PROGRESS

A publication of the Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center

BRIDGING THE VISION

with Dr. Kate Daly Rolander

In this issue of **PROGRESS**, we focus on the **Science of Reading**. Reading is a portal to opportunity, to social connection, and—for those who have found a love of reading—to joy. In this issue's article by Susan Hickman (p. 25), she quotes Barack Obama: "Reading is the gateway skill that makes all other learning possible", and this is why a focus on how adults learn-to-read and how they read-to-learn is so crucially important (Literacy and Education in a 21st Century Economy, 2005).

As adults' reading skills improve, so do their chances for economic advancement, healthier lives, and connection to their children and to their communities. Yet many of America's adults lack basic literacy skills and therefore, lack access to many of the opportunities that reading provides. The National Center for Data Statistics (2017) reports that more than half (54%) of adults in the United States read below the sixth-grade level, and nearly one in five (about 43 million people) read below the third-grade level. And, a Digital Promise PIAAC report (2017) reveals that low literacy rates are higher among minority groups, immigrant populations, and adults with disabilities. So, what can we do?

Adult education programs are in the unique position to bridge the literacy gaps for adult populations. What we can provide is access to quality instructional programs that combine alphabetics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension with a focus on adults' lived experiences and their life goals. The articles that follow cover a range of strategies and approaches to reach all adult learners.

In this issue, read about strategies to incorporate phonics and comprehension into reading instruction, including for English learners; learn about activities that strengthen reading skills while tapping into learners' personal goals and aspirations; and discover how a book club can become a powerful way for learners to strengthen their reading skills while connecting with each other and their communities. Learn about adult instructors' varied approaches to reading instruction, including an experiential approach and other research-based reading programs. You'll also find an article on using artificial intelligence (AI) to create leveled reading and writing materials for learners. And, the VALRC's Hillary Major (p. 30) writes about how we can use **SPOTLIGHT**, our annual adult learner publication, to support

>>>Continued from p.1

reading skills through the words and experiences of the learners' own classmates.

We hope you enjoy this issue and continue to come back to it for more ideas! Also, make sure to bookmark the VALRC's Featured Instructional Resources for Reading page; we'll update it often. ⬥

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Dr. Kate Daly Rolander is the Director of Literacy Programming and Workforce Education Specialist at the Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center (VALRC). She leads the team of educational specialists in carrying out the VALRC mission of equipping the field of adult education and literacy with essential skills and resources through an equity mindset. In addition, Kate also supports Virginia's development and implementation of career pathways programs, assists instructors and staff in tailoring instruction for workforce readiness, and coordinates the state's PluggedInVA programs.

Evidence-Based Reading Instruction (EBRI) for Adult Learners: The Why and How

by Dr. Marija Privitera and Trista Houghton Mason

With the recent shifts in language acquisition instruction across all educational fields, the phrase "science of reading" gets thrown around a lot. But what does it really mean, and specifically, does it have an impact on adult learners? The short answer is YES!, it does. The Science of Reading (SoR) can be defined as "a vast, unfinished, continuously growing, and evolving interdisciplinary body of scientifically based research about reading and issues related to reading and writing" (Lawson, 2022, unpaged). Although most of the discussions in the field are focused on evidence-based instruction in PK–12 institutions, there is much to be said about the importance of developing a well-rounded language acquisition program in adult classrooms. Much like in the other learning environments, adult language programs must provide learners with explicit reading instruction that supports two pillars—the phonics component and the comprehension track. The assumption that we must choose between the two is simply not correct.

So, What Should Reading Instruction for Adult Learners Look Like?

Reading Comprehension 30 minutes

Phonics 15-20 minutes

Student Directed Learning with Quality Feedback 25 minutes
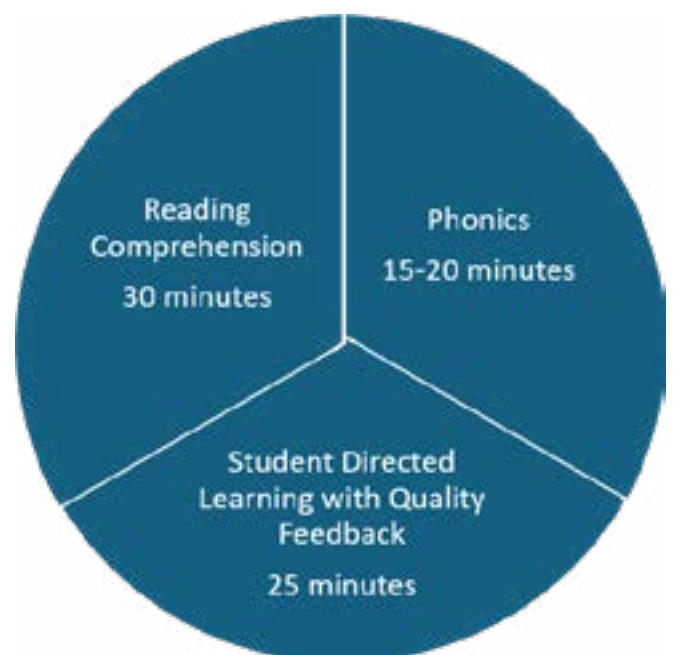
The **phonics** piece of any class should be approximately 15–20 minutes. During this time, the students should have access to high-quality lessons focused on phonemic awareness and decoding. Phonemic awareness includes activities such as identifying beginning, middle, and ending sounds; blending sounds to make words, word segmentation, and sound manipulation. On the other hand, decoding involves the manipulation of letter and sound correspondence; such as deleting, adding, or blending sounds to make new words. Having a structured curriculum helps, but even without it, plenty of free resources are available to educators. The current research recommends that meaning-based and phonics-based approaches must be deployed for successful language acquisition. It also shows that explicit teachings of phonics and phonological memory can enhance adult learners' language acquisition within these parameters in as little as 14 weeks of meaningful, structured decoding instruction.

For the second part of the reading class, the instruction should focus on the **reading comprehension strategies**. Providing explicit instruction in reading comprehension strategies may lead to increased reading comprehension achievement. For adult learners, it is important that they understand the purpose of reading the text, be able to preview it, and engage in activating prior knowledge and connections to the topic. One of the connections between phonemic awareness and comprehension instruction can be developed by using vocabulary words from the text preselected during the phonics part of the class, although these two parts of the class do not have to be on the same topic. Keep in mind, however, that precursors to reading comprehension are decoding and fluency. Choose text levels that correspond to the student's level of English language proficiency, their decoding/reading level, background knowledge, interest, and goal for reading the text. Students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and understanding of a task are especially important for adult learners.

What do Adult Learners Need?

Looking at andragogy, the primary adult learning theory, adult learners tend to do better when their **learning is self-directed and quality feedback is provided**. In terms of reading instruction, this can be achieved by allowing students to freely choose their learning paths such as flipped classroom, peer collaboration, or mini-stations. Additionally, providing timely feedback validates students' efforts and guides the next steps in self-directed learning. Quality and factual feedback should be concise and actionable, providing the adult learner with clear next steps. Reading resources are often geared towards the K–12 student and it is important to know your students' background knowledge and interests to connect adults to appropriate texts. The [Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center (VALRC) website](#) can be accessed for professional development opportunities and resources connected to this topic.

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Dr. Marija Privitera is an experienced and passionate educator with more than 20 years of experience. She holds a doctoral degree in educational leadership from Liberty University and has worked as a health and physical education teacher, Reading Specialist, Instructional Coach, Coordinator of Federal Sustainability Programs, and a doctoral studies applied research expert. Dr. Privitera is a VDOE Adult Education and Literacy Committee board member and VDOE English Language (EL) Regional Teacher Trainer. As a language learner and immigrant herself, Dr. Privitera focuses her work on the language acquisition of multilingual learners through the application of the Science of Reading (SoR).

Trista Houghton Mason, M.A., M.Ed., has more than 20 years of experience in the education field. A dynamic leader, she has instructional experience that spans Pre-K through postsecondary and has held school-based and site-based leadership roles in divisions across the state of Virginia. Currently the Supervisor, Sustainability of Federal Programs for Prince William County Schools Central Office; she is dedicated to providing meaningful and equitable opportunities for all students, with an emphasis on multilingual learners. Ms. Mason has also been an adjunct professor since 2016 with Northern Virginia Community College in the Early Childhood Department.

Additional Resources

Phonemic Inventories and Cultural and Linguistic Information Across Languages

Perspectives on Language and Literacy: The Role of Phonology and Language in Learning to Read

When Home and School Language Differ

The Scarborough's Reading Rope (2001) provides a more in-depth understanding of the subcomponents within word recognition (WR) and language comprehension (LC). It is a visual metaphor for the development of skills over time (represented by the strands of the rope) that lead to skilled reading.

