

Helping College Students Who Read Poorly

BY CHARLOTTE J. OLIPHANT

"I didn't do well in school, but now I'm an adult. I think maybe I could do college work if I could just have some catch-up time," Marty, a handsome young adult, told me recently.

More and more colleges are offering a "second chance" to learn basic skills. Serious students with average intelligence, cooperative attitudes, and good attendance can gain between three and seven grade levels in reading in one semester.

I've had a unique opportunity to experiment with methods to help such students by combining my doctoral courses in adult learning, my teaching methods courses, and my work remediating inner-city college freshmen. Here are some of the guidelines and methods that have worked for me.

The Teacher's Role

To succeed with these students the teacher needs to be flexible, firm, and analytical. *Flexibility* means a willingness to individualize instruction for each student after getting to know his or her background. To quickly find out what is relevant, ask

The ideas suggested in this article would also apply, with slight modifications, to high school-age students having difficulty with reading.

students what they liked or disliked about elementary and secondary school. Then ask them what they hope reading class will be like. This highlights their expectations, fears, and study habits. You can discover student interests and reading preferences by asking this question: "If you were a fast reader, what would you read in your spare time?"

Finally, ask each student, "Do you read best in a noisy or quiet room?" Responses will help you decide how much discussion and small-group work to include. The reading literature describes

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cozy little groups here and there in the classroom quietly discussing what they read. However, this doesn't always work when remediating young adults. Many of them need absolute quiet. Discussion participants often lack the self-control to limit noise level and stay on the subject. To gain the friendship and comprehension advantages of small-group or paired discussion, limit discussion to the last 10 minutes of class. Students thus gain the

benefits of group discussion and silent reading, and leave class feeling they have friends.

Teachers need to be *firm* with college-level reading students. Adults who lack basic skills tend to bring with them baggage from the past. Some seek attention and/or engage in power plays. Others act fearful and victimized. An in-between group can be swayed either way, or take alternate roles. This group wants to succeed academically, but the old urge to align with trouble-makers against authority may overcome them. Many students expect to be passed along through the system regardless of their effort or achievement. Plan ways to prevent disruption, giving consequences if necessary. Don't wait for self-policing to solve behavior problems.

Third, teachers of college students need to be *analytical*. It's not enough to be compassionate. You must identify the issues in teaching reading, analyze the entire instructional situation, and apply appropriate instructional principles to individuals and classes.

Dealing With Students Who See Themselves as Failures

Students who see themselves as failures may hide silently, openly confide their feelings, complain about "having to take this stupid course," publicly challenge every method and assignment, or

label the books they can read as “kindergarten books.” Encouraging students to talk about their perceptions doesn’t always work in these situations.

Neither does a pep talk. Don’t tell these students, “We’re all going to love this class and succeed”—they’ve heard this a hundred times and don’t believe it. People who’ve given up hope don’t want to go through the same painful experience again. So they defend themselves by not hoping—or by not trying.

What can you say to motivate these students? Try this: “I’m glad each of you had the interest, foresight, and courage to come. I like working with college students, and I look forward to knowing you personally. But first I’d like to share a couple of honest thoughts. Each person here needs to read better in order to reach some worthwhile goals. A lot of people who have made it big in life had temporary setbacks to overcome.

Don’t think that because you need to improve your reading, you therefore don’t have the ability. There are all kinds of reasons people don’t learn to read very well in elementary school. And once they get behind, they often stay behind until they have a chance to focus primarily on reading. Your struggles with reading have probably more to do with circumstances than ability. So don’t let the need to catch up in some area damage your self-respect. Respect yourself for doing your best.

“Your chances of speedy success in this class, providing you do your best, are built on good methods of instruction that have worked for other people. When

they came to class, some of these students were reading at second-grade level.

“But success isn’t always obvious at first. So please put aside your questions about ‘Can I succeed?’ for awhile. Don’t

to the familiar, even if it didn’t work. But there are methods that work better for older young people, so please give them a chance. For instance, if a man wanted to learn electronics, he wouldn’t tell his teacher, ‘I don’t want this book’ or ‘I don’t need that assignment.’ The teacher could give the students some choices, but not others. That’s how it is here. I’ll respect your abilities and preferences, and ask you to respect my careful planning. Try it my way for at least the next month.

“We’ve all lived long enough now to have been really hurt at times by life and by others. So let’s make this room a safe place where no one gets hurt by looks, by being ignored, or by cutting remarks or clever jokes. Everyone deserves to be respected, regardless of his looks or abilities or mistakes or opinions.”

