



Knowledge Builder

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About D.C. LEARNs: The D.C. Literacy Education, Advocacy and Resource Network, Inc. (D.C. LEARNs) is a coalition of literacy providers and stakeholders in the District of Columbia. We are a not-for-profit organization. Our mission is to build the capacity and effectiveness of adult, family and children's literacy services in Washington, DC; mobilize resources to support literacy in the District of Columbia; advocate for effective public policy that benefits District residents at the lowest levels of literacy and the organizations that provide services to them.

Gaining and Maintaining Attention: Supporting Adults Who Struggle With Learning

By Connie Bumbaugh

What is Attention?

Learning is a process in which we try to make sense out of, remember and apply the information we receive through our senses – vision, hearing, touch, taste, and smell. We are constantly being bombarded with information from our environment, whether at home, work, or in the classroom. In order to learn something new, we need to focus on the critical stimuli while filtering out the remaining information that is unrelated or insignificant. This is what is referred to as attention; without it we are unable to learn effectively.

When information comes into the brain, it determines what is important and then leads the individual to become more alert or conscious of that stimulus. Consider a scenario where two individuals are having lunch at the park. They are engaged in a conversation while in the background some children are playing Frisbee and another person is walking a dog. The brain receives a tremendous amount of information simultaneously including the conversation, the children playing, the barking of the dog, the temperature, the fly hovering over lunch, the taste of the sandwich, birds singing, wind rustling, and clouds passing overhead that cast shadows on the table. While the brain senses all of this information, it chooses which things to attend to at any given time depending upon its importance. The conversation may be the focus of one's attention, but if the person is cold, his attention will shift to the wind. If the person has a fear of dogs, the brain may attend to the barking dog instead of the conversation.

A similar scenario plays in the classroom. Adults play many roles and have many needs and responsibilities that can distract them in the learning environment. First, we must consider adults' basic needs such as hunger and comfort. If adults are hungry or are too cold, they will likely not be able to concentrate. Likewise, if they are worried about how they will afford to pay the rent, buy groceries, or find adequate childcare, they will be unlikely to pay attention in class. Additionally, if adults feel uncomfortable

Hello From the Editor!

Summer has finally reached Washington, DC in its usual sunny style. Along with this weather, instructors may be experiencing lower than normal class attendance or students and volunteers with a faraway look in their eyes. We look no further for motivational ideas! This issue of the *Knowledge Builder* highlights resources that will help engage learners of all ages and keep them coming back.

In a continuing series focused on adults and Learning Disabilities, Connie Bumbaugh examines common indicators of attention deficits and offers simple classroom strategies on how to best support adults faced with these challenges.

Do community volunteer tutoring programs always equal success? Effectively training and utilizing volunteer tutors can be a real challenge. Gabrielle Aponte Henkel shares the essential components that she implemented when adapting her own successful volunteer tutoring program at DC Reads.

English pronunciation seems to be a big hurdle to overcome for many ESL students. Jose Gonzalez explains the subtleties of why this might be so, particularly among native Spanish-speaking students. Based on his own teaching experience, he offers tips on how instructors can help learners improve their pronunciation and learn 'real world' English.

Enjoy your summer!



Jennifer Cavalet

Editor

The Knowledge Builder is the quarterly journal of D.C. LEARNs, written by and for adult, family, and children's literacy professionals. It highlights best practices, current research, teaching and program management strategies, and lessons from the field. We are dedicated to voicing the experiences and ideas of individuals in the field of literacy.

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or lack the self-confidence in their abilities to learn, they will most likely be unsuccessful.

When individuals are able to filter out the irrelevant information and pay attention to the task at hand, they are one step closer to learning successfully. Unfortunately, many adults enrolled in adult basic education programs find learning to be challenging because they struggle to sort out unnecessary information and maintain their attention. However, there are strategies we can use to identify and support those individuals who are challenged by attention problems.

Indicators of Attention Difficulties

Adult educators have all heard questions such as, "Can you repeat that?" or "What did you say?" when working with adult learners. They have seen students looking off into space, fidgeting in their seats, or taking frequent breaks during class. These are just a few signs that an adult learner might be struggling with attention. Other indications that an adult is having attention difficulties include poor time management and organization skills, chronic lateness, difficulties completing paperwork, making simple mistakes, overlooking details, and meeting deadlines.