The Reading Rope (Scarborough, 2001)
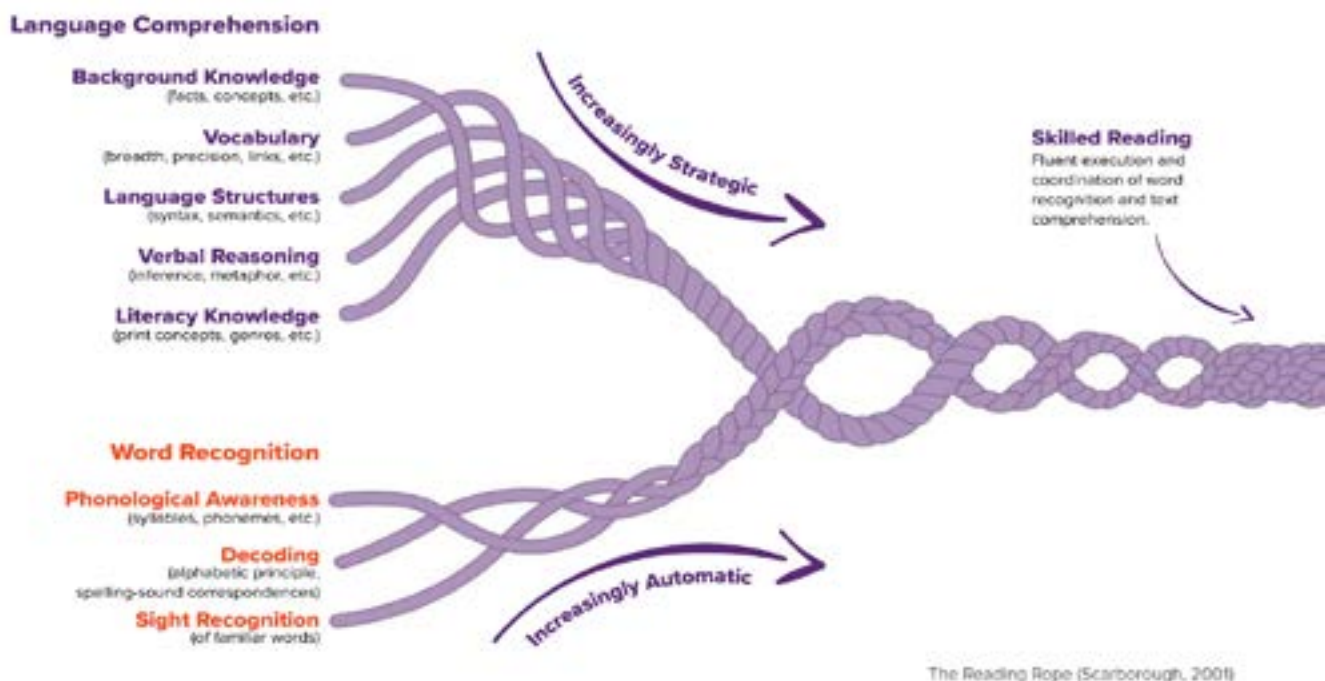
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Activities for Teaching the Components of Reading: One Teacher's Tool Box

by Nancy Coggeshall

Throughout my career in education, I have dedicated myself to promoting literacy. After teaching K–12 as a classroom teacher and later as a reading specialist, I transitioned into adult education where I have continued championing literacy among the students I teach. I have observed that adult learners often come with varying levels of skills and deficits in reading, which are not always sequential like those of children. These differences can lead to uneven reading profiles and levels. Regardless of their reading level, adults require support and practice in all components of reading; including alphabetics and decoding, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. My instructional recommendations for addressing these components are drawn from Susan McShane's (2005) work, _Applying Research In Reading Instruction for Adults: First Steps for Teachers_. Let's explore some classroom activities that can effectively support these components.

Time is always limited in my classroom, so I incorporate activities that cover multiple components. One of the essential activities in adult classrooms is providing dedicated time for independent reading during each session. Supplying reading materials in advance of class time proves beneficial, enabling students to get a head start on the material. When time is scarce, breaking the reading material into smaller segments or assigning reading as students arrive can be valuable. I particularly enjoy organizing book clubs to foster community and encourage active participation among students. This approach has proven highly

effective in creating a connected and engaged learning environment. Recommending book club titles from platforms like BookBrowse.com, Oprah's, and Reese Witherspoon's book clubs has been fruitful. Offering a curated selection of books and letting the class decide what to read has also been effective in my experience. When securing multiple copies of books poses a challenge, students can sign up at a local library to access a reading service like Hoopla, which allows multiple users to borrow the same book. This app is compatible with phones, tablets, and computers. One of the first books I selected for a book club was *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, which the students immensely enjoyed and led to lively discussions. Book clubs can be used for all of the reading components.

Adult readers can enhance their vocabulary with the instructor pre-teaching important terms, context clue activities, and word analysis exercises. One effective vocabulary activity that I particularly enjoy is the "10 Important Words" exercise. This activity can be utilized consistently across different content areas and during reading instruction, empowering the teacher and the students with a versatile tool.

To begin, provide students with ten sticky notes (five or even three if the reading selection is shorter). Next, have the students read an assigned passage to themselves and jot down the ten most crucial words, one on each sticky note. Encourage them to record words as they read, allowing them to replace words if they find more than 10. After reading, the sticky notes are used to create a class bar graph, which the teacher and students then discuss. This discussion focuses on the most frequently chosen

words, the reasons behind their choices, and the insights provided by these words about the text. Students are then tasked with writing a one-sentence summary of the selection using these words. Additionally, students can complete various assignments using these words, such as writing sentences, employing the Frayer Model, composing definitions, synonyms, or antonyms for the words, and even using the words for mini-lessons on decoding and phonics. This activity can be applied to any nonfiction text and requires minimal preparation, making it my preferred approach for enhancing vocabulary and comprehension.
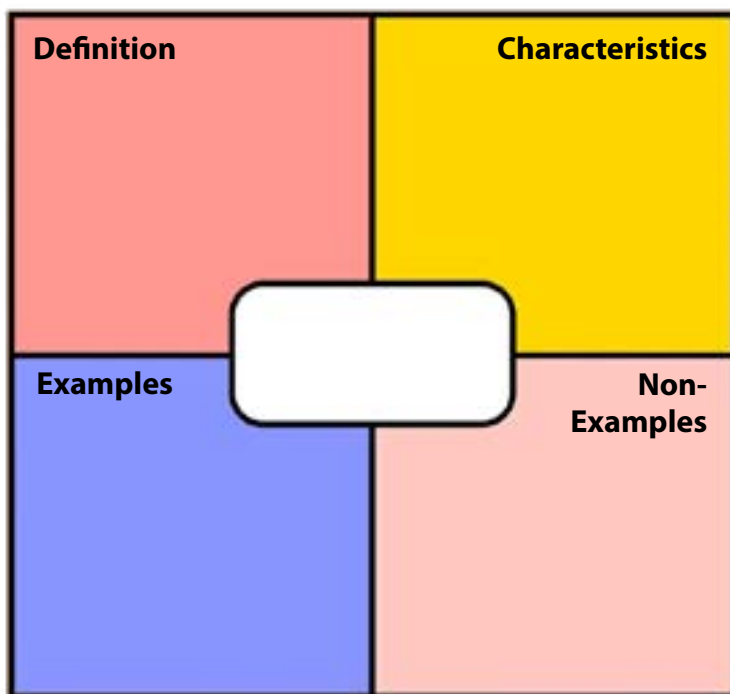
The Frayer Model

The components of alphabetics and decoding include phonemic awareness, phonics, and decoding. Many adult readers benefit from explicit, systematic phonics instruction to build their decoding skills. I assess my students with a Qualitative Spelling Inventory (QSI) such as Ganske's DSA Feature Inventory or Words Their Way at the beginning of each class session to identify gaps in phonics and decoding. These assessments are important for planning writing and help in developing an academic tone for our students' writing. The Upper-Level Spelling Inventory from Words Their Way helps identify areas in which our

higher students need instruction. The QSI provides the developmental sequence for teaching phonics, which is helpful when planning instruction. I incorporate phonics and decoding instruction into my lessons using the material we are reading and the developmental sequence from the QSI. We use word cards for sorting activities and discuss and devise rules as a group based on the students' input, even if it deviates from the phonics skill I was planning on.

The key to effectively teaching the components of reading is to connect them with the learner's aspirations using authentic materials. My shared activities can be adapted to different materials and used repeatedly. The advantage of having versatile activities at your disposal is substantial. As students engage in these activities multiple times, albeit with other content, they develop skills that they can independently apply without any external prompting. Ultimately, the goal is for our students to confidently utilize the components of reading for their learning and enjoyment. ◐

Nancy Coggeshall has been an instructor with Middle Peninsula Regional Adult & Career Education (MP R.A.C.E.) for the past 12 years. She is a certified Reading Specialist with a master's degree in curriculum and instruction from Eastern Mennonite University. Nancy is also a VALRC adult education professional development facilitator for the *Foundation of Reading: Print Skills* and *Foundation of Reading: Meaning Skills* courses.

Strategies for Teaching Components of Reading

by Debbie Tuler

with input from Natalie Detert, Dana Doyon, Chi Herrin, & Jay Kuhlmann

At TJACE@PVCC (Region 10), all ESL teachers went through the LINCS *Teaching Adults to Read: Teaching Beginning and Intermediate Readers* course in the fall. We discussed the course content in our professional learning communities (PLCs) and instructors chose for themselves what they wanted to work on or try in their own classrooms for the remainder of the year.

The LINCS course defines reading as the process of understanding, analyzing, and evaluating written texts to accomplish goals and tasks in the workplace, family, community, and for lifelong learning and enjoyment. Reading requires the integration of skills in four components: alphabetics, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency. In this article, I share a few strategies that you may also be able to use in your classes.

ALPHABETICS

A key alphabetics resource is abcEnglish. This is not a free site, but it is well worth the cost. While our literacy and low-beginning level teachers have long focused on **alphabetics**, this site is helping us identify alphabetics skills to focus on not just at those levels, but also systematically as students progress into higher levels.

VOCABULARY

Jay realized he needed to be more intentional about teaching academic **vocabulary**. He picked up on the research-based recommendation that academic vocabulary had to be explicitly taught, and that each word required about 10 separate exposures to the word for a learner to reach mastery. Vocabulary, according to the LINCS course, was best learned through synonyms and, where possible, in some meaningful context. Jay indicates that in retrospect he would take the LINCS recommendation with a grain of salt; in future he intends to not teach vocabulary so explicitly (with a tier 2 vocabulary list and 10 words selected each week at random) but instead model WAYS that vocabulary can be studied and ways to approach words in context.

