



English Foundations I

The Research Base

Devon Brenner, Ph.D.

Mississippi State University

Kathleen Wilson, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, Lincoln

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Introduction

The National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) uses three levels to describe student achievement: basic, proficient, and advanced (Lee, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007). Although below basic is not a recognized NAEP designation, it is in common usage in education circles (Deshler, Palincsar, Biancarosa, & Nair, 2007).

The accountability systems of many states use these same achievement levels to describe student performance. NAEP defines “proficient” as representing strong academic performance and achievement of grade-level expectations. “Advanced” represents superior performance that is above grade-level expectations, and “basic” performance indicates only partial mastery of the knowledge expected. “Below basic,” then, is used to describe the achievement of students who have mastered few, if any, of the expectations specified for their grade.

This white paper addresses teaching strategies appropriate for adolescent students whose achievement in literacy is below basic. Students with below-basic literacy achievement have great difficulty learning from grade-level texts. This difficulty is rooted in a variety of reasons.

For a few adolescents, the problem stems from underdeveloped decoding skills, especially with words that have more than one syllable (Buly & Valencia, 2002). More often, these students do not yet possess the basic and advanced comprehension strategies required to be successful readers in the wide range of secondary textbooks and materials.

Even if they are familiar with a few strategies, students do not have the flexibility to apply them as they read and write different content-area texts. For example, students with below-basic literacy achievement are often unable to interpret explicit information in texts and have trouble making inferences and discriminating between main ideas and supporting details.

These students may not be able to engage in basic literary analysis (e.g., identify the mood of a piece) and to think critically about the content (Alvermann & Moore, 1991).

- They may not know how to support their ideas with details or reasons.
- They struggle with vocabulary.
- They tend to have extremely limited knowledge of word meanings and automatically recognize only a limited number of words in grade-level texts.
- They often have little understanding of words’ multiple meanings (e.g., a run of bad luck, a press run at the newspaper, run the meeting), know very few academic words (e.g., interpret or summarize), and find it difficult to determine the meaning of a word from the context (American Institutes for Research, 2007).

Students with below-basic literacy achievement struggle with writing as well as reading. They may be unable to respond appropriately to a writing prompt; often include few, if any, relevant supporting details; may have little or no organizational structure; and have an over-abundance of problems with mechanics, including grammar, spelling, and punctuation (ACT, Inc., 2007). All of these components of successful reading and writing require effective direct instruction (Deshler, Palincsar, Biancarosa, & Nair, 2007).

The Research Base: Instructional Strategies for Students Whose Achievement Is Below Basic

Adolescents with below-basic achievement need a large volume of reading practice.

Research on the importance of reading practice is clear: students need to spend a lot of time with their eyes on the page—reading—to become good readers. Reading is like any skill: to become proficient, you need repeated, extended, and meaningful practice. Time spent reading boosts word recognition (Laberge & Samuels, 1974), improves vocabulary (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998), and is associated with improved reading comprehension and better reading achievement (Guthrie, Schafer, & Huang, 2001; Krisch et al., 2002).

Accessible texts

Students whose achievement is below basic struggle with grade-level texts. Research tells us that spending time reading texts that are too difficult does not boost achievement (Ivey, 2000). Only practice with reading texts that are accessible—texts that students can actually read—builds fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary (Rasinski, Blachowicz, & Lems, 2006). That is why it is so important for below-basic students to have opportunities to read accessible texts.

Texts are easier to read if they have a high proportion of one-syllable words, words that are easy to decode, and words that researchers call “high frequency”—the words that appear most often in all texts (Carrol, Davies, & Richman, 1971; Hiebert, 2001). Below-basic readers are also supported through repeated exposure to a limited number of new words.

Each exposure to a word in a different context supports the development of knowledge about how, when, and why the word can be used (Nagy, Anderson, & Herman, 1987). This repeated exposure gives students the chance to practice reading the words in meaningful ways and to develop deep vocabulary knowledge (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; Nagy & Scott, 2000).

English language learners (ELL), in particular, benefit from “comprehensible input,” that is, from reading texts they can comprehend (Krashen, 1982). Reading multiple texts accessible through carefully controlled vocabulary is likely to provide comprehensible input and show ELLs how English words are related to one another and how words can have multiple meanings. This is an area of weakness for students who are learning English along with the content of secondary classrooms (Biancarosa et al., 2006).

