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Title	Effective learning and teaching of reading
Authors	Brooks, Greg;Burton, Maxine;Cole, Pam;Szczerbinski, Marcin
Publication date	2007
Original Citation	Brooks, G., Burton, M., Cole, P., Szczerbinski, M.; (2007) 'Effective learning and teaching of reading'. London: The National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC).
Type of publication	Report
Link to publisher's version	http://www.nrdc.org.uk/publications_details.asp?ID=90
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Download date	2026-11-06 04:04:03
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/743



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National Research and Development Centre
for adult literacy and numeracy

EFFECTIVE TEACHING AND LEARNING

Reading

SUMMARY REPORT

Greg Brooks, Maxine Burton, Pam Cole and Marcin Szczerbiński



Published by the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy

This document is also available in pdf and text-only format from the NRDC's website, **www.nrdc.org.uk**. It is the summary version of the project's full report, which was also published in February 2007.

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ISBN 1-905188-35-8

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NRDC is a consortium of partners led by the Institute of Education, University of London (see back cover for a list of members) and is part of the Bedford Group for Lifecourse and Statistical Studies at the IoE.
www.ioe.ac.uk/bedfordgroup

Design: info@chapmandesign.net
Print: Redlin
Cover photo: iStock.com

EFFECTIVE TEACHING AND LEARNING

Reading

SUMMARY REPORT

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This reading study is the largest in Britain to date of the strategies used to teach reading in adult literacy classes



Introduction

■ The *Skills for Life* Strategy in England has led to unprecedented investment in adult literacy, language and numeracy (LLN), major reforms of teacher education and training, and the introduction of national standards, core curricula and assessment to inform teaching and learning. We have a unique opportunity to make a step change in improving levels of adult skills. But until recently too little was known about effective teaching and learning practices, and reports from Ofsted and the Adult Learning Inspectorate repeatedly drew attention to the quality of teaching, and the need for standards to improve.

It has been a strategic priority of the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) to investigate teaching and learning practices in all the subject areas and settings in *Skills for Life*. We also see it as our role to report on the most promising and effective practices, and to provide teachers, trainers, policy-makers and researchers with an unparalleled evidence base on which to build on the progress already made.

Our findings and recommendations are reported here, and in the four companion reports covering writing, numeracy, ESOL and ICT. The five studies, which have been co-ordinated by NRDC Associate Director John Vorhaus, provide material for improving the quality of teaching and learning, and for informing developments in initial teacher education and continuing professional development (CPD). We are also preparing a range of practitioner guides and development materials, as a major new resource for teachers and teacher educators. They will explore and develop the examples of good and promising practice documented in these pages.

This reading study is the largest in Britain to date of the strategies used to teach reading in adult literacy classes (some classes were integrated - with ICT and financial literacy, for example). It is also the first to attempt to chart teaching strategies used against changes in learners' reading attainment and attitudes to literacy. Over 472 hours of teaching and learning were observed and recorded. The data gathered on 454 learners in 59 classes, a broad national representation, constitute a wealth of information: about teaching and learning; effective and promising practices; and priority areas for further teacher training and development.

Ursula Howard, Director, NRDC

The Effective Practice Studies

■ The five Effective Practice Studies explore teaching and learning in reading, writing, numeracy, ESOL and ICT, and they set out to answer two questions:

- how can teaching, learning and assessing literacy, numeracy, ESOL and ICT be improved?
- which factors contribute to successful learning?

Even before NRDC was set up it was apparent from reviews of the field that there was little reliable research-based evidence to answer these questions. Various NRDC reviews showed that progress in amassing such evidence, though welcome where it was occurring, was slow. Four preliminary studies on reading, writing, ESOL and ICT were undertaken between 2002 and 2004. However, we recognised the urgent need to build on these in order greatly to increase the research base for the practice of teaching these subjects.

The inspiration for the design of the five projects was a study in the United States of the teaching of literacy and English language to adult learners for whom English is an additional language (Condelli et al., 2003). This study was the first of its kind, and the lead author, Larry Condelli, has acted as an expert adviser on all five NRDC projects.

Our research began in July 2003 and was completed in March 2006. We set out to recruit and gather information on 500 learners in each study, assess their attainment and attitudes at two points during the year in which they were participating in the study, interview both learners and teachers, observe the strategies their teachers used, and correlate those strategies with changes in the learners' attainment and attitudes. The ICT study differed from the others in that its first phase was developmental, its sample size was smaller, and it had a shorter timescale, completing in March 2005.

