Less-skilled adult word reading: The experiences and practices of readers and teachers

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Master of Education
(First Class Honours)

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I, Janet McHardy, certify that:

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Janet Mary McHardy

Date: 30 August 2017
Abstract

In recent decades, results from widely publicised international literacy surveys have suggested that tens of millions of adults around the world exhibit difficulties in reading. These difficulties can have diverse negative impacts both on individuals and on entire communities. Manifestations of adult reading difficulties are varied and complex, but for many less-skilled adult readers, the difficulties stem from word level reading problems. Research has also suggested that the efficacy of large-scale government initiatives to address reading difficulties in the adult population has varied considerably. Efforts to identify the factors that determine whether adult reading programs will succeed or fail have invariably highlighted the approaches adopted by adult-reading teachers as critical. Adult-reading teachers’ practices have been reported to rely primarily on factors such as the personal beliefs of the teachers, rather than on what is known about good teaching in reading. Considering the global importance of this issue, it is imperative that further research be conducted on the needs of adults with reading difficulties, as well as on the approaches adopted by adult-reading teachers and the origins of these approaches.

The five studies which make up this thesis focused on building an understanding of the experiences and practices of less-skilled adult word readers and adult-reading teachers in Western Australia and New Zealand. The opening two studies focused on adults who had demonstrated word reading difficulties, drawing upon data from interviews and standardised tests to investigate their word reading practices. In the first of these two studies, narrative inquiry methods were used to explore the impact of reading difficulties on 36 less-skilled adult word readers. A progression of diverse word reading experiences, underpinned by entrenched misunderstandings and confusions, was identified. The second study examined word reading strategy awareness and use in 38 less-skilled adult word readers. Results suggested that the inconsistent use and understanding of word reading strategies could be a primary factor in explaining the difficulties confronted by these readers.

The three remaining studies shifted attention from readers to the practices of adult-reading teachers. Data from survey responses of 60 adult-reading teachers were used in the first two teacher-focused studies. The first of the teacher-focused studies examined the foci that teachers would adopt in assisting a fictional reader with word reading difficulties. Only around 60% of teachers in the study indicated they would prioritise word level skills when
teaching the reader, with the remaining 40% indicating that they would focus on developing reading components other than those at the word level. In the second of the teacher-focused studies, the beliefs of teachers regarding how less-skilled readers should be taught to read were explored. Four categories of approaches to teaching word reading were identified, providing insights into a reliance on beliefs and the impact this had on teaching decisions. The beliefs of teachers were explored further in the final of the five papers. Nineteen adult-reading teachers were interviewed to gain insights into their perspectives on why a learner had become a less-skilled reader. The focus in this study was on the origins of the teachers’ beliefs. The results suggested that teachers’ perspectives were not necessarily informed by teaching or reading knowledge. The findings of the three teacher-focused papers identified variable teacher practices that were frequently based on personal beliefs and experiences, rather than on a sound theoretical understanding or knowledge of best practice evidence in the area of adult reading.

The research in this thesis has the potential to make a significant contribution to the sector’s growing understanding of adult readers’ experiences and word reading practices. In addition, the research provides insights into the approaches adopted by adult-reading teachers, as well as the beliefs that underpin these approaches. These findings can be applied to enhance the development of future programs aimed at improving adults’ word reading skills. The potential implications of the findings presented, as well as possible directions for future research within the field, are discussed in detail within the thesis.
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to all the less-skilled readers who persevere with text. You are the reason I undertook this ‘journey’. Reading alongside many of you over the years I have wanted to understand more and know more. When I was given the opportunity to do this study you are the reason I decided to proceed. I hope my contribution helps!
Acknowledgements

This research was supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program (RTP) Scholarship.

As with any undertaking such as this there are always many people to acknowledge. I recognise my coordinating supervisor Elaine Chapman whose advice and guidance inspired levels of thinking I could not have otherwise achieved. I am grateful for the depth and breadth you provoked me to bring to the study. In addition, thank you to Helen Wildy for timely advice and guidance and to Sue Dymock of Waikato University who was always waiting in the wings to provide her technical expertise.

Thank you to the Literacy Organisations for your interest in this study and for making time and space for me. Thank you to the learners and teachers who generously made themselves available for the study; it could not have happened otherwise. Thank you so much for being involved.

Thank you to my fellow doctoral students in G.29 and G.30. To Fiona, Thida, Gilbert, Shima, Jelena, Esti, Deb, and Si Hui, I feel very privileged to have worked with you all and I know the memories of the good discussions, outings and shared meals will stay with me. A special thank you to Deb, Fiona, Caz and Jelena who opened their homes to me and fed me, making the fly-in periods of the study manageable.

I wish to acknowledge and thank Penny Vincent, Academic Services Officer, for her efficiency, professionalism and friendship.

Finally, thank you to my family who have had to manage without me for long periods and especially my husband, who has provided ongoing support and practical assistance.
**Authorship declaration: Co-authored publications**

This thesis contains work that has been published and/or prepared for publication.

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In this paper McHardy participated in the design of the survey and took full responsibility for monitoring and evaluating responses. Chapman supervised the analysis and writing but McHardy contributed significantly to the introduction and method sections. McHardy took full responsibility for identifying a suitable journal and submission.

Percent contributions: McHardy-75%, Chapman-25%.

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In this paper McHardy jointly conceptualised the study, co-designed the online survey, and took full responsibility for monitoring and evaluating survey responses. McHardy took primary responsibility for analysing the survey and producing drafts of the paper. McHardy took primary responsibility for submissions and responding to reviewers’ comments.

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I, Elaine Chapman, certify that the student statements regarding her contribution to each of the works listed above are correct.

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Conference presentations arising from this thesis

2014

McHardy, J. (October 2014). What is important when we teach adults to read? Adult-reading teachers have their say. Paper presented at the Australian Council of Adult Literacy annual conference. (Surfer’s Paradise, Australia).

2015

McHardy, J. (April 2015). What are individual learners doing when they read words? Paper presented at the Western Australian Adult Literacy Council annual conference (Perth, Australia).


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Chapter One: General Introduction

Introduction

High levels of literacy are central to the way we communicate and learn (House of Commons Business, Innovation and Skills Committee, 2014), and are considered necessary for adults to participate fully in most aspects of life (e.g. Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013; EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy, 2012; Gyarmati et al., 2014; House of Commons Business, Innovation and Skills Committee, 2014; Miller, McCardle, & Hernandez, 2010; National Research Council, 2012). Low literacy levels are associated with, among other things, unemployment, disadvantage, social isolation and poverty (Centre for Longitudinal Studies, 2014; Chesters, Ryan, & Sinning, 2013; Morrisroe, 2014; National Research Council, 2012; OECD Skills Outlook, 2013). By ensuring that individuals in the adult population have strong literacy skills, society has the potential to improve economic, social and health outcomes, not only for the individuals directly concerned, but also for their families and communities (National Research Council, 2012).

Despite this, low literacy levels have been reported in adult populations of developed countries for over 50 years (Dymock, 2007; Perkins, 2009; Street, 1995), with concern escalating in the last two decades due to widely publicised unfavourable results from international and national adult literacy surveys (e.g. Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013; Kirsch, 2001; OECD Skills Outlook, 2013). The literacy surveys collect information on how adults (individuals aged 16 and older) use literacy skills at home, in the workplace and in the community; and how the skills are related to employment, income, health, and social and political engagement (OECD Skills Outlook, 2013). Across developed countries, surveys estimate that hundreds of millions of adults lack adequate literacy skills, including those necessary for successful reading.

The research presented in this thesis focused on adult reading and adult-reading teachers. This chapter provides an overview of the conceptual background of both adult literacy and reading. In addition, the definition of literacy used in this thesis is given. While an introduction to the implications of low literacy for adults, to adult literacy provision, and to less-skilled adult readers is given, these are dealt with in more detail in the following
chapters. The second part of this chapter details the rationale and aims and significance of the study, and describes the structure of the rest of the thesis.

**What is adult literacy?**

**Definition of literacy used in this thesis**

Even though everyone may think they know what they mean when they use the term ‘literacy’, there is no common understanding of the word with broad definitions used, and confusion about meaning (Benseman & Sutton, 2007; Perkins, 2009). The matter is further complicated as other labels and terms such as LLN (language, literacy and numeracy), foundation skills and core skills are used synonymously and interchangeably with literacy in discussions.

The understanding of literacy has changed considerably in the last decades (Gough, 1995), moving from a more traditional understanding of being able to read and write, to broader notions of communication and ‘being’, with multiple uses of the term (e.g. digital literacy). Some definitions focus on the skills needed by individuals for work and education, whereas others have a more social focus, and include the literacies for specific contexts e.g. financial literacies. There is consensus that literacy is no longer considered to be something a person either does or does not have, but rather to be a continuum upon which all people lie (Benseman, 2008).

For the purpose of this thesis, the lack of an agreed definition was recognised (Benseman & Sutton, 2007) and literacy taken to be the ability to understand, evaluate, use and engage with written texts to participate in society, achieve one’s goals, and develop one’s knowledge and potential (OECD, 2012; OECD Skills Outlook, 2013). Literacy is viewed as a set of skills, knowledge and strategies that individuals build on throughout their lives in different contexts and interactions (Kirsch, 2001).
Theoretical traditions.

For several decades, the terminology used to inform research and practice in the adult literacy sector has been shaped by intense theoretical debates. The debates are complex and long-standing. Capturing the multi-dimensional natures of literacy, literacy learners and the standpoints of the diverse professionals committed to the sector is difficult. A large number of general arguments have focused on claims regarding the nature of literacy (Street, 2011), and the many ways of considering, acquiring, and measuring it. For example, Street, arguing from an ethnographic perspective, views literacy practices as multiple with social meaning, and contends that literacy is always contested both in its meanings and its practices (Luke, 2004; Street, 2003; 2011).

Differences in the ideologies underpinning adult literacy have resulted in distinct approaches to adult literacy. The major approaches can be broadly summarised as the ideological model of the New Literacy Studies (NLS) and the autonomous model characteristic of the functionalist approach (Street, 1984).

The new literacies view regards literacy as a social practice (Street, 1984) that is linked with culture, knowledge, and power (Rassool, 1999). Paulo Freire was an early voice challenging the dominant traditional ways of viewing literacy (see for example Freire, 1970; 1983). From the perspective of the philosophy of education, Freire advocated a social action approach often referred to as critical literacy, wherein the technical aspects of learning are always linked to individual learners’ lives. In this approach, the inclusive plural term literacies is often felt to be more appropriate than the singular form because reading and writing skills are seen as just one part of a multidimensional view of literacy (Belfiore, 2004). The term multi-literacies is sometimes used in this model (Jackson, 2004).

In new literacies, literacy skills are seen as the means to gain equality and power, and literacy programs are grounded in the life situations of adults and communities in response to issues that are derived from their own interests and knowledge (Tett, 2003). Being literate means not just performing the task but doing it as a member of a social group, and having an understanding of its purpose (Jackson, 2004). Literacy is argued to be highly value-laden and defined by context (Townsend & Waterhouse, 2008).
In contrast, the functionalist tradition is a generalised term to describe an approach to literacy dating from the nineteenth century (Street, 1995) but with links back to the time of the Romans (Gough, 1995). The functionalist is said to regard literacy as a distinct, definable, autonomous set of technical skills to be mastered, hence the term *autonomous* model (Street, 1984) is often used.

