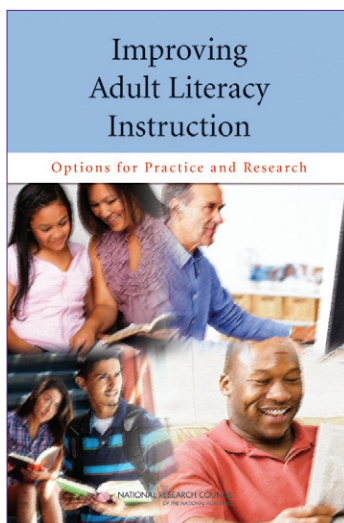


IMPROVING ADULT LITERACY INSTRUCTION: OPTIONS FOR PRACTICE AND RESEARCH



Virtually everyone needs a high level of literacy in both print and digital media to negotiate most aspects of 21st century life, such as succeeding in a competitive job market, supporting a family, navigating health information, and participating in civic activities. Yet according to the most recent survey estimate, more than 90 million adults in the United States lack the literacy skills needed for fully productive and secure lives.

At the request of the U.S. Department of Education, the National Research Council convened a committee of experts from many disciplines to synthesize research on literacy and learning in order to improve literacy instruction for adults in the U.S.

EFFECTIVE LITERACY INSTRUCTION

Little rigorous research has been conducted on effective approaches to teaching adults to read and write. Given this shortfall, the committee's report examines general research on how people learn, on teaching reading and writing to younger populations, and on teaching spoken language. This research offers guidance about principles of effective reading and writing instruction that can improve literacy education for adults.

Effective literacy instruction:

- addresses the foundations of reading — word recognition, fluency, vocabulary, reading comprehension, background knowledge — and writing, such as sentence construction, revision, and use of writing strategies;
- combines teaching and extensive practice with a variety of texts, tools, and tasks that are matched to the learner's skills, educational and cultural background, and literacy goals;
- develops learners' skills so that they are automatic and transferrable to tasks valued by society and the learner; and
- includes ongoing "formative" assessments to monitor learners' progress and provide feedback for adjusting approaches to instruction and learning.

It is important to motivate adults to persist with learning, such as by helping them set appropriate goals, engage with useful and interesting materials, and practice their skills. Technologies can support classroom instruction and can allow instruction and practice to be free from a particular time or place.

THE COSTS OF LOW LITERACY

Adults with low levels of literacy:

- have lower rates of participation in the labor force
- earn less than those with higher levels of literacy
- are less likely to read to their children
- have less ability to access, read, and use health information

NEXT STEPS

The committee recommends four steps to improve adult literacy instruction in the United States:

- Federal and state policymakers should expand the infrastructure of adult literacy education to support instructional approaches, curricula, materials, tools, and assessments that are consistent with the available research on reading, writing, learning, language and adult development. Because research on literacy instruction specifically for adults is lacking, instructional programs should be evaluated for effectiveness when they are implemented.
- Federal and state policymakers should ensure that professional development and technical assistance for instructors are widely available, ongoing, and consistent with the available research.
- Policymakers, providers of literacy programs, and researchers should collaborate to find ways to help adults persist in their literacy studies. Currently, many adults drop out before making enough progress toward their literacy goals. Ways to encourage persistence may include particular instructional methods, technologies, social service support, and incentives.
- Strategic and sustained investments are needed in a coordinated approach to improving programs, evaluating them, and conducting research about adult literacy learners.

Implementing these recommendations will require strong leadership from the U.S. Department of Education, the U.S. Department of Labor, and other sponsoring research agencies. Given

WHO ARE ADULT LITERACY LEARNERS?

The diverse groups of people who need stronger literacy skills in the U.S. include:

- recent immigrants who have little education in their native language
- middle-aged and older U.S.-born high school graduates who can no longer keep up with the reading, writing, and technology demands of their jobs
- adolescents and adults who dropped out of school
- adults who had disabilities that were not fully accommodated in school
- highly educated immigrants who are literate in their native languages but need to learn to read and write in English
- underprepared students in colleges

Adults receive literacy instruction in many settings, which include schools, community organizations, community colleges, prisons, and workplaces.

the scope of the problem, partnerships need to be developed among researchers, curriculum developers, and administrators across the systems that serve adult learners. Enlisting business leaders and community groups in the effort is also important.

COMMITTEE ON LEARNING SCIENCES: FOUNDATIONS AND APPLICATIONS TO ADOLESCENT AND ADULT LITERACY

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