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Main findings

Progress
Learners are progressing and achieving: many learners involved in this study achieved an externally accredited qualification at the end of their course (163 out of 265), and many went on to further study (171 out of 265). Progress was supported by regular attendance.

- Pair and group work encouraged progress, and learners who spent less time working alone in class made better progress.
- Women made slightly better progress than men.
- Employed people made better progress than the unemployed.
- People with a further education/national vocational qualification made better progress than those with no qualifications.
- Learners who spent time in self-study between classes made better progress.
- There was evidence of a significant increase in confidence amongst learners, crucial if they are to make progress.

Learners' progress is *not* affected or inhibited by many factors that might otherwise be thought of as having an impact on their achievement:

- Age
- Ethnicity
- English as a first or additional language
- Age of leaving full-time education
- Time since last course
- Having dyslexia
- Pre-test scores in reading.

Time to learn
Learners need enough time to learn:

- The average amount of attendance by learners between the pre- and post-assessments was only 30 hours. By contrast, in the *Progress in Adult Literacy* study in 1998–99 (Brooks et al., 2001a), many learners had attended for 50 or more hours between the two assessments, and those learners made the greatest average progress. Evidence from the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) in the US suggests that learners require 150-200 hours if they are to progress by one level within the *Skills for Life* qualifications framework.
- There were no significant differences between the mid- and post-assessments in either year (although in 2004/05 there was a gain between pre- and mid-assessment). The evidence suggests that learners in this study could have gone on to make more progress if the gap between assessments had been longer.

Teaching strategies
Although a wide range of teaching quality was observed, most teaching was of high or fairly high quality. Few classes were judged to be middling or poor. The instrument used was adapted from the authoritative Condelli study (Condelli et al., 2003) and covered teaching strategies and strategies for learner engagement.

The following teaching strategies were very frequently used:
- giving appraisal/feedback immediately
- discussion of vocabulary during a reading
- other word study (word lists, puzzles, word searches)
- using a dictionary to find word meanings.

However, several approaches that the literature suggests are effective were rarely seen, which may help to explain why progress was limited in some cases. In particular, teachers should allow more time for learners to engage in 'active reading', including reading aloud, as opposed to reading silently or non-reading activities. On average, active reading tuition occupied less than half the class time. The most frequent patterns of classroom activity observed were either a whole-class opening section followed by individual practice or entirely based on individual work. In both cases learners worked alone for substantial amounts of time - this was the most frequent grouping strategy, corresponding with silent reading as the most frequent specific teaching strategy.

Priorities for further development are:
- encouragement of fluent oral reading (we are gathering new evidence that this re-engages reluctant readers, produces excellent progress, and increases the amount of active reading in class)
- reciprocal teaching (where pairs of learners take turns to be 'tutor' and 'student'). There is research evidence from the US that this strategy can be effective with adult learners
- explicit comprehension strategies
- accurate phonics teaching
- language experience approaches.

The Adult Literacy Core Curriculum
Most teachers spoke positively about the core curriculum as more 'structured', 'focused', generating 'good ideas', raising the profile of adult literacy, increasing teachers' confidence and clarifying issues of differentiation. There were some criticisms: that paperwork/bureaucracy was burdensome; that there was pressure to 'teach to the curriculum rather than what learners want'; and that it could be 'restrictive' or 'inflexible'.

Recommendations

Teacher training and development
It is a priority for initial teacher training and for CPD to provide teachers with specific and general strategies for teaching reading, and in particular:

- oral reading fluency
- explicit comprehension strategies
- reciprocal teaching
- phonics
- language experience approaches.

Teachers in training need to be shown in more detail how to teach reading in ways adapted to their learners' needs -- and how to assess those needs, especially where learners have 'spiky profiles'[1] of achievement.

Initial teacher training and CPD should support teachers to make more creative use of curriculum materials.

Teachers, curriculum managers and providers should be supported in enabling learners to spend more time on learning tasks. This will include, in addition to more contact time and taught hours:

- self-study (which will both increase time on task and encourage learners to take responsibility for their own learning)
- distance learning
- ICT-supported study
- intensive provision.

Learners would benefit from spending more time working in small groups during course time, rather than most of their time working alone.

There is a need to support teachers in developing strategies for balancing pair and group work with time given over to learners working alone. These strategies should be developed and introduced into initial teacher education and CPD programmes.

At the level of classroom practice, the most practicable ways to reduce the amount of time learners spend working alone are to increase whole-class work and opportunities for learners to work in pairs – for example, in a buddy system.

