

## Session 101

### *Reading Profiles of US ABE and ESOL Students: Results of NCSALL's Adult Reading Components Study (ARCS) and NCSALL/ETS Level 1 Study*

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#### RESEARCH QUESTION

What are the various reading profiles of US ABE and ESOL students, and what are some the implications of these profiles for instruction, program design, and policy?

#### METHOD-ODOLOGY (sample, methods, type of data)

- The *Adult Reading Components Study (ARCS)* is a *descriptive survey*.
- The *sample* participants were 676 ABE and 279 ESOL learners enrolled at 40 adult literacy centers in seven states.
- The data was *quantitative*. The 955 learners were individually assessed in various components of reading, including: phonemic awareness, word analysis (phonics), word recognition, spelling, oral reading (accuracy and rate), oral vocabulary, background knowledge, and silent reading comprehension. Spanish speakers were also assessed in Spanish reading components. A questionnaire covering educational history, linguistic background, reading habits, basic health was also given to each participant. Learners' scores for the various reading assessments were entered in two separate data bases – one for ABE and one for ESOL enrollees.
- Cluster analysis was used to create ten instructionally meaningful profiles of ABE enrollees and six instructionally meaningful profiles of Spanish speaking ESOL enrollees.
- The *Level 1 Study* is also a *descriptive survey*.
- The *sample* participants included 930 learners from five states enrolled in ABE and ESOL classes and 104 non-enrolled adults who made up a comparison "household" sample.
- The data was *quantitative*. Participants were assessed individually in word analysis, word recognition, oral vocabulary, rapid naming, short-term memory, spelling, and silent reading comprehension - the latter using the IALS Prose test. A background questionnaire based on the NALS/IALS and ARCS questionnaires was also administered.

- Latent-class analysis (similar to cluster analysis) of the 1,034 participants' scores was used to create five learner profiles. Data were also analyzed to identify what levels of ability in vocabulary and word recognition were associated with IALS silent reading performance above Level 2.

## FINDINGS

### *ARCS major findings:*

- Confirmation of the diversity of strengths and needs (profiles) among ABE and ESOL readers, especially at the GE 4-8 ABE intermediate level.
- Evidence of "print skills" difficulties even among readers as high as GE 9-10; these are often associated with self-reports of early reading problems and learning disabilities; reading rate is a special difficulty for two of the ten ABE clusters.
- Vocabulary and background knowledge appear severely limited for about 80% of the participants - often below middle school levels for many learners.
- 80% of Spanish speaking ESOL students exhibit high school or near-high school abilities in Spanish; only about 5% show obvious signs of reading difficulties in Spanish.

### *Level 1 Study major findings*

- NALS/IALS and ARCS approaches can be combined to produce learner profiles linked to important "quality of life" issues.
- ABE and ESOL students exhibit different reading patterns, even at the same NALS/IALS levels.
- "Tipping-points" can be identified at which the vocabulary and word recognition abilities of NALS/IALS Level 2 adults begin to prefigure those of adults at Level 3 and above.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR

### Practitioners:

ABE and ESOL teachers need more diagnostic information on learners' strengths and needs in reading than most of them currently receive. With that information, they can begin to group students with similar needs together and plan lessons that are more focused and efficient.

**Administrators:**

In order for ABE and ESOL teachers to have more diagnostic information on learners' strengths and needs, time and money will have to be found for teachers to assess learners individually in the basic components of reading. To accommodate the several distinct profiles of intermediate readers – to move away from “one size fits all” – medium-to- large instructional sites should offer more than one generic intermediate set of class.

In order for practitioners to make the best use of diagnostic reading information on learners, administrators will need to fund increased staff development on how to teach reading to readers with the various profiles presented by adult learners.

**Policy makers:**

Programs may need to offer two “tracks” for ESOL – the first being the traditional functional/survival track for those with low native language literacy and the second being a more literacy-based “English-as-a-Foreign-Language” approach for those with strong native language literacy skills.

Policy makers should consider increasing research funding for the study of adult intermediates and increasing instructional resources for intermediate adult readers because many of these adults appear close to being able to read above NALS/IALS Level 2. For developed countries like the US, reading ability greater than Level 2 is strongly related to improved quality of life - significant increases in income, better health, greater civic participation, and enhanced lifelong learning opportunities.

**IMPORTANCE OF THIS STUDY**

The ARCS and Level 1 suggest that ABE and ESOL students' diverse needs in reading should be taken into account in all aspects of the US adult education delivery system, including intake assessment, class placement, program configuration, teacher training, and the design of curriculum and materials. Adult intermediate readers (those at GE 4-8) deserve special attention. They are approaching levels of functioning in the important component skills of word recognition and vocabulary that could support the higher levels of reading comprehension associated with increased income and civic participation as well as an increased capacity lifelong learning.

**FOR MORE  
INFORMATION...**

For ARCS please see:

Strucker, J. & Davidson, R. (2003). Research Brief: The Adult Reading Components Study.

<http://gseweb.harvard.edu/~ncsall/research/repbriefs.html>

Davidson, R. & Strucker, J. (2002). Patterns of Word Recognition Errors Among Adult Basic Education Native and Nonnative Speakers of English. *Scientific Studies in Reading*, 6-3. 299-316.

For a draft copy of the Level 1 report, please email:

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