The Relationship of the Component Skills of Reading to Performance on the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS)

John Stroffer, Kenita Yamamoto, and James Kirch

Key Finding

It is possible to identify how proficient adults need to be in word recognition and vocabulary to achieve Level 2 performance on the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS)—the standard associated with greatly enhanced life opportunities in many domains.

Related Recommendation

Leaders whose vocabulary and word recognition are near the people in Level 3 and above might be candidates for intensive, highly focused, direct instruction in the vocabulary encountered in their language and in rapid, accurate word recognition.

Key Finding

The IALS is an unrivaled literacy assessment containing real-world items embedded in a functional context. This has led some to argue that IALS performance is primarily a function of adults’ life experiences and their familiarity with the socio-cultural context of the items. In short, for 40 years, it was recognized that adults need to demonstrate well-known basic reading skills like word recognition and vocabulary play critical roles in real-life literacy performance, such as they do in more traditional academic, school-based literacy assessments. The good news about these basic skills is that, unlike life experience and cultural context, word vocabulary and literacy are readily teachable by IALS practitioners.

The Relationship of the Component Skills of Reading to Performance on the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS)*

What is IALS?

A federally funded research and development center focused solely on adult learning, the National Center for the Study of Adult Literacy and Literacy (IALS) is a partnership of the Harvard University Graduate School of Education, World Education, Rutgers University, Portland State University in Oregon, and the Center for Literacy Studies at The University of Tennessee in Knoxville. NCSALL’s efforts are dedicated to improving practice in educational programs that serve adults with limited literacies and English language skills, and those without a high school diploma.

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In addition to having adequate reading and vocabulary skills, those with low reading performance and vocabulary skills can perform well on the IALS if they have adequate knowledge of the academic components that influence reading performance: phonological processing skills, orthographic knowledge, and rapid naming.

For adults in IALS Levels 1 and 2, governments should consider investing not just IALS reading comprehension, but the key teachable components of comprehension—word recognition and vocabulary—that the readers' skills are determined by.

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T his Research Brief highlights key findings that is a subset of a larger study being conducted jointly by NCSALL’s John Stroffer and Kenita Yamamoto and Erin Kirsch of the Educational Testing Service (ETS). This study builds on the proposition that a reader’s comprehension performance is largely determined by his or her abilities in two areas—print components and meaning components—and that learners’ skills, and therefore institutional needs, vary depending upon their relative strengths and weaknesses in these component areas. Print components include decoding accuracy and fluency, meaning components include oral vocabulary skills.

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The study also continues work done by Strecher and NCES’s Rostov Davidson to develop reading profiles of IALS Levels 1 and 2 adults that will be informative for teachers, administrators, and policymakers in the field of adult literacy.

Goals
The study’s first goal was to see if specific levels of proficiency—open-Ended prompts—on the administration reading components might predict higher levels of reading comprehension. To explore this question, the researchers compared the reading component skills of students at Levels 1 and 2 of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) with those of Level 3 students. Level 1 is the IALS level associated with increased civic participation, increased economic success and independence, and enhanced opportunities for lifelong learning and personal literacy.

The second goal was to determine whether levels of proficiency in the key components of reading could be used to describe the strengths and needs of readers at Level 1 and Level 2 adults, and therefore to teach teachers, administrators, and policymakers to guide assessment design and instructional decisions.

The Sample
The study sample was a convenience sample rather than a representative sample. It included 950 adult learners from five states who were enrolled in adult basic education (ABE), adult secondary education (ASE), and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes. Forty-eight adults who had completed high school or above were added to the household sample for comparison purposes, for a total of 1,594 participants. Beginning ESL learners were not included in the study because while they did not have the capability to answer some literacy questions in their native languages. Otherwise, the sample was generally comparable to the nationally enrolled adult literacy population with respect to gender, age, and representation of major U.S. ethnic groups.

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The study also showed that up to IALS Level 5, the non-native speakers of English had English pseudo-words better than the ABE and ASE learners. Many reading researchers consider difficulty with reading pseudo-words to be an indication of the core phonological deficit that is at the root of most reading disabilities. Participants’ responses on the background questionnaire confirmed this: ABE/ESOL native English speakers reported a very high incidence of childhood reading difficulties, while non-native speakers of English reported a very low incidence of childhood reading problems.