Teachers in the field appear to have little opportunity for reflection on their practice. Practitioner-researchers' accounts suggest that more opportunities need to be provided for teachers to observe other teaching.

Policy
Evidence supports the policy of making provision available to learners of a range of ages and ethnicities, with English as their first or an additional language, who left school at different ages and/or have spent varying lengths

1 'Spiky profile' in this context refers to the different levels of ability in listening, speaking, reading and writing that one student may have.

of time away from education, and who may or may not have dyslexia.

As the field expands, the availability of more classes should be built on to differentiate learner groups by initial attainment in reading and writing – currently, most classes have to cater for a range of levels.

Research

Approaches that have been found to be effective elsewhere (mainly in North America) should be tried out and their effectiveness investigated. Examples include teaching reading fluency and accurate phonics teaching. NRDC is undertaking field trials of incorporating practice in oral reading fluency into classroom activities.

A detailed development and research project should be carried out on phonics teaching in adult literacy. Further professional development activity is needed to train adult literacy teachers to use phonics, and to assess the effectiveness of phonics teaching in the adult literacy classroom.

We should explore comparisons between:

- intensive courses and the typical pattern of extended provision
- large and small amounts of whole-class teaching
- more and less time spent working alone.

Practitioner-researchers' accounts suggest that more opportunities need to be provided for teachers to observe other teaching

Background to the study

■ In most English-speaking countries there are high proportions of adults thought to have less than functional literacy. In England, the British Government's response has been to establish the *Skills for Life* initiative with targets for increasing adult literacy, language and numeracy enrolments and qualifications by 2004, 2007 and 2010.

The overall aim of this reading study was to develop insight into what supports learners to make progress and/or develop more positive attitudes.

Specific aims were:

- to investigate in depth:
  (1) the range of pedagogical practices in the teaching of reading to adult learners in England which occur 'naturally', that is in the normal course of events and not as part of intervention studies
  (2) changes in adult learners' attainment in and attitudes to reading over the course of a year
  (3) the correlation between the different pedagogical practices and any such changes
- to make recommendations to the profession about effective practices.

Findings of previous studies

A review of previous literature (Brooks et al., 2001b) found there had been only two national surveys of adult learners' progress in literacy in England and neither had attempted to correlate progress in attainment with strategies for teaching. There was almost no information on what adult literacy teaching was actually like on the ground. The only area that had been thoroughly researched in England was the scale of need. Surveys had shown that very few adults could be considered illiterate, though many had less than functional literacy (defined as below Level 1) – possibly as many as 7 million.

An earlier, smaller-scale NRDC study (Besser et al., 2004) showed a mismatch between learners' difficulties in reading and teaching strategies:

- intensive, focused reading instruction did not comprise a significant amount of teaching
- little work beyond the literal was seen at sentence level or in comprehension exercises
- learners had poor phonological awareness
- much of the phonics teaching was done on the spur of the moment, and there were instances of inaccurate phonics teaching.

Other literature reviews have highlighted the following factors associated with better progress in reading:

- the benefits of reciprocal teaching (Rich and Shepherd, 1993; for reciprocal teaching see Palincsar, 1986; Palincsar and Brown, 1984)
- the benefits of a 'diagnostic prescriptive' approach - the use of diagnostic procedures to identify adults' strengths and weaknesses and to develop individual educational programmes (Cheek and Lindsey, 1994)
- tutors having qualified teacher status
- tutors having assistance in the classroom
- regular attendance by learners
- learners being taught word attack skills, fluency in reading aloud, repeated reading, and explicit comprehension strategies.

Scope of this study

Five practitioner-researchers (fieldworkers) and one research fellow gathered data in 2003/04, and they were joined by six more fieldworkers in 2004/05. They recruited 454 learners in 59 classes. All 454 learners completed a consent form, a learner profile and a pre-questionnaire on attitudes to literacy, and 440 completed a reading pre-assessment. Across the two years, 338 learners (74 per cent) returned for the mid-assessment and 322 (71 per cent) for the post-assessment, and full data were obtained on 298 (66 per cent). This is the largest sample ever achieved in a study of this sort in this country, and is sufficient to support robust statistical analyses.

The providers of the 59 classes in this study included:

- 34 FE colleges (of which one was learndirect)
- 19 LEAs (including one delivered by FE)
- three charities
- two training providers
- one prison (delivered by FE).