In his book, *Attention deficit disorder: ADHD and ADD syndromes*, Jordan (1996) provides readers with an extensive informal checklist that can be used to assess (not diagnose) attention deficits in both children and adult students. A sample of the indicators to look for include: attention – cannot take part in group activities without redirection, follows conversations with difficulty, or leaves tasks unfinished; organization – loses work or assignments, messy workspace, or difficulty managing time; and inhibition – starts working without hearing all of the directions, makes excuses, or becomes defensive when corrected.

Causes of Attention Difficulties

According to Jordan (1998), attention deficit disorders are manifested when the brain has difficulty filtering information and sends too much irrelevant data to other regions of the brain for processing. However, researchers are now looking into the possibilities that Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is either a problem of controlling impulses or motor responses to sensory input rather than an inability to effectively attend to information or one of sustaining motivation to complete tasks (Ratey, 2001).

The implications of poor attention skills have gotten a tremendous amount of attention in the media and from researchers alike. This disorder is gaining attention because its effects include hyperactivity, impulsivity, and inattention, which make it very difficult to learn new things. Estimates suggest that

between 5% and 13% of the general population have chronic difficulty maintaining attention due to neurological and biochemical causes (Jordan, 1996). However, even adults who do not have an underlying physical cause for attention difficulties often struggle with concentration and focus due to the many demands they face in their daily lives. The problem we face as educators of adults is not usually as severe as ADHD but attention is a necessary first step in the learning process and it needs to be addressed. Fortunately, many strategies exist to help learners overcome these obstacles to attention.

Strategies for Supporting Adults with Attention Difficulties

It is imperative that educators help learners attend to learning by employing some simple strategies to both gain and maintain their attention.

Gaining Attention

- “Check baggage at the door” – This is a simple activity which instructors can use to help learners prepare to learn before each class. Have learners take out a piece of paper and ask them to write down those things they are thinking about (rent, bills, work, family, etc.). Once those things are written down, they can be put aside for the duration of the class and picked up after class. This simple activity will allow the learner to remove obstacles to attention for a couple of hours.
- Satisfy needs - Whenever possible, allow learners to bring food or drinks with them if the class is held during a time when they would normally be eating. If food is not allowed, encourage learners to take care of their needs prior to class if possible.
- Raise curiosity – Introduce new information to learners in a creative, innovative way to arouse curiosity in the material. Use excerpts from books or movies, personal anecdotes or funny stories, comic strips, and other novel materials to illustrate a point relevant to the lesson and capture someone’s attention for the lesson.

Maintaining Attention

- Make learning relevant and transparent– Learners will be motivated to pay more attention to instruction when they understand how the material relates to their lives and how they can use the information. Design learning experiences that are related to the learners’ goals and clearly explain how the information will help them meet those goals.
- Advance organizers - Before a lesson begins, present an outline or other visual representation of the material to be covered. Build on what the learner already knows; describe what they will be expected to learn and how they

will be expected to demonstrate that they have learned the information.

- Learning environment – Be aware of and try to minimize distractions in the classroom. Have good lighting, a comfortable temperature, keep the noise to a minimum, and reduce visual stimuli (posters, open windows, etc.) if they become problematic.
- Teach organizational and time management strategies – Help learners to organize their work by subject or date, and use different colors to keep work separate. Help students to plan time for completing homework assignments. Teach calendar skills. Provide written or taped directions for assignments that are clear and concise so a learner can refer back to them as needed.
- Visual guides – Encourage learners to use a ruler, finger, or blank piece of paper to help them find and maintain their place on the page.
- Vary teaching techniques – Use a variety of delivery methods during instruction. Vary techniques to include visual media (handouts, the board, flip charts, images), audio (books on tape, lecture, discussion), and movement (role play, manipulatives, demonstrations).
- Take frequent breaks – Maintaining one’s attention for short but focused periods of time is easier than trying to concentrate for an entire class period. Allow students to take regular, but scheduled breaks to walk around the room or get a drink of water but expect that they will pay attention when doing class work.
- Make regular contact– Make regular eye contact with students and check that they are focused on the task at hand. Ask questions and interact with the learners to ensure they are engaged in the learning process and understanding the materials. Be sure to speak slowly and clearly and allow the learner time to process and respond to questions.
- Provide active learning experiences – Design interactive lessons that include team projects, research, or discussion groups. Not only will active learning aid in gaining and maintaining attention but it will also have the added benefit of enhancing memory, comprehension, and transfer of skills outside of the formal learning environment. Build in opportunities to practice new skills in class.
- Provide regular feedback – Continually encourage learners who are doing well and gently correct or support learners who do not understand the information. Remember, for every correction made, provide at least three positives. Find out what motivates the learners – public recognition of their successes, specific yet quiet feedback, or intrinsic satisfaction for a job well done. Providing feedback

