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TEACHING THE FUNCTIONALLY ILLITERATE ADULT: A PRIMER

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Although many recent articles on teaching reading to adult basic education students have discussed both the general process of teaching and the application of specific methodology, few have described either the concepts or the series of methods based on those concepts that a beginning instructor of adults in basic education reading programs needs to understand and use (Park, 1981; O'Malley and Haase, 1981; Karnes, Ginn and Maddox, 1980; Schneiderman, 1977; O'Donnell, 1973; Heitzman and Putnam, 1972; Becker, 1970). The methods which an instructor ought to use are based on three concepts:

1. There are differences in the way adults learn and the ways young people learn. Adults learn more slowly than young people—but more accurately. They are more sensitive to unfavorable criticism and have more need to see progress in their learning. Effects of aging, such as weakened eyesight and hearing, can make it more difficult for them to learn. Adults' ingrained habits and attitudes may inhibit their learning, but they may learn more quickly if instruction is based on their past experiences. Adults expect to be treated with dignity rather than being patronized. (Haase, Robinson and Beach, 1979; Haase and Robinson, 1979; Whitbourne and Weinstock, 1979; and Zahn, 1967)
2. Functionally illiterate adults usually have gaps in their learning beyond their inability to read. Many have attended school only intermittently. Others worked only on subjects which interested them during their years in school. Still others experienced failure early and learned only when risk of failure was minimal. (O'Malley and Haase, 1981)
3. Each adult requires an individualized reading program which will enable her/him to be responsible for her/his progress and to select materials s/he finds interesting (Mocker, 1975). Group exercises can be used as an interlude in the routine of individualized learning and can contribute significantly to such activities as word recognition and map reading.

METHODS

The Nature of the Student

Methods for teaching adults to read should differ from those used with younger people. Most adult basic education students are motivated to learn and have come to reading programs at personal risk, willing to expose their deficiencies so that these deficiencies may be remedied. Others are motivated because the job training program in which they are enrolled requires attendance in a remedial program. Still others, less motivated, come because they are receiving a stipend to attend school or because the program is located in a warm building during a cold winter.

Personality patterns of functionally illiterate adults are similar to those of literate adults. The characteristics that separate them from literate adults are their fear of schooling, their apparent inability to learn to read, and their inability to learn from print. Most have not been successful, and experience anxiety in classrooms. These adults have found testing a humiliating event and would prefer to ignore that which would confirm what they already know about themselves: that they are stupid, witless and without promise. Rather than lose their dignity, most will come to class infrequently or drop out.

Implications for the new teacher of functionally illiterate adults are:

1. The students in the program are adults with extensive experience and, therefore, should be treated with respect.
2. Most adults are motivated by pressures external to the program; thus, they require understanding and direction.
3. Schooling has been a negative experience for most functionally illiterate adults; therefore, they do well where there is an atmosphere of expectation without excessive pressure and competition.

Initial Testing

Functionally illiterate adults who come back to learn to read must be tested before receiving instruction, because the instructor must determine what gaps there are in adults' reading knowledge if s/he is to help them. Adults are interested in learning what they need to know without wasting time. If the teacher finds specific gaps in adults' reading knowledge s/he can help the adult know what her/his specific problems are and how they can be solved, thus encouraging adults to remain in the program.

Initial testing begins with an interview, in which the instructor begins to know and understand the adult and the types of learning problems s/he has. At the interview, the instructor may ask about the adult's personal characteristics, schooling history, and her/his reasons for wanting to read or to read better, the types of reading s/he generally avoids or seeks, her/his general interests, and what s/he believes are her/his reading deficiencies.

After the interview, the instructor should administer tests

individually to each adult in a friendly non-threatening, non-judgmental manner. Placing the adult at the appropriate testing level reduces the frustration, embarrassment and discouragement of adults who are given the CAT, IOWA, or SAT at too high a level as well as the umbrage some adults take when given tests at too low a reading level. Adults can be effectively placed in appropriate testing levels using the following method for ascertaining a student's ability to take a reading test with a minimum of frustration. In this process, the instructor presents the adult with a graded word list. If the adult is unable to read the list aloud, s/he is assigned immediately to an instructional situation. If the adult can read the list, s/he is presented with a series of graded passages that have readability and which correlate with the individual reading tests of an achievement test series. If the adult can barely read the passages or reads with difficulty, s/he may be assigned to CAT Level 2. If the adult can read the passages but had difficulty with comprehension, s/he is assigned to CAT Level 3. More difficult passages are provided to adults who show ease in oral reading and degree of comprehension. From performance on these passages, the adult is assigned to CAT Levels 3, 4, or 5.

As the adult reads aloud, the instructor listens carefully. Some obvious warning signs of frustration are: pausing for a long time before reading a word; missing one out of every three words; not remembering most of what was read; and, not being able to answer comprehension questions by searching for the answers in the text. Additional factors in making judgments concerning an adult's place in the testing program are: speed of reading, phrasing, hesitations, pronunciation (although this may be misleading if the adult speaks a dialect), ability to locate answers in a passage, ability to answer comprehension questions from memory, level of anxiety, and signs of organic impairments such as vision, hearing and perceptual problems as well as speech irregularities. Practice in testing and judging adults will increase the accuracy of an instructor in placing adults at appropriate levels of testing. If one test does not provide clear information on a particular skill, the instructor should give the adult a second short test which examines the skill in question. It is better to take time to check than to assume competence.