The strategies that he used include:

Vocabulary Storytelling:

- Groups of three.

- Select five words from the list.

- Create a short story or narrative incorporating all of the given words.

- Use your creativity and imagination in storytelling.

- Share the story with the class.

Word Association Game (with any word studied so far):

- Four teams.

- Word called out (by instructor or volunteer).

- Shout out any word that comes to mind associated with that word. (5 seconds each).

- Award points to teams for each relevant association.

- Repeat.

FLUENCY

Vocal Warm-Ups and Read-Alouds:

Using text derived from artificial intelligence (AI) or from in-class readings, students engage in whole group choral out-loud articulation with a focus on **fluency** of pronunciation and rhythm at the sentence and paragraph level.

COMPREHENSION

Comprehending a text requires more than vocabulary knowledge. A good reader also pays attention to text clues. For example, I tend to look at news headlines (titles), get a sense from those of what the article is about, and connect it to what I already know before reading the full article. A couple of TJACE instructors focused on text clues, text structure, and activating prior knowledge and experiences related to the topic to aid in comprehension. These aspects facilitate the actual process of reading by priming students to expect certain vocabulary and thus making **comprehension** of those items or structures faster and easier when they are encountered. Dana teaches low-intermediate ESL and decided to focus

on these aspects of comprehension. She tried a couple of methods for activation that have worked well for her students:

- With texts that have accompanying pictures or graphics: before reading, ask students to share in partners or with the whole class what they think the text will be about based only on the pictures.

- For any text: before reading, have students predict, based only on the title, what the text will be about, explain why they think that, and predict words related to that topic that they might encounter in the text.

- Extend both of these activities by writing on the board words that students predict and eliciting the spelling of those words from students. By generating vocabulary before reading, students are better able to comprehend the words as they come up in the reading.

In addition to formal classroom instruction, we wanted to encourage reading for pleasure and cultivate reading habits. Therefore, this past year TJACE initiated two **book clubs** (one for high-intermediate/advanced ESL/GED® learners and one for high-beginner/low intermediate ESL). Book clubs meet every other week and are an extension of classroom instruction. Facilitated by instructors Chi and Natalie, these book clubs have read and discussed books, short stories, essays, and poems. In book clubs, students engage in many of the same strategies as in classes:

- Looking at text features (illustrations, captions, titles, chapters, etc.)

- Reading aloud, including sounding out syllables as needed

- Repeated reading aloud to develop fluency

- Writing new words on the board and breaking them into recognizable phonemes

- Discussion: sharing experiences, asking questions, summarizing and predicting

In the lower-level book club, students read one book. In the higher-level book club, Natalie selects a variety of texts that expose students to well-known authors and styles of writing. She notes that multiple reads are essential for building vocabulary,

language facility, and personal meaning from text. She selects texts to enable students to dig into universal themes such as crossing cultures, being human, reading as conversation, reading as a means for understanding ourselves and our world, and reading to cultivate our imagination. At this level, students read a piece independently in advance of a book club meeting; during the group session, they read a related piece or two together on the same theme and then discuss the texts. Natalie has been thinking more about those essential skills (durable skills) that AI is making clear are more important than ever but are not often the focus of our teaching. The book clubs are an invaluable means for building hard and soft skills like empathy, critical thinking, growth mindset, etc.

With the new CASAS STEPS assessment, we will continue to hone our instruction of reading skills in 2024–25. ◓

Debbie Tuler, ESL Specialist, has been in the field of adult English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) for more than 30 years, with experience in instruction (all levels), teacher-training, curriculum development, and program evaluation. She was part of the state Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education (IELCE) development team. Currently, she teaches high-beginner ESOL and facilitates in-house professional development for ESOL staff in her program, Thomas Jefferson Adult and Career Education at Piedmont Virginia Community College, Region 10 (TJACE@PVCC).

Connect, Learn, Grow: Zoom Book Clubs for English Language Learners

by Melissa Rea & Xavier Muñoz

For the past four years, English Empowerment Center (EEC) has hosted organized book clubs for adult English language learners (ELLs). These clubs offer a unique blend of educational enrichment and personal development, empowering learners to improve their language skills, expand their knowledge, and forge meaningful connections. Here's a closer look at how these book clubs operate, their impact, and the valuable lessons learned along the way including tips and suggestions for starting your own book club for ELLs.

We thank EEC volunteers Karen, Janice, Linda, Kathy, Lisa, Laurie, and Stacey for initiating and continuing these book clubs.

> " I think the book club format is a terrific vehicle for teaching all aspects of English language learning.
>
> — EEC book club teacher

Overview

Each club is held virtually on Zoom, offering the chance for anyone to attend anywhere. Mothers often join from home with their children close by or in their laps. Each semester, we offer one morning and one evening option for greater access. The clubs typically run for a few weeks to a full semester depending on the book's length and difficulty level, and the instructor's availability.

EEC book clubs are free and supplemental to our classes, inviting students from intermediate classes to join. This self-selection by students has led to excellent outcomes with close to 100% participation. Learners are asked to buy the book or borrow it from their local library. Typically, the clubs have four to twelve learners, and include a mix of internationally trained professionals and others with varying levels of primary and secondary education.

Unlike traditional clubs where learners read the book and then gather to discuss, in our clubs, the students and teachers take turns reading the book together out loud when they meet. Reading before the meeting is not required but encouraged and homework is optional, which has also anecdotally seemed to foster regular attendance and participation.

Choosing the Right Book

Selecting the right book is crucial for the success of a book club. Here are some guidelines we follow with brief notes on books we have read:

1. Interest and Relatability: Select books that address topics of interest, such as overcoming struggles, achieving goals, and the immigrant experience.

   > For instance, *Front Desk* by Kelly Yang and *Home of the Brave* by Katherine Applegate tell relatable immigrant and refugee experiences.

2. Middle Grade Level: Choose books appropriate for middle-grade readers as the language is more comprehensible than young adult literature for intermediate English learners.

   > For example, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* proved too complex.

3. Length and Meetings: Tailor the book's length to the number and duration of the meetings.

   > A perennial favorite, *Seedfolks* by Paul Fleischman, has short chapters that can be treated as stand-alone readings for learners who miss a meeting.

4. Educational Value: Ensure the book aids in language acquisition, e.g., contains useful vocabulary and idioms.

   > For example, with *Mountain Dog* by Margarita Engle, learners studied how to read free verse and not just prose.

5. Cultural and Historical Context: Books with historical or cultural significance are favored.

   > The books we read provide rich, contextual learning experiences that expand learners' knowledge of this country and the world. Exploring the geographical and biographical backgrounds of the authors also enhances their understanding and appreciation of the texts.

Meeting Diverse Needs

Each book club is tailored to meet the varied needs of its members. One teacher's approach addresses pronunciation, grammar, and writing skills, adapting to the individual language learning

> ## "
> ### The advantage of the book is that it stimulates the imagination.
>
> #### - EEC book club participant

goals of her students.

Unlike textbook-based courses, the openness of a book club encourages an instructor to more readily notice opportunities to provide personalized learning, such as custom vocabulary exercises, dictation, and interactive dialogues catered to the varied proficiency levels.

To maintain engagement and promote active participation, a range of strategies and activities are employed:

- Homework and Voluntary Participation: One teacher gave optional homework and emphasized reading and listening. This approach ensures that all learners can engage at their comfort level, whether they complete assignments or simply attend and listen and/or read aloud.
- Interactive Reading and Role-Playing: Reading aloud in pairs in breakout rooms and acting out scenes help bring the stories to life. Learners practice pronunciation and develop comprehension and fluency while engaging in collaborative activities.
- Participating in a book club isn't just about learning, it's also about enjoying the process of reading. One teacher recruits other volunteers to help as fluency partners and enrich the discussion with other avid readers.
- Implementation of UDL Practices: Share audio versions of the book and use a mix of reading, listening, role-playing, and discussions to keep the sessions dynamic and engaging. Teachers encourage learners to turn off their microphones and read along without the pressure of immediate correction. This also

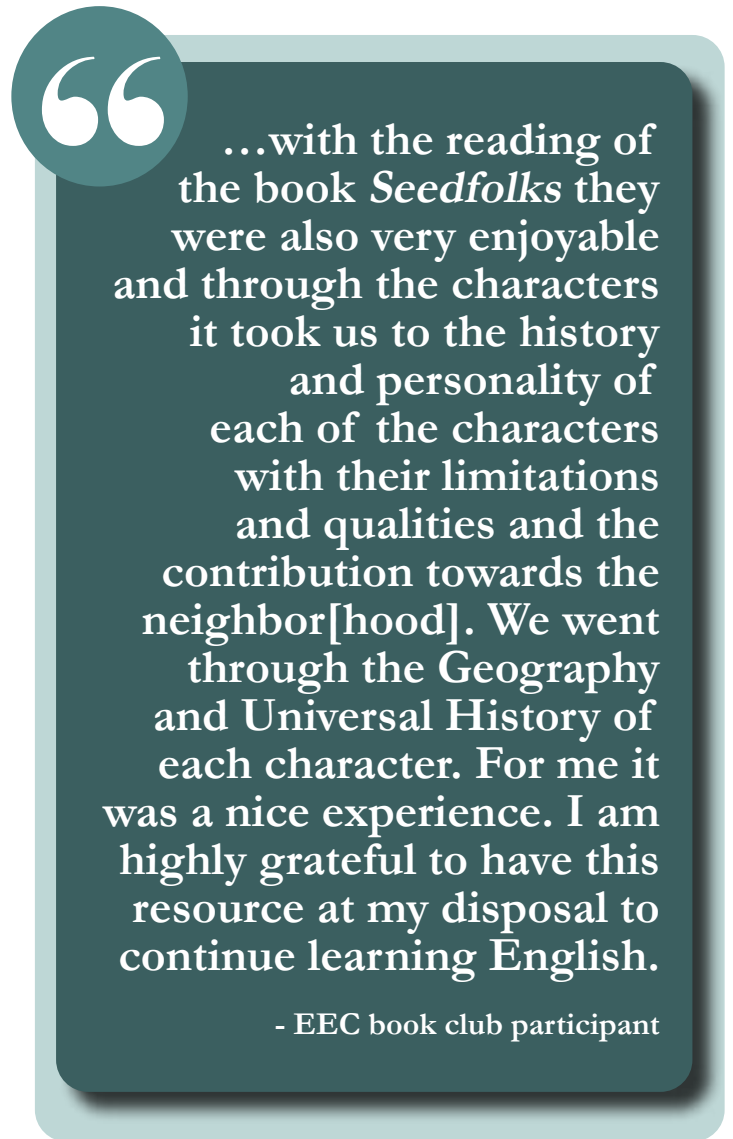provides exposure to diverse monolingual and multilingual accents.