Overall, the classes were fairly representative of mainstream adult literacy provision, but not of the full range. For instance, there were no classes in workplaces (even though several were contacted in an attempt to recruit them) or young offender institutions.

The study was confined to England and most of the 59 classes were held in an area bounded by Liverpool, Chorley, Leeds, Louth and Swadlincote. There were also three outlying classes, in Norfolk and West Sussex. Most of the classes were in urban or suburban settings, but some were in small towns or rural areas.

Thirty-nine classes were held in the daytime and 20 in the evening.

Method

A fuller account of the methods used is given in Appendix A of the full report of the study, which will be available later this spring on the NRDC website *www.nrdc.org.uk*

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Adult learners' attainment in reading and attitudes to literacy were assessed three times, and between the first two assessments the strategies their teachers used were observed.

In general, the initial (pre-) assessments of the learners, including gathering information on their background characteristics, took place in the autumn terms of 2003 and 2004. The second and third (mid- and post-) assessments were carried out in the spring and summer terms of 2004 and 2005.

The observations were conducted between the pre- and mid-assessments - mainly between November 2003 and March 2004 and between October 2004 and February 2005. Four observations were conducted in each of the 59 classes, making 236 observations in all. Since classes lasted two hours on average, the total amount of observation time was about 472 hours.

The reading assessment instrument used was specifically designed for NRDC by the National Foundation for Educational Research in 2003. It was aligned in detail with the Adult Literacy Core Curriculum and National Standards, and therefore also with the national tests for which many learners were being prepared. It tested reading comprehension, in line with the project's definition of reading as 'creating or deriving meaning from text'. Other aspects of reading, for example word identification, were not assessed. The instrument was designed to be appropriate for learners from Entry Level 1 to Level 2.

Information was also gathered from the teachers on their teaching background, their aims for the session and, where this was known, data on learners' achievement of an accredited qualification and progression to further study.

Four observations were carried out in each class. The observations involved:

- background information on the learners and the session – such as the layout of the room
- a timed log which covered, among other things:
  - whole class, small group and individual groupings, and changes between these
  - the content and style of the teaching
  - whether individual learners or small groups received help from the teacher or others present
  - the materials used
  - the time spent on each activity, logged to the minute as far as possible.
- an analysis of the session against a classification of teaching strategies and activities.

The learners

Who were they?
The gender balance and age distribution of the initial sample of 454 learners were similar to the national picture. However, our sample included proportionately fewer young people in adult literacy provision. The higher percentage of people of white ethnicity than nationally arose because this study sampled only a few areas with high ethnic minority populations, and none in London.

Most classes had no students with learning difficulties or disabilities, but 20 classes had at least one such learner. Two classes consisted entirely of such learners. Another had five learners with Down syndrome and two with severe learning difficulties, and a fourth consisted of people recovering from mental health problems. A total of 108 other learners were said to have dyslexia, of whom 50 had been formally assessed and the rest were judged by their teachers to have dyslexia. In all, there were at least 170 learners with some form of learning difficulty or disability (37 per cent) in the sample.

Of the 454 learners who had provided data at the pre-assessment stage, full data were gathered on 298 (66 per cent of the original sample). This group are referred to as the 'returners' and are judged as representative of the full original sample.

Their progress
The reading scores were standardised on a 0-100 scale with a national average of 50. The average scores for this study were all somewhat below the national average, though probably not significantly so. Our samples may have been much more diverse than the sample on which the reading assessment instrument was 'normed'. The ranges of scores were certainly very wide. On all occasions at least one learner scored zero, and on four occasions at least one learner got the maximum score of 100.

Reading attainment, by cohort

		Occasion		
Cohort		Pre	Mid	Post
2003/04 (N=123)	Average scaled score		43.1	41.9
2004/05 (N=179)	Average scaled score	40.0	46.5	46.2

N= sample size

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Analysis of assessment data

Analysis of the reading assessment data showed no significant differences between the mid- and post-assessments in either year. However, in 2004/05 there was a statistically significant gain between pre- and mid-assessments. (The pre-score for the first cohort is not shown because a different and possibly less reliable version of the test was used.)

Contrary to what might be expected, the comparison between the types of errors made on the pre- and post-assessments would seem on the surface to reflect less understanding on the post- than on the pre-assessment.

What might account for this change? Learners' reading ability may have decreased between assessments, which seems highly unlikely, or learners' motivation may have decreased by the third assessment, in some way affecting their responses – but these possibilities seem inconsistent with the findings on attitudes. Conversely, it may be that confidence and ability increased and learners felt able to attempt more complex questions, and made more basic errors as they were working at the limit of their ability.