Implications for the new instructor are:

1. Functionally illiterate adults have gaps in their reading knowledge which require identification.
2. Tests are administered individually in a friendly way and non-threatening manner.
3. Maintaining the dignity of the adult throughout the testing process ensures that the adult will return to and remain in the program.
4. Observing the reading behavior of adults while they are being tested is crucial to making good judgments.
5. Retesting of specific skill areas may be necessary if test results are not clear.

Diagnosis

The instructor should diagnose the adult's abilities when all relevant information has been collected, including a list of the adult's personal characteristics, the test results, and judgments about the adult's motivation, anxiety, and self-concept.

To analyze the test results, the instructor—

1. Compares the vocabulary and comprehension scores to see if the adult's problems are a result of knowledge or vocabulary or of comprehension skills.
2. Analyzes the adult's working speed, the number of items completed, her/his perception of the adult's anxiety level, and whether a small number of items were completed accurately, or whether a large number were completed with minimal accuracy in order to judge whether the adult is slow and accurate or fast and inaccurate. Later the instructor may have to question the adult about her/his thinking process while s/he took the test.
3. Checks again to see if the errors were made as the material increases with difficulty or if the errors were clumped or scattered. These error patterns might denote adults who never mastered the concept of main idea but who can make inferences. Where the errors are and how they form a pattern will provide information concerning the adult's major reading deficiencies.

Robinson (1973) has provided a sequence in which an adult must acquire reading skills. It includes skills in pre-reading, perception, word-recognition, comprehension, understanding content skills and reference. Since failure on any particular skill usually promises failure in subsequent areas, the instructor must diagnose the point in the sequence at which the adult must begin learning. After analyzing the adult's test results and considering the point in the skills-sequence at which the adult should be placed, the instructor compares the personal characteristics of the adult with the test results and the sequence of skills. The instructor begins to ask such questions as: Does this information correspond to what the adult believes are her/his problems? With this error pattern, what kind of material can be given to this adult? Is the adult highly motivated to produce a lot of work? Is the adult easily confused or bored? How much time does the adult have to devote to learning? The answers to such questions to the next step—prescription.

Prescription

In order to prescribe the correct mixture of sequences in learning for each adult, the instructor must synthesize all the information s/he has collected on the adult and her/his knowledge of learning materials available for adults (and of reading material available to the particular adult at her/his work place). Most instructors of adult learners believe every kind of written material is good at some time for some person.

Typical materials used in learning centers for adults are: Random House's Criterion Reading; Be a Better Reader, Basic Skills

Edition; I.D.E.A. Power for Reading Comprehension from Prentice Hall; Readers Digests' New Reading Skill Builders; SRA reading series; Scholastic Magazine's GO, Reading in the Content Areas; New Practice Readers and Vocabulary published by McGraw Hill; Sullivan Associates' Programmed Reading for Adults; Croft Inc.'s Skill Pack in Reading Comprehension; Stech-Vaughn Co.'s Reading Improvement Activities, Just for Fun Series; GED Test Series by Contemporary Books; GED Program and Skill Power Series by Cambridge Book Co.; and Barnell Loft's Multiple Skill Series, Specific Skills Series and Supportive Reading Skills.

In addition to reading materials, the instructor must prescribe modes of instruction to fit the needs of the adult learner. Some adults function well at computer terminals or on programmed instruction alone. Others require intense group experience. Some may need a combination of these methods. Other adults require more instructor attention and still others may need both attention and a great amount of encouragement.

After diagnosing the adult needs and planning her/his program, the instructor should explain to her/him, methodically yet congenially, her/his deficiencies (one skill at a time), and ask if each aspect of the diagnosis is correct. This will help the adult to maintain her/his dignity and to feel supported. The instructor should then explain the skill and show the adult what pages in the materials will provide practice in this skill. The instructor should show the adult everything s/he writes in front of her/him, to build trust and confidence. This also helps the adult to keep track of her/his own progress. The adult may then work on her/his own with the instructor nearby to answer questions or periodically check on progress. If the initial prescription is not effective, the instructor should give the adult new material along with the reasons for change.

During this time of individualized instruction, the instructor should be aware that adults will act as students and may become dependent on the instructor. Some will bait the instructor, others will feign knowledge for fear of appearing stupid, and still others will never do what is required for success in learning. Adults will come when it is convenient and if they believe they are making progress. If they feel frustration or failure, they will seldom tell anyone, but will simply drop out of the program (Seaman, 1971).

Implications for the new instructor include:

1. Diagnosis and prescription are extremely important in teaching adults to read or to enhance their reading skills.
2. Test results must be analyzed carefully so that the specific reading problems may be revealed.
3. The instructor needs to have a knowledge and understanding of the sequence of reading skills.
4. The instructor must compare the personal characteristics of the adults with the test results.
5. All reading materials are good for something at sometime for an adult reader.

6. The instructor needs to have a knowledge and understanding of the instructional strategies.
7. The instructor must combine the adult's test results and personal characteristics with information about the sequence of reading skills and instructional strategies in order to create a learning prescription for an individual adult.
8. Everything the instructor does with the adult should be explained to that adult.

A successful adult-basic-education program will recognize the differences between younger students and adults, provide a setting in which adults' dignity is not threatened, carefully diagnose each adult's needs and capabilities, and prescribe and carefully implement a program to meet each adult's needs within that person's capacities.

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