Exploring the Essential Components of Reading

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Abstract

Teachers of adult learners of English as a second language (ESL) have increasingly encountered students with limited literacy skills in their native language and/or in English. Yet, many of these practitioners are not adequately equipped to meet the challenge of teaching reading, especially beginning reading skills. Although there is a paucity of empirical research on teaching reading to adult ESL students, a body of research does indicate that research-based strategies that are effective for native speakers of English are also beneficial for second language learners, provided that appropriate modifications are made. In 2000, the National Reading Panel pinpointed five essential components for success in reading for native speakers as well as ESL students. This article provides a description of these components accompanied by instructional considerations and recommendations for teaching reading to adult English language learners.

Essential Components of Reading

Over the past two decades, teachers of adult learners of English as a second language (ESL) have increasingly encountered students who have limited literacy skills in their native language and/or in English (Burt, Peyton, & Adams, 2003; DelliCarpini, 2006). A recent report by the Center for Adult English Language Acquisition (CAELA) Network (2008) draws attention to the large number of lower proficiency learners enrolled in adult education ESL programs nationwide. According to this report, of the approximately 1.1 million adults who participated in federally-funded ESL programs across the U.S. during the 2006-07 academic year, 48% were enrolled in beginning or literacy-level ESL classes (CAELA Network, 2008). This statistic reveals the critical need for ESL reading instruction which is specifically designed to foster literacy development. Many ESL practitioners, however, have not been adequately prepared to meet the challenge of teaching beginning reading skills to adults (DelliCarpini, 2006). Because most Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages programs do not emphasize literacy instruction for adult second language learners, ESL teachers may find themselves having to search out resources on their own once they are faced with the need.

A review of the literature reveals a lack of empirical research regarding effective practices for teaching low-literacy adult ESL students to read. However, research regarding best practices in reading instruction for K-12 English language learners provides some important considerations. The National Reading Panel (2000) reports that research-based strategies which are effective

with native speakers of English are also beneficial for second language learners, provided that modifications are made to accommodate the unique strengths and needs of this population (see Goldenberg, 2008; Nation, 1993). In other words, it is recommended that teachers employ scientifically-based strategies and make adjustments to those strategies based on the unique linguistic and cultural distinctions of second language learners.

In order to facilitate adult second language learners' literacy development, ESL teachers need substantial understanding of the reading process. This article presents an overview of the five essential components of reading. Within the discussion of each component, instructional considerations and recommendations are offered for teaching adult second language learners.

The five essential components of reading are interrelated and work in concert to extract the essence of reading, which is gaining meaning from text. These critical components of reading include (a) phonological awareness/phonemic awareness, (b) word study/ phonics, (c) vocabulary, (d) fluency, and (e) comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000).

Phonological/Phonemic Awareness

Definition/Description

Phonological awareness is an all-encompassing term for hearing sounds in spoken language. Specifically, it refers to combined sounds as found in compound words, rhyming words, syllables, and onset-rimes. Students listen for (a) the parts of compound words (/basket//ball/); (b) the rhyme in words (/h/ill/ and /m/ill/), (c) syllables in words (/de//fine/); and (d) onsets and rimes (/h/ /and/). Single sounds called phonemes are also included under the umbrella of phonological awareness. Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear and manipulate individual sounds in words. For example, the word, *am,* has two phonemes, /a/ /m/ while the word*, look* has three, */l/ /oo/ /k/.* Phonemic awareness activities are totally auditory. Pictures can be used to represent the word, but print is never present. Students listen for the number of sounds, identify the

first, middle, and last sounds in words, and manipulate sounds to make new words. Phonemic awareness, the most complex phonological skill, is important to the reading process because of its association with improvement in reading and spelling (Ehri, Nunes, & Willows, 2001).

Significance for Second Language Learners

Ample evidence points to the importance of phonemic awareness in promoting reading for second language learners of alphabetic as well as non-alphabetic languages (DelliCarpini, 2006; Wagner, Torgesen, & Rashotte, 1994). Learners who have acquired this skill in their native language can apply this ability to another language (Cicero & Royer, 1995; Comeau et al., 1999). Moreover, possession of phonemic awareness skills in one language predicts reading ability in another language (Lindsey, Manis, & Bailey, 2003).

Instructional Considerations

Although the acquisition of phonological skills is essential in learning to read in English, a number of barriers may exist: (a) limited or no exposure to English or sounds in English, (b) limited or no engagement with phonemic awareness activities, (c) possible presence of a reading difficulty, (d) absence of literacy in the native language, and (e) incongruence with English symbol system in the native language. Regarding the last two items, Antunez (2002) reports that second language learners who are not literate in their native language or those who have learned a different symbol system such as Chinese or Arabic may have difficulty learning the sounds of spoken English. Initially, these students may be unable to *hear* or produce the sound in English.