Opposed beliefs about appropriate approaches to developing literacy skills can make adult literacy debates contentious (Perkins, 2009). Carpentieri (2013, p. 544) referred to the persistence of “deep fissures within [adult literacy] research, policy and practice communities”, noting how these contributed to a lack of ongoing consistent collaboration, and at times, blinded stakeholders to evidence and impeded development of the sector’s capacity and capability to develop learner skills. Approaches to adult literacy can be teased out and discussed in isolation, but the reality is that most programs and tutors in the adult literacy sector operate using a blend of approaches (Benseman, 2008). Belief that a skill can be developed by targeted instruction does not have to imply that a narrow or unconstructive pedagogical stance must be adopted. Depending on the context and the needs of individuals, an adult literacy teacher can explicitly target specific skills in a sympathetic and appropriate manner. In particular, addressing entrenched learning difficulties such as reading requires a different approach than addressing lack of educational opportunities, where learning difficulties may not be a factor. Adult literacy teachers must be flexible. The use of a blend of approaches to adult literacy instruction which best meets the diverse needs of adult learners in varying contexts, underpinned this thesis.

**Why is literacy important?**

The implications of low literacy levels are well documented (OECD Skills Outlook, 2013), and discussed in more detail later in this thesis. It is important to note that while low literacy levels are generally associated with disadvantage (e.g. Centre for Longitudinal Studies, 2014; House of Commons Business, Innovation and Skills Committee, 2014), the widespread consequences are not always obvious. For example, strong literacy skills are linked to better health outcomes in general, and implicit in this, is having the literacy required to access and manage health care systems and information. An everyday example is the skill required for compliance with the use of prescription drugs (Miller et al., 2010; Perkins, 2009).
In addition, there are particular contexts, with telling implications for society, in which there are high numbers of adults with low literacy skills (House of Commons Business, Innovation and Skills Committee, 2014). Among these contexts is prison. Although an outcome such as incarceration in adult life is a combination of educational and social influences in which literacy only plays a part (Clark & Dugdale, 2008), studies do portray offender populations with low literacy (Shippen, Morton, Flynt, Houchins, & Smitherman, 2012). Figures range from near 40% to as high as 75% of prison populations in developed countries having difficulties in basic literacy skills (Clark & Dugdale, 2008; Shippen, 2008; Weisel, Toops, & Schwarz, 2005).

Attending to low adult literacy levels may have the potential to widely improve ‘life chances’ for millions of individuals and the communities they live in.

**What is being done about low adult literacy?**

Responses to reports of low adult literacy levels vary. For many decades, and in many countries, a range of relatively small-scale community and adult education programs has been active, attempting to provide literacy support to adults in a range of local contexts (Dymock, 2007). Programs often deliver non-accredited provision using trained volunteers and adult learners participate voluntarily (Perkins, 2009). Instruction in many places lacks coordination and coherence with respect to what is taught and how. The program outcomes vary, often determined by each adult learner’s own goals and motivations for joining the program.

In recent decades, and chiefly in response to international survey results (e.g. OECD Skills Outlook, 2013), calls for governments to address unacceptably low levels of adult literacy skill have increased, resulting in various policies and initiatives aimed on building adult skills. Although community and adult education programs continue to respond to diverse literacy requirements, much recent literacy instruction is focused on employment needs (Black & Yasukawa, 2011). Employers globally, cite numbers of employees with literacy difficulties, and report that low levels of literacy impact on productivity, workplace communications and relationships, workforce planning and training, and safety and compliance (Australian Industry Group, 2013). Poor literacy skills are argued to have financial costs to business (Perkins, 2009) while improvements in employees’ skills and
education are linked to a high productivity workforce and a strong economy (Vignoles, De Coulon, & Marcenaro-Gutierrez, 2008).

These calls by industry have resulted in the dominance of literacy programs designed to address specific work contexts. Programs are conducted in workplaces and training organisations, with content contextualised to the needs of specific industries, and funded by government or industry, or both. Programs may be short term and focus on building specific literacy skills for a specific work need. The needs of individual literacy learners may be overlooked in favour of the needs of the employer.

However, adult literacy is multifaceted, and effectively addressing literacy difficulties in adults requires a comprehensive informed approach across learning contexts. More needs to be understood about how to best address adult learners’ literacy needs. One logical starting point for building understanding is to focus on specific components of literacy. Reading is one such component. Reading skills must be strong in order to build general literacy (Galletly & Knight, 2013; Street, 1995). To make a contribution to the important issue of less-skilled adult literacy learners and to manage such a large topic, this thesis focused on adult reading skill and practices.

**Reading**

**Models of reading**

Just as with literacy, understandings of reading, can be contentious. For several decades, debates over models of reading acquisition, labelled the ‘reading wars’, led to confusion and demoralisation in the education sector (Stanovich & Stanovich, 1995). While there is now some level of general consensus among reading specialists that a useful approach is to find the points of convergence and agreement between the models and adopt a ‘balanced’ view of reading (Pressley 2006), confusions and entrenched ideas are still prevalent among practitioners.

Two classes of models of reading have been important in building an understanding of reading. Those termed *bottom-up* models emphasise a series of discrete stages, each
necessary for subsequent stages in the reading process. In these models, word reading is often viewed as an initial stage to be mastered. It is argued that skilled readers are not guessing words but have mastered how to process letters and sounds, and once the words have been sounded out, the mind is able to ‘listen’ and make meaning (Gough, 1985). Skilled readers automatically recognise words and read words they have never seen because they are decoding well (Pressley 2006). In a bottom-up approach there is an emphasis on teaching reading skills and bottom-up models are often called skills-based approaches.

In contrast to this ‘stages’ view of reading are those models termed top-down whereby the fluent reader engages in hypothesis-testing as they proceed through the text (Stanovich, 1980). Top down models such as proposed by Goodman and Goodman (1979) hold that learning to read is a natural process and should not be broken up into stages. Development of reading skill occurs in the same way as individuals learn to speak and listen and in this model, instruction in reading and writing must be consistent with the natural process (Goodman, 1976). Readers learn by exposure to reading. The term whole language has been used in discussions of this approach (Stanovich & Stanovich, 1995).

There is current, research-informed support for the view that skilled reading is a coordination of higher-order processes (top down) such as comprehension and lower-order processes (bottom up) such as decoding (Pressley, 2006), and widespread agreement that reading clearly involves components that must be skilfully coordinated (National Research Council, 2012; Sabatini, Sawaki, Shore, & Scarborough, 2010). A balanced approach to reading teaching is advocated (Pressley, 2006). The reading teacher using a balanced approach builds reading skills specific to the individual reader’s needs, and understands the interrelationship of reading components to successful reading.

Focusing attention on specific reading components does not imply rigid adherence to a skills approach; rather it can be described as being attentive to the individual reader. Some components are more important at different points of reading skill development (MacArthur et al., 2012). For example, word level skills play a key role in reading acquisition (Mellard & Fall, 2012) but in the balanced approach are not seen as a distinct stage, merely essential underpinning skills which develop as reading skill develops. As text becomes more complex all components of reading work together to facilitate reading comprehension (e.g. MacArthur
et al., 2012). If necessary, specific skills must be explicitly taught (National Research Council, 2012) but this is not to the detriment of developing other components of reading.

The necessity of a balanced approach to reading teaching was assumed in this thesis.

**Adult reading**

Adult reading is a component of adult literacy in general and is a pivotal, underpinning literacy skill. Contemporary society is dominated by the written word, and to take part fully in society, individuals need to be able to read (EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy, 2012). Less-skilled adult readers, despite typically having received instruction in their youth, remain challenged by the reading materials of adult life. Millions of adults only read simple texts and remain unable to read the more challenging material increasingly needed in occupational and community contexts (Sabatini et al., 2010).

Relatively little research is available to describe the specific reading difficulties of less-skilled adult readers (e.g. MacArthur, Konold, Glutting, & Alamprose, 2012; Nanda, Greenberg, & Morris, 2010). However, research suggests that inability to develop fast, automatic word recognition is a primary factor in the breakdown of adults’ reading skill development (e.g. Cunningham, Nathan, & Raher, 2011; MacArthur et al., 2012; Macaruso & Shankweiler, 2010; Mellard & Fall, 2012; Mellard, Fall, & Woods, 2010; National Research Council, 2012; Roberts, Christo, & Shefelsbene, 2011; Sabatini et al., 2010; Stanovich, 1991). Strong word level skills are important for successful reading comprehension. Given the importance of word level skills, this thesis focused on the practices and experiences of less-skilled adult word readers, and an examination of the research describing adult word reading difficulties is provided in the following chapters.

In addition to research on the practices of word readers, the body of research on effective word reading teaching practices is also limited and needs to be extended (e.g. Alamprose, MacArthur, Price, & Knight, 2011). Many teaching practices in the adult literacy sector vary considerably and remain inconsistent with the available research. Furthermore, the expertise of teachers, frequently needing to address entrenched learning difficulties, is highly variable (Kendall & McGrath, 2014; National Research Council, 2012).
The approach adult-reading teachers employ often displays incorrect assumptions and knowledge about word reading difficulties, and at times reflects personal beliefs and perspectives on how adults can, or should be taught to read (Greenberg et al., 2011; Van Kan, Ponte, & Verloop, 2013). Many teachers have inadequate or no specific training in best methods for teaching in adult reading programs. The variability of approaches adopted to build word skills may be one explanation for poor results from adult reading interventions where poor literacy gains are often reported (Palameta, Myers, & Conte, 2013). Further investigation of approaches and motives of reading teachers about adult word reading was an additional focus of the present research.

**Rationale**

Considering the discussion above, the rationale for the research presented in this thesis addresses four related concerns: First, high numbers of adult readers worldwide are reported to be unable to read many of the texts required to function fully in modern society. Second, there are numerous negative personal, social and economic implications of low reading skills for both the individual reader and for communities in general. Third, adult reading initiatives designed to address the issue of low reading skills, and the associated impact, have had limited effect to date and more needs to be understood as to why this is the case. Fourth, less-skilled adult readers commonly experience difficulties at the word reading level. Consideration of the experiences and practices of less-skilled adult word readers and adult-reading teachers was judged to be important in light of these issues.

**Aims and significance**

The overall aim of the research presented in this thesis was to explore experiences and word reading practices of individual less-skilled adult readers and the responses of adult-reading teachers to readers’ needs. Implicitly, the intention was to provide awareness of the practices of individual readers and teachers, with the view to identifying needs and informing future education for both groups. In order to achieve this aim, a series of studies is presented that provide insights into adult readers and those who teach them.

The initial study is presented in Chapter Two and ‘set the scene’. The study aimed to understand how less-skilled adult readers experience word reading, and the implications of
the reading experiences for instruction in adult reading programs. The stories of reading reported by individual readers in Chapter Two prompted Chapter Three where actual reading practices were examined. Two research questions were addressed in Chapter Three: i) Which strategies used by less-skilled adult readers best predict word reading performance on standardised reading tests? And ii) What word reading strategies do less-skilled adult readers report using, and to what extent do they correlate with direct observations of reading behaviours?

