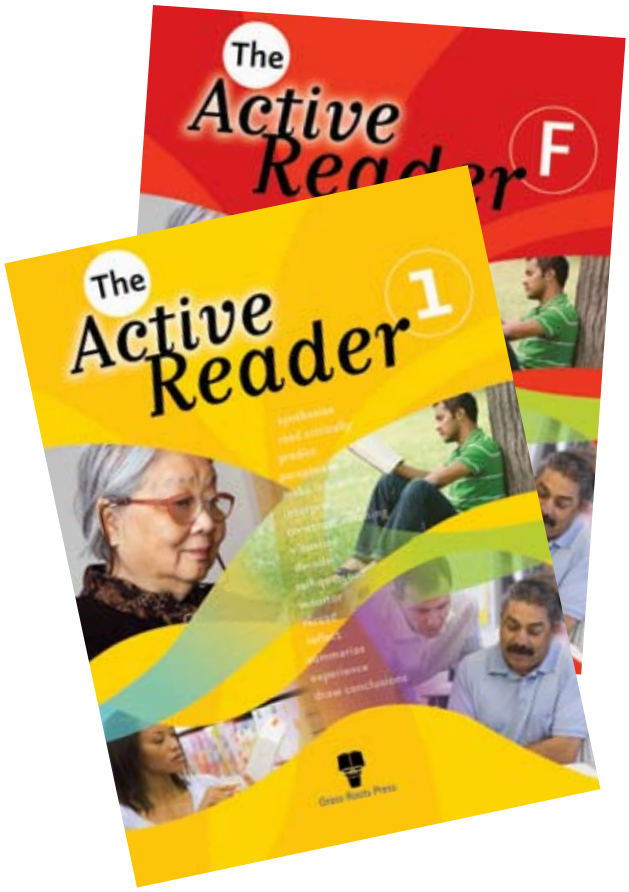

Working with Beginning Readers

by Pat Campbell

Contents

Working with Beginning Readers

Grass Roots Press

INTRODUCTION

Beginning readers engage in a range of literacy activities that support their everyday life functions and interests. Yet, students might say "I don't read anything" because, to them, reading means picking up a book or newspaper. Therefore, it is important to validate all of their everyday reading activities. Beginning readers need to recognize that, for example, looking at a sign such as Exit or Open and understanding the meaning behind the word constitutes reading. By asking, What food labels did you read in your home today? or What signs did you read on your way to class?, students will begin to view themselves as readers.

PRINCIPLES FOR WORKING WITH BEGINNING READERS

The following principles are based on research from the field of emergent and adult literacy research.

1. **The instructional program incorporates a balanced approach.**

   A balanced literacy program integrates reading *and* writing instruction. Students are encouraged to engage in literacy activities that are connected to their daily lives. For example, writing activities should focus on a specific purpose, such as creating a grocery list or signing a birthday card. Reading instruction should include reading and discussing authentic text that students encounter outside the classroom.

   A balanced program places equal emphasis on print and meaning-centred literacy activities. Print-centred activities, such as teaching phonics, draw the students' attention to letters and sounds. Meaning-centred activities such as discussing a story stress the importance of producing meaning.

2. The instructional program responds to the student's learning needs.

Each beginning reader is at a different point on the continuum of literacy development. Students who are *acquiring* a specific skill will be at a different point along the learning continuum from those who are *building* their ability with a specific skill. Consequently, instruction needs to be tailored to a student's level of competence for a particular skill.

For example, phonics instruction based on the student's knowledge is more effective than teaching phonics in a predetermined sequence. Beginning readers usually possess some phonics knowledge. For instance, if a student's name is Tyrone, he might know that the letter "t" makes the /t/ sound. Once you have determined the student's needs, integrate the phonics instruction into your lessons.

3. Students are actively involved in the learning process.

Research shows that students learn best when they are actively engaged in the learning process. In an active learning environment, students define their goals and participate in choosing materials and activities, making decisions, and evaluating their progress. Students who feel responsible for their learning are more apt to transfer and apply their literacy skills into the home and community. Some students are eager to take ownership of their learning while others are reluctant. Students who come from a culture that views the teacher as the expert might feel uncomfortable about taking control of their learning. Likewise, a student's reluctance may stem from past experiences when they were excluded from participating in decision making, as often happens. It is important for educators to relinquish control so that students do not adopt a passive role in their learning.

4. Instruction includes discussion about the student's understanding of reading.

Responses to the question, What does it mean to be a good reader? can provide valuable information as to why students prefer certain reading strategies over others. For instance, if adults were exposed to phonics instruction during their primary education, they may believe that good readers sound out every letter or that "guessing" unfamiliar words is a form of cheating. In this case, educators can broaden and deepen these students' concept of reading by discussing how good readers use their background knowledge to decode and interpret text. By asking questions such as, What do you do when you come across a word you don't know?, and What do you do if you don't understand something you have read?, educators gain further insight into the students' awareness and knowledge of reading strategies.

5. Students and educators discuss their expectations.

Students often have expectations about how they will be taught and the time it will take for them to become fluent readers. Students and educators need opportunities to voice their expectations so that they can come to a common understanding. If discussion does not occur, students and educators can experience frustration or anger because expectations are not being met. For example, beginning readers might not realize that in order to make the transition from being beginning readers to fluent readers, they need to apply and transfer the skills they have learned within the classroom to their everyday life. Students who restrict their reading to that which occurs within the four walls of the classroom might become frustrated with their lack of progress. They might leave the program rather than express their dissatisfaction. Without fully understanding the situation, the educator might label these students as unmotivated.