Regardless of the aforementioned barriers, phonological/phonemic awareness can be taught. For adult learners, an efficient and effective way to incorporate these skills into an existing curriculum is to include phonological and/or phonemic awareness activities when explicitly teaching vocabulary. For example, if a targeted vocabulary word is *carpenter,* the

teacher would (a) say the word, *carpenter*; (b) provide a meaningful sentence with a picture: *A carpenter built the table*; (c) offer a user-friendly definition: *A carpenter is one who builds with wood;* and (d) conduct a phonological awareness activity: "Listen to the word, *carpenter: /car/ /pen/ /ter/.*" The teacher claps with each syllable as it is spoken. Then to maximize interaction with the word during the phonological activity, the following interactions with the word are recommended: (a) teacher model, (b) student responses with teachers, (c) student echo response, (d) student choral response, and (e) student partner response.

If a vocabulary word is only one syllable, then a phonemic awareness exercise is appropriate. The instructional sequence and various interactions would be the same as for *carpenter* except that the focus would be on the single sounds and manipulating the sounds. For the word, *tool,* the teacher would say the word slowly, not stopping between each sound, (/t//oo//l/). A clap would be heard for each sound.

Word Identification

Definition/Description

Reading words requires a number of word identification strategies such as phonics, onset/rimes, morphemic analysis, and contextual analysis. Phonics is a method of teaching the predicable relationship between English sounds (phonemes) and symbols (graphemes) to decode words. Phonics instruction usually occurs in the beginning stages of reading in English when students learn how sounds and letters correspond to one another and use this knowledge to read and spell. For example, when encountering the word, *fish,* students would recall the sound segments /f/ /i//sh/. Onsets and rimes are the predictable word patterns in English. The onset is a consonant or consonant cluster that precedes the rime or spelling pattern. For example, in the word, *same*, *s* is the onset and *ame* the rime. Onset and rime instruction focuses on predictable word patterns. Word building is accomplished by changing the onset to read or spell multiple words. For example, if the student knows the

rime *ack,* he or she can read and spell many new words by *manipulating the onset: back, sack, black, slack.*

Morphemic analysis is another word identification strategy employed to read unfamiliar multisyllabic words. A morpheme is the smallest word part with meaning. Prefixes, suffixes, and root words are considered morphemes. To illustrate, *regaining* has three morphemes: (a) the prefix, *re*; (b) the root word, *gain*; and (c) the suffix, *ing*. When encountering multisyllabic words, students recognize affixes and root words as an aid to word identification as well as word meaning.

Yet another word identification strategy is contextual analysis. With this strategy, students use the clues in the surrounding context to determine the unfamiliar word and its meaning. Types of clues found embedded in the context include definitions, appositives, function indicators, examples, synonyms, antonyms, and descriptions. The following sentence illustrates the use of a descriptive definition as a context clue to read the word, *neighbors:* The Perez family lived next door to the Jones family; they were *neighbors*.

Typically, the previously described word identification strategies operate automatically and in concert with one another. For example, a beginning reader in English may use phonics, onset and rime, contextual analysis, and pictures accompanying the text to read unknown word. A more mature second language reader may also draw from visuals but focus more on morphemic and contextual analysis.

Significance for Second Language Learners

Instruction in word identification strategies offers two major benefits for second language learners. To begin, it equips these learners with effective decoding strategies. Concerning phonics in particular, Denton, Antony, and Parker (2004) maintain that second language learners who receive phonics instruction as part of a comprehensive reading program usually develop stronger foundational reading skills. Continuing in this vein, Koda (1999) reports that phonics instruction should improve reading in general for adult

English language learners. Additionally, teaching word identification strategies provides an opportunity for second language learners to understand how the English language works. This is particularly helpful because of the many inconsistencies encountered when learning English.

Instructional Considerations

According to Robertson (2009), students who are literate in their native language have an advantage over students who are not. This is because similarities in learning to read transfer across languages. In this instance, teachers can help students make connections between the native language and the second language. Conversely, students who have not learned to read in their native language or students whose native language does not use a phonetic alphabet may have difficulty learning phonics. The differences in the orthography of the native language influence the degree of difficulty experienced by second language learners and the length of time required to learn to read in English (Linan-Thompson & Vaughan, 2007).