It is also possible that 'assessment fatigue' had set in by the third occasion. This may help to explain why the mid- and post- scores did not differ significantly.

Differing classes

The classes differed markedly in average change in reading scores. In the 2003/04 cohort, the best class had an average improvement of almost 5 scale points, while the worst experienced an almost 12-point decrease. Similarly, in the 2004/05 cohort, the best class improved by 19 points, while the worst got worse by 3 points. So, although the classes were very small, differences between them were probably not just random fluctuations. However, the numbers of learners in each class were so small that statistical tests would not show these differences to be significant. Class rolls ranged from 4-15, but numbers attending were almost always lower, with eight classes running for at least one session with only two or three learners.

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Factors associated with improvement in reading attainment

Gender

Women's scores rose slightly more than men's.

Occupational status

In the 2004/05 cohort only, employed and self-employed learners improved significantly more than those who were unemployed.

Formal qualifications

In the 2004/05 cohort only, learners with any FE/national vocational qualification improved significantly more than those with no qualifications or CSE/GCSE/O-level.

Attendance

More regular attendance was associated very weakly with improvement.

Enjoyment of literacy

Learners whose reading benefited more from the classes reported slightly, but significantly, greater enjoyment of literacy at post-test than at pre-test, and had higher self-ratings than others on this at post-test. These relationships were very weak, however.

Self-study

Learners who reported more self-study between classes made better progress. This has also emerged as an important factor in the Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning in Oregon (Reder, 2005).

Factors **not** related to improvement in reading attainment

Age

There were no significant differences in progress between age bands. Age at leaving full-time education was not related to improvement either.

Ethnicity

White learners performed better than others[2] at pre-test and at post-test, but neither group made significantly greater loss or gain than the other.

English as a first or additional language

Progress made by learners with English as an additional language did not differ from that of the majority whose first language was English.

Time since last course

It made no difference (on average) how long it had been since learners had been on a course.

Having dyslexia

There was no significant difference in change in reading scores between those who had dyslexia and those who did not and between those who had been assessed as having dyslexia and those who had not.

Improvement in self-confidence

Rather surprisingly, the improvement in learners' self-confidence was not related to changes in reading scores.

Attending other provision

Less than half of the learners were also attending some other provision. There was no correlation between attending other provision and change in reading scores.

Scores at pre-test

The correlation between initial scores and change in scores between pre- and post-assessments was not significant.

2 Because the numbers of ethnic minority learners were small, for purposes of analysis all ethnicities other than white were collapsed into a single category.

Their voices

Learners willing to attend consultation and feedback days were likely to be the more confident and successful. Nevertheless, their comments provide some insight into their views on their progress.

Milestones:

- One learner said he had now read his first book (*The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams) and had just finished a second. (His teacher said that the 'most fantastic thing' for her was when he came in and said he had read that first book.) In terms of writing, he said he was now prepared to persevere, writing exercises out about five times to get them right, even although he still found the process difficult.
- Another learner said that she could now understand 'How they want me to answer certain questions'. She also said she read more, and not just the TV magazines but things she would not have read before.

What helps?

- One learner said her teacher had been more like a friend and helped a lot - not like at school. This one-to-one help was 'tremendous' and had helped her confidence and self-esteem.
- Another learner mentioned the different atmosphere in adult education compared with school. She described it as being treated as 'an equal'.

Pride in progress:

One learner talked about how she was so nervous that it took her about 40 minutes of pacing up and down outside the learning centre before she dared to go in to enquire about what help she could get with her reading and writing. When she was given the forms, she didn't have her glasses with her – 'Yes, really' – and joked about how often people would have heard that excuse! 'It was the best thing I've ever done in my life.' She said that last year she had been made redundant after 17 years working in a factory. She said that she thought she would not be able to get another job. 'Now I have done my English Levels 1 and 2 and maths Level 1, have just signed on to do GCSE English and I've just got a job in a college as a learning support worker for learners with profound learning difficulties.'

Both from these comments and general experience it is clear that measuring progress in reading is more complex than any tests devised by researchers or awarding bodies. A worthwhile research topic would be to investigate more systematically what learners perceive as markers of their progress.

The teachers

Across the two years, semi-structured interviews were conducted with all but three of the 47 participating teachers, on completion of the observations of their classes.

Who were they?

Gender:

Thirty-six of the teachers were women and 11 were men, and the overwhelming majority of classes observed were taken by female teachers (46 out of 59).