Understandings gained from examining strategy use and awareness of adult readers led to the examination of teacher practice in teaching word reading reported in Chapter Four. Two research questions were examined: i) What teaching focus do adult-reading teachers prioritise when teaching specific word reading skills? And ii) Do the teaching foci that adult-reading teachers prioritise when teaching specific word reading skills vary with the age, sex, years of experience of teachers, employment status, and qualifications and training teachers receive to teach adult reading?

The findings of the study reported in Chapter Four stimulated investigation of the beliefs that underpin the teaching practices adopted by adult-reading teachers. The aim of the study reported in Chapter Five was to unpack the approaches teachers currently use to teach adult reading. From the investigation of approaches a further study to explore adult-reading teachers’ perspectives about adult readers and the origins of these views was made. This study is reported in Chapter Six. The research questions framing the study were What are adult-reading teachers’ perspectives on how adults become less-skilled readers?, and (ii) What are the origins of these perspectives?

This research contributes to the knowledge base of adult literacy research, specifically the area of less-skilled word reading, and is significant in at least seven ways. First, despite wide scale adult reading interventions, tens of millions of adults around the world continue to be unable to read the materials they need for everyday activities. These limited reading skills are associated with negative personal, social and economic outcomes for both the reader and wider communities. If society effectively addresses adults’ literacy needs there is the potential to greatly improve lives for adult learners and associated groups. Limited research exists into the nature of adult reading difficulties, particularly in Australasia where this
research is conducted. Thus, the findings of this study overall, provide additional information about adult reading and teaching practices in this very important field.

Second, there is evidence that less-skilled adult readers have diverse reading difficulties and that adult reading programs must be tailored to the specific reading needs of individuals. Further, it is clear that many less-skilled adult readers have difficulties at word level reading. The current research is significant because it is one of very few studies, which attempts to explore specific reading difficulties from the viewpoint of individual readers. The real life experiences and stories of readers as they read words illuminate diverse word reading practices. The progression of specific word reading difficulties revealed, and the labelling of types of word readers, provides a language for teachers to discuss and build understanding of multi-layered word reading experiences. The stories provide insights into what readers are thinking when they encounter unknown words and can build teacher awareness of what may be required to effectively address word reading needs.

Third, less-skilled adult readers may attend adult reading programs for extended periods yet remain unable to recognise and read words fluently. There is limited knowledge about how aware less-skilled adult readers are of what is needed to read a word, and of the strategies which readers use to facilitate the process. This research is significant because it asks readers about how they are reading the words and increases understanding of which strategies are commonly used and reveals varying levels of reader awareness. The information gained from the readers can support adult-reading teachers to make better sense of the kinds of word reading difficulties, and be able to direct their instruction accordingly.

Fourth, adult-reading teachers comprise a diverse group. There are no universally accepted standards and established criteria for determining who is qualified to teach adult reading. Knowledge, expertise and practice of adult-reading teachers varies considerably and this may be a factor in variable skill development of adult readers. This research is significant because it examines teaching foci adopted and instructional approaches used, and identifies misconceptions and confusions about adult reading and how word reading can be taught. Further, it finds a significant relationship between specific teacher practice and teacher training. The identification of these misunderstandings, and a possible explanation, is a useful
starting point in informing and changing how teachers are equipped to be adult-reading teachers, and has the potential to inform more effective reading programs.

Fifth, adult word reading difficulties are diverse. The role of accurate diagnosis of specific difficulties in effective instruction is supported in the literature. The current research is significant because it reinforces the diversity of word reading difficulties, the confusions of teachers in how to address them, and provides insights into how the use (or lack of use) of diagnostic assessment influences teaching practice.

Sixth, less-skilled adult readers are disadvantaged in society and the impact of adult reading programs in building reading skills is variable. The practice that adult teachers employ often reflect their own personal beliefs and perspectives on how adults can, or should be taught to read. This research is significant because it presents frameworks to depict both approaches, and the perspectives and origins of perspectives, on why adults are less-skilled readers. The frameworks are useful tools to scaffold reflection by teachers, with the potential of increasing self-awareness of what each teacher is doing and why. Such reflection may assist teachers to challenge and evaluate their beliefs and explore alternative views on teaching and learning. Further, the frameworks provide a common language for widening discussions about teaching adult reading with the aim of achieving a shared understanding of effective teaching.

Seventh, a further significance of this research is that by determining insufficient understanding of word reading processes in both readers and teachers the research provides the diverse stakeholders, including funders, policy makers, educators, and employers, with clear directions for ‘next steps’. Effective learning requires effective teaching; adult-reading teachers must be supported to know and understand much more about how to teach less-skilled adult readers to read. If adult reading levels are to improve, consideration needs to be given to training and regulation of those who teach adult literacy.

**Structure of thesis**

A *pragmatist* approach underpins this research. It is important to stress that, in this context, pragmatism refers to philosophical pragmatism and should not be confused with expediency (Onwuegbuzie, & Johnson, 2006) or an ‘anything goes’ approach (Denscombe, 2008).
Pragmatism is not committed to any one system of reality but seeks to solve a particular problem using research methods that provide the best answers to the problem (Creswell, 2009). The research presented in this thesis seeks to take things learnt with one type of method in one specific setting and make the most appropriate use of that knowledge elsewhere (Morgan, 2007).

The overarching aim of the thesis is to explore and examine experiences and practices of both less-skilled adult readers and adult-reading teachers. To achieve this aim, five papers are presented (Chapters Two to Six) which provide an integrated set of contributions to the field of less-skilled adult reading as a whole (see Figure 1-1). Chapter One provides a general introduction to the thesis and Chapter Seven provides concluding comments. In each of Chapters One to Seven, literature is presented which is pertinent to that Chapter but also contributes to the over-all literature review. In addition, as Chapters Two to Six contain papers prepared for publication, they each have a reference list relevant to that chapter and this is included at the end of each chapter. For the sake of consistency, the reference list for each of Chapters One and Seven is included at the end of each of those chapters (i.e. each of the seven chapters has a reference list attached to the chapter). In addition, at times the formatting of the published and submitted versions may have been changed to be consistent with the format adopted in the thesis. While Chapters 2 to 6 comprise distinct studies, the papers presented in Chapters 2 and 3 drew on data from the same body of less-skilled adult readers. The studies of adult reading teachers detailed in Chapters 4 and 5 drew on data from an on-line survey. Chapter 6 used data from participants, some of whom participated in the survey and some of whom were ‘new’ volunteers.

This first chapter provides an overview of the context and the conceptual debates in both the fields of adult literacy and reading, and makes the case for the thesis focus of adult reading at the word level. The concept of ‘literacy’ as understood in this thesis is defined. An overview of the implications of low literacy and the current response is provided next. In addition, this chapter contains information about the rationale, aims and significance of the research as well as structure of the thesis.

An extensive review of the literature concerning less-skilled adult readers highlighted negative impacts in terms of economic, social and health outcomes. However, it was clear
from the literature that the implications of low literacy skills are often viewed in terms of human capital, and that the specific literacy needs of individuals are overlooked and their ‘voices’ are not heard. It was also clear from the literature that there is a need for research into studies of specific reading difficulties to better inform targeted reading instruction. The need to ‘listen’ to what individual readers are saying gave rise to Paper One (Chapter Two). The paper is titled ‘How less-skilled adult readers experience word reading’ and is in press in *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*. The paper serves as a ‘background paper’ and recounts the experiences of less-skilled adult word readers as they attempt to read words.

The confusions of readers and the diversity of word reading difficulties described by readers in Chapter Two identified a need to increase understanding of what the adult readers are doing, what strategies they are using as they read words, and what they think they are doing. A review of the literature revealed limited research into the strategies used by adult readers, and this prompted the examination of actual word reading practices and awareness of practice described in Paper Two (Chapter Three). Paper Two is titled ‘What strategies do less-skilled adult readers use to read words, and how aware are they of these strategies?’ and is submitted to *Reading and Writing*.

The findings of Paper Two emphasised the confusions and misunderstandings adult readers discussed in Paper One, and reinforced the need for adult reading programs to ensure that specific reading skills are explicitly taught. The teaching practices in adult reading programs are variable with little research on specific word reading teaching. More needs to be understood about the decisions teachers make and what they teach. Thus, Paper Three (Chapter Four) examined the teaching focus adult-reading teachers favour for an adult with specific reading difficulties and further, examined relationships of teacher characteristics to the practices identified. Paper Three is titled ‘The teaching focus of adult-reading teachers when developing word reading skills’ and is submitted to *Literacy*.

The findings presented in Chapter Four, that the teaching practices of many adult-reading teachers do not match the diagnosed reading needs of the less-skilled adult reader, led to an exploration of adult-reading teacher beliefs about less-skilled readers and how they can be taught to read. The findings of this study are reported in Chapter Five (Paper Four). Paper Four is entitled ‘Adult-reading teachers’ beliefs about how less-skilled adult readers can be
taught to read’ and is published in *Literacy & Numeracy Studies*. Categories of approaches teachers adopt to teach a specific learner were identified and it appeared that some adult teachers relied on existing personal beliefs about how an adult can learn to read rather than on informed knowledge about the reading process.

**Figure 1-1.** Integrated set of five papers presented in Chapters Two to Six.
Beliefs and perspectives are complex but existing research suggests that when a teacher operates from a particular perspective about what should be taught and how to teach it, the teacher perspectives, rather than content knowledge, can dominate the focus of the teaching. To evaluate perspectives teachers must be conscious of where personal perspectives originate but limited studies focus on the origins of adult literacy teachers’ perspectives, particularly in the area of less-skilled reading. Thus, Chapter Six (Paper Five) explored adult-reading teachers’ perspectives about adult readers and the origins of those views. The paper is titled ‘Adult literacy teachers’ perspectives on reading difficulties and the origins of these perspectives’ and the first revision has been submitted to Journal of Research and Practice for Adult Literacy, Secondary and Basic Education.

Chapter Seven provides a summary of the findings of this thesis. In addition, implications of the findings are discussed with suggestions for future research and directions.

In summary then, this thesis is comprised of seven chapters. Chapter One introduces the research and Chapters Two to Six each contain a paper which provides an integrated set of contributions to the field of less-skilled adult reading. Chapter Seven offers concluding comments.

References


Chapter Two: How less-skilled adult readers experience word reading

Foreword

Chapter Two contains a paper written to provide insight into the word reading experiences of less-skilled adult readers. The paper is in press in *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy* and titled ‘How less-skilled readers experience word reading’.

The information letter provided to participants is in Appendix A.
How less-skilled adult readers experience word reading

Abstract

Reading skills are central to the development of over-all literacy but large numbers of adults worldwide continue to experience complex reading difficulties, in particular at the word level. Less-developed adult reading skills have negative impacts on personal wellbeing including health, earning ability, and family and social life. Low literacy skills can be disadvantageous for families and communities. However, current adult literacy initiatives are dominated by economic priorities, and the experiences of individuals are frequently overlooked. In this study narrative inquiry was used to understand the experiences of 36 less-skilled adult readers in Western Australia and New Zealand as they attempted to read words. A metaphor of following a path through woodland was used to illustrate the difficulties in readers’ experiences. Four themes of word reading experiences are identified: locked out, anxious, wandering and persistent readers, and presented as a narrative. Each narrative tells of individuals’ thoughts and experiences as they read words. It is argued that the narratives build appreciation of individuals’ experiences and offer insights for understanding adult reading needs. The on-going confusions of readers, and diversity of the described word reading difficulties, support calls for specific professional learning for adult-reading teachers on how to diagnose and effectively address word reading difficulties.

