

Session 202

The Forgotten “R”: Toward an Agenda for Research on Writing by Marilyn Gillespie, SRI International

RESEARCH QUESTION	What research currently exists on the teaching of writing in adult literacy education? What kind of research agenda should be developed to help teachers support student success in writing?
METHODOLOGY (sample, methods, type of data)	This session will provide a review of the existing research literature, examples from practice and the implications for further research and policy initiatives.

FINDINGS

There are many reasons to support writing instruction as a component of adult literacy education. For beginning readers, writing has been shown to support the development of many of the “basic” skills advocated by recent reading panels, including phonemic awareness, the understanding of phonics and, in particular, vocabulary development. More advanced readers use it as part of even the most basic research processes, for planning, and as a tool to solve problems in many school-related subject areas. The ability to write well is important for success in post-secondary education. The relatively limited amount of research on writing outside of schooled contexts has obscured the fact that writing is a tool we use in everyday life much more than we often realize, for personal expression, recreation, and in community and civic life. Significant percentages of workers, including employees without a college education, write regularly as part of their job. The technological revolution has also led not to fewer but to more demands for writing. Only a limited number of research studies have examined writing with adult literacy learner populations. Most are either small scale qualitative classroom-based studies, or studies of particular components of writing such as spelling.

Although we can learn a great deal from the research that has been conducted with other populations, more research is needed to better understand how the writing development of adult education learners is both similar to and different from the writing development of children, of college level learners, and of native and non-native speakers of English. We need to support the development of model programs for teaching writing that allow us to track the writing development of learners over time and compare the efficacy of different approaches. Models that appear to hold promise for improving the writing-related development of adult learners need to be replicated in other contexts so we can learn what works under the varied kinds of conditions within which we teach. In particular, we need to learn more about kinds of writing-related challenges faced by adult learners who move from our programs into postsecondary education and how to develop effective programs to prepare our students to meet them.

More research is also needed outside the classroom. We do not yet know enough about the writing-related demands our learners face on the workplace and about whether or how the development of writing abilities facilitates the move from entry level to higher levels of employment. We also need to learn more about the other kinds of writing demands outside of work and school our learners face as they fulfill their roles as parents, family members, and members of the community and about the impact of computers and multi-media technology on the writing demands they face outside the classroom.

IMPLICATIONS FOR:

PRACTICE

Although we can learn a great deal from the research that has been conducted with other populations, more research is needed to better understand how the writing development of adult education learners is both similar to and different from the writing development of children, of college level learners, and of native and non-native speakers of English. We need to support the development of model programs for teaching writing that allow us to track the writing development of learners over time and compare the efficacy of different approaches. Models that appear to hold promise for improving the writing-related development of adult learners need to be replicated in other contexts so we can learn what works under the varied kinds of conditions within which we teach. In particular, we also need to learn more about kinds of writing-related challenges faced by adult learners who move from our programs into various kinds of postsecondary education and how to develop effective programs to prepare our students to meet them.

POLICY

FURTHER RESEARCH	More research is also needed outside the classroom. We do not yet know enough about the writing-related demands our learners face on the workplace and about whether or how the development of writing abilities facilitates the move from entry level to higher levels of employment. We also need to learn more about the other kinds of writing demands outside of work and school our learners face as they fulfill their roles as parents, family members, and members of the community and about the impact of computers and multi-media technology on the writing demands they face outside the classroom.
IMPORTANCE OF THIS STUDY	(1-3 sentences: describe what this study contributes to our understanding of how to support student success) This session will provide an opportunity for adult educators interested in writing instruction to share ideas about how to advocate for writing-related research, to discuss the most important directions for research, and to talk about how to promote the value of the forgotten “r” in adult literacy and adult ESL education.
FOR MORE INFORMATION...	Go to (URL OR WEBSITE WHERE REPORT OR PAPER CAN BE FOUND). Or contact (YOUR NAME) at (E-MAIL AND PHONE). Marilyn Gillespie at marilyn.gillespie@sri.com