Home language:

English was the first language of all but one teacher.

Qualifications:

Current standards now expect adult literacy teachers to have both a full teaching certificate and a Level 4 subject-specialist qualification. Two of the teachers were fully qualified in this way as literacy teachers, but the data were gathered at a time when few teachers had yet had the opportunity to acquire the new Level 4 qualifications. One other teacher was fully qualified, but as a numeracy teacher.

Twelve of the 47 teachers had both a generic teaching qualification (Cert Ed, PGCE or equivalent) and a subject-specific literacy teaching qualification in the form of the 'old' City & Guilds 9285. A further 11 teachers had qualifications of both types, but one or other, or both, of the qualifications was of an introductory nature only.

Thirteen teachers had a full generic teaching certificate, but no qualifications in teaching adult literacy. A further two teachers had less than full versions of generic teaching qualifications, also with no literacy teaching qualifications.

Three teachers had qualifications in teaching adult literacy, but no generic teaching qualifications.

Three teachers were not interviewed about their qualifications.

Of the 31 teachers with full generic teaching qualifications, 20 were in the context of training to teach in schools.

We make no assumptions here about how the status of teaching qualifications has affected teaching skills.

Experience:

Over three-quarters of those interviewed (34) had additional teaching experience in other subjects. Nearly half of these teachers (16 of the 34) had infant or primary school experience. All but two had previous teaching experience in adult literacy, which varied from one year to 28 years, with a mean of nearly nine years.

Teaching practice

The nature of class teaching:

- Group work

Up to 92 teaching sessions in 23 classes were studied during the first year. Of these, a large number were found to contain whole-group teaching - 62 sessions in 18 classes - a pattern seen in over two-thirds of sessions. Forty-three sessions in 14 classes followed a style which may be simply described as group work followed by practice. This usually consisted of a taught lesson, ranging from 10 minutes to an hour, where the teacher involved the whole group in the teaching of some point, often a reading strategy or a spelling or punctuation rule, followed by individual, paired or small group practice. Frequently the teacher would have prepared worksheets, usually differentiating the level of work in mixed-level groups.

- Individual work

Twenty-seven sessions in 10 classes consisted entirely of individual work. Five teachers taught all of their sessions in this way. (Five classes varied between the pattern of group work and practice and having no taught whole-group session at all, usually for identifiable reasons.) Working as part of the whole class and working alone were the predominant modes of working. Relatively little time was spent in any other grouping.

The average length of a session was about 120 minutes. For the average learner, the groupings listed took up about 73 minutes (sum of averages for the six categories), or about 61 per cent of time in class. The remaining 47 minutes were taken up with social time. This included an opening chat and tea breaks but most of this time was spent on work that was not reading-related: discussing individual learning plans with the teacher or writing.

Secondly, in five of the groupings it could be assumed that learners were receiving active reading tuition or practice, the exception being working alone. If the average 29 minutes spent working alone are subtracted from the average 73 minutes spent on all reading activities, it seems that learners received on average 44 minutes (37 per cent) of active reading tuition or practice per session.

Learner groupings in class, by average number of minutes

Grouping category	Average number of minutes per session
A. Whole class with teacher/assistant	25.4
B. Alone	29.1
C. 1:1 with teacher	4.6
D. 1:1 with assistant.	6.3
E. Learner pair – no teacher/assistant support	3.6
F. Small group, with or without support	4.4

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Teaching strategies

Most commonly used teaching strategies

2003/04 Cohort	Average number of minutes per session
Learner reads text silently	13.23
Appraisal/feedback given immediately	10.45
Discussion of text	7.01
Discussion of vocabulary during a reading	5.76
Other word study (e.g. word lists, puzzles, word searches)	4.92
Use dictionary to find meanings	5.39
Teacher reads text aloud while learners follow own texts	3.97
2004/05 Cohort	
Learner reads text silently	11.57
Appraisal/feedback given immediately	8.54
Other word study (e.g. word lists, puzzles, word searches)	6.72
Discussion of vocabulary during a reading	4.46
Use dictionary to find meanings	5.47

The most popular classroom layout was one large table with learners sitting round, showing that teachers had an overall preference for the model of 'group work followed by practice'.

Most teaching was assessed as of high or fairly high quality. The specific teaching strategy recorded most frequently was silent reading. Several 'effective' approaches highlighted by literature reviews were rarely, if ever, observed.

