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Never Too Old: A How-To Guide for Developing Adult Readers' Oral Reading Skills

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A Different World

"I listen very close and ask questions because I don't read as good as other people," said James, a 30-year-old living in Houston, Texas. He can read sight words, but multisyllabic words present obstacles; thus, James is classified as functionally illiterate. He possesses a wealth of worldly knowledge acquired from storytelling, K–12 schooling, and experiential learning, but he struggles in his attempts to pronounce unknown words, read in phrases, read with expression, and comprehend. No one knows this better than James, as he hastily quips, "I get so upset that I could pull my hair out. Even my 9-year-old daughter can read better than me!" The gravity of his situation is overbearing; he is ashamed of his literacy proficiencies, or lack thereof, and gets easily frustrated when his family and friends offer to help. The daily tasks that most take for granted (e.g., using the computer, a smartphone, and other electronic devices) present challenges for him to communicate with his family, friends, and coworkers. Now with a 6-month-old child, he feels compelled once and for all to seize the day and become a better reader.

James's motivation to read is apparent, but his previous failures lead him to use defeatist language when describing his abilities, not to mention his trepidation of reading aloud around others; he is ashamed that he is 30 years old and has yet to master the ever changing literacy demands of society today (Kirsch, 2001). What he needs is a model for improvement, one that is tailored to his adult needs and considerations and capitalizes on his wealth of knowledge and lived experiences.

A Lack of Literature Related to Adult Literacy

If we are serious about empowerment and addressing diverse needs, then adult literacy warrants further attention. Although it was listed on the annual What's Hot, What's Not survey in 2009–2011— a survey in which expert panelists indicate those topics that are currently receiving attention in the field of literacy and those that are not—adult literacy has not recently been deemed a hot item and was dropped from the list entirely after three years (Cassidy, Grote-Garcia, & Ortlieb, 2015; Cassidy, Ortlieb, & Grote-Garcia, 2016). Relatively little research has been published on the topic compared with childhood or adolescent literacy (Kruidenier, 2002; Venezky, Oney, Sabatini, & Jain, 1998). But why? A multitude of rationales prevail, including how funding bodies have targeted early prevention within childhood and elementary years' literacy development.

Research Funding

A substantial amount of federal funding is directed toward early literacy development, as evidenced by Head Start programs at an annual cost of $6 billion (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2008). These preschool programs aim to prevent reading and writing difficulties from manifesting in the later grades, but their effectiveness varies, creating disparities in literacy performance for diverse learners.

In the middle and high school years, a greater focus is on deeper learning and advanced literacy skills in this Common Core era (Hiebert & Pearson, 2012). The latest results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (Kena et al., 2016) indicate lower literacy scores in eighth-grade students than in 2013 and no statistical change since 1992. It is clear that literacy struggles persist and may even become more daunting as students' progress through the upper grade levels before eventually becoming at risk for dropping out of

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school altogether. In turn, such underserved students can enter adulthood without sufficient literacy skills to navigate their social and career contexts. A guide to understanding and addressing adult literacy needs in the 21st century is long overdue.

One Instructional Approach for Adult Literacy Success

In the elementary grades, researchers often equate proficient reading with adultlike reading (Miller & Schwanenflugel, 2008; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000; Rasinski, 2010). Thus, researchers have implied that reading like an adult is the goal of reading. We know, of course, that reading comprehension is the ultimate goal of reading, but this notion of adultlike reading intrigues us, perhaps because it can potentially shape instructional approaches for adult literacy success. So, what is adultlike reading?

Educators and researchers assess adultlike reading by listening to students read aloud. Miller and Schwanenflugel (2008) reported that students who read with adultlike prosody in first and second grades could better comprehend text by the end of third grade. Researchers in adult literacy (Kruidenier, 2002) also consider fluent readers to be more proficient, assessed through oral renderings that are characterized by automatic and expressive oral renderings of text. We can then use the traditional constituents of reading fluency—word recognition accuracy, reading automaticity, and prosody—as objectives for adult learners.

Accuracy and automaticity in word recognition are crucial for reading success (Kruidenier, 2002; NICHD, 2000). Because accurate and automatic readers spend less time and energy on word recognition, their cognitive resources are allocated to higher order processes such as comprehension, a relationship that manifested in automaticity theory (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974). The theory posits that automatic readers have an advantage over nonautomatic readers (i.e., readers who laboriously move through text) in that their automatic and swift word recognition serves as the foundation for reading comprehension. The theory, indeed, has merit and implications for all readers, including adults. When considering interventions and instruction for an adult population that Sticht (1988) found primed for improvement, the methods should increase accuracy and bolster reading automaticity.

