chall Diagnostic Reading Test of Word Analysis Skills
(Available from Educator’s Publishing Service)

Sylvia Greene’s Informal Word Analysis Inventory
(Free from the ARCS website)

Examples of word reading tests for Intermediate ABE students include:

Slosson Oral Reading Test (SORT-R)
(Available from Slosson Educational Publications, Inc.)

Quick Adult Reading Inventory (QARI)
(Free from the ARCS website)

Implementing Beginning Word Study

Beginning word study is focused on teaching unknown sound patterns for reading and spelling mastery. This improves phonological processing, or the ability to process and distinguish the sounds of our alphabetic English language. The time spent on beginning word study should be about 15-30 minutes of a reading lesson.

Beginning Word Study Process:

1. Assess English sound/letter knowledge with word analysis tests.
2. Select word lists for unknown patterns (such as from *The Adult Reading Toolkit - Appendix 3*) or word family lists available free from the ARCS website.
3. Explain the unknown sound/letter pattern.
4. Model reading the one-syllable word list to student.
5. Have the student reread the word list until mastery (3 or more times).
6. Dictate the words for spelling practice until mastery (90% correct).
7. If a sound/letter pattern is especially challenging, consider providing minimal pair practice. Below is a sample of minimal pairs for the consonants “b and d.”

bad	dad
rob	rod
did	bid
bud	dud
dell	bell
8. Have the student read or write sentences or short stories that combine the words with sight words and provide context.

Introducing *Story by Story*

By the Minnesota ABE Summer Institute in early August, a new resource for low-level adults will be available from LDA of Minnesota. *Story by Story* is a contextual phonics model and curriculum for American-born adults “learning to read”. It will include (1) informal word analysis, (2) an instructional model, (3) sequential “adult-appropriate” stories for developing reading fluency, and (4) related word lists for teaching sound/letter patterns.

Below are two samples from *Story by Story*:

A New Job (short vowel o)

_____ had a new job. He worked 8 hours a day. He worked 40 hours a week. He got \$15 an hour. But one day, his boss had to lay him off. His boss said, “I have to let you go. I am sorry. You are a good worker.”

_____ looked in the newspaper for jobs. He got applications. He had interviews. In 4 weeks, he got a new job offer.

Decodable
job
got
boss
off
offer

Survival/Sight
hour(s)
week(s)
sorry
application(s)
interview(s)

A Computer (digraph ch)

_____ and his roommate wanted a computer. They needed to get the right computer. They wanted to check their banking. They wanted to chat with their friends. They wanted to play chess or checkers online. They went to Best Buy to look at computers. Each had to chip in money to afford the best computer.

Decodable
check
chat
chess
rich
chip

Survival/Sight
roommate
banking
friends
online
afford

Implementing Intermediate Word Study

Word recognition tests for intermediate students determine a word reading score. The word reading level can be used to convince students of the importance of word study and can also serve (with post-testing) as evidence of improved decoding skills. Word study lists should be related to the student’s reading materials.

Here are some ideas:

Word Journals

Have students write down 6 -12 multi-syllable words they do not know from content lessons in a “word journal.” Go over their word lists for pronunciation, syllabication, and meaning. If appropriate, provide other extended words they may also encounter; however, be careful of word overload!

Content or Topic Word Lists

Pre-select 10-12 multi-syllable key words from content lessons for individual or group instruction. List them on paper or on the board and teach pronunciation, syllabication, and meaning. Again, if appropriate and not too “wordy,” teach extended forms.

For example, here is a list of 12 multi-syllable “Colonial America” words created from a review of pre-GED and GED Steck-Vaughn Social Studies workbooks:

Colony (colonies, colonist, colonial)
Soldier
Minutemen
England (English/British)
Taxes (taxation)
Import (importation)
Export (exportation)
Boycott (boycotting)
Government (govern, governing)
Parliament (parliamentary)
Legislature (legislate, legislative)
Congress (congressional)

EDL Core Vocabularies in Reading, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies (1989)

Steck-Vaughn www.SteckVaughn.com

These core vocabularies were based on the frequency of occurrence in major textbook series. The authors stress the research-based link between understanding of vocabulary and content areas.

Select relevant words from core vocabulary lists for Reading, Social Studies, or Science available in the above resource. Present 10-12 alphabetized or related words to individuals or groups for pronunciation, syllabication, meaning, and extension.

For example, here is a list of 12 multi-syllable "E" Science 6 words:

- electric
- electric charge
- electric circuit
- electric impulse
- electric potential
- electron
- electron emission
- electron microscope
- elliptical
- endocrine
- energy
- enzyme

Here is a list of 12 multi-syllable "A" Social Studies 4 words:

- aborigines
- accent
- adobe
- agricultural
- alphabet
- altitude
- amendment
- anthropologist
- anthropology
- area
- assembly
- automatic

Megawords - Multisyllabic Words for Reading, Spelling, and Vocabulary (2002)

By Polly Bayrd and Kristin Johnson
Educators Publishing Service www.epsbooks.com

Megawords is a series of workbooks for systematic reading and word study. There are eight workbooks and teacher's guides in the series. Students need to read at about 4th grade level to handle *Megawords*. Each workbook has approximately eight word lists that are built based on phonetic or structural elements and categorized as practical or less common words. Worksheet pages provide plentiful practice from part (syllables) to whole (sentences and paragraphs) to improve pronunciation, spelling, and vocabulary knowledge.

In Conclusion...

It is the author's experience that Beginning and Intermediate ABE students greatly enjoy and benefit from planned and directed word study. They soon realize that this is what they have been missing in their reading instruction and actually look forward to reading, spelling, and/or understanding selected word lists.

The mysteries of the English language diminish and they begin to believe that they will become readers. Their lifelong reading difficulties are no longer "about them"; but rather are about finding out what they know and don't know and filling in the gaps of alphabetic or background knowledge.

**Try word study...
you and your students
will like it!**

The author of NetNews is Marn Frank, Adult Learning Disabilities Specialist at LDA of Minnesota. Contact Marn at mf@ldaminnesota.org or 952-922-8374 x3715.