Teaching strategies not generally used but deemed effective

- Reciprocal teaching (see Palincsar, 1986; Palincsar and Brown, 1984) - an approach in which pairs of learners take turns to be 'tutor' and 'student', e.g. in formulating questions for each other about a text – was rarely seen.
- Teaching of 'word attack skills' (Kruidenier, 2002) or phonics was infrequently used and, when observed, was often inaccurate.
- Fluency in reading aloud seems hardly to be taught at all, though it is in widespread use in North America at both initial and adult levels. Many UK adult literacy teachers may be reluctant to put pressure on learners to do this because they see it as involving individual reading aloud. North American practice seems to refer more to choral reading, where individuals' uncertainties need not be revealed.
- Repeated reading is an extension of that technique: classes and individuals practise reading a

familiar passage aloud until they can do so faultlessly. Again, in North American experience it seems to build confidence and comprehension rather than just being an exercise.
- Teaching explicit comprehension strategies brings us back to reciprocal teaching. It is clear from the research literature that the teaching of comprehension, which after all is the point of reading, is the least researched topic in the field, at both initial and adult levels.
- Language experience approaches – researchers looked for examples where learners read out their own writing after having composed it, which might have reflected a language experience approach, but found few examples.

Case study

Sensitive teaching

One particular example of sensitive and thoughtful teaching was a class, which comprised seven learners, of whom five were adults with Down syndrome. Their teacher had been working with adult literacy groups for some time, and was following a course leading to a certificated qualification. She was regularly helped by an experienced assistant. Both staff and most of the learners had worked together in the previous academic year.

The sessions displayed common characteristics:
- a casual, familiar conversational approach, but without ever losing group control
- very little formal exposition, with what there was always supported by a medium other than speech and almost always involving the learner
- considerable support/encouragement of even the smallest achievements
- staff involving themselves in the activities they were presenting, at the same level as the learners
- relatively swift switches to individual participation in group work, or to individual work (mainly copying) with staff sitting with individuals or pairs to encourage and support
- use of effective role-play techniques to encourage involvement, often with learners taking the lead role
- absolute acceptance that the pace had to be measured, and that progress would be slow.

Over the year, the learners' growth in confidence was evident. It was most marked in one learner who, by the end of the year, was a markedly different person – open and communicative, not just wanting to please by her responses but wanting to get involved. It was also possible to see that some learners had made a little progress, even at the minimal level of literacy that they needed to cope with their lives.

How teacher practice may affect learner performance

■ The effectiveness of teachers' practice depended greatly on their attitudes. It must be significant that the class with the greatest evidence of learner dependence, leading to long periods of inactivity, was the one whose teacher expressed the most negative attitude towards his teaching.

Working alone in class was significantly and *negatively* associated with change in reading scores. Thus, greater amounts of time spent working alone were associated with worse progress. The relationship was very weak, but does call into question the high proportion of time learners spent working alone. In one class where learners generally worked alone on worksheets too much time was wasted waiting for the teacher's comments and directions.

Working in pairs was *positively* associated with change in reading scores. On average, learners who worked more in pairs made better progress. Group work tended to promote a more positive class atmosphere due to mutual support between learners, though individualised working could also achieve this.

Silent reading was the most frequent specific strategy in both years. This suggests that this was the largest single component of the average 29 minutes per session that learners spent working alone. Of course, this means that learners were practising their reading, but could they or should they have done this between sessions? Does this strategy improve their fluency or accuracy or comprehension if not linked to discussion or oral practice or some form of comprehension exercise? Similarly, are word lists, puzzles and word searches effective in developing reading comprehension?

The finding that silent reading was the strategy that occupied the greatest amount of class time, coupled with the substantial amount of time learners spent working alone, requires some exemplification (see case study opposite).

Case study

Pair work/buddying

One session demonstrated how a tutor incorporated pair work into her lesson plan. After a whole-class section on advertisements and persuasive writing, the tutor handed out differentiated worksheets and attempted to pair learners working at the same level. The two learners at Level 1 were told, 'Get together, get ideas from each other.' They disregarded this and worked on their own. However, when the teacher asked the two Entry Level learners to work together, one immediately moved her seat so they were sitting together. They discussed the worksheet (on adjectives) at length together and helped each other look up entries in a dictionary. When the teacher gave feedback, it was done jointly, rather than one-to-one.

With a different class, however, this teacher 'seized the moment' to provide a buddying opportunity. One learner (J) arrived very late, after the session on pronouns and distribution of individual worksheets. The tutor told her, 'S will explain what you've to do'. S laughs – 'If I can!' J sits down next to S, who explains briefly but accurately about pronouns and what the task involves.