This approach may appear authoritarian, but it is really learner-centered because it provides for the needs of students who would otherwise cut each other down, deny their academic needs, select

books they can’t read, and refuse suggestions. Students with problematic backgrounds often need to begin college with more teacher-directed learning at the beginning. They can then move toward self-directed learning at their own pace.

Principles of Learning to Read

A person learns to read a word when he or she *simultaneously* sees the word, hears or says the word, and understands its meaning. After seeing a word for the first time, the person needs to repeatedly read it fast enough to not forget the word between “sightings.”

This is why young adults need predictable or repetitive vocabularies just as

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try to evaluate your progress for a month. Then we’ll talk frankly about your individual needs at conferences.

“Many college students want reading practice to be just like their elementary school workbook because we’re attracted

much as children do. I believe that the basic principles of learning to read are not different for adults, but the content and classroom climate do need to be different.

As a teacher you need to continually create a setting in which the student sees the word, hears or says the word, and understands it—simultaneously. A student does not learn to read by looking at words he cannot hear or say, understand, or reasonably guess any more than he would learn German by reading a German book over and over. This is why “letting young adults pick whatever they’re interested in reading” doesn’t work. You have to match the book’s vocabulary to words the person can read.

So how do you get readers to do this magical thing—to recognize new words? How do you enable them to see, hear, and understand words simultaneously? Any way you can. Use prompts and cues, and give only words that are already in the student’s spoken vocabulary. Introduce and explain new words before the student reads the assignment. Repeat the new word often until recognition is automatic and immediate.

Where does phonics fit in? “Phonics”—broadly defined—includes a system of prompts and cues that helps a student recognize new words. Students who lack basic word-attack skills need phonics. But word-attack skills should not form a major part of a remedial reading course.

Here’s why. First, I’ve found that even poor readers can usually sound out phonetically consistent words. Second, by using good sight-reading methods, students immediately and automatically recognize several hundred core words faster than they can learn and use scores of technical word attack rules.

Third, a good reader’s key skill is fast word recognition, not fast decoding or speedy word-attack. Many poor readers focus on one syllable at a time, or one word at a time. They have forgotten the

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beginning of a sentence by the time they reach the end. They don’t see whole paragraphs or sentences: they see letters and syllables. No wonder they don’t know what they read!

Finally, many simple “functional” words aren’t phonetically consistent. Just look at a standard list of 500 basic vocabulary words, or at a third-grade reader. Ask yourself how many “phonics rules” you’d have to first know, then instantly recall, select, and use in order to read “by phonics.” How fast could you read this way?

For these reasons and others, I em-

phasize the following reading methods:

- Prompts and cues,
- Fluency first (before content),
- Whole passages,
- Controlled vocabulary,
- Vocabulary-in-context, and
- High interest/suspense.

In choosing your preferred methods, the most important thing is to help students immediately recognize the words they encounter. Here are some suggestions:

1. *Buy adult-interest books beginning at second-grade level*, selecting true stories that are meaningful to the student or that feature high suspense.* Color-code books by reading levels (not by topic) and provide matching color-coded short comprehension worksheets.

The worksheets are needed

not because the search-for-answers method aids fluency, but because this gives the students a sense of accomplishment while “getting credit.” This extrinsic motivation keeps them reading; the reading builds fluency.

2. *Give as much credit for rereading a book as for reading it the first time.* Implore students to reread chapters or books until reading becomes automatic and they feel as if they’re watching a movie—seeing action and ideas, not words.

3. *Use modeled reading*, especially the first week. Give all students copies of the same easy-reading adult book. Ask them to follow along silently while you read aloud. At the end of each chapter, give them a five-point worksheet so they feel they’re “doing something.” This enables them, often for the first time, to read fast enough to get a whole sentence or paragraph at once, a whole sequence or idea. Finally they read and comprehend fast enough for reading to be interesting. Their inabilities are not revealed to the class, as they would be in “round robin reading,” which embarrassed them all the way through elementary and secondary school.

4. *Provide read-along books and tapes.*

Buy taped sets or record selected books. Provide tape recorders and comprehension worksheets or discussion guides.

5. *Use scripted reading.* Find an easy article or chapter, preferably containing dialogue. Using a yellow highlighter, designate parts for each individual to read. Pass out the easiest parts to the poorest students, and more difficult parts to the best students. Each person can thus read aloud without embarrassment.