6. Instruction builds upon and validates student's experiences and knowledge.

Adult literacy learning is most successful when students are encouraged to express their ideas and opinions and draw on their interests and experiences. Knowing students' interests will help you choose topics for language experience stories. Knowing how they use literacy in their daily lives will guide the choice of literacy materials that will be used during instruction.

7. Reading material is authentic.

Authentic text is material that adults encounter in everyday life, such as novels, newspapers, recipes, emails, bank statements, bills, instructions, and memos. The authentic material that can be read by beginning readers is restricted because of the difficulty of the text. For beginning readers, authentic text includes language experience stories, photostories, and environmental print such as flyers, coupons, signs, food labels, and calendars. Using relevant and authentic resources, rather than relying on worksheets with little or no connection to the students' lives, makes for much more meaningful lessons.

Phonics instruction, for example, needs to be embedded in authentic, meaningful activities. If the student can read the word *Monday* on a calendar, the relationship between "m" and /m/ can be introduced. Using the sight word "Monday" to introduce a new letter and sound enhances learning by moving from the familiar to the unfamiliar, from the concrete to the abstract, and from the whole to the part.

STRATEGIES FOR WORKING WITH BEGINNING READERS

Assisted writing, which is also referred to as the language experience approach, and sight words are core instructional strategies.

LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE APPROACH

Purposes:

To provide familiar, meaningful text that is predictable and easy to read.

To establish the link between spoken and written words.

Steps:

1. Invite the student to share a personal experience or provide the student with a prompt.
2. Encourage the student to tell a story about the experience or prompt.
3. Record the story, making sure the student can see the words being printed. Record the student's exact words, printing clearly on every second line. Say each word as you print it.
4. Read the story, pointing to each word as you read. Ask the student if they want to make any changes.
5. Read the story together several times, tracking the words with your finger. Ask the student to read the story independently. If the student falters, provide support by reading the word.

NOTES: Initially, record three or four sentences from the story. As the student gains skills and confidence, you can record longer stories.

Type up the story for future use. Print out and store the story in a folder or binder.

SAMPLE LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE STORY

My Usual Day

I get up at four o'clock in the morning and I make myself some tea. I get a shower and then put on my clothes to go to my work. I take the bus at a quarter to five in the early morning and I get to the subway at five. I have to take a next bus and then another one that takes me to another place. From there, I still have to take another bus or I can walk to the place. If it's a nice day, I walk there. At work, I pick orders for a big food store. I work in the freezer section. This is a new job for me. I been there for four months now and I had to pass a test to get in. I like the people there. Them, well they are really nice to me. Now it's only a part-time job, but I hope it to be full-time one day. The pay and the benefits, well, they will be good for me.

Source: From a student enrolled in the Toronto Public Library's Downsview Adult Literacy Program.

The circled words are the student's sight words. The underlined words are the highly predictable words that the educator deleted for a cloze activity.

LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE ACTIVITIES

Sight Words

Ask the student to circle five words they would like to learn. Ask them to copy each word on a separate flash card. Ask the student to illustrate the word on the back of the card. The student can then use the illustration as a reminder for the word, when necessary. (**NOTE:** Some words such as "and," or "tax" are hard to illustrate.)

Cloze Activity

Cover highly predictable words with a small piece of paper. Read the text back to the student. Stop when you reach a covered word and ask the student to predict a word that makes sense and sounds right. Check their predictions by looking at the print.

Phonics

Select one of the student's sight words (E.g., bus). Say, "Bus starts with the letter 'b.' The sound /b/ goes with the letter 'b.' Can you find some other words in the story that start with the letter 'b'?"

Copying

Ask the student to copy the language experience story. Writing provides practice in both printing and in learning the sound symbol correspondences.

Frame Sentences

Choose a sentence from the language experience story. Write out the first part of the sentence and ask the student to complete the sentence with one word. Write down the word. Repeat the sentence frame, recording all of the student's words.

I make myself some _____.
I make myself some tea.
I make myself some toast.
I make myself some soup.
I make myself some spaghetti.

SIGHT WORD BANK

Purpose:

To develop a repertoire of words that can be instantly recognized.

Steps:

1. Print five words the student wants to learn.
2. Ask the student to copy each word on an index card.
3. Ask the student to close their eyes and make a mental picture of the word. Have the student print the letters of the word in the air, eyes still closed.
4. The student illustrates the word on the back of the index card. Using an illustration enables the student to study the words independently. If the student has difficulty reading the word, they can flip over the card and use the illustration as a reminder. The index cards can be stored, using dividers to separate known words from study words.

Sight words can include personal words, high-frequency words, and environmental print.

PERSONAL DICTIONARY

Purpose:

To create a personal dictionary to use as a reference for reading and spelling.

Steps:

1. Explain how and why a dictionary is used. Point out that a dictionary is organized alphabetically.

2. Tell the student that they can use the words in a personal dictionary to help them spell. Provide the student with a notebook. Head each page with an upper and lower case letter (E.g., Aa). Allow at least two pages per letter.

3. Bring in some flyers and magazines. Ask the student to cut out pictures that represent words they want to know how to spell. For example, a student might cut out pictures of food items they might include on a shopping list, such as coffee, bread, and juice.

4. Have the student paste the picture under the appropriate letter in the dictionary. Print the name of the item on a piece of paper. Have the student copy the word next to the picture of the item.