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ABSTRACT

An adult literacy course at Harvard University's Extension School trains professionals and volunteers who teach reading to adults. This 1-semester course consists of weekly lectures and workshops along with a supervised practicum. Students need not be accepted into a degree program to enroll. Clients are self-referrals who pay no fees. Students are provided with an effective strategy to use when teaching an adult to read. Each student applies this strategy while working directly with an adult client in closely supervised tutoring sessions. The strategy consists of a cycle that includes assessing an adult's reading abilities, using this assessment to develop a profile of the adult's strengths and needs, using the profile to develop an effective instructional plan, and using instruction to gain additional information as part of assessment. Each aspect of the teaching process is guided by knowledge of the reading process (components) and what is known about the way in which reading develops (levels). Students first participate in workshops and lectures during which they are introduced to the concepts and strategies. Once tutoring begins, the course consists of one lecture or workshop along with two tutoring sessions each week. (15 references) (YLB)

Objectives and Content of a Course for Professional and Volunteer Teachers of Adults

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Introduction

A recent survey of adult literacy centers found that community programs teaching reading to adults needed more adequately trained literacy teachers and volunteers, more appropriate methods for evaluating their adult clients, and more teaching materials designed specifically for adults (Chall, Hillferty, and Heron, 1987). As a result of this survey, an Adult Literacy course was established to provide training for professionals and volunteers who teach reading. This one-semester course consists of weekly lectures and workshops along with a supervised practicum. The major course goal is to provide students with an effective strategy to use when teaching an adult to read. Before describing this strategy, it will be useful to first describe the students who take the course and the adults they teach.

Description of Students and Clients

Students

As I just mentioned, an important goal for the Adult Literacy course is to offer training for adult literacy professionals and volunteers in the local area. For this reason, the course is offered through a university's Extension School[1] where there are no school-wide entrance requirements and where students need not be accepted into a degree program to enroll. To make the course even more accessible, full tuition scholarships are offered to those involved in local literacy centers.

In the five semesters that the course has been offered, 97 students enrolled for credit. Questionnaires administered periodically

indicated that about one-half of the students had some teaching experience before entering the course. About three-fourths of these had some professional experience while the remaining one-fourth had experience as volunteers. All students except three either held undergraduate or graduate degrees or were enrolled in a degree program. Of the three who did not have college degrees, two were high school students.

On average, students taking the course were 37 years-old, ranging from 18 to 60 years. About one fourth were undergraduate or graduate students at various colleges and universities in the area. The remainder were employed in a wide variety of occupations: teacher, retired nurse and librarian, writer, editor, school administrator, business manager, hospital research associate, photographer, accountant, warehouse supervisor, homemaker, and so on.

Clients

Clients entering the course were all self-referrals who paid no fees. They learned of the course through local literacy centers, public service announcements, or from others who had taken the course. A client was accepted into the program if it was determined, using a phone-administered questionnaire, that a significant reading problem existed. We asked prospective clients what they could read (newspapers, magazines, product labels, and so on), what difficulties they had while reading, and whether or not they had received help for their reading in the past.

Approximately one-fourth of the clients served were ESL (English was their second language). First languages of these ESL clients

included, for example, Spanish, Portuguese, Korean, Japanese, French, Armenian, and Thai. The average age of all clients was 32 years, ranging from 22 to 56. They had, on average, 11 to 12 years of schooling. All had at least a seventh grade education. A majority of ESL clients and a few non-ESL clients had attended college.

Clients' occupations were as diverse as those of their student tutors. Most held good positions, although a few were unemployed. A sampling of their occupations includes: homemaker, librarian's assistant, welder, president and general manager of a large company, refrigeration engineer, building superintendent, city maintenance worker, fireman, painting contractor, sales clerk, supervisor (at a factory, in a service agency, and in a city transportation agency), custodian, machine operator, and landscaper.

