



National Research and Development Centre  
for adult literacy and numeracy



# Research Review

## **Developing adult reading skills:** an exploration of text-, sentence-, and word-level reading difficulties

### **Synopsis**

This exploratory study of adult learners' difficulties with reading was carried out by NRDC as part of the Centre's work in support of *Skills for Life*. A total of 53 learners were assessed, sessions in which they participated were observed, and tutors were interviewed. The findings showed a wide range of strategies being used to address reading difficulties, but less than a perfect match between learners' difficulties and pedagogy.

### **Key Points**

- ❑ As a group, the adults in the study showed difficulties with the following areas: word identification, comprehension, phonological awareness, decoding, and spelling.
- ❑ When the assessment data were reviewed by individual subject and analysed for strengths and weaknesses, three groups, or reader profiles emerged each with distinct teaching requirements.
- ❑ Whilst teaching was observed that targeted some of the identified reading difficulties, intense, focused reading teaching did not comprise a significant amount of the teaching that occurred during the sessions.
- ❑ Learners may not be making sufficient progress in reading because not enough of the class session is spent on reading activities.

❑ A greater amount of time is devoted to teaching reading during sessions where the teacher worked with a group of similar ability teaching, compared to sessions where the students work on reading activities independently and receive occasional feedback from their tutors.

❑ Although tutors are teaching word identification strategies, and decoding strategies, teaching may need to be more intense and focused. In addition these strategies may not cover the range of difficulties that students have with word identification and decoding.

### **Background and rationale of research**

Very little information was available on what adult literacy provision was like on the ground, and no study expressly on adult learners' difficulties in reading was available. However, a recent comprehensive US review of the literature (Kruidenier, 2002) obviated the need to undertake a literature review.

## Main elements of research

- ✘ This was an exploratory study designed to investigate areas of reading difficulty in adult literacy learning through focused observation of practice and close study of learners
- ✘ 27 2-hour observations of teaching and learning were conducted at 21 different sites within six basic skills providers
- ✘ 54 interviews were conducted with basic skills tutors (27 individual interviews with the tutors whose class sessions were observed, and four focus group interviews comprising 27 tutors)
- ✘ 53 individual adult learners were assessed using a combination of diagnostic materials which covered word identification, reading comprehension, and phonological awareness (see Bristow and Leslie, 1988; Leslie and Caldwell, 1985)
- ✘ The observations, interviews, and assessments were conducted by a team of five teacher-fieldworkers, recruited for the project.

## Research team

### Project Director

Professor Greg Brooks

### Senior Researcher

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### Practitioner-researchers

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## References and further reading

- Bristow, P. S. and Leslie, L. (1988). Indicators of reading difficulty: Discrimination between instructional- and frustration-range performance of functionally illiterate adults. **Reading Research Quarterly**, 23(2), 200-218.
- Kruidenier, J. (2001). **Research-based principles for adult basic education reading A resource for researchers**. Washington, DC: National Institute for Literacy.
- Leslie, L., & Caldwell, J. (1995). **Qualitative Reading Inventory**. New York: Harper Collins.

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