in a manner consistent with their needs will be more encouraging than a generic “good job”.

This article is part of a series that focuses on various aspects of Learning Disabilities. Other articles will appear in future issues.

About the Author

Connie Bumbaugh is the Executive Director of Literacy Volunteers of the National Capital Area (LVA-NCA) and an advocate for adults with special learning needs. She provides LD screenings for adult learners and conducts training for educators on how to effectively support these learners in the classroom. Connie received her Master’s degree in Adult Learning from Virginia Tech.

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One-to-One Tutoring with Paraprofessionals and Reading Recovery

(Part two of two)

By **Gabrielle Aponte Henkel**

Reading Recovery as a Model for a Tutoring Program with Paraprofessionals

I have a confession; As a teacher, I avoided adults who wanted to tutor my first graders. This may sound counterintuitive, but my experience had shown me that tutors came to my classroom untrained, unprepared and without materials. It would then become my responsibility to train them, help them plan tutoring sessions and provide them with literacy materials. With twenty-five young learners, daily playground duties and little time for planning my teaching lessons, this was, I reluctantly admit, a burden.

However, research supports my reluctance. Tutoring programs do not automatically engender success. They need to have comprehensive instructional lesson plans (Wasik and Slavin, 1993) and occur frequently. Furthermore, tutors need to be well trained and well supervised by a person who has knowledge of how children learn to read. The time spent with children, high quality instruction and appropriate curriculum are all associated with higher achievement for tutoring programs (Shanahan, 1998). The effects of unsupervised and unplanned tutoring may be wasted time for the child and the tutor (Neuman & Dickinson, 2002).

The good news is that there are one-to-one tutoring programs that use community volunteers with success. Analyzing the Book Buddies program, Invernizzi, Rosemenary, Juel and Richards (1997) found that two sessions of one-to-one tutoring per week by a trained, supported and supervised community volunteer for a minimum of twenty weeks, can be an effective and affordable intervention for children at risk of reading failure. The Howard Street tutoring program has also experienced success in one-to-one tutoring using a five-part instructional program in reading with trained and supervised tutors in an after-school setting (Morris, Shaw and Perny, 1990). Both programs have a modified Reading Recovery structure or incorporate some form of instruction similar to a component(s) of Reading Recovery.

Equipped with knowledge of the efficacy of Reading Recovery and the understanding, as an educator, that managing reading tutors is time-consuming, challenging and even frustrating, I arrived at Georgetown University in 2003 as the new Director of DC Reads. DC Reads is a tutoring program for low-income children in first, second and third grades who are not reading at grade level. Tutors are federal work study and volunteer college students. They are paired with struggling readers twice a week for an hour and many tutors work with the same child throughout the academic year.

As the Director of DC Reads, I had the opportunity to improve upon a tutoring program that used college students, not professional teachers, as tutors. As a former school teacher I considered what I would want in a tutoring program. "Simple" immediately came to mind. I would desire a program that I did not have to manage directly, a program that had trained tutors, a proven curriculum and its own books (we teachers can be possessive of our books). I thought of Becky, the Reading Recovery teacher where I taught first grade for three years. Cognizant of the complexities of the Reading Recovery program and the in-depth training required to become a Reading Recovery tutor, I realized quickly that I would have to adapt the program to make it accessible to college students.