As this list of occupations implies, virtually all clients were reasonably intelligent and articulate adults. From casual conversation, one would not suspect that they had a severe reading problem. Most non-ESL clients, however, did have a learning disability in reading. Some had previously been diagnosed as learning disabled. Most others had a severe discrepancy between their reading ability and their potential (as measured by oral vocabulary tests).

Chall, Heron, and Hilferty (1987, see Figure 1) identify three levels of literacy: Level I is the illiterate or beginning level, and

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Insert Figure 1 here

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includes those reading is below the fourth grade level, Level II is

the functional level, (those reading from the fourth through the eighth grade level), and Level III is the advanced level (those reading at the ninth grade level and above). Despite their years of schooling, about one-half of the clients were at Level I when they entered the course, based on a measure of their ability to read connected text (the Gray Oral Reading Test). Only a few were at Level III (or reading above the ninth grade level).

What the Course Teaches: An Approach to Assessment and Instruction

As the above descriptions of students and clients indicate, the Adult Literacy Course has included students with very diverse backgrounds and adult clients at various levels of literacy development. To meet our goal of training literacy professionals and volunteers, the course must provide a diverse group of students with the knowledge needed to teach adults at various levels of development in their reading.

Students in the course are presented with a strategy to use when teaching reading to an adult. They are shown how this approach or strategy is derived from what is currently known about the reading process (from current reading research and theory).

Each student applies this strategy while working directly with an adult client in closely supervised tutoring sessions. An overview of the strategy and major concepts taught in the course is presented in Figure 2[2]. The strategy consists of a cycle that includes assessing an

Insert Figure 2 here

adult's reading abilities, using this assessment to develop a profile of the adult's strengths and needs, and using the profile to develop an effective instructional plan. Instruction, in part, can be used to gain additional information and thus becomes a form of assessment. Each of these aspects of the teaching process is guided by our knowledge of the reading process (components) and what we know about the way in which reading develops (levels like those presented in Figure 1).

During the first two and one-half weeks of the course, before beginning to tutor their adult clients, students participate in a series of lectures and workshops. During these lectures and workshops, lasting for a total of three hours each week, students are introduced to the concepts and strategies outlined in Figure 1.

Students learn, first of all, that reading is a process made up of several identifiable components: isolated word recognition and analysis, word recognition in context, meaning vocabulary, and silent reading comprehension (Chall and Curtis, 1988; Chall and Curtis, in press; Perfetti and Curtis, 1987). Students also learn that adults with reading problems may be at different levels of reading development: a beginning level, a functional level, or an advanced level as I discussed earlier (Chall, Heron, and Hilferty, 1987).

These notions of components and levels can be used to guide the assessment-profile-plan cycle. The components, for example, tell us what aspects of reading it is useful to assess. An estimate of an adult's reading level, obtained from early discussions with the adult, can also help us decide what tests we want to use.

During the workshops at the beginning of the course, students are given practice in the administration, scoring, and interpretation of the tests used to assess the various aspects of reading.

To assess word recognition and analysis, students are taught to use two simple and direct measures. The reading subtest of the Wide Range Achievement Test or WRAT (Jastak and Wilkinson, 1984) contains a list of words that gradually increases in difficulty and is used to measure an adult client's ability to recognize regularly and irregularly spelled words. If the client scores below the fourth grade level on the WRAT, the Roswell-Chall Diagnostic Reading Test of Word Analysis Skills (Roswell & Chall, 1978) is used to assess fundamental knowledge of phonics: recognition and production of single consonants, consonant blends and digraphs, vowels and vowel digraphs, and polysyllabic words.

Oral reading of connected text is assessed using the Gray Oral Reading Test (Gray, 1963), which has clients read short passages of increasing difficulty. Vocabulary knowledge and silent reading comprehension are measured with either the ABLE (Adult Basic Learning Exam, Karlsen & Gardner, 1986) or the Gates MacGinitie Reading Test (MacGinitie, 1978). These use multiple choice formats to measure knowledge of word meanings and the ability to answer questions about passages of varying difficulty.