Impact and Outcomes

The book clubs have had a profound impact on learners. For some, this experience marked a significant milestone—their first time reading an entire book in English! Learners often report improved vocabulary, increased confidence, and greater interest in reading.

The clubs also promote family engagement, with learners reading to their children or discussing the stories together. This shared activity not only reinforces learning, but also fosters a love for reading within the family. Family literacy is also in action even as children simply observe their parents reading and discussing a book with other adults.

Conclusion

EEC's book clubs exemplify the power of community-based learning, offering adult learners a supportive, enriching environment to develop their language skills and connect with others. Through thoughtful organization, diverse activities, and responsive teaching, these clubs have become a cornerstone of EEC's supplemental services, inspiring a love for reading and lifelong learning.

> " …with the reading of the book *Seedfolks* they were also very enjoyable and through the characters it took us to the history and personality of each of the characters with their limitations and qualities and the contribution towards the neighbor[hood]. We went through the Geography and Universal History of each character. For me it was a nice experience. I am highly grateful to have this resource at my disposal to continue learning English.
>
> - EEC book club participant

As the English Empowerment Center's Faculty Support Manager, Melissa Rea (she/her) hires, trains, and works with instructors providing them with instructional support and professional development opportunities. She has more than 25 years of adult education experience as an instructor, tester, teacher trainer, manager, and director. She has an M.S. in adult learning & human resource development from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech).

As Senior Director of Academic Programs and Student Services at the English Empowerment Center (Region 8), Xavier Muñoz (he/him) oversees adult English language acquisition, family literacy, and workplace literacy classes as well as distance learning, digital literacy, and student advising initiatives. He has more than 10 years of adult ESOL experience as an instructor, tester, teacher educator, and IELCE program manager. He has an M.A. in TESOL and a TESOL Certificate from the School for International Training.

by Mady Rodriguez

Bringing Reading and Writing to Life with Experiential Learning Activities

I scream. You scream. We all scream for ice cream! That is the tongue twister Aurora yelled to the crowd, repeating it quickly three times during the recent class play called *The Language Journey* performed by learners of the Northern Shenandoah Valley Adult Education program.

Aurora and 14 other students aided their instructor, Mady Rodriguez, by selecting content for the play that highlighted what they had learned in their High Intermediate/Advanced English as a Second Language (ESL) class this past year. Various reading techniques were used in the classroom to activate background knowledge, use context clues, and visualize the content.

The play started off with the journey of three students from different countries and how they ended up in the U.S. in an ESL classroom. The goal was to show the diversity of ESL learners in a classroom. In addition to tongue twisters, a class recipe and haikus about spring and themselves were shared. A skit on dumpster diving was also included because of a recent lesson on identity theft.

Once the rough draft of the script was created, the instructor put students in groups of four and had them read, review, and report back with any changes or suggestions. As a group, the script was then read again with these changes and roles were assigned. It was interesting to see how classmates already had in mind who they thought should take specific roles. Students practiced the script regularly both in and out of the classroom, and provided

revisions to the format and content. The play ended up being a group collaboration and opportunity to explore areas beyond the English learning environment.

Throughout the 23–24 school year, students from all levels of society shared about their own personal journeys through group discussions and regularly practiced tongue twisters. Short tongue twisters, long tongue twisters, funny tongue twisters, complicated tongue twisters—you name it, they practiced it! The instructor's goal was to improve fluency, but more so to exercise oral movements that may not be used in a student's native language.

Pilar's favorite tongue twister was "Eddie edited it!" and Gloria's favorite tongue twister was "I thought I saw a kitten eating chicken in the kitchen!" Now say those at least three times each as fast as you can! As soon as a new tongue twister was presented at the start of class, students were ready and eager to exercise their tongue muscles. Visualizing the content was a technique used with tongue twisters to help students get faster. You would hear laughter — the noise level would quickly increase — and the competition was on to see who could repeat the tongue twister the fastest three times consecutively.

Along with tongue twisters, students shared their favorite recipes with each other. They shared why they were so special, who typically made their favorite foods, and how to make them. These interactions resulted in the class creating a cookbook filled with recipes from Yemen, Mexico,

Afghanistan, Peru, Vietnam, Honduras, China, El Salvador, Japan, and Guatemala. The exercise, as a whole, was an emotional journey as many had not had their favorite meals in years and the process brought back so many memories. Nonetheless, it created an opportunity to explore the world through food and have experiences directly from the source. This learning experience, which lasted about three weeks, activated background knowledge and the opportunity to visualize the content through reading classmates' recipes and asking questions for clarification.

In March, for World Poetry Day, students were presented with spring Haikus. After reading several poems, students reflected on the meaning of each and broke down complex phrases. Many had never drafted a poem before but once the Haiku pattern was introduced, they created fabulous poems embracing spring. At times, it took several attempts at reading and re-reading a word for students to hear the number of syllables, but they quickly caught on.

Mohammad's poem reads,

Coming spring season;

Blooming all of flowers then;

Enjoying the spring.

Margarita's poem reads,

I saw three tulips;

Blooming time in my garden;

They are beautiful.

In addition to writing about spring, students drafted poems about themselves. Gracia's poem reads,

> Thousand years ago;
>
> Universe created dust;
>
> Stardust I'm made of.

The students took considerable pride in their work and wanted to share these poems as part of *The Language Journey* play.

In class, students used the [Stand Out](#) curriculum in addition to the activities mentioned above which I, their instructor, feel have opened the learners' imagination and creativity. The reading techniques implemented throughout the semester helped students master challenging material and understand vocabulary/phrases. Through poetry, tongue twisters, idioms, and real-life scenarios; students engaged and embraced the language learning process and gained a new level of confidence. The script and vocabulary were provided to students from the other lower-level classes who would be watching the play. This allowed the instructors to give context and cues to help prepare students for the play. A listing of tongue twisters referenced in the play was provided to participants the day of the play. Highlighting what they had learned provided students in other classes with a glimpse of where they can be in the future. This play will hopefully be one of many more for our program as we continue to highlight our learners' growth.
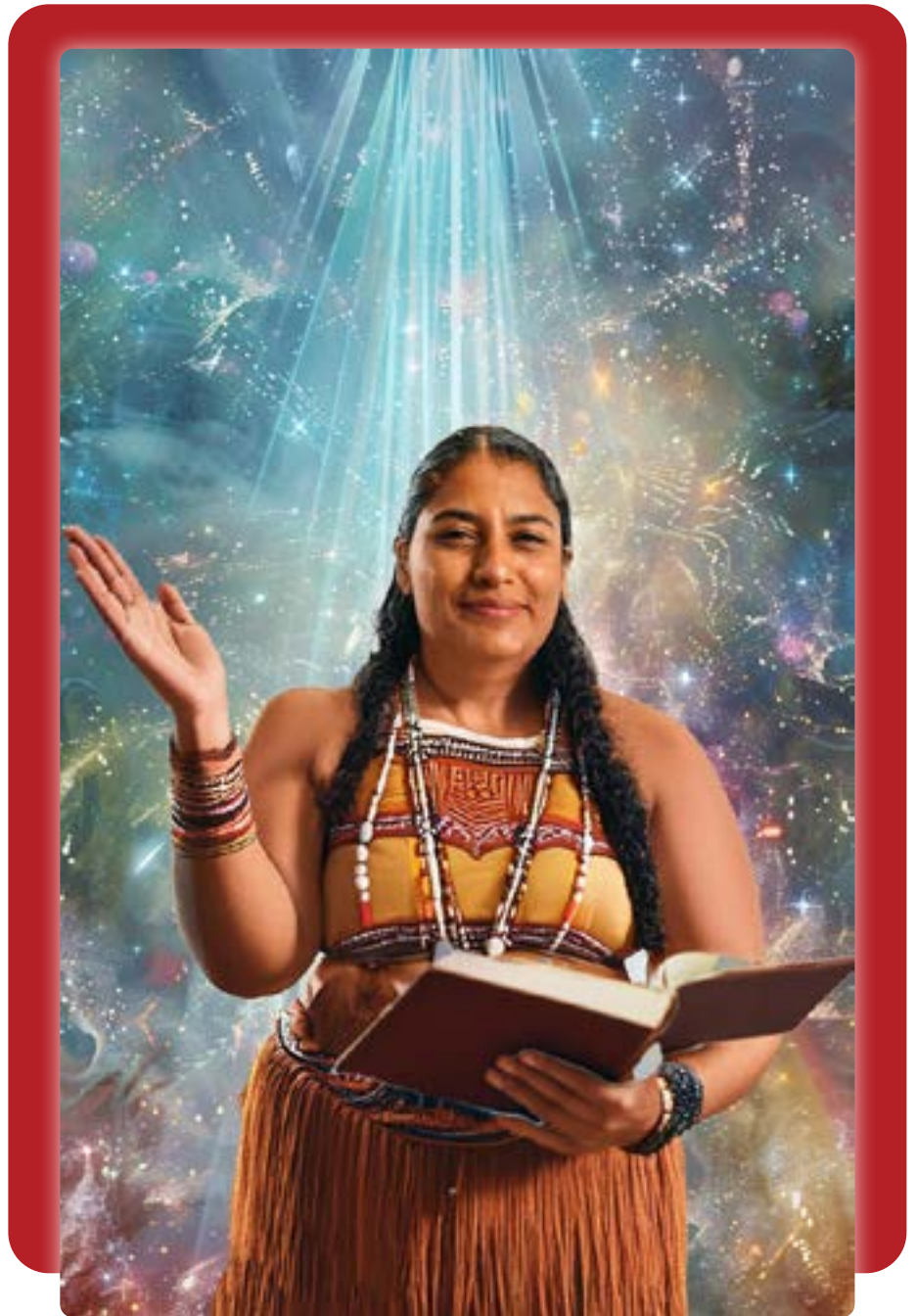
Mady Rodriguez began her career in adult education at the age of 19 in 1997 as a volunteer for the Northern Shenandoah Valley Adult Education program. She found her passion for serving others and pursued a master's degree in human services. She continues to teach ESL and provide assistance with outreach and registration to the local program.