Engaging topics

But just providing accessible texts is not enough: students have to be willing and able to read those texts. Issues of motivation are especially important for the below-basic adolescent reader, who may have experienced repeated failure from reading school-based texts and may be reluctant to try new texts (Alvermann, 2004). Decisions not to read are tied to self-image. When reading is a difficult task, avoiding reading is a student’s way of protecting or preserving his or her self-image (Reed, Shallert, Beth, & Woodruff, 2004).

One way to support adolescent readers is through the selection of the reading materials that are given to them as learning tools. Adolescents who struggle with reading are more likely to read texts that have a connection to their own lives and that make a real-world connection to their concerns and interests (Guthrie, 2004; Reed, Shallert, Beth, & Woodruff, 2004; Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999).

Additionally, when adolescents are given a choice in what they read or how they read it, they have more incentive to read (Deci & Ryan, 1985). When asked, adolescents stated that their worst experiences with reading involved a lack of control over the reading selections, boredom with the content, and difficulty comprehending materials that did not match their reading level (Ivey & Broadus, 2001).

Adolescents with below-basic achievement need explicit instruction in comprehension.

Proficient readers apply skills and strategies that enable them to comprehend as they read. In the domain of reading, a strategy is a set of mental steps that can be explicitly applied to help with comprehension. Research in the 1980s and early 1990s focused on identifying the strategies used by proficient readers and on figuring out ways to teach those strategies to individuals who read less skillfully (e.g., Duffy, 2002; Pearson et al., 1992; Pressley et al., 1994; Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995).

The gradual-release-of-responsibility model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983) has been shown to be effective in teaching comprehension strategies.

- Using a gradual release of responsibility, the teacher first explicitly explains the strategy and why it is useful. Then the teacher models how and when to use the strategy to comprehend text. This model in with a think-aloud step is very important because reading is an inherently invisible process.
- Struggling readers do not necessarily know what mental steps to take to help make text meaningful. When a proficient reader “thinks aloud” about how she uses the strategy, why she is using it, and what thoughts she has as she reads, struggling readers are able to see good reading practice in action.
- After explanation and modeling, students need supported practice to apply strategies in meaningful contexts; that is, they need opportunities to try the mental steps they have observed.

This series of steps is enhanced when students are asked to explain their thinking as they apply the strategies. After several opportunities to practice, the responsibility is completely released to the student, and he or she can use the strategy independently during reading (Nokes & Dole, 2004). There are many reading strategies that have shown to support reading comprehension. Three of these may be especially important for the below-basic adolescent reader—summarizing, making inferences, and making connections.

Summarizing

Summarization is the ability to identify and name the main idea and supporting details. Because summarization leads to comprehension and retention of ideas, it may be the most important reading strategy to learn (Pressley, Johnson, Symons, McGoldrick, & Kurita, 1989).

Proficient readers summarize as they read, which allows them to monitor for comprehension. Proficient readers also summarize after reading as they sort out important information from less meaningful details. Summarizing is a complex mental task (Hidi & Anderson, 1986), and struggling readers often find it difficult to determine importance and generalize the main idea (Winograd, 1984).

Students can be taught to summarize through modeling and explanation and through steps like paying attention to headers and footers and using the text's organization pattern to structure the summary (Bean & Steenwyk, 1984; NICHD, 2000; Ruddell & Boyle, 1989).

Making inferences

Proficient readers make inferences when they use their background knowledge and understanding of how texts work and then draw conclusions. Inference-making is important because authors can never include all the information necessary for a purely literal reading of a text. They rely on readers' using their related knowledge and reading between the lines in order to comprehend text. Struggling readers are often very literal readers, paying attention only to the surface meaning of the words (Westby, 1999).

Readers can be taught to make inferences (Hanson & Pearson, 1982). In particular, it can be helpful to explicitly teach struggling readers some of the most common types of inferences that texts ask readers to make, such as location (e.g., I looked into the foggy mirror as I brushed my teeth), time (e.g., The sun set as we drove home), cause-effect (e.g., She felt a little sick as she threw away the candy bar wrappers), and feeling-attitude (e.g., His cheeks burned red, and he hung his head as he walked away) (Johnson & Johnson, 1986).