At lower levels of the ABLE and Gates, vocabulary tests are given orally. Oral tests, unlike silent reading tests, do not require a client to read and are therefore used as measures of a client's potential. They indicate what a client's vocabulary level is

independent of reading ability. In order to obtain measures of potential for all students, not just those at the beginning levels of literacy, we use the vocabulary subtest of the DARTS (Diagnostic Assessments of Reading with Teaching Strategies; Roswell and Chall, in preparation).

In addition to these formal tests, students may also informally assess other aspects of their clients' reading and language, such as interests and goals related to reading, or writing ability.

Once tutoring begins, the course consists of one two-hour lecture or workshop along with two one-hour tutoring sessions each week. Students are observed frequently as they teach and keep a journal in which they record each session's lesson plan and results. Interaction between the instructors and students occurs regularly through journal comments, conferences, and small group discussions.

The weekly lecture or workshop is used to present various aspects of the reading process in more detail, including instructional activities and materials related to each component. It is also used to discuss more general issues, such as teaching ESL clients, and to provide students with the opportunity to discuss each others' clients and to share assessment results and lesson plans. Initially however, as students are testing their clients, the lectures focus on developing profiles and lesson plans from assessment results.

Assessment is used to development a profile of an adult's strengths, weaknesses, and interests in terms of components. This profile helps to answer questions like the following: Which aspects of reading is the adult best at? Which need the most work? What

additional information has assessment given us about the adult's level of reading development? What does the adult want to be able to read?

Grade level equivalents from tests form an important part of the profile. They enable comparisons to be made across tests and reading components and also provide a first approximation of the reading level of materials to be used during instruction. Grade level scores are more likely to indicate the appropriate level of instruction than are results expressed, for example, in percentiles or stanines (Chall, Curtis, and Fletcher, in preparation).

Two simplified profiles, one ESL and one non-ESL, are presented in Figure 3. I am calling these profiles "simplified profiles" because the actual profiles developed by students in the course include other information as well, such as client interests and other relevant background information, analyses of individual test items, additional test results, and so on.

Insert Figure 3 here

Looking first at the adult whose native language is English (the non-ESL adult), we see that her major strength is knowledge of word meanings (she scored at the 8th grade level on the DARTS). This oral vocabulary score indicates that she should be able to understand text written at the 8th grade level of difficulty. Her major areas of weakness are isolated word recognition and word recognition in context (WRAT score of 3B, beginning 3rd grade level, and a Gray score of 2). Weaknesses in these areas seem to be keeping her silent vocabulary and

comprehension scores down around the 3rd or 4th grade level.

The major difference between the ESL and non-ESL client lies in the vocabulary score. The ESL client, new to the English language, does not have a well developed vocabulary (DARTS score of 4). She does, however, seem to be strong in word recognition in context (Gray score of 5). Unlike the non-ESL adult, her strengths seem to be in the more mechanical aspects of reading.

This is supported by the results of a phonics test given to both students. The ESL client, while scoring at the same level on the WRAT as the non-ESL client, had nevertheless mastered more aspects of fundamental phonics.

Using the profile along with knowledge of a client's interests and goals, students next develop a preliminary or general lesson plan (see Figure 2). The components provide an orginizational framework for this plan, just as they do for assessment. A typical 60 minute lesson consists of a series of about 4 activities, including at least one activity related to each component of the reading process so that neither weaknesses nor strengths are neglected. The general plan also includes the reading levels of materials that will be used with various activities, particularly those texts used for oral reading and silent reading comprehension activities. These materials will often include reading material that the client has expressed an interest in, such as material related to work, politics, or children.

Care is taken to assure that we use materials that are at an appropriate level of difficulty. If reading material is too hard, the adult may become frustrated and have difficulty seeing any progress.

If material is too easy, the adult will not be challenged.

The general plan is revised in discussions with the instructors and other students. Attention is focused on relating the profile of strengths and weaknesses to the types of activities suggested, the ordering of activities, their length, and the type and level of difficulty of any reading materials.