Structured Linguistic Literacy: A Phonics Alternative

by Benjamin Merrion

There has recently been a major interest in "The Science of Reading" due to several reasons; one of them being that teachers and parents were noticing that students' reading scores were dropping during the pandemic. The phrase "Science of Reading" refers to a collection of reading research about what concepts and skills students need to read. These main skills and concepts include phonemic awareness, knowledge of the sound-to-letter relationship, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Although this research has existed since the 90s, the recent investigative journalism of American Public Media's Emily Hanford with her radio series and a later podcast exposed the differences between what reading strategies have been proven to work versus what has actually been taught in the classrooms about how to read. Referred to as "the most prominent figure in advocacy for big changes in reading instruction", her work is also another reason why interest in "The Science of Reading" has risen (Borsuk, 2023).

One of the evidence-based components of a good literacy program, as previously mentioned, includes knowledge of the sound-to-letter relationship which is vital for sounding out words. However, it has been assumed by many educators and educational researchers that phonics is the only model for teaching students how to sound out words. On the contrary, there has quietly been a movement towards a new, different, more effective, and more efficient model for teaching the sound-to-symbol relationship.

Structured Linguistic Literacy: A New Model for Sounding Out Words

This new model is called Structured Linguistic Literacy (also known as speech-to-print) by the founders of the different methods that teach this model.

The first method to use this new model is called Phono-Graphix and the other methods that use Structured Linguistic Literacy (SLL) are based on the principles of Phono-Graphix. In 1997, after graduating from college, I joined an AmeriCorps program that placed me in an adult literacy center in Washington D.C. where I taught basic literacy and GED® preparation to adults. After trying various strategies and methods—such as something called the whole language approach (which is focused on reading meaningful text but doesn't really include specific help with sounding out words) and using phonics with my students—and finding out neither was at all effective, I found the book *Reading Reflex*. This book contains principles and lessons of Phono-Graphix and I discovered it was the only thing that seemed to work with them. I was later trained in this method in 1998 and have been using it primarily with adult learners ever since.

Concepts SLL Programs Teach That Help Students to Read

SLL methods teach how to sound words out differently than phonics by teaching four main concepts:

1. Letters are pictures of sounds.

2. A sound can be represented by one or more letters. For example, the letters <igh> stand for what is typically known as the "long i sound" in the word "light." The technical term for a visual representation of a sound is "grapheme." With Phono-Graphix, and other SLL methods, we don't use this abstract term with students; instead we use the term "sound picture." So, a sound picture is a letter or a group of letters that can stand for one sound.

3. There is variation in the code. Most sounds can be shown with more than one sound picture. So, what we typically know as the "long o sound" can be shown six different ways:

b **oa** t   sl **ow**   m **o** st   t **oe**   n **o** t **e**   th **ough**

Below is an example of a completed activity called "Mapping and Sorting" that we do to teach this concept. The student is given the below words in a randomly ordered list and has to sort them into the below categories, sounding each word out, and writing the sound picture for each sound as they say each sound out loud. They are told that all the sound pictures stand for the same sound. A demonstration of this activity can be found in this PhonoGraphix Advanced Decoding video at time mark 6:20.

oa	**oe**
boat	note
toast	cone
goat	tone
roast	hope
float	
groan	
coat	

ow	**o**
show	hold
glow	bold
grow	most
know	host
throw	no
snow	go

4. Many of the sound pictures are used for more than one sound. As noted in the previous example, <ow> can stand for one sound in "show", but a different sound in "shower." Students learn that this sound picture can stand for both sounds and they get practice with trying one sound. If that doesn't sound like a word or is a word but doesn't make sense as a word in the story, then they try another sound that sound picture can be.

For example, when reading the word "shown" but they use the sound /ow/ as in "cow" for

the sound picture <ow>, they learn to take the sound /ow/ out and put in what is known as the "long o sound" so that it sounds like a word they recognize.

If reading "town" and they use the long o sound for the picture <ow>, that does make a word - "tone," but in that case, they learn to check the context of the sentence to see if it makes sense. For example: In the sentence, "We all live in a tiny town," the word "tone" doesn't make sense.

Skills SLL Methods Teach to Help Students Process Sounds

Since the sound pictures stand for sounds and these sounds form words, three skills need to be explicitly taught so that we can form words from separate sounds: blending, segmenting, and phoneme manipulation.

1. Blending, which is pushing sounds together into words. This involves saying the separate sounds /c/, /a/, /t/ and being able to push them together to form the word "cat"

2. Segmenting, which is saying each sound individually in a crisp and clear way as much as possible. Some people, when saying consonant sounds, use a "sloppy /u/ sound" which may result in an incorrect reading of the word. For example, the word "sip" is read as "suh-i-puh." So, when teaching students to segment, we try to help them eliminate that extra sound.

3. Phoneme Manipulation, which is moving sounds in and out of words. If a student reads <brown> as "broen," for example, I would point to the <ow> and say: "You said /oe/ (the "long o sound") here, but the sound for this in this word is /ow/, so say /ow/ here." Some students can't do this and need practice taking the old sound out and putting the new sound in.

Error Corrections: We Learn Best Through Failing

SLL methods also give explicit error corrections so that students understand what they did if they misread a word and are given the information they need to correctly sound out that word.

Before learning this model and a student misread

a word, I didn't know what to say to help guide them through a word. It seemed just giving them the correct word didn't help them very much at all to read independently, but that's all I knew how to do.

Now with SLL, I can help guide students through a word, offering them specific help with either blending and the other skills needed to sound out a word. I can also tell them what sound they need to say for a specific sound picture (for example <oa>, <eigh>, etc).

Some phonics programs try to control the process of sounding out words so the student has little chance of failing, but failure—when given the opportunity to correct it—can help students learn and perhaps remember better what they are supposed to do.

Examples of Error Corrections:

Situation: Student reads <simple> as "simply."

Error Correction: Say, "This (indicating the sound picture <le>) is a way to show the sound /l/. Say /l/ here."

Situation: Student reads <stamped> as "stamp."

Error Correction: Say, "You didn't finish the word. After "stamp," what's next?"

Situation: Student reads <house> as "home" in the sentence "We all lived in an old house."

Error Correction: Say, "I think you guessed this word (indicating <house>). Please sound it out."

Context and Meaning are Important

In my experience, SLL programs help students learn faster and in a concrete way. Initially, after reading the *Reading Reflex* book and using it with my students, I thought I had to have my students completely master all the sound pictures to be able to read, so I drilled them. For example, I gave them words with different spellings of the "long o sound" to see if they could remember them, but that wasn't working.

When I got trained in Phono-Graphix, I asked one of my trainers what to do with one particular student who was particularly challenging because he didn't seem to remember much from session to session, and she asked me "What does he want to read?"

This student wanted to learn to read so that he could take the driver's test and shop for his parents. When I told my trainer this, she suggested that we start studying for the driver's test. When we started reading material that he was motivated to read, he began remembering more of the sound pictures because he was learning in a meaningful way.

Also with adults, if possible, it's much easier to focus on getting more fluent with reading that is focused on one area or topic such as studying for the driver's exam, reading the Bible, or reading their 12-step recovery literature than reading more general material because they will see words related to that topic or area more frequently. Reading more focused material gives them more opportunities to sound out words related to that topic until they know them on sight, so eventually, they won't have to sound out as many words. This will help them improve their fluency with those words and in the area about which they are reading and that will also help them start to get more fluent with reading in general.

The SLL model helped me with students who did not seem to cognitively understand how to read by any other way. My current student was kicked out of a program that uses the Wilson Reading System (which is based on phonics and requires a lot of memorization) because he wasn't making any progress. This student, like my previous student, is also now studying for the Maryland Driver's Exam and is passing all the practice tests he has taken. With SLL, we can reach more students and help them be successful in their goals. I hope that we in the adult literacy field are willing to learn and eventually be able to teach this new model. ⬤

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Other Resources

Book: McGuinness, C. and McGuinness, G. (1998). *Reading reflex*. Fireside.