Introduction

Despite decades of arguments regarding the nature of literacy (Street, 1984), and the many ways of considering, acquiring, and measuring it, common current agreement views literacy as involving being able to understand, evaluate, use and engage with written text to participate in society and achieve personal goals, and develop personal knowledge and potential (OECD, 2012). Without the appropriate literacy skills, people may be kept at the margins of society, and vocational and academic opportunities may be limited (OECD Skills Outlook, 2013). By addressing adults’ literacy needs effectively, society has the potential to improve the economic, social and health outcomes for adult learners, their families, and their communities (National Research Council, 2012). Internationally, significant numbers of adults continue to have problems with basic literacy (e.g. House of Commons Business, Innovation and Skills Committee, 2014). Consequently, the question of adult literacy has
moved in recent years from the margins of policy to a mainstream consideration (Carpentieri, 2013) with hundreds of millions of dollars spent on adult literacy initiatives (Australian Industry Group, 2013).

Despite strongly voiced perspectives which view literacy as social activities and argue for an understanding of literacy practices as multiple, with social meaning (Street, 2011), current adult literacy initiatives are dominated by a skill focus and the contexts and interactions of industry and economic imperatives, and more specific employment-related competences (Yasukawa & Black, 2016). Against this backdrop, the specific literacy needs of individuals are regularly overlooked (Athanasou, 2011), with individual learner-voices frequently not heard, and learners’ lives reduced to reportable statistics and measurable outcomes. Calls are growing to broaden the current discourse and go ‘beyond economic interests’ (Yasukawa & Black, 2016) to facilitate adult literacy learning to balance the needs of individual learners with the interests of industry.

Reading has long been accepted as an underpinning literacy skill (Street, 1995). Reading skills are central to the development of over-all literacy (Galletly & Knight, 2013). Contemporary society is dominated by the written word and to participate actively individuals need to be able to read (EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy, 2012). Worldwide, large numbers of adults are able to read only simple texts and form only low-level inferences (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013; EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy, 2012; House of Commons Business, Innovation and Skills Committee, 2014; National Research Council, 2012). Such readers are described as less-skilled readers (Binder & Borecki, 2008). A paucity of research exists into the nature of specific difficulties of less-skilled adult readers (MacArthur, Konold, Glutting, & Alamprese, 2012). Research is necessary to enable tailored reading instruction to occur (Binder, Snyder, Ardoin, & Morris, 2011). The current study focuses on the reading experiences of individual adult readers. To make sense of these experiences, the social implications of less-developed literacy skills are explored followed by a section discussing adult reading.
The social implications of less developed literacy skills

Despite debate in the adult literacy field about the consequences of low literacy skills (e.g. Black, Yasukawa, & Brown, 2013) there is strong support for the view that literacy skills are important to the growth of social capital and contribute to personal and social wellbeing. This support derives largely from findings of large-scale literacy surveys both international and national. Chief among these is a series of international surveys of adult skills, the most recent of which, the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), involves 24 countries (OECD Skills Outlook, 2013). Across surveyed countries, less-developed literacy skills are associated with low earnings, poor health, and impact on family and social life including civic and cultural participation. Low literacy is linked to the profile of disadvantaged adults (e.g. Centre for Longitudinal Studies, 2014; Clark & Dugdale, 2008; Miller, McCordle, & Hernandez, 2010; Morrisroe, 2014; National Research Council, 2012; OECD Skills Outlook, 2013).

The survey results are the impetus for numerous national reports which examine, among other things, links between literacy and employment opportunities and earnings. For example, Gyarmati et al. (2014) in Canada, Morrisroe (2014) in the UK, and Shomos and Forbes (2014) in Australia found adults with low literacy are twice as likely to be unemployed, with evidence that those who are employed report challenges in advancing in continuing employment. Higher wages, employability and job retention are associated with strong literacy skills. The National Assessment for Adult Literacy (NAAL) in the US administered to approximately 19,200 adults found individuals with sounder literacy skills generally earned significantly more per year (Miller et al., 2010). Across countries, hourly rates are strongly associated with reading proficiency (OECD Skills Outlook, 2013), with the median hourly rate of workers who can make complex inferences from written text found to be 60 percent higher than workers who are able to read only simple texts (OECD Skills Outlook, 2013). Less-developed literacy is linked to low earnings and poverty (Centre for Longitudinal Studies, 2014; Shomos & Forbes, 2014).

Strong literacy skills are linked to broader health issues for individuals and communities. Adults with low literacy face a greater risk of poor health (OECD Skills Outlook, 2013). Rudd, Kirsch, and Yamamoto (2004), analysing data from US surveys, found evidence that low literacy skill in adult workers is associated with a higher rate of injuries and a longer
recovery time. In a Canadian project involving 1,438 workers, participation in adult learning programs contributed positively to healthy behaviours including healthier life style choices and less stress (Gyarmati et al., 2014). Literacy skills facilitate understanding of health care systems and information about healthy living and warning symptoms (Miller et al., 2010; Morrisroe, 2014), and increases confidence in utilising health information and filling out medical forms (Gyarmati et al., 2014; Perkins, 2009).

In contrast, Bynner and Parsons (2006), Parsons and Bynner (2005), and the Centre for Longitudinal Studies (2014) drawing on data from the 1958 and 1970 British birth cohort studies, which have followed individuals throughout their lives, found links between less-developed literacy skills and poor mental health and depression. Associated intrapersonal issues such as lack of self-reliance and social marginalisation or isolation were found to be associated with low literacy (Centre for Longitudinal Studies, 2014). Reasons for voluntarily attending adult literacy programs include “the need for social contact and the desire to take more control over their lives” (Dymock, 2007, p. 9). In addition, in studies of workplaces in Australia, increased literacy is seen to enhance individuals’ confidence and ability to work independently (Perkins, 2009).

Low literacy can impact on families (Miller et al., 2010) and has links to intergenerational disadvantage (Bynner & Parsons, 2006; Morrisroe, 2014; Parsons & Bynner, 2007). Children of parents with low literacy skills have significantly lower literacy levels than those with parents with higher levels (OECD Skills Outlook, 2013). Lack of confidence about personal literacy skill can limit the types of literacy interactions (e.g. reading to children) that parents and caregivers can engage in at home (Miller et al., 2010). Further, the impacts of low literacy extend to social life including civic and cultural participation (Condelli, Kirshstein, Silver-Pacuilla, Reder, & Spruck Wrigley, 2010; Miller et al., 2010). For example, with increasing levels of literacy, individuals are more likely to vote, to believe that they have an impact on political processes (OECD Skills Outlook, 2013) and to participate in volunteer activities (Condelli et al., 2010).
**Less-skilled adult reading**

The reading process requires fluent decoding and word recognition for reading comprehension to occur (National Research Council, 2012). Skilled reading is characterised by the ability to rapidly recognise words in print and general mastery of the word level components of reading (Holmes, 2012). Where word recognition is not automatic, the reading process stalls. For adults with reading difficulties, less-skilled word reading has been found to be a major obstacle (Macaruso & Shankweiler, 2010).

Word recognition relies on decoding skill (Mellard, Fall, & Woods, 2010), and decoding is facilitated by phonological awareness. However, less-skilled adult readers frequently have deficits in phonological awareness and have slow and unautomatised decoding abilities (MacArthur et al., 2012). Limited to basic decoding knowledge and often incomplete orthographic processing of letter and syllable patterns, less-skilled readers fall back on the strategy of looking at the first letter or syllable of a word and attempting to say the rest of it based on that letter or syllable (Davidson & Strucker, 2002). Thus, unable to decode words, adult readers rely on partial orthographic information to read a word, and on recognition of a limited bank of sight words (MacArthur, Konold, Glutting, & Alamprese, 2010).

Projects such as ‘A Fuller Sense of Self’ (Bowen, 2011) and ‘Resilience: Stories of Adult Learning’ (Furlong & Yasukawa, 2016) record stories and provide insights into the lives and learnings of individuals in adult literacy programs. More needs to be known about specific literacy practices of individuals (MacArthur et al., 2012). Skilled reading is crucial to literacy development (Street, 1995) and word level reading skills are crucial to skilled reading (Holmes, 2012). In this study, we sought to understand how less-skilled adult readers experience word reading, and the implications of the reading experiences for instruction in adult reading programs.

**Method**

**Design**

Narrative inquiry, a way of understanding individual experiences in the world, was used to examine individual less-skilled adult readers’ experience. The design provides a way of
thinking about learner experience through the study of experience as lived and told stories. The researcher works with the universality of storytelling to understand collective experiences, all the while acknowledging individual differences (Trahar, 2013), and the stories allow the individuality and complex nature of reading experiences to be expressed (Clandinin, 2006; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). While common themes are identified, the themes also represent distinct individual experiences. This enables experiences to be seen in a holistic and integrated way in the speakers’ voice, to create for the reader a sense of ‘being there’.

Narrative accounts describe how the individual in a given context experiences a given phenomenon (word reading). The three dimensions of temporality, sociality and place (Clandinin, 2006) are intertwined in the narrative. The place or context involves these adult readers telling their story in a society where reading ability is considered a universal skill. Temporality relates to past, present and future experience as readers, while sociality relates to the personal feelings and reactions of learners, and to the social and cultural expectations of a reader. Individual experiences can only be understood within a social context, and with regard to past experiences that will lead to further experiences (Clandinin, 2006).

**Participants**

The primary researcher has extensive experience working in the context of community and accredited adult reading programs in Australia and New Zealand, and through these networks, adults were recruited who consider themselves less-skilled readers (i.e. able to read only simple texts and form only low-level inferences). The invitation to participate was sent directly to the respondents by the researcher or forwarded to the respondents by an adult literacy organisation or tertiary institution. Exact numbers of those who received the request to participate are unavailable but the organisations each have networks numbering hundreds of literacy learners.

Forty-one adult readers volunteered and were interviewed. Reading tasks were included in the interview to determine less-skilled word readers (i.e. the focus of this study). These tasks are commonly used to provide information regarding strengths and weaknesses in word reading processes and skills. No one test score was used to determine less-skilled word
reading. Rather all results were examined to provide information about the word reading level of each participant. The Castles and Coltheart reading test 2 (CC2) (Castles et al., 2009) was used to examine single word and nonword reading. The task includes 40 regular and 40 irregular words, and 40 nonwords with the possible maximum score of 120. The decision about what should be considered a skilled word reading performance is partly influenced by the particular purpose in carrying out the task (Castles et al., 2009). In this study, individual scores around 35 out of 40 and total scores over 105 were seen to indicate more-skilled word reading. The blue word reading list of Wide Ranging Achievement Test (WRAT4) (Wilkinson & Robertson, 2006) was also used to test word recognition. Fifty-five words of increasing difficulty are tested. Scores below 45 were considered to indicate less-skilled word reading. Phonological processing skills were examined using a phoneme deletion task (Martin, Pratt, & Fraser, 2000) and a phonological choice task (Olson, Kliegl, Davidson, & Foltz, 1985). Both tasks have 18 items and skilled word readers score close to the maximum score of 18. Of the 41 who were tested and interviewed, five did not meet the criteria of being less-skilled word readers. Thus, data from 36 adults deemed to be less-skilled readers were included in the study.