I reviewed the multiple components of the Reading Recovery and pared them down to four components to be used in the DC Reads curriculum:

- **Rereading a familiar book;**
- **Letter and word sorts;**
- **Writing; and,**
- **Introducing a new book**

Rereading a Familiar Book

Much like a Reading Recovery lesson, DC Reads children reread two to three familiar books they have used in previous session to practice fluency. Books are recorded on a book list and the tutor removes the book from the child's repertoire after five to seven readings.

Letter and Word Sorts

During letter and **word sorts** (a basic word study routine in which students group words into categories by comparing and contrasting words within and across categories), DC Reads tutors use word sorts from *Words Their Way* (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton and Johnston, 2004) as well as **magnetic onsets and rimes** and dry erase boards (onsets are the initial consonant or consonant blend of a word; rimes are the vowel and any consonants that follow it within a syllable). *Words Their Way* sorts allow tutors to invite children to hear sounds and syllables in words. For college-aged paraprofessionals, preprinted word sorts offer some guidance in the complexities of phonemic awareness, phonics, and the alphabetic principal.

Writing

DC Reads children write a story (sentence) on a sentence strip, reread it, pointing to each word and then cut up each word. The story is then rearranged in proper order. While Reading Recovery uses an unlined exercise book to practice the sentence and then transfers the sentence onto light cardboard, DC Reads children write the sentence directly on to a sentence strip. Similar to Reading Recovery, DC Reads tutors evolve in their level of contribution and interaction, with the child gradually taking over the process.

Introducing a New Book

DC Reads tutors introduce a new book with a picture walk and tutors are encouraged to ask questions and make comments beyond "sound it out" when a child comes upon a word she does not know. These questions/comments include:

- **Does it make sense?**
- **What do you see in the picture to help you?**
- **That starts with the right letter, but does it make sense here?**
- **Let's start the sentence again and think about what would make sense here.**
- **Let's skip that word and read on.**

Because DC Reads tutors are paraprofessional, they are encouraged not to stray from the lesson plan and do not teach on the run. Naturally, DC Reads tutors are not as skilled as Reading Recovery teachers at meaningful questioning, soliciting independent responses from children and teaching for strategies. However, the lesson plan guides them through the tutoring session.

In addition to modifying the lesson plan for college students, running record procedures were simplified. For the DC Reads curriculum, the daily Running Record used by a Reading Recovery teacher is used two times a semester as opposed to every tutoring session. Additionally, DC Reads tutors assess only accuracy to ascertain at which level a child is reading. Due to training and time constraint, DC Reads tutors do not complete the full battery of observation surveys used by Reading Recovery teachers and detailed earlier.

Conclusions

As indicated by the research on Book Buddies and the Howard Street program, Reading Recovery can successfully be used as a model for one-to-one tutoring by paraprofessionals. The keys to success are training and supervision. A comprehensive lesson plan coupled with well-trained tutors who are monitored by an individual who is skilled at teaching reading can positively enhance the literacy development of low-achieving readers.

This year is the first year of implementation for DC Reads using the new curriculum based on Reading Recovery. Already, tutoring with children is more focused than before the lesson plan was used, and tutors are engaged in meaningful reading instruction as they guide children through book levels. The challenge is supervision. With one director and four tutoring sites, quality assurance is difficult. DC Reads is in the process of training student site coordinators to be “reading leaders” in an effort to ameliorate this challenge.

The decision to model the DC Reads curriculum on Reading Recovery was born out of first-hand observation of the tutoring programs’ success and a secure belief that college students can be trained and supervised in the use of a modified Reading Recovery tutorial. This new curriculum is in its infancy and the outcomes remain to be seen. I am confident that the program will be a successful initiative that helps young children at risk for reading difficulties improve their reading skills.

About the Author

Gabrielle Aponte Henkel is the Director of DC Reads and Summer Programming at the Center for Social Justice Research, Teaching and Service, Georgetown University. Gabrielle received her Master’s Degree in Education from The Ohio State University.

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When Should we Teach Pronunciation in our ESOL Classes?