This book contains the Phono-Graphix Reading Method in the form of lesson plans for helping a parent teach their child how to read. The techniques and principles can be easily applied to teaching adults with little adaptation, though activities reading the stories to practice the words at different levels can be skipped if deemed to be inappropriate for their age. An adaptation for adults to practice reading would be to read text that they want to read at a level as close to theirs as possible, with the learners reading the words they are able to sound out and the instructor can read the words they can't read.

Videos: Phono-Graphix Book Study Series (for use with the book *Reading Reflex*)

Online Magazine: Dystinct Issue 13, January 2023

This issue of *Dystinct* magazine contains articles about Structured Linguistic Literacy and some of the methods that teach it.

Structured Linguistic Literacy Methods: (Note: This is not a comprehensive list. Below are methods accessible for those living in the United States.)

- EBLI -Evidence Based Literacy Instruction

   Partial training is available for free but full training is online in the form of videos for $3,000.00. In addition to teaching how to sound out words, EBLI also teaches vocabulary and comprehension which most SLL programs don't explicitly teach.

- Phono-Graphix

   The principles of this method can be found in the book, *Reading Reflex* (mentioned previously) and in the video study series available on YouTube (also previously mentioned).

   Online training is available for $795.00, which includes the certification kit materials.

   Live, in-person training is available for $800.00 at various locations but participants must make an additional purchase of a certification kit for $395.00.

- Reading Simplified

   Online training is available for $43 a month or $387 a year. The basic principles are covered under a preliminary 10-hour course. Although estimated at taking 10 hours to complete, you can work through this course at your own pace watching videos.

- Sharpen

   Personalized online reading instruction for $24.95 a month only available for each student. A free trial version is available for 7 days.

- Sounds-Write

   Some webinars are available for free. Full online or face-to-face training is available for $900.00. Face-to-face training may require additional costs such as transportation that is not included in the training fee.

Supplemental Resource

Phonic Books

Books for use with any Structured Linguistic Literacy method. They have books for older readers under the section "Catch Up Readers."

Ben Merrion is an Education Specialist at the Adult Learning Department (ALD) of the DC Public Library. He has more than 27 years of experience teaching GED® preparation, adults how to read, and training teachers in Washington, D.C. In addition to coordinating adult literacy outreach events for the library, Ben provides information and referral services to adult learners and adult education programs as well as coordinates, develops, and facilitates best practices meetings and various professional development workshops for the ALD. He was trained in the Phono-Graphix reading method in 1998 and has used it with primarily adult learners.

Utilizing Wilson Comprehension S.O.S.™ in the ABE Classroom

by Josie Voorhies

The READ Center teaches literacy skills at no cost to adults in the metro-Richmond area who speak English and read below an 8th-grade equivalency. Teachers and tutors at The READ Center utilize the Wilson Language Training® System for many instructional needs. This highly structured program incorporates phonology (the study of sounds), morphology (the study of word elements), and orthography (the study of the rules that govern English) to systematically instruct students on how words work.

Within our student population, many are 'learning to read' and others are 'reading to learn.' In both cases, comprehension is a struggle. Some students may be focused on decoding phonetically without regard to meaning. Other students may read an entire passage without grasping the content. As teachers, how do we provide support beyond decoding? How can we encourage and grow comprehension skills? READ tutors and teachers use a part of the Wilson Language Training® System called Wilson Comprehension S.O.S.™ (S-Stop, O-Orient, S-Scaffold/Support). This process is used to instruct and encourage students struggling with listening and reading comprehension. Students are engaged and guided through a comprehension exercise with an end goal of deep understanding.

Getting Started

- Create a comfortable and relaxed classroom environment. Use a conversational tone when approaching the text.

- Step through the process yourself in advance of the lesson. Envision how you would answer if you were a student.

- Choose a vocabulary-rich, level-appropriate fictional text. The teacher should 'chunk' the text—this process can be utilized for one sentence of complex text, one paragraph, multiple paragraphs, or with a short story.

The Steps

Select if you will engage in a reading comprehension or listening comprehension exercise.

- Reading comprehension:

  > Together, read the title, view any illustrations, and read any captions.

  > The student reads the text silently without interruption.

◊ During silent reading, the student should be developing a mental picture or visualizing the story.

> Next, the student replays the story in their mind.

> If desired, the student can draw a simple picture of the story.

> The student re-tells the story to the teacher or tutor.

> If important details are missed during the re-tell, re-read the passage together or have the student re-read silently.

> The student re-tells the story to the teacher or tutor.

> Dive Deeper! Engage the student with questions about the text, scoop phrasing of the text to reflect meaning, and practice fluent reading.

• Listening comprehension:

> The teacher reads the title and any captions

> The teacher reads the text aloud. The student is encouraged to listen and develop a mental picture or visualization of the story.

> Next, the student replays the story in their mind.

> If desired, the student can draw a simple picture of the story.

> The student re-tells the story to the teacher or tutor.

> If important details are missed during the re-tell, re-read the passage or sections of the passage together.

> The student re-tells the story to the teacher or tutor.

> Dive Deeper! Engage the student with questions about the text.

The Challenges

• *How should teachers handle challenging vocabulary?* Discuss vocabulary within the context of the story. Do not pre-teach vocabulary. Offer a succinct explanation or elicit discussion based on timing and appropriateness.

• Use student-friendly definitions for new vocabulary.

• If a student is confused or uncertain, show your own learning journey. Use phrases like, 'I'm guessing they may mean…' or 'I wasn't sure either, but this word here makes me think . . .'

• Encourage the students to make a movie in their mind. Use phrases that resonate with your student population.

This method takes practice! You may need several exposures to the process to feel comfortable and to develop a rhythm with your students. Students will benefit from the repetition and will come to learn and expect the steps. Deep, true comprehension is a challenge for many teachers and students. We encourage you to explore this method for increasing student listening and reading comprehension.

If you find success from this method, consider a flow into writing exercises as an extension. We often hear a reluctance from students to put pen to paper. A common complaint is that they don't know what to write or have nothing to say. A natural extension from Wilson Comprehension S.O.S.™ is to have the student 'write what they told' during the story re-telling portion of the exercise. 🔺

Josie Voorhies started as READ's Education Program Manager in March, 2023. She is an experienced educator and program coordinator with a passion for adult education. Josie has spent almost 10 years coordinating and teaching ABE, GED®, ESOL, and workforce development courses for students in the metro Richmond area. She is motivated by connecting with adults and by creating engaging and diverse programs within the community.

Instructional Approaches to Ignite the Love of Reading in Adult Learners

by Susan Hickman

How many of your adult learners tell you that they love to read? If your demographic is similar to mine, your answer is "very few." In fact, probably even more profound is the realization that "very few" of our adult learners read at all. Sure, they come to class each week and read along with their teacher and classmates, but that is very likely the extent of their reading experience. How can we remedy this predicament and why do we need to? In a 2005 speech titled "Literacy and Education in a 21st Century Economy," former President Barack Obama is credited with saying the following: "Reading is the gateway skill that makes all other learning possible." This is the answer to why we, as adult educators, must find ways to engage our students in reading and foster a love of reading.

Building active readers begins with basic skills that our adult learners may never have gained, which results in reading being something that frustrates them and that they do not enjoy. The major components of reading include decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Our students need direct instruction in these skills in order to become comfortable with reading—the first step to wanting to read.

Without the knowledge of how to recognize sounds represented by letters and blend those sounds, a potential reader has already hit a roadblock. I find that allowing students to read aloud in class from a common text gives them practice in **decoding**. Once students who are reluctant to read aloud have heard other classmates struggle, they are likely to not feel so intimidated and are then willing to take a turn. **Fluency** (reading with accuracy and expression) follows decoding. As students read and hear themselves reading, their confidence will grow and so will their fluency. Reading is a practiced skill, so practice is essential for students to grow as readers. Choosing vocabulary-rich text is the best way to increase **vocabulary**. When students can see unknown words in context, they will expand their vocabulary using context clues. And finally, **comprehension** is our ultimate goal in growing proficient readers. Once students can read with fluency and comprehension, they have opened the world of the written word and reading is no longer a frustration, but a joy.

I have several approaches that have worked for me. Number one is **finding engaging text**. Many of our students never finished high school because they were bored and did not see the relevance of the subject matter. As Reading Language Arts (RLA) teachers, we have a plethora of real-world material that our students can read, enhancing their knowledge of science, social studies, and current events. I believe that we need to meet them where they are in their adult lives. Informational topics such as the militarization of police, fake news, social

Reading is the gateway skill that makes all other learning possible.

~ *Barack Obama* ~
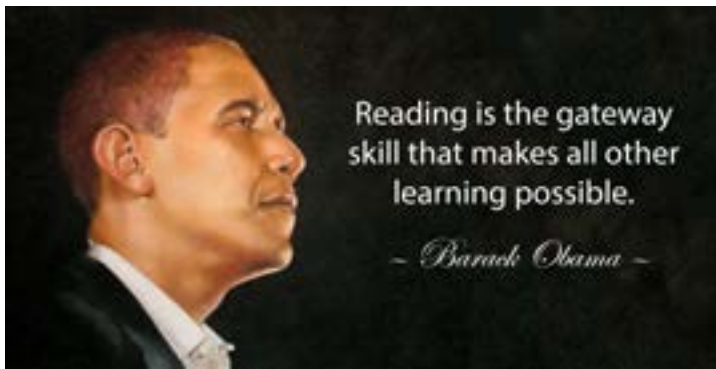
media, and gamification are all topics of interest to our learners. There are also compelling and timeless short stories that can be used to teach the elements of literature as well as literary devices. In my class, we talk to each other—giving opinions, making predictions, and drawing conclusions. An interactive class, especially through Zoom which is how I am teaching now, is paramount.