6. *Allow poor readers to practice their parts ahead of time,* or practice with them so they will succeed in front of their peers. (Classes vary in how much you can affect their tolerance of very poor readers.)

7. *Provide intensive tutoring outside class* using a mastery approach—paragraph by paragraph, page by page, chapter by chapter. If a student learns one chapter in two hours, he may have for the first time really learned 70 words well, which he'll automatically recognize forever.

8. *Use direct instruction.* Introduce an adult easy-reading newspaper, like *News for You*, or appropriate articles from other sources. Mark copies for scripted reading. Write new words on the chalkboard and drill students on them before they read the article. Say each word twice. Next have them read the selection in unison slowly, then faster. Talk about the meaning of each word. Remind them about simple word-attack skills.

Read the list in unison again. Then read prepared sentences with one new word missing from each sentence, asking the class to call out the missing words from the list on the board.

Drill once more very fast. Now ask students to read the list while you point to the words. Then do scripted reading of the passage; then modeled reading having the students read the parts you skip. Next, read the whole article in unison, then ask or assign discussion questions. Last, point out reading/study skills that one would use if approaching this article alone. You may also want to outline the article together on the board.

9. *Give students little books to read independently.* Ask them to start with books that seem a little too easy (they gain speed and whole-passage comprehension best this way, as well as mastery).

10. *Teach students to find their optimal reading levels* (for each student there is an easy level, instructional level, and frustration level). Teach them the value of

reading at their easy level. Many students have spent years struggling at their “frustration” level without comprehending or enjoying. Insist on a lot of easy reading to build fluency. Then, via graduated vocabulary, direct instruction, and readiness activities, have them stretch to read at their instructional level. This is the level at which students can read passages when prepared by readiness activities. At the end of the semester, show students how to deal with frustration-level reading when they must do so.

11. *Set priorities for word difficulty levels.* Help students to first master a thousand “easy” basic words by seeing the same words over and over in interesting stories. Then they can move on to learn

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“harder” words, and finally “technical” words. (It's surprising how many college students still either miss or have to focus on “easy” words like *through*, *thought*, and *which*.)

12. *Prepare students for success at both comprehending and recognizing/guessing the new words in a passage* by (a) reading the passage to them first while they doodle or draw; (b) doing modeled (read-along) reading first; (c) discussing the topic/vocabulary first (before asking them to read it independently). I first discuss a topic (for example, leukemia) with students. Then I read them an article about a new treatment. Next, I give them copies of the article and ask them to read along silently. Then I ask them to read it independently and answer questions about it.

13. *Parrotting.* Read a paragraph, then have students read the paragraph, until you have read a whole article or chapter.

14. *Emphasize stories* (not content areas) until the student automatically recognizes about a thousand words. Stories more effectively build fluency and maintain interest. Select stories that teach high values, model exemplary adults, and contain some built-in content.

15. *Responsive reading.* Yes, just like what you do in worship services. It's a variation on modeled reading. The

teacher reads one paragraph; teacher and students read the next in unison. You gain the advantages of modeled reading and unison reading without the “togetherness stress” of a whole group reading a long story in unison, and students' eyes don't stray from the text while the teacher is reading.

The above guidelines make it possible for college students at very low reading levels to advance rapidly. Students with deficient but higher reading levels benefit from the same general guidelines, but need more advanced and varied materials. They also need to gain fluency before mastering any other skill.

Students who are almost ready to read college textbooks benefit from whole-story and whole-book reading that combines substantive content-area information and new vocabulary in a meaningful and self-explanatory context (for example, historical narratives, self-help or life adjustment books, practical religious books, and readable research studies). Such stories provide a transitional bridge from secondary school to college—from simple subject-then-verb sentences to complex sentences and thought forms, from sequential to conceptual organizations, from concrete to abstract, from knowledge acquisition to critical thinking. But all content areas and study skills are best acquired by students who have already achieved college-level reading fluency and have been taught specific strategies for reading content area material.

By using the ideas listed above, you can turn non-readers into successful students who are prepared for study and work. ☞

**Order adult high-interest/low vocabulary-easy structure books from:*

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<i>Steck/Vaughn</i>	(800) 531-5015
<i>Contemporary</i>	(800) 621-1918
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Charlotte Oliphant holds a doctorate in adult and community education. She teaches parent education and remedial reading at Jordan College, Benton Harbor, Michigan; as well as teacher-education classes at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan.