



NetNews

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GED Learners

GED (General Educational Development) learners are a diverse group – just like ABE (Adult Basic Education) and ESL (English as a second language) learners. The one thing GED learners have in common is their need or desire to pass official GED testing and receive their GED diploma. Having the equivalent of a high school diploma allows them to apply for a wider variety of jobs, receive job promotion, enroll in post-secondary settings, join the military, and/or earn more money during their lifetime. For some, passing the GED tests closes the door on a history of defeat and failure and allows them to move ahead personally.

GED learners often have reading difficulties that interfere with GED preparation, motivation, and persistence.

However, achieving the goal of passing all five GED tests is not easy for some GED learners who have not been successful in school settings. Their academic difficulties, behavioral problems, inconsistent or limited high school attendance, negative school experiences, and other interfering factors likely mean they do not have GED level (9th-12th grade) skills – especially in the area of reading.

GED learners with reading difficulties frequently have related problems with motivation and persistence. They might complain:

- “I can’t read a lot of the words.”
- “I can’t understand what I read.”
- “I can’t remember what I read”.
- “This is too hard.”
- “This is boring.”
- “ I don’t like social studies, science, literature, math, writing, etc.”

This combination of reading, motivation, and persistence problems can be very challenging for GED instructors. Many of them have shared these challenges through referral for LDA’s assessment or prescriptive tutoring services or during LDA’s “Reading to Learn” practitioner circles based on *The Adult Reading Toolkit (The ART)*.

During the past three years of the Minnesota Practitioner Reading Research Project, several participants have centered their practitioner research study around reading difficulties experienced by their GED learners. Reports from 2004 and 2005 can be accessed from the website: http://ltn.themlc.org/Evidence-based_Practice.html

Reading difficulty is an all too common problem faced by both GED learners and instructors – not only in Minnesota, but around the nation.



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Reading Research and the GED

The *Adult Reading Component Study (ARCS)* at www.nifl.gov/readingprofiles, conducted by John Strucker and Rosalind Davidson from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, determined that “many ABE students below the GED level have reading skills similar to those of children at risk for reading difficulty.” They continue to have word recognition or decoding problems and their fluency and reading comprehension seem to have “stalled” at intermediate or middle school levels (4th-8th grade). This results in limited development of age-appropriate vocabulary and background knowledge. They need help with improving reading skills, passing the test, and building skills for post-secondary education.

Implications for practice from the *ARCS* included the following:

1. Beginning students need direct, systematic, and sequential instruction in word recognition skills.
2. Intermediate level students need to increase fluency using oral reading.
3. Intermediate level students also need to develop better vocabulary and background knowledge.

These implications are all addressed extensively in the six chapters of *The ART*. Chapters 1-3 provide strategies and materials for teaching beginning to intermediate word recognition skills; Chapter 4 focuses on fluency training for all levels; and Chapter 5 provides ideas for improving vocabulary.

But how does the reading research apply specifically to GED preparation? On the following pages are four “GED-specific” strategies piloted with ABE learners with reading difficulties, several of whom wanted or needed their GED. A pilot prescriptive reading tutoring service was provided by LDA during FY 2006. Participating ABE learners received 10-12 sessions of individualized tutoring, following which a prescriptive plan for reading instruction was determined and shared with the ABE program.

These GED-specific strategies were successful in improving word recognition, vocabulary, and fluency using informal assessment and authentic pre-GED materials matched to the learners’ actual reading levels.

Strategies for GED Preparation

Strategy One: Using informal assessment

Informal assessment includes the use of “teacher friendly,” public domain, or non-standardized testing or survey tools to determine strengths and weaknesses in specific reading skills. Informal assessment would be *in addition* to required CASAS or TABE testing, which measure silent reading comprehension for reporting purposes.

Using informal assessment tools can:

- (1) identify word analysis or decoding skills
- (2) identify word reading levels
- (3) determine reading rates
- (4) determine general or specific vocabulary development
- (5) engage learners in self-assessment

The *Quick Adult Reading Inventory (QARI)* was used with several learners. This is a word reading test that can be freely downloaded from the *ARCS* website, printed, and copied. It has two forms, A and B, for pre and post-testing. Each form has five word lists that range in grade equivalents from 1 to 10. The *QARI* provides data on word reading level, the need for decoding instruction, and learner progress in word reading skills. Other informal assessment ideas are described in *The ART* and available from the *ARCS* website.

One GED learner demonstrated a two year gain in word reading skills after 12 sessions of tutoring at LDA and participation in ABE classes. She was thrilled with this progress and was actually looking forward to the next round of TABE testing at her ABE site! She felt like she had accomplished something and was motivated to continue working from authentic pre-GED materials matched to her actual word reading level.

Strategy Two: Providing decoding and vocabulary instruction

Reading research supports providing flexible decoding strategies for breaking down multi-syllable words into base words, prefixes, and suffixes. It is also recommended that words for instruction and practice be selected from classroom material.