For adults most word identification strategies are better taught in conjunction with teaching vocabulary in context. Words can be systemically analyzed by using the following multi-step *Difficult Word Strategy.* This strategy has two sections. The first section is intended for second language learners in the beginning stage of learning to read in English. The second segment targets learners who are in the primary and intermediate stages of reading in English. This multi-step strategy provides for variability of strategies and reading stages. When second language learners encounter unknown words, teachers can (a) model the strategy, (b) guide second language learners as they practice the strategy and internalize the steps, and (c) monitor second language learners as they use the strategy. Once learners have internalized the strategy and its appropriate use, they can apply the strategy as they work with partners or in small groups. The steps to *The Difficult Word Strategy* are as follows:

The Difficult Word Strategy

When encountering an unknown word, students can ask the following questions:

For beginning readers:
Analyze the Word (What do I know?)
1. What sounds do I know? (phonetic analysis)
2. What parts of the word do I know? (word patterns)

Use Context (What can I use to help?)
1. Look at the pictures.
2. Take all the clues and read to the end of the sentence.
3. Does the word make sense in this sentence? (contextual analysis)

For primary and intermediate readers:
Analyze the Word (What do I know?)
1. What parts of the word do I know? (word patterns and morphemic analysis)

Use Context and Other Resources (What can I use to help?)
1. Take all the clues including any visuals and read to the end of the sentence. Does the word make sense in this sentence? (contextual analysis)
2. Use a dictionary
3. Ask someone. (Adapted from the Variability Strategy, Gunning, 2004)

Vocabulary

Definition/Description

Simply stated, vocabulary is knowledge of words and their meanings (Lehr, Osborn, & Hiebert, 2005). In reading, knowing a word involves being able to decode written text and comprehend its meaning.

Significance for Second Language Learners

Researchers and practitioners alike attest to the critical role of vocabulary in reading comprehension for both native speakers and second language learners (Blachowicz, Fisher, Ogle, & Watts-Taffe, 2006; Coady, 1997; National Reading Panel, 2000). Without sufficient vocabulary, it is impossible to successfully read for meaning.

Instructional Considerations

Second language learners often benefit from the use of cognates in learning English. A cognate is a word which is similar in both form and meaning to a word in another language that originates from the same source (Richards, Platt, & Platt, 1992). For example, the following words are cognates of the English word *adventure*: Spanish, *aventura*; Italian, *avventura*; French, *aventure*; Romanian, *aventura*, and Portuguese, *aventura.* Since cognates are similar in regard to both spelling and meaning, learners who know the Portuguese word *aventura*, for example, can draw on prior knowledge from their native language when encountering the English word *adventure* for the first time in written text. Cognates are particularly beneficial for native speakers of Romance languages, which are derived from Latin (e.g., French, Italian, Portuguese, Romanian, and Spanish). This is due to the many borrowings of Latin in the English language.

It is important to note, however, that transfer of cognate knowledge is not automatic; that is, teachers need to make learners aware of the powerful tool that is at their disposal and demonstrate how native language vocabulary knowledge can be applied in figuring out the meaning of related English words (August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005; August & Shanahan, 2008; Goldenberg, 2008). In addition, teachers and students need to recognize that not all words which appear to be similar in the native language and second language are actually cognates; some are *false cognates*. False cognates are similar in form but have different meanings, as illustrated in the pairs of Spanish/English words below:

- Spanish *bizarro* (meaning "brave") and English *bizarre* (meaning "strange")
- Spanish éxito (meaning "success") and English *exit* (meaning "departure")

These types of words can be a significant source of confusion for second language learners; therefore, it is recommended that teachers provide explicit instruction on commonly-occurring false cognates in addition to teaching cognates.

The procedure outlined below was developed by Rodriguez (2001) as a means of helping ESL students learn to identify cognates and use context clues in reading English texts. While the procedure was designed for use with native speakers of Spanish, it can be effectively implemented with learners from other language backgrounds that share cognates with English as well.

1. Have students read the text silently or aloud to a partner, and then discuss the meaning of the text with the partner. (Note: Alternatively, the read aloud and discussion can be done in a small group.)
2. Discuss the vocabulary of the text with the whole class, focusing on cognates and other words figured out through context. Have students discuss strategies or clues that they used to determine meaning. Point out common spelling patterns in the two languages (e.g., English words that end in the suffix *-tion* in English end in *-cion* in Spanish, as in *conversation* / *conversacion*).
3. Discuss grammatical differences between the two languages (such as word order and placement of adjectives) and make generalizations about English (e.g., adjectives come before the noun in English whereas they come after the noun in Spanish).
4. Read the text aloud while students follow along. Have students listen for words that they recognize orally. Note: In this step, the teacher models pronunciation, and students have the opportunity to simultaneously hear and see the words, some of which may be in their oral vocabulary.