The more specific lesson plan that results is used during the initial or "trial" lessons that follow testing. Trial lessons are used to confirm results from the initial assessment and to try out various activities, materials, and methods with the client (Chall and Curtis, in press; Roswell and Natchez, 1989). The lesson plan that results is modified further during the semester as a client's needs change. Instruction then becomes, in part, another form of assessment that can lead to a more complete profile, which in turn can lead to a better plan.

Students keep detailed records of tutoring sessions so that they and their supervisors can continually evaluate and modify the reading instruction that an individual adult receives. These records are also used by the supervisors and course instructor to identify methods and materials that are especially effective with adults in general.

End of the semester tests, similar to those administered at the beginning, and tutor and client observations are used to measure client progress.

Conclusion and Implications

We have found that both professionals and volunteers can learn to use this approach to reading instruction, and that their adult clients

will experience qualitative as well as measurable gains in their reading ability. Non-ESL adult clients in the course, despite severe reading problems, have averaged over one year's growth in reading ability in roughly 20 hours of instruction. This compares favorably with progress reported in other adult literacy programs we are aware of, where one year of growth in reading requires 50 to 100 hours of instruction (Holmes, 1982; Mikulecky, 1989). ESL clients in our course, who presumably do not have any severe reading disabilities, have gained close to two years with 20 hours of instruction.

Not all clients make progress, but we have found that clients at all levels of literacy development, even those at the beginning of Level 1 in the three-level conception of literacy development, can make progress. And those who are able to stay in the lab for more than one semester can continue to make progress. We have seen adults begin at Level 1 and progress through Level 2 reading materials to the beginning of Level 3.

In addition to client test scores, informal observations of tutoring sessions also indicated that students were able to identify their clients strengths and needs and use this information to develop and implement effective instructional plans. Follow-up surveys have shown that many students who took the course are now using their skills as tutors and teachers in adult literacy centers and, in some cases, have established their own programs in local libraries and churches.

In conclusion, we have found that the Adult Literacy Course can provide professional and volunteer teachers with an effective strategy

for teaching reading to adults.

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Footnotes

[1] Harvard University's Extension School.

[2] This approach is based on one developed in the Harvard Reading Laboratory by Dr. Chall and her colleagues over the past 25 years and, more recently, by Dr. Curtis.

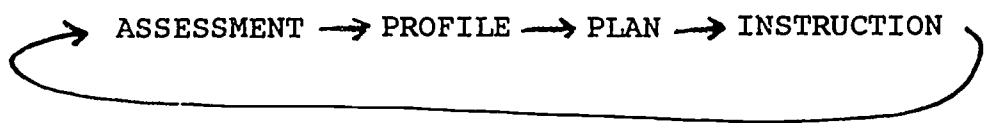
Figure 1

Levels in the development of literacy in adults, adapted from Chall, Heron, and Hilferty (1987).

Level	Grade	Able to read	Task
1 Beginning Literacy	0 - 3/4	simplest signs, labels, instructions	learn basic reading skills
2 Functional Literacy	4 - 8	simple signs, application forms, labels; easy instructional materials; local news in daily paper; simpler articles in magazines like Reader's Digest	learn to use reading as tool for acquiring knowledge and information
3 Advanced Literacy	9 - 12	high school material	develop vocabulary, concepts, and cultural knowledge in order to understand texts at advanced levels

Figure 2

Overview of approach taught to students: Using components and levels in the assessment-profile-plan cycle



COMPONENTS

Isolated word recognition
and word analysis
Word Recognition in Context
Meaning Vocabulary
Silent Reading Comprehension

LEVELS

Beginning Literacy
Functional Literacy
Advanced Literacy

Figure 3

Two Simplified Profiles

	Grade level scores	
	Non-ESL	ESL
Isolated Word Recognition (WRAT)	3B	3B
Word Recognition in Context (GRAY Oral)	2	5
Word Meaning -- silent (ABLE)	3.4	4.0
Word Meaning -- oral (DARTS)	8	4
Silent Comprehension (ABLE)	4.8	4.1