In narrative inquiry, all participants have voice (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) so a trusting relationship between researcher and participant is necessary. The primary researcher has wide practice building appropriate trust with program participants. In addition, the primary researcher was generally recommended and introduced by someone the participant trusted such as a tutor, friend or program coordinator.

Of the 36 participants, 15 were female and 21 were male while 19 were Australian and 17 were New Zealanders. Seven participants were aged 15-19 years, four were 20-24, four were 25-34, seven were 35-44, ten were 45-54 and four were aged over 55 years. Eighteen participants were involved in voluntary adult reading programs, 17 were enrolled in tertiary courses and one participant was not currently doing a program. All participants gave informed consent.
Data Collection

Interviews, in conjunction with the reading tasks, were conducted individually by the primary researcher to determine word reading ability and allow careful observation of skills and strategies used, and to provide an opportunity for individuals to demonstrate and discuss what they do as they read. The interview consisted of two stages: first, personal information was collected, serving to establish a rapport with the participant. The information included age group, gender, nationality and program enrolment.

Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Open-ended questions were asked about participants’ feelings about reading, and what they were thinking and the strategies they used as they attempted to read words they were shown during tasks. Questions included ‘how does it feel when you do not know the word?’ ‘what do you do when you see this word?’ ‘what part of the word do you look at first?’ ‘how did you know to do that?’ and ‘did that sound like a real word to you?’ The semi-structured interview was audio taped and notes of responses and interviewer observations were recorded in a written form.

Analysis

All audio taped interviews were transcribed and listened to several times with reference to the notes. Recurring themes were identified, providing insights into learners’ reading experiences. The analysis was confined to word level components of reading. Themes of limited and partial decoding skill, guessing words based on initial letters, and reliance on sight words reflected what individuals experienced as they encountered known and unknown words.

The themes were used to construct the narratives from the point of view of a less-skilled reader and to tell of readers’ thoughts and experience as they read words. The three stages of broadening, burrowing and restorying occurred (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Broadening was used to generalise about the emotions experienced by readers during particular events. Burrowing focuses on possible origins of the feelings at the time of the events described. Restorying returns the story to present and future considerations and concerns the meaning of the event and how a new story may be created for the story teller and change the significance of it in terms of the larger life story the person may be trying to recount (Connelly &
Clandinin, 1990). All examples in the narratives are from the interviews. Instances describing similar skills and issues are combined and no particular individual experience is identified.

**Narrative accounts**

Four themes were identified in the analysis and each is presented as a short narrative. Each narrative presents experiences about trying to read words. The narratives employ a metaphor of attempting to follow a path through woodland to illustrate the difficulties in readers’ experiences. When trying to ‘travel’ through text some less-skilled readers feel they are locked out from the start and do not have knowledge about how to enter the woodland and find the path. A second group of readers are anxious and unsure about the journey and not confident about recognising the path while a third group are more confident but may unknowingly wander from the main path. A fourth group persists to find the way but experience the journey as difficult and draining. To some extent all readers are persisting as they are all resolutely working to develop reading skills. However, for the purposes of drawing fine distinctions in the word reading journeys the label ‘persistent’ is used for the fourth group. To all less-skilled readers, skilled adult readers appear to travel easily backwards and forwards along the path through the woodland.

**Locked out reader**

Some less-skilled adult readers are largely unable to make sense of the letters, the sounds and the words. They feel locked out from the understanding demonstrated by others, and make little sense of what others tell them about how to read the word. Locked out readers are unable to make a start on the ‘journey’ of making sense of text and this is illustrated in this narrative of a locked out reader.

Reading was difficult from the beginning. I liked school but cannot remember anything I learned. I felt I was part of the furniture and I never fitted in.

When people try to help, they say ‘listen to the sounds’; ‘what does that mean?’ I find it hard to hear sounds. It is frustrating because I just do not hear them. People use words and I have no idea what they mean. I remember one time the teacher was talking. She said something was a ‘long vowel sound’ and I kept thinking
‘how can a vowel sound be long?’ I did not hear anything else that she said, but I kept smiling and nodding. I did not want to hurt her feelings, or worse, let on that I was lost. That happened a lot at school; it still happens to me. Others get it and things carry on and I think, ‘what was that all about?’

I look at a big word. I see the first few letters and sometimes I think ‘wow is that even a real word?’ I would not have a clue what it says and I cannot put all the letters together. I usually look at the first letter. The ‘e’ can be a bit hard…and the ‘ch’ and ‘st’ are helpful…but I cannot get it together so I give it away. I tell myself ‘you are not going to get that’ so instead I put in a word I know. Usually when I have to read, I leave out hard words.

There is a key to this whole lot but if you missed out on those basics at school, it is very hard now. You have to get the key.

**Anxious reader**

Although able to start on the journey, some less-skilled adult readers are hesitant, anxious and unsure, and make slow progress. Anxious adult readers lacking confidence rely on a bank of sight words to avoid situations where unknown words may be encountered. Anxious readers easily get lost and depend on known ‘paths’ as discussed in the following narrative.

School was a miserable time. I was picked on. I was not that smart. I was put in the dumby class. That was horrible. I did not think much about new words I saw. I just tried to get it right. I looked at the first letter and guessed a word that started like that and might fit in. I usually knew how to say the front and then I knew I was supposed to try to sound the whole word out but I went straight to the end. The middle bit was hard. The ‘u’s and the ‘e’s were tricky, especially when there were three vowels all in together.

When I read now, I use words that are common. Grocery shopping is hard because I need to know what stuff looks like or what the words look like. It is hard because they can look the same. I buy what I know and if they change the
arrangement of aisles or packaging on the boxes I cannot find what I am looking for. It is murder trying to find my way to houses for work. I write down the streets but if I copy one letter wrong I cannot find the street. I cannot help my son do his spelling practice because the words are in a list and I have no clues to help me read them out to him.

Sometimes, I look for bits inside the word that I know. For example, I saw ‘ten’ on the end of a word. It is like finding a word within a word. I am not sure if it is right but that is what I do. It has got to look right but I am not too sure how to say the combinations of them.

Initially, when they tried to send me to an adult reading class, I said ‘I am not going to go there and make a fool of myself again’. But I have kept trying and that is why I have pushed my kids - they are not going to be like me. There are already too many like me in my family.

**Wandering reader**

Some readers enter the woodland and feel quite confident for parts of the journey. Wandering readers know some of the information needed for the journey but unknowingly take wrong turnings, and may stray from the path. Wandering readers may be aware that they are off the track but have inaccurate information about the correct route. This narrative recounts the reading journey of a wandering reader.

Reading the whole word by itself has always been hard but I never liked to ask anyone for help. With the short words, I tried to start with the part that looked the easiest to read or I guessed. The big words were hard to figure out so I left them.

I had to get past all the childhood feelings that I cannot read. I keep trying. Sometimes I have no sense of the word until I break it down to two parts. Some I can split three ways. It is hard to break down a word correctly. I am always getting it wrong. Finding out where the syllables are is hard because it changes from word to word. Or it seems to. I look down the middle of a word, looking to
be able to split it. Some words I can split; some words I cannot. Like with ‘can’, you cannot split ‘can’: you just know ‘can’.

Now I try to read really big words. I look at the start, and the end, and I will glance through the middle but I am happy to miss letters out. For example, when I am sounding, I may look and decide I do not really need ‘a’. I know there is ‘e’ before the ‘a’ in most words too.

I have learned some tricks to use when I am reading. I try to work out all the sounds that I can get out of the word and put them together. I can use rhyme and find another word that sounds like it. Even if I have never heard of the word I can use rhyme to read it. For example, with the word here [cello] I can rhyme it with hello and I know it is ‘sello’. Sometimes I skip the word, and go to the end of the sentence, and then I can figure out what the word is. I know some letters are silent and you have to watch out for that. The tricks make it easier. You have to keep trying.

**Persistent reader**

Some adult readers are determined to keep trying. Persistent adult readers persevere with word recognition, having mastered many decoding skills. Familiar, effective reading strategies are used. Persistent adult readers expect to get through the woodland by keeping going, and expect to sometimes go back and try another route. The slow, stressful and exhausting progress of a persistent reader is narrated here.

For 30 years I kept it a secret that I could not read. Only my wife knew because she had to help me do things. Twenty years ago, I started adult reading classes. I have attended quite a few different programs since then. It is not easy but I knew I had to try. Once, when I was 40, I was in class and reading a hard bit. The tears were running down my cheeks and the teacher kept asking me if I wanted to stop but I did not. It was hard but I wanted to try all the words. You have to have a good whack at it and try to say it.
I am feeling more confident now. Finding the holes has helped; working out stuff about different letters and sounds. Some words I know with no hesitation. Some, I will take two or three goes to work out. I look at the word and repeat it; keep on reading the word over and over. I get used to the word, and it is stuck in my brain and stays there. Also, I use a dictionary at home. I look up the word and try and figure it out.

When I am at work I can get stuck, and my wife is not there, so I have other ways to work out words. I have not been taught; I just worked the ways out for myself. For example, you use some work-words all the time so I had to learn them. I learned to be thorough going back, getting familiar with words I am going to need a lot. I know most of them now.

Context might help. I read through the sentence, and know when I get a bit further I have pronounced it wrong or read it wrong. So, I go back, and find something that fits and makes sense. I sometimes come back to it later on and try it again and end up getting it.

Sometimes it takes a long time but you have to stick at it. I am determined to get better at reading. I think to myself, ‘keep reading, pick up something, anything, and read’. I believe that the more time you practise, the more you are guaranteed to get somewhere.

Discussion

The four narratives illustrate the negative social implications described elsewhere (e.g. Shomos & Forbes, 2014). Each story offers examples of the past and present adverse impacts on personal and family life associated with being a less-skilled reader. The social isolation and marginalisation associated with poor literacy skills (Centre for Longitudinal Studies, 2014) are evident in the stories and are reflected in an inability to confidently engage in common daily tasks such as grocery shopping or helping a child with spelling homework. Despite the concealing behaviours and reliance on others to complete simple tasks, the narratives reflect the reported resilience of less-skilled readers (Furlong & Yasukawa, 2016).
More importantly, while the reading experiences identified in the stories mirror the assortment of reading difficulties present in the adult population (Scarborough et al., 2013), the stories go further to present a progression of specific word reading difficulties readers face as they read words. Word reading experiences are broken down, illustrating levels of shortfalls in phonological awareness and decoding abilities, and also the impact of incomplete information on the word reading attempt and the word reader. Further, the narratives corroborate the use of inadequate strategies such as guessing words based on the first letter or from recognisable parts of the word (Davidson & Strucker, 2002), and tell of reliance on limited banks of sight words (MacArthur et al., 2010). Adult reading instruction needs to be sensitive to what learners have already mastered but also appropriately challenging (National Research Council, 2012), and the progression in the stories of learners offer teachers an insight into how multi-layered word reading experiences can be.

