What Science has taught us about instructional goals in reading for adults

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Topics for this presentation:

1. What are the primary causes of poor reading skills in adults?

2. What should be the “targets” of instruction to improve literacy in adults?

3. How can we work most efficiently to increase reading skills in adults?
Primary causes of poor reading in adults

1. May have a learning disability such as dyslexia – received insufficiently powerful instruction—got off to a very poor start and never recovered.

2. May have entered school with very poor preparation for learning to read, and been “left behind” because of inadequate instruction—got of to a very poor start and never recovered.

3. May not have valued literacy, may have attended school sporadically, might have generally low learning ability – received insufficiently powerful instruction, got off to a poor start and never recovered.
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What skills are required to be a good reader?

Reliable strategies for identifying unknown words in text

Phonemic analysis - “phonics”

Other analytic strategies

Guessing from the context
What skills are required to be a good reader?

Anyone who is still learning to read has very frequent encounters with words they have never seen before in print.

Unless they have been taught how to "decipher" these unknown words, they will be frustrated by making too many errors, and they will not become fluent readers.
After reviewing recent educational, psychological, linguistic, and neurobiological research on reading, 5 eminent scientists recently concluded:

“From all these different perspectives, two inescapable conclusions emerge. The first is that mastering the alphabetic principle is essential to becoming proficient in the skill of reading....”

(Rayner, et al., 2001)

3rd Grade passage

_______the middle ______, it was the ______for a _________ to wear his full set of ______ whenever he ________ in _________ - even in times of_______! When a _________ believed he was _________ friends, he would ________ his _________. This _______ of ______________ showed that the ______ felt _________ and safe.
During the middle ages, it was the custom for a knight to wear his full set of armor whenever he appeared in public - even in times of peace! When a knight believed he was among friends, he would remove his helmet. This symbol of friendship showed that the knight felt welcome and safe.
Facts about reading from scientific research:

The most efficient way to make an “accurate first guess” of the identity of a new word is:

First, do phonemic analysis and try an approximate pronunciation.

Then, close in on the exact right word by selecting a word with the right sounds in it, that also makes sense in the passage.
What skills are required to be a good reader?

Reliable strategies for identifying unknown words in text

Must know many thousands of words “by sight” to be a fluent reader
What is a “sight word”? 

“Sight words include any word that readers have practiced reading sufficiently often to be read from memory” (Ehri, 2002))

Adults must correctly pronounce words 5-10 times before they become “sight words”

To be a fluent reader, an adult must be able to recognize most of the words in a passage “by sight”
These are interesting and challenging times for anyone whose professional responsibilities are related in any way to literacy outcomes among school children. For, in spite of all our new knowledge about reading and reading instruction, there is a widespread concern that public education is not as effective as it should be in teaching all children to read.
The report of the National Research Council pointed out that these concerns about literacy derive not from declining levels of literacy in our schools but rather from recognition that the demands for high levels of literacy are rapidly accelerating in our society.
What skills are required to be a good reader?

Reliable strategies for identifying unknown words in text

Must know many thousands of words “by sight” to be a fluent reader

Must know the meanings of many thousands of words
Important facts about difference in vocabulary

First-grade children from higher SES groups know about twice as many words as lower SES children.

High school seniors near the top of their class knew about four times as many words as their lower performing classmates.

High-knowledge third graders have vocabularies about equal to lowest-performing 12th graders.

Individual differences in vocabulary have a powerful impact on reading comprehension beginning about third grade.
If the goal is to attain proficient reading skills, then vocabulary instruction will be a challenge. There are 26 letters to learn, 44 phonemes to worry about, and 8,400 root words to know by 5th grade. Because of their age and experience, most adults will know most of the words in the text they are reading up until about 4th-5th grade level—when reading vocabulary diverges dramatically from spoken vocabulary.
What skills are required to be a good reader?

Reliable strategies for identifying unknown words in text

Must know many thousands of words "by sight" to be a fluent reader

Must know the meanings of many thousands of words

Must know how to "think" while reading – reading strategies
Comprehension Strategies

- Thinking activities that are used to increase comprehension or repair it when it breaks down
What must we teach adults if we want them to become good readers?