5. Read a similar text with Germanic-based words in place of the cognates. Compare the two texts, discussing vocabulary.
6. Direct students' attention to non-cognates and other words that cannot be figured out by using context clues. Provide additional clues to help students guess the meaning; then clarify any points that remain unclear. (Rodriguez, 2001)

Fluency

Definition/Description

According to the National Reading Panel report (2000), fluency is reading accurately, quickly, and expressively. These three critical elements work together to produce fluent readers. Fluent readers recognize and comprehend words simultaneously while making sense of the text as they read.

Significance for Second Language Learners

Fluency is important to second language learners for three main reasons. First, it is the critical connection between word reading and comprehension. Second, fluency is an essential aspect of reading comprehension (Robertson, 2009). Students who labor over reading words and determining word meaning have little attention and energy left to devote to extracting meaning from the text. Lastly, fluency practice may promote increased reading achievement (Kruidenier, 2002).

Instructional Considerations

Learning to speak English first positively influences reading fluency (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Interestingly, second language learners can be fluent readers while retaining a native language accent. On this note, Atunez (2002) warns teachers against confusing fluency with accent. Fluency problems may be more common with second language learners because they are apt to have more difficulty with word meaning. Thus, second language learners may be slower readers (Linan-Thompson & Vaughn, 2007). Fluency in oral reading in adults may be made more difficult by native language interference at each level of reading, from letter-sound relationship, to stress, intonation, and rhythm (Burt, Peyton, & Van Duzer, 2010). For this reason, many second language learners need numerous opportunities to hear English read aloud. Additionally, these students require plenty of practice and support as they attempt to improve reading fluency.

Two strategies that develop fluent reading are repeated oral readings and tape-recorded readings. These strategies can be easily incorporated into an existing adult curriculum. Repeated readings involve students' rereading phrases, sentences, or designated short passages of text numerous times. The material selected for rereading should be interesting to the students and should be on their independent reading level, which means they are able to read 95% of the words accurately. With second language learners, repeated readings require teacher support through (a) modeling fluent oral reading, (b) having the students read orally with the teacher, (c) having students orally echo read, and (d) having students orally read alone accompanied by monitoring with a designated feedback routine.

The second strategy, tape-recorded readings, involves learners listening to a carefully selected recording and then reading along with the tape. One benefit of the tape recording is that students can listen to a native speaker reading and practice reading with the tape as many times as they deem necessary.

Comprehension

Definition/Description

Reading comprehension, or extracting meaning from text, is the focus of all reading engagement. Individuals must read print with fluency, possess adequate prior knowledge and vocabulary, and own and appropriately apply research-based comprehension strategies. Irvin (1986) conceptualizes comprehension as the interaction between the reader and the text; the reader activates prior knowledge and experiences in addition to drawing from clues within the text to make

meaning. To arrive at meaning, good readers intentionally interact with what they already know and activate comprehension strategies that enable them to extract meaning from text.

Significance for Second Language Learners

Second language learners who comprehend what they have read are then able to engage in verbal interactions as well as write about what they have read. This provides opportunities to use academic language and engage in higher order thinking. Both English language proficiency and content knowledge are enhanced.

Instructional Considerations

August (2003) suggests that limited word knowledge, unfamiliar language structures, and unfamiliar content affect reading comprehension for second language learners. Interestingly, unfamiliar content impedes comprehension more than unfamiliar language structure (Carrell, 1994). Because values, beliefs, experiences, and concepts vary across cultures, cultural factors may also interfere with comprehension of text (Burt, Peyton, & Van Duzer, 2010). To address linguistic barriers, Hiebert et al. (1998) suggests previewing student texts to ascertain unfamiliar critical vocabulary and language structures and then pre-teaching and discussing unfamiliar features including literal and figurative meanings. Regarding cultural factors, Burt, Peyton, and Van Durez (2010) recommend discovering what adult second language learners know, need to know, and want to know and at every opportunity building on ideas and concepts from students' cultures and experiences. Whenever possible, teachers should provide culturally familiar materials. Comprehension is enhanced for both young and adult learners when they read culturally familiar content (August, 2003).

Conclusion

The five areas of reading addressed in this article

(phonological awareness/phonemic awareness, word study/phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension) are foundational components of the reading process. For native speakers and second language learners alike, the skills underlying each of these areas are critical to reading success. It is important to note that some learners, particularly those with a literacy foundation in their native language, will benefit primarily from targeted instruction in specific areas of difficulty. To that end, the recommendations and strategies presented here are designed to be easily integrated with existing instruction and curriculum. The content of this article can serve as a resource for teachers who desire to more effectively address the reading challenges of the ever-increasing population of low-literacy adult second language learners.

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