I have taught several novels during my tenure in adult education. When I was still teaching in-person classes, our entire region taught *A Lesson Before Dying* by Ernest J. Gaines. This was manageable because we could read together in class. I did not have success with students reading this outside of class. A much easier book that I have used is *Seedfolks* by Paul Fleischman. This little gem is [710L reading level](), so it does not present difficulty and frustration for even readers who struggle. The story is compelling and with it are life lessons about diversity and acceptance.

For several years, I have taught an eight-session course in June and used *Night* by Elie Wiesel. Each year I consider choosing something else, but I just cannot move away from this eloquent telling of a horrific time in history. When a student said that he had never read an entire book but that he could not put this book down, I knew I had chosen well. I set the classes up in Google Classroom and include a copy of the text, which I have annotated. In addition, each student has a personal copy of the book but can read the homework from my text if preferred. Each week, we look at a different literary aspect that Wiesel uses to "keep memory alive." The study starts with historical background to establish the setting, as well as the author's purpose (Wiesel's Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech). I use YouTube videos and personal instruction to teach irony, imagery, figurative language, symbolism, and theme. We

discover these elements and devices as we go over portions of the text which they have read for homework. Each week, we have a "quiz" covering the material they have been assigned, basically to hold them accountable. We conclude with an interview with Wiesel to know him and his dedication to the fight for human rights and human dignity. Is this teaching reading skills? Yes. Is it teaching decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension? Yes. Is it teaching about humanity and citizenship? Yes. Is it promoting lifelong learning, reading for pleasure, and increased civic responsibility? I hope so.

Our job as adult educators is to provide a salve to heal the wounds of failure in most of our students and to equip them with the skills they need in a fiercely competitive and increasingly technological world. We want them to have higher incomes, less unemployment, and access to a world of learning that they will want for the rest of their lives. In the words of Dr. Seuss: "The more you read, the more things you will know. The more you learn, the more places you'll go."

Susan Hickman is an Adjunct Adult Education Instructor with [Southside Virginia Community College](). She is starting her twelfth year teaching GED® classes to adult learners, having begun with the program at the initiation of the "new" 2014 test. She has taught in-person classes in all subjects as well as classes with co-teachers, and now she teaches RLA on Zoom. In addition to teaching GED® classes four nights a week, she is in her nineteenth year teaching high school English for Nottoway County Public Schools (NCPS). Mrs. Hickman was selected Teacher of the Year 2024-25 for NCPS, an honor that she believes she shares with many well-deserving colleagues. Her passion for reading, language, and the lives of her students drives her enthusiasm for her career in education.

Leveled Reading and Writing Activities for a Civics-Based Lesson Using AI

by Dr. Melinda Vander Ploeg Fallon

While participating in a VALRC professional learning community (PLC) titled "Teaching the Skills that Matter: Civics Education", I undertook to adapt a problem-based learning (PBL) lesson for ABE to the various levels of Fairfax County Public Schools Adult and Community Education (FCPS-ACE) English as a Second Language (ESOL) program. The original lesson, "Raising Public Awareness", was a great PBL lesson that lent itself to practicing all four skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) with English language learners; however, its level suited only the most advanced learners in our program. Making it workable for beginning through advanced levels required maintaining the lesson's appealing content while adapting both materials and techniques. While developing the leveled lessons, a few considerations helped prioritize how to present the material. The basic practical considerations were how to make the core materials readable through adaptation as well as vocabulary and context support. The less tangible considerations were how to balance the adult learners' wealth of world experience—a resource to be validated and utilized—with their varying levels of pre-existing knowledge and limited means for communicating what they know. The final leveled lessons successfully addressed these considerations in ways that were familiar to teachers in our program.

Adapting the core reading materials was easier than ever thanks to artificial intelligence (AI). The original lesson used an article titled "Setting the Public Agenda." The leveled lessons added a second article about a construction project planned for a lot next to our school. Asking AI for a simplification of both texts to a particular K–12 grade level was a great timesaver when adapting the articles. The results just needed to be checked for accuracy against the original articles and to make sure the vocabulary was common and consistent. For the lowest reading levels, adding free-use images or photos provided visual support to readers. The images that follow show the adapted versions of one section of "Setting the Public Agenda".

Beginning & Low-Intermediate

Share your Thoughts! 2

To make a difference, you need to share your thoughts. You can share your thoughts in different ways. Here is one way.

Letter-Writing Campaigns
In a letter-writing campaign, lots of people write letters about the same thing. Leaders will pay attention!

Here are some steps to organize a letter-writing campaign:

- Ask for permission to set up a table in a public place, like a mall.
- Plan who should get the letters—like all the city council members or just one person.
- Make a flier or card that explains the issue and says where to send a letter.
- Encourage people to write their own letters. Letters show you care.

High-Intermediate

Letter-Writing Campaigns

Sending a letter by mail can have more impact than an email. It shows you took time to write. You can set up a table in a mall to encourage more people to write letters.

- Decide who should receive your letters. Is it the whole city council or a specific committee?
- Explain the problem clearly in a leaflet and provide all the needed information to send a letter.
- Avoid sending the same letter to everyone. Handwritten letters show more care and attention.
- Collect contact details of people who write letters. They could be potential supporters.

Advanced

Letter-Writing Campaigns 2

Writing an email is a civic action, but writing a letter is a civic action and generally has more impact than an email. A letter delivered in the regular mail shows that you took a little more time to get your message across, and it stands out from the hundreds of emails that policymakers typically receive. Also, if politicians and corporations pay attention to one writing, think of what many letters can do.

- Get permission to set up a table in the mall and ask passersby to write letters.
- Hang a poster that shows what you're doing. You can hand out fliers, talk to people, and get those interested to write a short letter right there.
- Provide clipboards to write on.
- Plan your target. Who should receive the letters? All the members of the city council? The members sitting on a particular committee? Just one member? Decide.
- Prepare a leaflet. Explain the problem. Give the address of the person to write to. Include all the information a person would need to send the letter.
- Don't send form letters. A handwritten letter shows that a person really cares. Some groups organizing letter-writing campaigns at malls often use a variety of pens and paper and envelopes. That way all the letters look different.
- Get people's names, addresses, emails, and phone numbers. People who write letters care about your problem. They are potential supporters.

Adjusting activities for pre-reading activation or post-reading comprehension provided learners with level-appropriate support for vocabulary and context. Question generating prompts, opinion-sharing activities, and discussions in the adapted lessons also brought opportunities for learners to share existing knowledge and experience. As an example, for the beginning levels, slides with questions about images related to the construction project encouraged learners to contribute vocabulary and information, while a "take sides" activity facilitated expressing an opinion on the project. For the advanced level, the title of the article about the project acted as the prompt for predictions about the article's content. After reading, learners shared opinions in order to build lists of the project's pros and cons. At all levels, exchanges among learners fostered the use of new vocabulary, activated thoughts, and raised questions about the readings.

The suggested reading techniques also varied according to level. When working on the article about the planned construction project, the lower levels received more decoding support while the advanced learners started out more independently. These differences can be seen in the following slides.

For all levels, the other text, "Setting the Public Agenda," was structured as a jigsaw reading with comprehension questions. The entire class read the introduction together, then the teacher formed groups and distributed a "notes" page. Beginning learners answered questions like "Is this good for one

Beginning & Low-Intermediate

1. **Listen to the teacher read.**
2. **Listen and repeat.**
3. **Read again. Take turns reading a sentence to the other students at your table.**

High-Intermediate

1) **Listen and follow along as the teacher reads the article aloud.**
2) **Now, read along to practice intonation, pauses, and pronunciation.**

Advanced

1. **Read on your own**
2. **Highlight words you do not know**
3. **Put a "?" next to confusing sentences or phrases.**
4. **Put a "*" next to important ideas.**

person or many people?" The advanced learners had more complex questions like "What are the benefits or upsides of using this method to set the public agenda?". After reading and answering questions together, learners regrouped to share what they had learned. Each learner's contribution to the new group displayed their reading comprehension

The leveled writing activities for these lessons prioritized group production to reduce the anxiety adult English learners often feel about writing. More structured support characterized the lower levels where the teacher and learners collaborated on an example before the learners adapted it. At the upper levels, learners worked in groups to create a letter, petition, or poster to present in front of the other learners. An extension of the lesson at the upper levels involved generating written materials to put a learner-selected issue on the public agenda. This led to independent writing that could be based on the early models generated by the groups

While the leveled adjustments of the "Raising Public Awareness" lesson required tailoring materials and support, many of the teaching techniques were similar. The pre-reading questions and discussion activities as well as the group writing activities provided opportunities for learners at every level to bring existing knowledge and experience into the classroom. While the complexity of the reading and writing differed, learners at all levels grasped the core ideas and gained experience in the targeted types of writing.
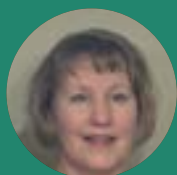
Melinda K. Vander Ploeg Fallon (M.A., Ph.D.) is a lead teacher in the Fairfax County Public Schools Adult and Community Education (FCPS-ACE) English as a Second Language (ESOL) program. She also teaches pronunciation for the same program. Melinda began her teaching career as an art history professor at George Mason University but later discovered that her true vocation was teaching ESOL.