Hyatt (1943) described fluent reading as pleasing oral discourse. Decades later, however, prosodic reading was considered necessary for reading development

and is often used to assess reading proficiency. Because the hallmark of fluent reading is the ability to read aloud prosodically, Schwanenflugel, Hamilton, Wisenbaker, Kuhn, and Stahl (2004) recruited adults to create an adult prosodic profile used to assess second and third graders. The results suggested that young students whose reading more closely matched the adult profile were also more highly skilled in other aspects of reading (i.e., automaticity and accuracy) than those students who read less like the adult profile.

Moreover, both formally and informally, adult reading proficiency is often assessed by oral reading fluency. We adhere to Allington's (2011) recommendation that we should meet readers where they are developmentally with age-appropriate instruction. Because our goal is to produce fluent adult readers, we narrow our discussion of methods here to those that promote fluent oral reading.

Reading Fluency Instruction and Intervention

Because very little research exists on adult fluency instruction and interventions, we looked to research at other levels that has the potential to also serve adult learners. Our goal was to find a method that includes several key features, namely, evidence that the method increases word recognition accuracy, automaticity, and prosody through multimodalities (Wagner & Kozma, 2005).

Several methods exist that meet our criteria. One in particular, Read Two Impress (R2I) combines repeated readings (Samuels, 1979) and the neurological impress method (Heckelman, 1969). R2I increases reading fluency and overall reading proficiency (Young, Mohr, & Rasinski, 2015).

The first of the combined strategies, the neurological impress method, has extensive research support in both elementary and secondary contexts (Eldredge, 1990; Eldredge & Quinn, 1988; Heckelman, 1969; Hollingsworth, 1978; Topping, 1987). This is an assisted reading approach where the reading tutor serves as a model for fluent oral reading, which also promotes prosodic reading. The second method used in R2I, repeated readings, is one of the most effective ways to increase word recognition accuracy and automaticity (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003; NICHD, 2000). Research has suggested that texts should be read at least four times to be effective. The effect is essentially increased reading rate (automaticity) and accuracy. Although it seems intuitive that this might occur, there is also a transfer effect of the reader's increased proficiency on alternate text. Thus,

the practice increases the fluent reading not only of practiced texts but also of new, subsequent texts.

The strong research bases of both the neurological impress method and repeated readings inspired the combination of the approaches for adult reading development. R2I has a growing research base of its own that substantiates its use for developing reading proficiency (Young et al., 2015). Although research has only been conducted with elementary-age students, and research with learners at other ages is needed, the method meets the criteria for adultlike reading that teachers and tutors can consider.

First, we obtain two copies of a challenging text, one for the tutor and the other for the student. Then, we explain the method to the student. We might say,

> We are going to use a method called Read Two Impress. We call it Read Two Impress because we combine two methods, neurological impress and repeated readings, so we impress the reading with the first round as we read together, and then you read it alone a second time. We will begin reading aloud together, and then I will begin reading slightly ahead of you—not far, just half a word ahead. If you catch me, I will speed up, and in some cases, I might slow down. After we read each paragraph aloud in this way, I will ask you to reread the paragraph to me without my help.

After explaining the method, we begin R2I. At first, we read aloud with the student and subsequently adjust our pace to be slightly ahead of the student. We may need to adjust our rate frequently because the student's pace is likely to vary greatly. So, we listen carefully in order to calibrate our pace accordingly. Keep in mind that you only want to be about one syllable ahead of the student.

In addition, it is important to read with appropriate expression. During this part of R2I, we are modeling proficient adultlike reading and providing the student with a large amount of support. So, as we read slightly ahead, we also read prosodically. The first phase essentially improves the student's word recognition accuracy, increases rate, and instills the experience of prosody into the reading repertoire.

After reading a paragraph or page aloud, we ask the student to reread the text aloud. While the student is reading, we listen for our expression. Many times, the reading will sound a lot like ours. Indeed, this is one of the desired outcomes. The student should also be reading accurately and at a decent pace, which means not too slow and not too fast. It should sound like natural speech. After the rereading, we move to the next chunk of text and repeat the process. We recommend that this instruction occur between three and five days per week for at least 20–30 minutes each day.

If a student struggles with any of the desired outcomes during the rereading, we recommend shortening the amount of text read for each section. If it is still too difficult, we consider choosing a less complex text. Conversely, if the student reads with accuracy, automaticity, and good expression, we recommend a more challenging text. The goal of R2I is to rapidly increase reading proficiency toward adultlike reading, so it is imperative that we informally assess the student each time and make sound instructional decisions. Theoretically speaking, we work at the very outer limits of the student's zone of proximal development (Mills, 2010). With R2I, this zone should expand quickly, so we make adjustments frequently.

The research on R2I and its theoretical tenets has postulated that frequent use of this method helps develop accuracy, automaticity, and prosody, although, again, more research is needed on use of this method with adults. Although the method should not be used in isolation, and additional instruction should focus intensely on reading comprehension, it can enable adults like James to improve their reading fluency and increase their capacity to partake in added print literacy activities at home and at work.

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