

Summary of English Review

This review attempts to distil the existing knowledge base around effective teaching of literacy for adults, collecting analysis some of the most promising and well-developed research together in a 14-page summary. The first systematic research programme for investigating adult literacy and numeracy (ALN) in the UK was set up in 2002 with the creation of the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC). Following their extensive review of research, they found “*strong evidence*” of *good practice in teaching literacy* and numeracy and of the benefits of embedding ALN in vocational programmes. They also found positive impacts on learners of working with qualified teachers and the need for “multiple ways of engaging in learning” – in class, self study, distance learning and ICT supported learning. There was some evidence that significant learning progress took time – often in excess of 100 hours.

Early signs, then, are broadly positive. Amongst the detailed findings in regard to literacy of the research, it was reported that teachers of adult basic skills need to have both *good generic teaching skills* and *good subject specific teaching skills*. Effective practice in literacy, they found, occurs where *teachers build on learners’ experience*, encourage fluent oral reading, use reciprocal teaching and explicit comprehension strategies and adequate time is allowed for active reading in class. *Learner progress in literacy was found to be greater where teachers have qualified teacher status and worked full time*. The review reported that the Skills for Life strategy had contributed to gains in reading for literacy learners, but not in writing.

In the schools sector, research (and the Inspectorate – Ofsted 2012) point strongly towards a *less heavily teacher-directed* style of teaching and learning, with such features as *flexible teaching; responding to students’ needs* as the lesson develops; students given *time to think, plan, discuss and test out ideas*; using *questions to extend thinking skills*; and developing independent learning through *problem solving*.

As the Kings College research team (Lets think in English) has pointed out, this style of teaching is very different from the teacher-directed approach recommended by the National Strategies with its learning objectives and three (sometimes more) part lesson. “Promoting independent learning requires the teacher to ‘let go’ in all sorts of ways and this involves a ‘culture change’ which needs help and support”.

Reading

The research evidence around how to improve adult learners’ reading comprehension is relatively narrow compared to that for improving writing. The key messages are that teaching needs to be *adapted for different groups of learners* (which is a message almost universal to all the evidence around teaching literacy to adults), that teachers in all subject areas use *comprehension strategies* (that is, the sets of *steps that good readers use to make sense of a text*), that teachers should *clarify learners’ purposes for reading* (i.e. that reading should be related to learners’ lives and experiences as much as possible), and that *questioning by both teachers and learners* is foundational in improving comprehension.

Writing

The evidence and suggestions drawn together in the review are multiple and complex, to the point where it is difficult to distil them in brief here. The long-standing nature of writing instruction and the many different approaches which have been adopted over the years mean that there is a large pool of possible teaching techniques and attitudes to be considered. As such, this summary will provide excerpts, rather than attempt at a comprehensive overview.

In 2012 a DFE review of evidence on writing in the schools sector set out to discover what effective teaching of writing looks like. The researchers found evidence that the following approaches are effective in teaching writing (What Works Clearinghouse, 2012; Gillespie and Graham, 2010; Andrews et al, 2009; Graham et al, 2011; Santangelo and Olinghouse, 2009):

- Teach learners the writing process;
- Teach learners to write for a variety of purposes;
- Set specific goals to learners and foster inquiry skills;
- Teach learners to become fluent with handwriting, spelling, sentence construction, typing and word processing;
- Provide daily time to write;
- Create an engaged community of writers.
- Teach grammar, spelling and handwriting (The contextualised teaching of grammar also has a significantly positive effect on learners' writing development. The approach is more effective for the most able writers (Myhill et al, 2011).)

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There is a discernible gender difference in writing, where boys tend to lag behind girls. Research suggests that this is because of factors related to the quality of teaching such as teaching grammar separately from contextualised writing, inappropriate use of interventions, misuse of writing frames and a lack of connection between oral and writing work. It also relates to the way in which classes are conducted, such as too much emphasis on story writing, not giving boys ownership of their writing, a discrepancy between boys' reading preferences and writing topics, using 'counting down' time strategies and a dislike by boys of drafting and figurative language.

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Some concluding thoughts

Research on both English and maths consistently highlights that knowing rules and practising their application is not enough to equip learners with the skills and understanding required for advancement and success. In both domains, researchers have identified affective elements such as motivation and persistence as important aspects of post 16 learning. Structured dialogue, thinking about the processes and understanding the underlying principles are also common features of the research in both domains. The implications for teaching seem to lie in the areas of flexibility (letting go of the lesson plan and starting where the learners are if necessary); devising rich tasks for structured discussion, having high expectations and providing frequent, formative feedback. Confident subject knowledge is a key element of effective teaching in both domains.