Top 5 Reasons to Teach With *SPOTLIGHT**

by Hillary Major

The voices highlighted in the links provided on the following page are just a few of the powerful stories shared in the pages of *SPOTLIGHT*, Virginia's annual anthology of writing by adult education and literacy learners. Of course, *SPOTLIGHT* also includes humorous stories, narratives of everyday life, information about cultural traditions, poetry, and more.

After the first issue of *SPOTLIGHT* was published, I spoke with Inocencia Toribio Garcia and Rosa Hernandez, English language learners from Fairfax Adult High School who contributed to the issue, along with their instructor Kim West. Kim shared that, at first, learners were reluctant to write; they felt they didn't have a "special story." She continued to ask questions and provide encouragement, and the results showed how much learners had to share. Inocencia found her inspiration in family, writing about a traditional Peruvian dance and her nephew, who dances competitively. "I very happy when I writing … It is part of my country; it is part of me," said Inocencia. She shared how improving her writing skills helped her support her daughter with her own school work. Rosa wrote about her personal story of coming to the United States as a thirteen-year-old and how she is thriving today, advocating for her son's education. She spoke about learning how to organize her writing, learning about main ideas and supporting ideas, along with literacy terms like "setting" and vocabulary for parts of speech. Her advice is that, no matter how challenging the circumstances, with "focus and determination," you can make a difference. "I think it's important for us to … educate ourselves," said Rosa. "[W]e can cooperate to have a better world if we … educate ourselves."

2. *SPOTLIGHT* aligns with standards-based instruction.

Writing for publication is explicitly built into the *College and Career Readiness Standards for Adult Education* (CCRS). Writing Anchor Standard 7 reads, "Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others." This standard highlights the digital literacy and workplace readiness skills that can be taught alongside skills like organizing paragraphs, providing relevant and specific details, and making use of standard English grammar and mechanics.

1. Student Voices are Powerful!

- **Learners in a workplace literacy class write a letter to the mayor about the importance of local bus services.**

- **A woman survives nearly overwhelming challenges to share the message, "Don't give up."**

- **A young woman starts a new job in the city and in just a few days finds herself fleeing for her life.**

- **A former class clown reflects on his choices.**

Consider supporting learners in using tools like Google docs, which makes it easy to save work online, make comments, collaborate, and revise. Be sure to explain how sharing settings allows writers to keep work private, share it with chosen readers and classmates, or share work publicly.**

Writing for publication can help learners understand the importance of "clear and coherent writing" that is "appropriate to task, purpose, and audience" (CCRS Writing Anchor 4). Learners can resist the revision process, but knowing a piece of writing will be published can provide motivation for them to "strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach" (CCRS Writing Anchor 5).

3. *SPOTLIGHT* is multilevel.

Model writing by other adult learners can show student writers what's possible in an approachable way.

Working with beginning writers? Browse the poems that have appeared in *SPOTLIGHT*, including haiku, acrostics, and list poems. It only takes a few words for learners to create something they can take pride in. Beginning writers can overcome fear of the blank page or screen by using sensory words to describe a scene or memory. Students can also write prose about a shared experience, like the visit to a local art center described by several of The READ Center learners featured in *SPOTLIGHT 2024*.

As learners' writing skills progress, consider sharing personal narratives—*SPOTLIGHT* provides many examples, from some as short as a few simple paragraphs to longer, more complex pieces. Working with learners preparing for the GED® tests? Explore informative writing, like Dajan Kantimerov's "Tatars in Russia: History and Challenges" or the use of compare and contrast in Milena Alfonso's "A Special Day to Show Love." Encourage learners who write persuasive or argumentative essays or letters to the editor to submit their work to *SPOTLIGHT*.

Use the online *SPOTLIGHT* index to find texts that align with your curriculum and your learners' interests. Under the "Search" and "Filter" options on the left side of the webpage, click on the arrow next to "All Topics" and check the boxes next to types of writing (Personal Narrative, Informative Writing,

Poetry, etc.) or topics (Work, Education and Learning, Cultural Traditions, etc.) that are relevant to your instructional setting. Or, simply type key words in the "Search" box to look for pertinent *SPOTLIGHT* articles.

4. *SPOTLIGHT* can be part of reading instruction, too.

Many *SPOTLIGHT* articles reward close reading. Learners can practice their self-monitoring and prediction skills as they read narratives like Fatima Hairane's "I Did Not Miss the Train." They can ask and answer questions grounded in the text's main ideas and key details. Pieces like "The Saddest Persimmon" by Soyoung Early and "Love Is Worth the Wait" by Dina Gortman provide opportunities to discuss metaphors and figurative language (CCRS Reading Anchor 4) as well as how ideas develop throughout a text (CCRS Reading Anchor 3).

Shorter pieces can provide opportunities to focus on reading fluency; learners might, for instance, choose a poem to practice reading and re-reading. *SPOTLIGHT* articles reflect their writers' English vocabularies so can be approachable for beginning readers. Teachers or tutors can copy-and-paste from the VALRC website into an online readability tool like the ATOS Analyzer to help get a general idea of whether the reading level of a *SPOTLIGHT* article will be a good match for their learners. *SPOTLIGHT* articles can be paired with readings from curriculum materials or other sources to provide multiple, engaging points of view on a topic or theme.

5. *SPOTLIGHT* provides an annual opportunity to celebrate writers.

Submissions for the fourth edition of *SPOTLIGHT* will open in fall 2024 and be submitted anytime through the issue deadline on March 14, 2025. (Find *SPOTLIGHT* FAQs, which are updated for each issue, on the VALRC website.) This gives teachers and tutors flexibility to plan how they will incorporate writing activities into their instruction. Giving learners choices in what they write can be motivating, and including regular writing practice provides opportunities for learners to develop their skills. In the words of *SPOTLIGHT* contributor Heidi Gao, "I think writing is a process of continuous thinking and improvement."

Contributing to **SPOTLIGHT** is a meaningful accomplishment for learners. One learner requested extra copies of **SPOTLIGHT** to send to family overseas. Another shared a photograph proudly holding a copy of his published article. Programs have honored student writers with opportunities to read their work to learners in other classes and at special readings or events such as graduations. Programs can also share **SPOTLIGHT** with community partners and funders to help demonstrate the impact of adult education and the important roles adult learners play in our communities.

I consider it a privilege to be part of **SPOTLIGHT**'s editorial team. I am excited to see how **SPOTLIGHT** will grow, featuring more learners, more localities, and more types of writing. ◉

*Note: This article focuses on Virginia's **SPOTLIGHT** publication to discuss the benefits of using learner-generated writing in instruction, but there are other valuable sources of learner work, including local and regional publications and *The Change Agent*.

Digital Literacy Tip: Photographs, illustrations, and other images are welcome in **SPOTLIGHT. They should be either learners' own original work or work that has been made available for free reuse (and the original creator of the image should be credited unless they have given permission for their work to be used without attribution). When teaching learners to locate images and incorporate them into a document, consider highlighting sites that focus on freely usable images, such as:

- Wikimedia Commons
- Unsplash
- nappy
- Pixabay

You will likely need to teach terms and concepts such as "copyright," "license," and "attribution." Resources like GCFGlobal's Copyright and Fair Use and Avoiding Plagiarism lessons can help.

Hillary Major is the Instructional Standards and Communications Specialist at the Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center. She works to assist Virginia adult educators as they incorporate the College and Career Readiness Standards for Adult Education into their programs and instruction. She is a coordinator for Virginia's Teaching Skills that Matter pilot team and **SPOTLIGHT**, Virginia's annual anthology of writing by adult education and literacy learners.

2024
PROGRESS CALENDAR

SEP

15–21 National Adult Education & Literacy (AEFL) Week

16 National GED® Day

18 VALRC: *Science of Reading Overview* Webinar
2:00 p.m.–4:00 p.m.

19 VALRC: Online Facilitated Course begins - *Beyond Basics: An Introduction to Multilevel ESOL Instruction*

19 VALRC: Career Pathways Professional Learning Community (PLC), Session 1
1:00 p.m.–2:30 p.m.

25–28 National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) 2024 Annual Meeting and Expo: *The Math of Their Dreams: Illuminating Students' Brilliance*
Chicago, IL

27–28 VATESOL Conference *The Future of Multilingual Education: Innovative Approaches for Supporting Multiliteracies*
Richmond, VA

OCT

6–9 ProLiteracy Conference
Baltimore, MD

8 Annual American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE) Conference
Virtual Day

10 VALRC: *Integrating Digital Literacy into the Classroom* Webinar
3:00 p.m.–5:00 p.m.

16 VALRC: Disabilities and the Adult Learner Webinar Series, Session 1: *Introduction to Working with Adult Learners who Have Disabilities*
1:00 p.m.–2:30 p.m.

21–23 Virginia Association for Adult and Continuing Education (VAACE) Conference
Charlottesville, VA

23–24 Hire Education Conference 2024
Roanoke, VA

29–NOV 1 Annual American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE) Conference
Reno, NV

NOV

7 VALRC: Career Pathways Professional Learning Community (PLC), Session 2
1:00 p.m.–2:30 p.m.

13 VALRC: Disabilities and the Adult Learner Webinar Series, Session 2: *Instructional strategies for Working with Adults with Disabilities*
1:00 p.m.–2:30 p.m.

18–20 2024 Families Learning Conference
Louisville, KY

DEC

4 VALRC: Disabilities and the Adult Learner Webinar Series, Session 3: *IMaking Content Accessible*
1:00 p.m.–2:30 p.m.

5 VALRC: Career Pathways Professional Learning Community (PLC), Session 3
1:00 p.m.–2:30 p.m.