1. We must teach them the knowledge and skills required to identify unknown words in text.

2. We must help them learn to accurately recognize many thousands of words “at a single glance.”

3. We must help them to understand the meanings of the words they will be encountering in their reading material.

4. We must help them to “think about meaning” at the same time they are identifying the words, so they can comprehend.
Do adults really need to learn to read in the same way that young children do?

Our best answer to the question at present is YES.

In order to become skilled readers, adults need to learn the same set of skills and knowledge that are required for reading growth in children.

However, adults come to us with many different goals and levels of skill, so we need to have individualized plans.
Goals for adult literacy instruction

I want to read to my children....
I want to be able to read the bible....
I want to go to technical school.....
I want to read the newspaper.....
I want to not have to depend on my wife to read my manuals for me.....
I want to get my GED.....
What are the most serious challenges faced by adults who have not yet acquired good reading skills?

1. They still do not understand how letters are used to represent the sounds in words and cannot reliably "decode" print accurately.

2. Their reading is so slow and labored that they do not enjoy reading, and they have difficulty concentrating on the meaning of what they read.

3. Their background knowledge and vocabulary are so limited that it is hard for them to understand what they read.
No matter what the goal, we want them to be able to read with reasonable accuracy.

If they are extremely weak in phonics – we need to identify what they don’t know and teach it to them.

Phonographix, Lindamood

If they have 3rd- 4th grade skills, we need to teach them how to attack multisyllable words and apply word analysis in context.

The DISSECT strategy- Strategies
  Intervention Model
Word Identification Strategy

- **D**iscover the context
- **I**solate the prefix
- **S**eparate the suffix
- **S**ay the stem
- **E**xamine the stem
- **C**heck with someone
- **T**ry the dictionary
Do we need to teach phonemic awareness as an oral language skill to adults to prepare them for “phonics”?

Probably not

Except in extreme cases of phonological disability (dyslexia), adults should be able to acquire phonemic awareness through good phonics instruction.
If we want them to read more fluently, we must help them to read more words “by sight”

Learning to read lots of words “at a single glance”

Focused practice with words from the 1,000 most frequent – “Teacher’s Book of Lists”

Focused practice with words from the kind of texts they will be reading

Repeated, timed reading of phrases and paragraphs from the texts they will be reading
If we want them to read more complex text with understanding….

Teach vocabulary and reading strategies

Bringing Words to Life
Isabel Beck
M. McKeown
L. Kucan
Guilford Press
Big ideas from “Bringing Words to Life”

Research has discovered much more powerful ways of teaching vocabulary than are typically used in classrooms.

A “robust” approach to vocabulary instruction involves directly explaining the meanings of words along with thought-provoking, playful, interactive follow-up.
Helping adults to increase their reading comprehension using research-based strategies

Before Reading
- Activate prior knowledge
- Preview headings

During Reading
- Visual imagery
- Comprehension monitoring

After Reading
- Summarize in own words
- Ask clarifying questions
The “Paragraph Shrinking” activity

Learning to identify and state the main idea

1. Name the who or what (the main person, animal, place, or thing the selection is about)

2. Tell the most important thing about the who or what

3. Say the main idea in 10 words or less
What can we expect from high quality interventions with adults?

Most should be able to acquire beginning word analysis strategies relatively quickly (15-60 hrs), depending on where they start, which will increase their reading accuracy and independence.

Reading fluency will take longer to acquire, and will depend a lot on their willingness to practice.

Comprehension will increase as their reading accuracy and fluency grows, and will also be helped as they learn to think actively while they read.
A concluding thought....

There is no evidence for a biological “critical period” in the development of reading skills that makes it harder for adults to learn than children.

However, we all know that it will take steady determination and sufficient time and practice for illiterate adults to become fluent readers.

If we will work with focus and determination to apply new knowledge about reading to our work with adults, we will find ever increasing levels of success.
The End

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