The reading difficulties recounted by individuals persist despite, in some cases, many years of participation in programs. An explanation may lie in the nature of adult literacy programs. To address adverse social impacts of low literacy a major emphasis in adult literacy programs is on developing trusting relationships and supportive learning environments (McHardy & Chapman, 2016; Miller et al., 2010; Perkins, 2009). While the focus on trust and support is an appropriate response to overcoming issues such as lack of confidence and disinclination to ask questions or seek help, teaching practices vary and are not always consistent with available reading research (Kendall & McGrath, 2014; National Research Council, 2012). Teachers are often informed by their own learning experiences and personal beliefs about how adults learn to read, rather than from professional learning about literacy (Kendall & McGrath, 2014; Van Kan, Ponte, & Verloop, 2013). To benefit from literacy programs, individuals need teachers who have appropriate technical skills (Perkins, 2009); educators with better knowledge are more likely to help learners improve key skills (Kruidenier, MacArthur, & Wrigley, 2010). The narratives suggest participation in reading programs may not effectively address confusion and misunderstanding about reading, and may at times bewilder learners further. A response to the ongoing negative experiences may be to ensure that adult-reading teachers have specific education on how to address individual’s word reading difficulties, and on how to identify when instruction has not met individual’s needs.
The narratives describe an assortment of reading needs at the word level. To build reading skill where reading difficulties persist, instruction must be informed by diagnostic assessment (National Research Council, 2012). Effective instruction requires identification of what each learner knows and what skills are yet to be mastered (Kruidenier et al., 2010; MacArthur et al., 2012). Teachers need to be able to identify confusions and entrenched misunderstandings of learners. Many adult-reading teachers resist any kind of standardised assessment partly because of the perceived lack of adult-appropriate tests and partly because for some less-skilled adults, testing is argued to have negative associations with school (Mendelovits, 2011). However, the variety of word-reading experiences reported in the stories strongly supports the argument for using assessment of crucial word level components. Without careful assessment to provide information about aspects of learner difficulties, teaching may not be useful (Scarborough et al., 2013), and individuals’ needs may not be addressed.

**Conclusion**

Low literacy is disadvantageous for families and communities (Morrisroe, 2014) but the experiences and needs of individual adult literacy learners are commonly overlooked (Athanasou, 2011). The four narratives build appreciation of individuals’ experiences and provide insights for effectively addressing adult readers’ learning needs. The confusions of readers and the diversity of reading difficulties described in the narratives provide support for calls for adult-reading teachers to have appropriate professional learning to diagnose and deliver reading instruction that allows learners to change their stories and live stories that offer other possibilities.

**References**


McHardy, J., & Chapman, E. (2016). Adult reading teachers’ beliefs about how less-skilled adult readers can be taught to read. Literacy & Numeracy Studies, 24(2), 24-42.


Chapter Three: What strategies do less-skilled adult readers use to read words, and how aware are they of these strategies?

Foreword

Chapter Three contains a paper written to examine the word reading awareness and strategy use of less-skilled adult readers. This paper has been submitted to Reading and Writing and is titled ‘What strategies do less-skilled readers use to read words and how aware are they of these strategies?’
What strategies do less-skilled adult readers use to read words, and how aware are they of these strategies?

Abstract

Research has indicated that, presently, tens of millions of adults can read only texts which require low level reading skills. Less-skilled adult readers have been found to be limited in their awareness and use of effective reading strategies. This study examined reading strategy awareness and use in 38 less-skilled adult readers. The specific aims were to (i) identify the strategies used by less-skilled adult readers that best predict word reading performance on standardised reading tests, and (ii) identify the word reading strategies that less-skilled adult readers reported using, as well as the extent to which these reports correlated with direct observations of reading behaviours. Results indicated that readers relied on six main strategies to read unknown words, but only two (Observed Use of Syllables and Observed Use of Sounds/Break down) significantly contributed to prediction of actual word reading performance. These were also the two strategies that were most poorly understood by the readers. The findings emphasise the importance of phonological processes in word reading success, and support the need for programs to incorporate methods to increase metacognitive awareness and strategy use in adults with reading difficulties.

Introduction

Despite widespread adult literacy interventions, reading challenges persist globally. Results from the most recent of a series of international surveys of adult skills, the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) (OECD Skills Outlook, 2013), suggest that today, tens of millions of adults can read only texts that require a low level of inference (e.g. House of Commons Business, Innovation and Skills Committee, 2014; OECD Skills Outlook, 2013). Less-skilled reading is linked to profiles of disadvantage within the adult population, and has significant negative impacts on vocational and social opportunities (e.g. Centre for Longitudinal Studies, 2014; EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy, 2012; Morrisroe, 2014; National Research Council, 2012; OECD Skills Outlook, 2013). For these reasons, it is important that research into ways to improve reading instruction for adults with reading difficulties continues to expand and develop.
Word reading difficulties

Skilled reading requires a rapid and flexible word recognition system, so that the reader can efficiently pronounce and understand all known words, and engage in higher-level reading processes, such as comprehension and critical thinking (Castles & Nation, 2008; Cunningham, Nathan, & Raher, 2011; Roberts, Christo, & Shefelbine, 2011). Less-skilled adult readers commonly experience difficulties at the word reading level (Macaruso & Shankweiler, 2010), and there is much evidence to support the notion that the inability to develop fast, automatic word recognition is a primary factor in the breakdown of reading skill development (Roberts et al., 2011).

Words may be read in various ways, but research has indicated that the accurate recognition of words and word parts is associated primarily with sound phonological (non-lexical) and orthographic (lexical) processes (Binder & Borecki, 2008; Coyne, Farrington-Flint, Underwood, & Stiller, 2012; MacArthur, Konold, Glutting, & Alamprese, 2010). Phonological processing allows access to the component sounds of speech within words, and underpins the ability to manipulate sounds (e.g. Stanovich, 1986). Orthographic processing is the ability to form, store, and access orthographic representations in the lexicon, including the allowable order of letters within a specific language, and links to phonological, semantic, morphological, and syntactic information within the language (Cunningham et al., 2011). Context may also be used to read words, but it has been suggested that less-skilled readers have a tendency to rely too heavily on context to mask deficits in phonological and orthographical processing (Binder & Borecki, 2008).

Both phonological and orthographic processing are critical in the trajectory of reading-skill development. It has been found that developing word readers rely on different aspects of phonological and orthographic processing to make sense of words, and that the importance of these two forms of processing will depend primarily on the attributes of specific words, rather than the reader’s overall stage of reading development (Cunningham et al., 2011; Wang, Castles, Nickels, & Nation, 2011). Evidence suggests also that the relative strength of orthographic and phonological processing will vary not only across skilled and less-skilled readers, but also, within each of these two groups – that is, patterns of strength in word reading profiles can vary for both skilled and less-skilled readers (Dennis & Kroeger, 2012).
Some similarities have been identified between less-skilled adult readers and skilled and less-skilled child readers (e.g. Kruidenier, MacArthur, & Spruck Wrigley, 2010). As a result, what is known about child word readers will often inform the development of adult reading programs (MacArthur, Konold, Glutting, & Alamprese, 2012). However, differences across these two groups have been observed. For example, studies have found that, unlike child readers, less-skilled adult readers tend to have weak decoding skills, relying more on orthographic processes or visual memory, and less on phonological analysis (Greenberg, Ehri, & Perin, 2002; MacArthur et al., 2010; Mellard & Fall, 2012; Mellard, Fall, & Woods, 2010; Sabatini, Sawaki, Shore, & Scarborough, 2010; Thompkins & Binder, 2003). Thus, less-skilled adult readers have been reported to rely heavily on familiarity with certain language structures (Mellard & Fall, 2012). This includes a focus on remembering specific words and patterns, and applying similarities of known words rather than decoding (Thompkins & Binder, 2003).

When reading unknown words, adults with reading difficulties often fall back on a favoured strategy of looking at the first syllable of a word and attempting to say the word based on that syllable (Davidson & Strucker, 2002). Less-skilled adult readers have been found to read words slowly, with the phonological and orthographic processes needed to read being poorly integrated (Greenberg et al., 2011). In contrast, the skilled adult reader recognises words so quickly and automatically that it is difficult to observe what is happening in the process (Castles & Nation, 2008). In less-skilled adult readers, different kinds of reading attempts are often observed, which may draw on phonological processes, but may also rely heavily on orthographic processes for recognition of common words and word parts (MacArthur et al., 2010).

The importance of knowing more about the nature of the processes and strategies employed by less-skilled adult readers to read was acknowledged over a decade ago (Thompkins & Binder, 2003). To date, however, well-controlled empirical research on this topic remains scarce. A search of the relevant literature by the authors produced no studies on the strategies used by adults at the word recognition level. However, various studies with developing child readers have suggested that a range of different word reading strategies can be chosen flexibly to read a word. In one such study with beginning child readers, Farrington-Flint, Coyne, Stiller, and Heath (2008) identified four strategy categories for word reading:
Retrieval (the child stated they just knew the word), phonological (the child reported segmenting the word into phonemes and blending sounds), analogy (the child reported using a known word to identify the unfamiliar word) and other (any answer that did not belong to one of the other three categories). However, there is no research to indicate whether these strategies would also be evident in the repertoires of adult readers.

**Metacognitive awareness of reading strategies**

Reading skill development will depend to a large extent on the ability of the reader to monitor his or her own word reading activities, and to select, on a continuous basis, the most effective strategies to apply in reading given types of words. This type of awareness is generally referred to as metacognition, that is, the ability to consciously control cognitive processes (Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002; Schiff, Ben-Shushan, & Ben-Artzi, 2017). Metacognition, involving knowledge and understanding by the reader of what they are doing and why, at each particular stage in the reading process, enables the reader to select the most appropriate strategies to use in reading specific words (Hock & Mellard, 2011; Mahasneh, Alkhawaldeh, & Almakanin, 2016). Skilled readers are aware of a repertoire of reading strategies that can be used to control the cognitive processes needed to read words successfully (Hong-Nam, Leavell, & Maher, 2014). In contrast, extensive research over several decades has indicated that less-skilled school-aged readers tend to be limited in their metacognitive awareness, with incomplete control of reading and, at times, being unaware that they do not understand (e.g., Garner & Reis, 1981; Mahasneh et al., 2016; Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002). Again, however, given that important differences have been observed between school-aged readers, and adults with reading difficulties, the extent to which these findings can be generalised to the latter population is unclear.

While there is much research on typically developing readers and their awareness of reading strategies (Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002), fewer studies have examined levels of metacognition exhibited by adult readers with a history of reading difficulties (Chevalier, Parrila, Ritchie, & Deacon, 2017; Mahasneh et al., 2016). Further, studies of reading strategy use frequently focus on comprehension tasks (Furnes & Norman, 2015). In a recent example, Hong-Nam et al. (2014) examined the reading comprehension strategy use of 2,789 high school students in Texas. A strong positive correlation was observed between reading achievements, as measured by a standardised measure of reading, and student self-reported strategy use. The
students with high reading scores reported use of more reading strategies than students with lower reading scores. Similarly, in a US study of 79 university students with, and 295 without, a history of reading difficulties, Chevalier et al. (2017) found that students with a history of reading difficulties were less likely to apply metacognitive strategies to reading comprehension than students with no reading difficulties. However, and of particular importance in respect to reading instruction, reported awareness of reading strategies does not guarantee that readers actually use them (Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002). It is not enough to know of a given strategy. For successful reading to occur, readers must also know when, where, and how to use a strategy (Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002). Given the importance of metacognitive processes for reading skill development, further research is needed on the levels of metacognition exhibited by less-skilled adult readers.