Making connections

Explicit instruction in connecting new learning to students' background knowledge and experiences—their schemata—can help low-achieving adolescents become better readers. Rumelhart (1980) defined a schema as “a data structure for representing generic concepts in memory. There are schemata representing our knowledge about all concepts: those underlying objects, situations, events, sequences of events, actions, and sequences of actions” (34).

Schemata help our thinking and learning in several ways. They help us to allocate cognitive resources by having us limit the focus of our attention. They influence how we make meaning by giving us a “place” to integrate new information into established knowledge bases. When we can associate something we already know with new knowledge learned through reading, it becomes easier to retrieve the knowledge again in different contexts—a goal of education.

Being able to make connections with our prior knowledge helps us to make predictions about a text, increasing engagement. These connections also help us to make inferences, thereby increasing the probability that we will comprehend what the author or speaker is communicating.

Finally, making connections between the content of the text and our life experiences can be motivating and engender interest in the text. Through modeling and direct instruction, students can be explicitly taught to make connections during reading, thereby increasing engagement, comprehension, and learning (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001).

Adolescents with below-basic achievement need explicit instruction in strategies for figuring out unfamiliar words.

Adolescents who often read will learn many words incidentally, through repeated exposure to words in multiple, meaningful contexts (NICHD, 2000). However, students whose literacy achievement is below basic need support to figure out the meanings of new words.

This may be particularly true for English language learners, who are learning new concepts and vocabulary while learning English words for concepts they know from their first language (Carlo, 2007; Klingner & Vaughn, 2004). Two specific strategies can help below-basic students figure out the unfamiliar words they encounter in texts—analyzing morphemes and using context clues.

Morphemes

Morphemes are the smallest meaningful chunks in words. Prefixes, suffixes, and roots are all examples of morphemes. The word shoes, for example, has two morphemes: shoe, something you wear on your foot, and s, which makes the word plural. Celery has one morpheme; polysyllabic has three.

Readers can figure out the meanings of many unfamiliar words by analyzing their morphemes, that is, by using their knowledge of roots, suffixes, and prefixes to determine the meanings of the words (Henry, 1988). By breaking a word like indefatigable into its parts, readers can figure out that it means “not able to be fatigued, not able to be made tired.”

White, Sowell, and Yanagihara (1989) have determined the nine most common prefixes: un- (not); re- (again); in-, im-, il-, and ir- (not); dis-; en- and em-; non-; in- and im- (in); over-; and mis-. These account for 75 percent of all words with prefixes. Knowing the meanings of these prefixes, along with many common root words, can help readers to figure out the meanings of the words they encounter (Lehr, Osborn, & Hiebert, 2004; Stahl, 1999).

Context clues

In addition to morphemes, proficient readers use context clues to figure out the meanings of unfamiliar words (Nagy, Herman, & Anderson, 1985). A context clue is information about a word's meaning that can be found in the text that surrounds the word, as well as in the illustrations and other graphics.

Baumann et al. (2003) found that explicit instruction in using both text and visual context clues helped students to determine the meanings of unfamiliar words. Some of the most common types of context clues found in text have been identified, including definition or explanation (e.g., A fen is a kind of wetland); restatement or synonym (e.g., She was livid, so angry she couldn't talk); antonym or contrast (e.g., Her ruddy face looked nothing like the pale white of the marble statue); and gist, or the overall meaning or sense of the passage (Beers, 2003).

Context clues can help a reader to figure out the general meaning of a word, determine which possible meaning of a word is called for, and construct general comprehension of the passage being read. However, it is important to help students recognize that not all context clues are helpful. Sometimes the text does not provide enough information to figure out the meaning of a word, and sometimes the text is downright unhelpful, as when sarcasm is used (Beck, McKeown, & McCaslin, 1983).

Adolescents with below-basic achievement need explicit instruction in the writing process.