Steck-Vaughn *Building Strategies* (reading levels 4-6) and *Pre-GED* (reading levels 5-8) workbooks were used with several GED learners during tutoring. Their word reading levels as measured by the *QARI* were well below a high school level. It was determined that they would be much more successful working from these materials and then scaffolding later to GED materials.

Prior to each lesson, 10-12 relevant and high frequency words were selected for decoding and vocabulary instruction. Some of them were bold-faced words from the text; others were not, but most appeared in both pre-GED and GED level materials.

For example, from *Pre-GED Social Studies*, Lesson 6 – “The Cold War and the Vietnam War”, the following word list was selected:

government
democracy
communism
containment
South Vietnam
North Vietnam
Viet Cong
guerilla
civilian
draft
deferment
protest

These words were selected because they seemed relevant to the lesson topic. They were divided into syllables, prefixes, and suffixes as needed. Simple meanings were provided. If other forms of words seemed appropriate to discuss (such as democratic or Vietnamese), they were included in the word study – although limited to just a few more words. **Pre-teaching key GED words seemed to instill more interest in American history as well as in the GED lesson!**

Strategy Three: Developing background knowledge

Before the introduction of new vocabulary words, the question was always asked: “What do you know about _____?” The purpose was to establish prior knowledge, a strategy strongly supported by research for improving reading comprehension and learner motivation. However, more than once, the GED learners had very limited background knowledge in American history. They either did not know or could not recall information about the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, the Industrial Revolution, or World War II.

This lack of knowledge, but strong interest in movies and videos, led to weekly discussions about DVDs to rent to build historical vocabulary and background knowledge. We often did a Google search to create a list of possible videos. Although this would be Hollywood’s version of history, it at least gave them a sense of the time and place, if not completely accurate information. Another suggestion – if they have cable access – would be to watch the History or Nature channels to improve historical or scientific background knowledge.

Below is a short list of typical GED time periods and related movies for rental:

Establishing Colonies

The New World, Last of the Mohicans

The American Revolution

The Patriot, 1776, Revolution

The Civil War

Glory, Cold Mountain

World War II

Saving Private Ryan, Pearl Harbor, Schindler’s List

The learners often wanted to discuss their movie viewing prior to beginning the next lesson. This “homework” also seemed to facilitate more interest in American history and family-related history.

Strategy Four: Including oral reading

Fluency, or the ability to read text with speed, accuracy, and expression, is considered the bridge between learning to read and reading to learn. Fluency training using guided repeated oral reading is appropriate for all levels of reading. The focus at beginning levels is on rate; at intermediate or advanced levels it is on prosody, or reading with rhythm and expression.

Fluency training was incorporated into all reading tutoring. For lower level readers, *Read Naturally* (www.readnaturally.com) stories seemed to be the most appropriate. Mostly nature stories about animals, plants, or events, they begin at a .8 phonics level and progress to 8.0 level. The stories tend not to be childish and provide even low beginners with contextual reading. **Several non-readers working their way through the consonants and short vowels have been thrilled with their ability to read short stories from the .8 phonics level series!**

For GED learners, sections from previously completed pre-GED lessons were selected for oral reading practice. They were first modeled by the instructor for speed, accuracy, and expression. Then they were read aloud by the learners with correction as needed. Another source of GED fluency material was summaries of lessons written by the learner and instructor. For example, below is an excerpt from the summary of Lesson 1 – “Native and New Americans”, from Steck-Vaughn *Pre-GED Social Studies*:

“The United States is made up of many immigrants or people born in another country who have moved here to live and work. It is believed that the first immigrants walked to North America from Asia. They are known as Native Americans. Beginning in the 1400s, explorers from European countries such as England, France, Spain, and Portugal came to The New World looking for land and riches. They were followed by missionaries who came to spread the Christian religion. In the early 1600s, many Europeans settled in North America for land and freedom. The first colony or settlement was in Jamestown, Virginia...”

Continuing LDA supplemental services grant activities

- If you have learners experiencing significant difficulties in reading, writing, or math and you suspect a learning disability, contact Mike Anderson at ma@ldaminnesota.org or 952-922-8374 for information on **LD assessment**. This statewide service is free for any ABE program or adult learner! It includes screening, intellectual and achievement testing, scoring, interpreting, and reporting. If the learner meets GED criteria for testing accommodations, it also includes completion of the GED request form.
- If you have any **questions about learning difficulties**, learning disabilities, assessment, or adult reading instruction, please contact Marn Frank (mf@ldaminnesota.org) or Mike Anderson for a free consultation.
- If you have **questions about ADHD**, contact Becky Lawyer, LDA’s new ADHD specialist, at bl@ldaminnesota.org.
- If you would like a copy of *The Adult Reading Toolkit - Edition 4*, email Marn (mf@ldaminnesota.org) and include your mailing address.