The present study

Research into the strategies used by adults with reading difficulties remains scarce. Increasing knowledge in this area could enable practitioners to make better sense of the kinds of deficits that underlie such difficulties, and direct their instructional strategies accordingly. The current study, therefore, aimed to contribute to increased understanding of word reading strategy use in less-skilled adult readers. The research questions addressed were:

1. Which strategies used by less-skilled adult readers best predict word reading performance on standardised reading tests?

2. What word reading strategies do less-skilled adult readers report using, and to what extent do they correlate with direct observations of reading behaviours?

Method

Participants

The primary author has extensive experience as a reading teacher in both community and accredited adult reading programs in Australia and New Zealand. The participants for the study were recruited through these networks. In all, 38 less-skilled adult readers took part in the study (16 females, 22 males). Of these, 21 were Australian, and 17 were New Zealanders.
Thirteen participants were aged 16-24, four were 25-34, seven were 35-44, 10 were 45-54, and four were aged over 55 years. Eighteen participants were involved in voluntary adult reading programs, with the same number enrolled in tertiary courses. Two participants were not currently enrolled in any reading program. Participants were provided with written and oral information, and informed consent was sought from all participants for the use of their data within the study. All participants gave consent.

**Data Collection**

Interviews with less-skilled adult readers were conducted individually, in three stages. First, general background information (e.g. age, gender, etc.) was collected. Second, the word reading assessments were administered. These were the regular and irregular word reading tests of the Castles and Coltheart Reading Test 2 (CC2) (Castles et al., 2009), and the blue word reading list of Wide Range Achievement Test (WRAT4) (Wilkinson & Robertson, 2006). Two standardised reading tests were used in the study to ensure that the results were robust across different measures of word reading performance. Commonalities and points of departure between the two instruments are as follows:

- Both tests measure readers’ skills in recognising words out of context.

- Both incorporate regular and irregular words, which are separated only in the CC2.

- In the CC2, 40 regular and 40 irregular words are tested, yielding a maximum total score of 80; in the WRAT4, 15 letters of the alphabet and 55 words are tested, yielding a maximum total of 70.

- Both tests are read aloud, have words of increasing difficulty, and include a stopping rule. In the case of the CC2, if five errors in a row occur on any one item type (i.e. regular or irregular), presentation of that item type is discontinued. Testing continues until five consecutive errors have occurred in both item types or until all 40 words are
read. For the WRAT4 if the participant responds incorrectly to 10 consecutive items, the testing is discontinued.

Third, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Participants were asked open-ended questions about how they read words, both correctly and incorrectly, shown to them in the assessments. Examples of questions include ‘which part of the word do you look at first’, ‘talk me through how you break that word down’, ‘tell me more about what you are doing as you look at that word’. Participants were encouraged to model what they were describing and explain why they chose particular strategies. Notes were written during the semi-structured interviews, which were audio-recorded for later transcription.

**Coding of strategies used by readers**

During the conduct of the reading tests, the first author observed and made notes on the word reading strategies that the participants were actually using. All interviews with participants were transcribed, and both the audio records and the transcripts used in the data analysis phase. Each audio-record and each transcript was reviewed multiple times alongside the notes made during the interviews.

To determine the strategy used to read words in the testing, the first author first noted what the adult reader may have said he or she was doing (e.g. ‘sounding out [caddy]’). This was reviewed alongside the evidence of how the adult reader read the word (e.g. ‘cuddle’) or modelled the word reading act (e.g. ‘co-d-yee’). A judgement was then made about the actual strategy used by the participant, based on the first author’s professional experience. Key terms, explanations and descriptions used by participants, alongside demonstrations of what they were doing, were considered and identified, and brought together under headings explanatory of the observed strategies (see Figure 3-1).
Figure 3-1. Word reading strategies used by less-skilled adult readers.

Although readers were observed to rely heavily on retrieval in the testing situation (i.e., recognising words automatically because they are already known to the reader), this was not considered a ‘strategy’ for reading words, which focuses on the processes by which readers recognise words that are not already known to them (Ehri, 2005). For each individual reader, each reading strategy observed in the study was assigned one of two categories: ‘not observed using the strategy’ (0), ‘observed using the strategy’ (1).

**Coding of strategies reported by readers**

After the actual reading behaviours had been coded, self-reported strategy use was considered. All interviews were reviewed, and the transcripts of these interviews re-read multiple times to capture verbal self-reports of word reading strategy use (i.e., what the readers said they were doing in their attempts to read the words). To align with the codes assigned to observed strategy use, a ‘not reported’ (0) / ‘reported’ (1) decision was made for each reader, against each of the observed strategy headings.
Results

Prior to performing any statistical analyses, all assumptions for the relevant test statistics were explored, with no significant violations identified. These preliminary analyses included tests for normality, linearity, and outliers. All such tests produced satisfactory results.

Research Question 1. Predictors of Word Reading Scores

To address Research Question 1, ‘What strategies used by less-skilled adult readers best predict word reading performance on standardised reading tests’, three multiple regression analyses (MRAs) were performed for each of the word reading outcome measures used (WRAT4 word reading, CC2 regular word reading, and CC2 irregular word reading). In each analysis, the independent variables were the six strategies observed within the interview sessions. A stepwise (statistical) procedure was used for these analyses, given that the analysis was exploratory in nature, and that there were no a priori hypotheses about the priority that should be assigned to different predictors. Thus, the primary goal was to determine empirically which of the strategies actually used by the reader best predicted actual word reading performance.

Descriptive statistics and bivariate (Pearson) correlations for WRAT4 and CC2 word reading scores and the six observed strategies are presented in Tables 3-1 and 3-2. An examination of the patterns in the descriptive results indicated, as would be expected, that the three outcome measures of reading were significantly correlated, $r_s(36) > .71, ps < .01$. Amongst the six strategies observed, surprisingly, only three correlated significantly with one another. Specifically, there were the Use of Sounds/Break down, the Use of Syllables and the Use of Letter Patterns, $rs(36) > .49, ps < .01$, but all other correlations were non-significant. Thus, with the exception of these three strategies, the use of the six strategies was largely independent – that is, there did not appear to be a clear distinction between ‘good’ readers who used all six, or ‘bad’ readers who used none of these; their use varied across the sample considerably.
Table 3-1. Descriptive Statistics for Word Reading Scores and Strategy Use (n=38)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome Variable</th>
<th>Means and Standard Deviations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WRAT Word Reading</td>
<td>M=37.84 SD=10.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CC2 Regular Word Reading</td>
<td>M=28.61 SD=8.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CC2 Irregular Word Reading</td>
<td>M=22.42 SD=7.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor Variable</th>
<th>Observed</th>
<th>Not Observed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Observed Use of Sounds/Break down</td>
<td>50.0% (n=19)</td>
<td>50.0% (n=19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observed Use of Syllables</td>
<td>42.11% (n=16)</td>
<td>57.89% (n=22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observed Use of Onset Rime</td>
<td>21.05% (n=8)</td>
<td>78.95% (n=30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observed Use of Analogy</td>
<td>68.42% (n=26)</td>
<td>31.58% (n=12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observed Use of Letter Patterns</td>
<td>52.63% (n=20)</td>
<td>47.36% (n=18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observed Use of Morphological Rules</td>
<td>15.79% (n=6)</td>
<td>84.21% (n=32)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3-2. Bivariate Correlations between Word Reading Scores and Strategy Use (df = 36)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. WRAT Word Reading</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.85*</td>
<td>.80*</td>
<td>.68*</td>
<td>.76*</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.52*</td>
<td>-.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. CC2 Word Reading – Regular</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.88*</td>
<td>.71*</td>
<td>.69*</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.60*</td>
<td>-.17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. CC2 Word Reading – Irregular</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.65*</td>
<td>.70*</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.54*</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Observed Use of Sounds/Break down</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.64*</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.63*</td>
<td>-.29</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Observed Use of Syllables</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.49*</td>
<td>-.22</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Observed Use of Analogy</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>-.02</td>
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<td>8. Observed Use of Letter Patterns</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Observed Use of Morphological Rules</td>
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</table>

*Significant at α=.01
The outcomes of the MRA on WRAT4 and CC2 word reading scores are presented in Table 3-3. The outcomes of the MRA indicated that, of the six strategies that readers were observed to use, only two (Observed Use of Syllables and Observed Use of Sounds/Break down) contributed significantly to prediction of actual word reading performance. Whilst these appear in different orders across the three word reading tests, with Observed Use of Syllables entered as the strongest of the two predictors for WRAT4 Word Reading and CC2 Word Reading – Irregular, and Observed Use of Sounds/Break down entered as the stronger of the two for CC2 Word Reading – Regular, based on the bivariate correlations in Table 3-2, the magnitudes of the correlations between these two predictors and reading scores were very similar. Thus, the order of entry within the MRAs was not deemed a noteworthy pattern in the results. These results underscore the importance of these two phonologically grounded strategies in predicting adult readers’ word reading performance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome Measure</th>
<th>Predictor Variables</th>
<th>R</th>
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<th>R²_adj</th>
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<td>Observed Use of Sounds/Break down</td>
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<td>CC2 Word Reading – Regular</td>
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<td>.49</td>
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<td>Observed Use of Syllables</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Observed Use of Sounds/Break down</td>
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<td>.53</td>
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</table>
Research Question 2. Self-reported and Observed Word Reading Strategies

This section addresses Research Question 2, ‘What word reading strategies do less-skilled adult readers report using, and to what extent do they correlate with direct observations of reading behaviours?’. To compare the self-reported and actual strategy use ratings, Spearman rank-order correlations were used, given that the ratings were categorical in nature. Owing to the number of correlations performed on the data, to maintain the overall $\alpha$ level at .05, a Bonferroni correction was applied, and all correlations were assessed for significance at the Bonferroni-adjusted $\alpha$ level of .008. Results are shown in Table 3-4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>% Self-Reported</th>
<th>% Observed</th>
<th>Correlation</th>
<th>% Overlap</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use of Sounds/Break down</td>
<td>97.4</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>-.16</td>
<td>2.69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Syllables</td>
<td>60.5</td>
<td>42.1</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>13.10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Use of Onset Rime</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>.42*</td>
<td>18.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Analogy</td>
<td>73.7</td>
<td>68.4</td>
<td>.75*</td>
<td>56.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Letter Patterns</td>
<td>73.7</td>
<td>52.6</td>
<td>.51*</td>
<td>26.01%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Morphological Rules</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>.91*</td>
<td>83.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Significant at Bonferroni-adjusted $\alpha$ level of .008

As indicated in Table 3-4, by far, the strategy reported to be used by the largest proportion of the sample was Use of Sounds/Break down, with 97.4% of the sample indicating that they used this strategy. It was on this strategy, however, where the correspondence between observed and self-reported use was lowest. The correlation for this strategy was -.16, indicating only 2.69% overlapping score variance, which was not statistically significant. The next lowest correlation between self-reported and observed strategy use obtained was for Use of Syllables, which also did not reach significance at the adjusted Bonferroni level (13.10% overlap between self-reported and observed usage).