The ability to compose texts is perhaps more important now than ever before. Composing texts includes generating ideas, formulating those ideas to communicate with a particular audience, revising drafts to improve organization and word choice, and skillfully editing your work. Graham and Perin (2007) conducted a meta-analysis of research on effective writing instruction. From this work, Perin (2007) offers several recommendations for effective writing instruction that apply directly to adolescents. To improve adolescents' writing ability, writing instruction should

- teach specific strategies for planning, revising, and editing students' writing (De La Paz, 2005);
- teach students to set clear goals in their writing tasks. Students should identify
 - the purpose of the writing task they are asked to complete;
 - the characteristics of the final paper required for successful completion (Page-Voth & Graham, 1999).
- encourage students to use word processing, which enhances the quality of student writing, in particular by facilitating the revision of writing (Lowther, Ross, & Morrison, 2003);
- explicitly teach students to write increasingly complex sentences by teaching sentence combining (Saddler & Graham, 2005);
- teach effective prewriting activities that help students gather and organize the information before they begin to compose their first draft. This works especially well when students create visual representations of the information, for example, graphic organizers or illustrations (Brodney, Reeves, & Kazelskis, 1999);
- present models of good writing and encourage students to analyze them and imitate the critical elements from the models they review (Knudson, 1991);
- encourage students to write across the curriculum. Both formal and informal writing—journals, notes, responses to essays, narratives, and research reports—support learning of the curriculum and the development of writing ability (Boscolo & Mason, 2001).

In writing instruction, it is essential to take the student's developmental level into account and to adjust instruction to meet the current needs and ability of the student. If students do not feel competent and efficacious, they are more likely to lack persistence in the task. Students' motivation to write is enhanced through effective instruction to improve their skills (Bruning & Horn, 2000).

English Foundations I and the Research Base

Research provides a great deal of information about the strategies that can help adolescents with below-basic achievement to become more proficient readers and writers. English Foundations I has been built on a foundation of these research findings to provide engaging, relevant curriculum in reading and writing strategies that can support adolescent literacy development.

English Foundations I has been designed to provide struggling readers with ample reading practice. Each lesson is built around topics that the adolescent reader is likely to find intriguing. The passages are written at a third- to fifth-grade level and are accessible to adolescents with below-basic achievement. The passages have been written with very careful vocabulary control and a limited word count per page.

have been written with very careful vocabulary control and a limited word count per page. All of the text that students are expected to read in English Foundations I, including instructional materials and assessments, is written with a high percentage of one-syllable and high-frequency words and only occasional multisyllabic words. These multisyllabic words are repeated multiple times to facilitate mastery and have been carefully chosen because they are important to the content and are likely to be seen again in grade-level text.

Although the passages are easy to read, they are still appropriate for adolescent readers, who are skeptical of anything that appears too young or immature. The topics and passages in English Foundations I engage readers with important and interesting ideas about food, culture, people, current events, the environment, arts, money, and politics.

Comprehension strategies can best be taught through the gradual-release-of-responsibility model, using think-alouds, modeling, explicit explanation and demonstration, and repeated reminders to use the strategies at appropriate times. English Foundations I provides these instructional methods by using a wide variety of unique technological features. Through Flash pieces, videos, and audio clips, virtual readers model using and applying reading and writing strategies. As students work through the lessons, characters pop up to remind them about appropriate times to summarize, make connections, infer, or apply writing skills. Frequent feedback allows students to see if they are using the skills and strategies appropriately and to try again if needed.

Multiple lessons and units in English Foundations I teach the most important reading strategies, including summarizing and synthesizing, making connections, making inferences, author's purpose, and fact and opinion. The course teaches students important, research-based vocabulary strategies—including using context clues and using knowledge of morphemes, particularly prefixes and roots—to determine word meanings.

The second half of the course is focused on improving students' writing abilities. This remarkable attention to writing instruction includes units and lessons on those best practices that have been identified by the research, including knowing your audience, generating ideas through graphic organizers, outlining and organizing writing, identifying types of sentences and sentence combining, revising writing for word choice and organization, and applying knowledge of mechanics to edit writing for an audience.

Conclusion

Sound instructional programs for adolescents whose achievement is below basic include ample reading practice, accessible texts about interesting and engaging topics, explicit instruction in comprehension strategies, vocabulary instruction that helps students figure out the meanings of unfamiliar words, and ample opportunity to learn.

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Contact

Apex Learning

1215 Fourth Ave., Suite 1500
Seattle, WA 98161
Phone: 1 (206) 381-5600
Fax: 1 (206) 381-5601
ApexLearning.com