Case study

Silent reading

In one session all learners received a 'silent reading' coding for times that varied from 6 to 44 minutes. However, this strategy was never used on its own. As they read through the worksheet passages, learners were identifying unknown words, highlighting them and using dictionaries to find their meanings. Time was also spent one-to-one with a learner who needed more help, listening to him read the text aloud. The reading was followed by individual comprehension exercises.

An alternative to silent reading as a prelude to comprehension exercises is demonstrated by the following description of a session on contracts and 'reading the small print'. The teacher distributed sheets with information about telephone contracts, with comprehension questions. She read the first part of the sheet to the learners and asked the first question ('Where would you find these texts?'). This was followed by further questions about features of this particular type of text and then a class discussion. The learners then continued reading the next text, this time with the learners being asked to read out in turn. Again this was followed by questions and discussion, and this time the tutor wrote up the main points on the whiteboard. The learners were then given a second sheet with the text of the actual contract and read it silently for about three minutes before further questions, discussion and taking turns to read it again. These whole-class activities occupied about 40 minutes, and only then did the learners work alone, on a task which involved writing a summary of the main points.

Conclusions

■ This study provides substantial evidence of the range of teaching practice within adult literacy and the real effect this has on learner attainment in, and attitudes towards, reading.

- The adult literacy workforce emerges from the research as well-qualified and experienced on the whole, with an overarching concern to meet learners' needs.
- Most teaching was assessed as of high or fairly high quality with many positive features (e.g. flexibility, direct teaching, opportunities for practice, links to life outside the classroom, praise and encouragement). Teachers provided good opportunities for learner involvement (e.g. contributing their own ideas, thinking about tasks and discussing them, expressing themselves without being immediately corrected) and many had considerable teaching experience. More than half had assistance in the classroom.
- The introduction of a core curriculum is prompting teachers to move towards greater group work and indeed group and paired work has a positive effect on reading attainment, as opposed to students working alone. Many teachers, including the more experienced, spoke in terms of the curriculum being more 'structured', 'focused', generating 'good ideas', raising the profile of adult literacy, increasing teachers' confidence and clarifying issues of differentiation, although the highest praise came from those who had been teaching adult literacy for a relatively short time. One teacher with four years' experience said: 'It's my bible'.
- Although the specific teaching strategy recorded most frequently was silent reading this strategy was rarely used on its own and required more engagement than might be assumed. As learners read through worksheet passages, for example, they would simultaneously identify unknown words, highlight them and use dictionaries to find out their meanings. Time might also be spent one-to-one with learners who needed more help.
- Although learners were exposed to a range of single sounds and 'blends' (consonant clusters), a more structured approach to phonics is desirable and a more systematic method of determining which sounds are known, which need some reinforcement and which need to be taught.
- There is scope for further review of ICT software and web-based

resources and their effectiveness as a teaching resource over a range of strategies. How the resource is used could be an important factor in learner progression.

- Change in reading scores was significantly related to just two variables: working alone and in pairs. Learners who worked alone less made better progress, and learners who worked in pairs more made better progress. Learners who reported more self-study between classes also made better progress.
- Learners' self-confidence increased significantly between pre- and post-assessment, and those whose reading benefited more from classes reported significantly greater enjoyment of literacy. In feedback sessions learners spoke with great pride of their achievement. For example, one learner described writing the first letter ever to her brother: 'He was shocked and said, don't let that be the only letter you write to me!' Another who talked about writing a book review for the first time -- 'I was quite proud of that' -- went on to achieve Levels 1 and 2 qualifications and to enlist for GCSE English. Such stories were not uncommon.

Our research suggests that measuring progress in reading is more complex than any tests yet devised by researchers or awarding bodies. A worthwhile research topic would be to investigate more systematically what learners perceive as markers of their progress.

Limitations to this research

We acknowledge the following limitations to our research:

- The amount of time between assessments is likely to have been too short for evidence of substantial progress to emerge.
- The assessment instrument assessed only comprehension at text level. No data were gathered on progress in other aspects of reading, such as word recognition.
- Active reading tuition was found to occupy less than half the average class time, and not all classes were only focused on reading.
- Some basic aspects of reading were not assessed: word recognition, for example.
- Several effective teaching strategies were rarely seen.
- The assessment tool used at pre-test in the first year was a pilot instrument.
- Significant numbers of learners had a learning disability.

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Funded by the Department for Education and Skills as part of ***Skills for Life***: the national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills.

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