



Adult Learning

What can we learn about literacy development from adult learners' perceptions of reading?

Adult literacy learners who choose to improve their reading and writing bring their knowledge, skills and experience to the classroom in a self-aware way. So they present an important, but rarely used resource for research and practice of reading development. The researcher in this study set out to explore the perceptions of adult literacy learners to add to our existing knowledge of the learning and teaching of reading, and to highlight how it can be used to improve practice

Adult literacy learners' perceptions of 'what we are doing when we read?' were analysed under several categories, including:

- decoding
- ways to get better at reading, and
- why we read (motivation).

Decoding included learners' ideas about the physical and cognitive processes involved in reading, such as looking at words, making connections between letters and sounds, word recognition, guessing from context, etc. The researcher observed that most learners lacked the 'metalinguage' to describe phonic decoding. They had to search for ways to describe the process, e.g. 'break it down', 'spell it', 'sound it out'. Given that the learners perceived phonic decoding to be their primary literary strategy, the researcher believed that using metalanguage in an adult literacy classroom could be beneficial, and create a sense of empowerment resulting from being able to describe and name these learning activities.

Ways to get better at reading

The researchers found four main ways to helping learners improve at reading.

- Reading as much as possible – Read, read, read! ...the more you practice the better you get at it, and that's the way it is.
- Reading easy books – You know, when I want to read and improve my reading, I choose a book that I can read and understand easily.
- Reading books you have strong motivation to read – If there's a book I like and find exciting, that's what gets me reading.
- Reading aloud.

Reading aloud was defined by the learners both as a type of reading for specific purposes, such as accessing stories, poems and religious texts, and as a method to improve their reading. Learners spoke of how often they read aloud when they were alone:

"[when] I'm on my own at home, I'd read out loud... so I can understand the words and the sounds as well".

Many explained that reading in pairs or groups gave them an opportunity to learn from working with others:

"I like reading loudly because I am learning something... it's good that other people can hear – if there's a mistake they can help".

The learners recognised that listening to others reading aloud clarified the connections between written words and sounds for them:

"... when someone's reading it and you're following it, it helps – if you can't say that word, don't know what the word is and someone's reading it, and then it's 'oh yeah yeah'. That helps a lot".

Motivation was seen as not just what drove the learners to join literacy classes, but what had encouraged them to learn to read (often struggling against the odds) and to continue to improve their skills. The main motivating factors included doing it for the sake of their children - being able to help their children with their learning, getting a good job, and escaping from 'real life' problems.

Evidence source

Duncan, S. (2009) 'What are we doing when we read?' – adult literacy learners' perceptions of reading. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 14(3), pp 317-331

Take action

Could you:

- discuss reading with your learners, using the categories in the study, to clarify what motivates them and helps them learn and perhaps produce together an informal guide for reading development?
- experiment with using metalanguage (such as 'decode' 'syllable' and 'vowel') to describe and explore the process of decoding (i.e. recognising letters, their combinations and words)?
- try reading aloud, in groups and individually, as a tool for developing reading with your learners?

The researcher, who was an adult literacy teacher and teacher educator, carried out 21 individual interviews and four focus groups with adult literacy learners at a London further education college. Participants were selected to present a spectrum of English Adult Literacy Core Curriculum levels from Entry1 (beginners) to Level 2.