By Jose Gonzalez

Teaching adults with low levels of literacy is in itself challenging. When we add on the fact that English is much more difficult to pronounce than Spanish (the language of our largest immigrant group) and other languages, we realize that our adult ESOL learners are facing an uphill battle from the very beginning.

I am sure many of you are asking: “How can you say that English is more difficult than Spanish”? I have spent years studying and teaching both languages to adults in almost all situations imaginable. There is one small difference in these languages that makes a world of difference to our learners: the number of vowel sounds.

Take a look at these words and notice how they are pronounced. The underlined vowel sound (sometimes blended with the “r”) is different in each of these words.

Cup Arm Cat Met Auway
Learn Hit Beat Rock Call
Could Food Eye Now Go
Air Eight Here Boy Tourist

For native English speakers the pronunciation of these words, of course, is no problem. Unfortunately, for native Spanish speakers, it is a very difficult task. Spanish has only 5 vowel sounds and no matter where you find a vowel in a word it is pronounced the same in 99% of the cases. Take a look at these Spanish words:

Imperialista Estupefacto Periodico
Establecido Genérico Principalmente
Importante Eliminación Entorpecimiento

No matter where you find an “e”, no matter how long the word, it will always be pronounced as a Spanish “e”. The same goes with the other 4 vowel sounds. Adults, who have spoken all their lives with 5 vowel sounds, find it excruciatingly difficult to distinguish the variety of vowel sounds of American English.

Now let's add onto this problem, the blends and contractions we use when we speak every day English. Read these sentences in your usual every day English and make a conscious effort to listen to the blends and sounds you make when you pronounce them.

I had a hat in my car.

I pick it up in the morning.

Didn't you buy it?

We talk to the principal.

We talked to the principal.

Imagine what our adult learners hear when we speak. How can we help? The best way is to expose them from day one with natural everyday English, not slowing down for them and making a concerted effort to correct pronunciation, especially in the vowel sounds. At the beginning levels, constant repetition with effective correction is the best formula to turn out learners who can understand and be understood by people around them, learners who won't get discouraged because of coming to class so many days and still not being able to understand spoken English.

I have had great success by stressing pronunciation in my beginning classes. I always use natural speed and enunciation when I speak to my beginning learners. By doing this, my learners are always exposed to English that they are bound to hear outside of the classroom and not "classroom" English. I try not to use words that I haven't introduced in class. I do this to keep my learners' attention on the vocabulary and grammatical topics of the lesson. I don't allow my learners to see anything in writing until they are able to pronounce it well and use it according to the lesson's requirements. This has been especially effective because if a learner sees an unknown word, he/she will try to pronounce it in his/her own language, and as we have seen above, this will always produce an incorrect pronunciation of the word. Then it is up to us to "unlearn," what was learned incorrectly and then teach it correctly. This takes more effort on the part of both teacher and learner.

Our English classes are composed of adults from different countries and different linguistic and educational backgrounds and therefore they have many different linguistic needs. I hope this article will help beginner-level teachers to fill the need of our learners to pronounce English appropriately and to be able to understand when their co-workers, neighbors and friends speak to them in natural every day English.

About the Author

Jose Gonzalez has been the Director of Adult Programs of the Spanish Education Development (SED) Center for about 10 years. A son of immigrants and a native of Washington DC, Jose has taught ESOL and Spanish for over 20 years. He began his career as an elementary school teacher, but found his true calling working with the low-income immigrant community of the DC area.

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We welcome your submissions for publication on an ongoing basis. In order for an article to be considered for the forthcoming issue, it must be submitted **no later than** the 15th of the month prior to the month of publication. **The deadline for the next issue is August 12th.** To submit an article to be reviewed for publication and for other editorial questions or comments, please contact Jennifer Cavalet at jcavalet@dclearns.org or 202.331.0141 Ext. 23

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- Submissions should be typed double-spaced, in Times New Roman, including quotations and references.
- Follow the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA), Fifth Edition for reference style guidelines. Present important information in the text and do not use footnotes or extensive endnotes.
- Include a biography of the author (50 words maximum).
- Please include a cover sheet with the author's name, address, phone number and email address.
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