All other correlations between observed and self-reported strategy use were significant, but varied in magnitude. The lowest correlation of those that were significant was for Use of Onset Rime (18.00% overlap), then Use of Letter Patterns (26.01% overlap). The degree of
overlap rises sharply for the remaining two strategies, with 56.40% overlap for Use of Analogy, and a very strong 83.00% overlap for Use of Morphological Rules.

These results, as a whole, underscore the fact that readers’ awareness of the strategies they were using was poorest for the three phonological processing strategies: Use of Sounds/Break down, Use of Syllables, and Use of Onset Rime (in that order). The correlations obtained for Use of Sounds/Break down and Use of Syllables were not significant, while that for Use of Onset Rime only just reached the Bonferroni-adjusted level (criterion $\alpha = .008$, obtained $p = .008$).

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the strategies that adult readers use which best predict their actual word reading performance, and also, the level of self-awareness or metacognition exhibited by these readers about the various strategies that they are using.

The results indicated that of the six different strategies that readers were observed to use, only two, both of which were phonological processing strategies, contributed significantly to word reading skills, as measured by the WRAT4 Word reading, CC2 Word Reading – Regular, and CC2 Word Reading – Irregular scores. The strength of relationship between each of these predictors and the three word tests was very similar, and thus, the results suggest the two predictors to be of similar importance for word reading performance. These results emphasise the importance of phonological processes in word reading success, and thus, align with the findings of many previous studies that have explored the importance of various reading skills in determining overall reading efficacy (Cunningham et al., 2011; Greenberg et al., 2002; MacArthur et al., 2012; Mellard & Fall, 2012; Mellard, Fall, & Woods, 2010; National Research Council, 2012; Sabatini et al., 2010; Stanovich, 1986).

The two most frequently used strategies by the readers were analogy (68.42%) and use of letter patterns (52.63%), which aligns with previous research reported (Davidson & Strucker, 2002; MacArthur et al., 2010; Mellard & Fall, 2012; Thompkins & Binder, 2003). Surprisingly, only a small percentage of readers was observed to make use of morphological rules (15.79%). This could, however, reflect the fact that it was difficult to differentiate
between use of letter patterns and use of morphological rules based on the interview evidence. As a result, the low percentage obtained for use of morphological rules should be interpreted with some degree of caution.

Despite the importance of applying phonological knowledge and skills to word reading, the results indicated that only 50.00% of readers in this study actually used the strategy Sounds/Break down, and only 42.11% used Syllables. The percentage for Use of Onset Rime, which did appear as a significant predictor, but which is also a part of phonological processing, was also low, at 21.05%. Given that this strategy is a component of phonological processing, it was somewhat surprising that it did not emerge as a significant predictor variable. It should be noted here, however, that the Use of Onset Rime is similar in manifestation to Use of Sounds/ Break it down. Therefore, as for Use of Morphological Rules, it is possible that on a proportion of the occasions when readers were actually using Onset Rime, it had to be coded as Use of Sounds/Break down, because these were difficult to discriminate in the interviews.

The results also indicated that, while the vast majority of readers reported the Use of Sounds/Break down strategy in their reading, this appeared to be the strategy on which they demonstrated the lowest level of metacognition, with a non-significant correlation between reported and observed usage. Use of Syllables was also very poorly understood by readers, again, with a non-significant correlation observed between readers’ reported usage and observed usage. The correlation obtained for self-reported and actual usage of Use of Onset Rime strategy was only marginally significant, just meeting the criterion level of .008. Correlations between self-reported and actual usage were significant for the remaining three strategies (Use of Letter Patterns, Use of Analogy, and Use of Morphological Rules), indicating a somewhat higher level of reader metacognition in terms of these strategies. The degree of overlap observed for the latter three strategies varied considerably, however (26.01%, 56.40%, and 83.00% respectively), indicating that readers had the highest level of awareness with respect to Use of Morphological Rules.

Collectively, these results suggest a concerning situation: that the two most important strategy predictors of word reading performance were the two strategies that readers appeared to understand most poorly. The lack of awareness demonstrated supports previous calls to
provide explicit instruction in strategy use within adult reading programs (National Research Council, 2012). However, a review of programs available currently for adults with reading difficulties indicate that few incorporate explicit strategy instruction (Hock & Mellard, 2011). One possible explanation for this is that, while there is significant research on how to teach strategy use in school-based reading instruction (Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002), very few studies have examined how this can best be achieved with less-skilled readers in adult reading programs (Sabatini et al., 2010).

In the few studies that have focused on the effects of explicit reading strategy instruction with adult participants, the results have been somewhat inconclusive. In one such study, Hock and Mellard (2011) used a Strategic Instruction Model (SIM) which had been modified for use with adults. SIM includes multiple learning strategies that had previously been identified as effective in improving adolescents’ reading skills. In the study, adult literacy learners received strategic instruction over a four-year period in one of four learning strategies (Hock & Mellard, 2011). In that evaluation, the results indicated that there were no significant differences in the reading skill improvements obtained through the use of SIM, and those obtained through the use of more ‘traditional’ or ‘typical’ reading programs. Mellard and Hock speculated that the sporadic participation of learners, common in adult literacy classes, meant that they received only a portion of planned instruction, and that generalising interventions designed for younger readers to adults is a complex task. Together with the results obtained in the present study, Mellard and Hock’s findings suggest the need for future research to explore the development and evaluation of alternative programs to address effective metacognitive reading strategy instruction for adults with reading difficulties.

Tens of millions of adult readers worldwide have been reported to have poor reading skills, which can contribute to limiting economic and social opportunities. Without appropriate reading skills, these individuals are at risk of being kept at the margins of society (OECD Skills Outlook, 2013). The efficacy of programs to address reading difficulties in the adult population has been reported to vary significantly (Palameta, Myers, & Conte, 2013). Thus, it is clear that further research is warranted in this area, to allow adult reading programs to be adapted to the specific profiles of individual readers (National Research Council, 2012). As one contribution to this area, the findings of this paper emphasise the need for adult reading programs to ensure that phonological processing skills and metacognitive awareness are
explicitly taught. Further research is needed, however, to identify other components that are critical for ensuring that such programs are effective.

Limitations

As noted, there are difficulties in obtaining accurate self-reports and making observation decisions when word recognition strategies are closely related, and additional investigations are necessary to extend these findings further.

References


Chapter Four: The teaching focus of adult-reading teachers when developing word reading skills

Foreword

The previous two chapters report findings about reading experiences of less-skilled adult readers and strategies used to read words. The findings gave rise to an investigation of the reading instruction approaches adult-reading teachers believe will build word reading skill.

Chapter Four contains a paper written to examine the teaching focus of adult-reading teachers when developing word reading skills. This paper has been submitted to Literacy.

The survey used in the data collection phase of this study is in Appendix B.
The teaching focus of adult-reading teachers when developing word reading skills

Abstract

Despite widespread literacy interventions, reading difficulties persist in the adult population. Millions of adults around the world remain unable to read the texts they require for daily life and work. Adult reading difficulties are diverse and under-researched, and adult-reading teachers are generally underprepared to build reading skills, particularly in the areas of administering and interpreting diagnostics, and targeting instruction accordingly. This study examined (i) the teaching foci that 60 adult-reading teachers prioritised in determining how to teach a hypothetical adult reader with difficulties at the word level, and (ii) the teacher attributes by which these decisions varied. Around 40% of teachers indicated that they would prioritise non word level components in deciding how to teach the hypothetical reader with word level difficulties, and these decisions varied with teachers’ background training/qualifications. To make sense of the persistence of low reading levels in the adult population, it is necessary to understand more about what teachers teach, and why they teach the way they do. The findings of this study may provide an important step towards this goal.

Introduction

Adults attending literacy programs represent a mixed group of readers with a range of reading skill levels and reading difficulties (Bell, McCallum, Ziegler, Davis, & Coleman, 2013; National Research Council, 2012; Sabatini, Sawaki, Shore, & Scarborough, 2010). Similarly, adult-reading teachers comprise a diverse group in a highly ‘casualised’ workforce (Perkins, 2009). In general, there are no universally accepted standards for the skills and knowledge that adult-reading teachers must have, and no established criteria for determining who is qualified to teach adult reading (Bell et al., 2013; Smith & Gillespie, 2007). Given this, the knowledge, expertise and practice of adult-reading teachers remains decidedly uneven (Kendall & McGrath, 2014; National Research Council, 2012).

Reading development, like development in any other complex skill domain, requires precise teaching and learning (Condelli, Kirshstein, Silver-Pacuilla, Reder, & Spruck Wrigley, 2010; National Research Council, 2012). While research on adult reading difficulties is generally
scarce (MacArthur, Konold, Glutting, & Alamprese, 2012), there is some level of consensus on the notion that effective adult reading instruction requires a sound understanding of reading processes and of how to teach reading, and that the approach used in teaching individuals should be based on the assessed needs of that learner (Bell et al., 2013; Bell, Ziegler, & McCallum, 2004; National Research Council, 2012; Smith & Gillespie, 2007).

Adults who experience reading difficulties frequently have limitations at the word level, with many demonstrating deficits in recognising and reading words fluently (Macaruso & Shankweiler, 2010). If word recognition is not fluent, working memory resources cannot be used efficiently to comprehend text and the reading process stalls (MacArthur, Konold, Glutting, & Alamprese, 2010; Macaruso & Shankweiler, 2010).

In a recent study of 38 less-skilled word readers, McHardy and Chapman (submitted) found that of six word reading strategies that readers actually used, only two (both of which trigger phonological processing) contributed significantly to prediction of actual word reading performance. The two strategies were *Use of Syllables* and *Use of Sounds/Break down*. These two strategies were also the two that were most poorly understood by the readers. These findings were consistent with previous research that has identified phonological processing (i.e., the control of different levels in the sound system of spoken language) as central in developing word reading skills (MacArthur et al., 2010; MacArthur et al., 2012; Mellard, Fall, & Woods, 2010). Given this, many adult readers will require explicit instruction in the area of phonological awareness as a first step (e.g. Fracasso, Bangs, & Binder, 2016).

Where word reading skills are found to be poor, they need explicitly to be taught (National Research Council, 2012). To do this, reading teachers must understand the processes and strategies that can be used to effectively read a word (Moats, 2014). Adult-reading teachers have, however, frequently received minimal training, and may be unable to respond to the assortment of reading difficulties encountered in reading programs (Sabatini et al., 2010). Over a decade ago, Besser et al. (2004) observed adult reading sessions, and found that while teachers used a range of strategies to address reading difficulties, the strategies were not always matched to specific learners’ needs. Much of the teaching was also reported to be misaligned with what is known about effective teaching of reading. In another study of adult reading instruction, Belzer (2006) found that teachers generally relied on just a few strategies
to help learners attempt unknown words. However, the assistance given by teachers was largely ineffective, with learners remaining unable to read words following this assistance. Deficits in effective reading instruction approaches were also observed by Benseman, Lander, and Sutton (2008) in a New Zealand study of teachers from a cross-section of adult literacy programs.

Explanations for the persistence of reading difficulties (OECD Skills Outlook, 2013) among adult populations are complex, but these and other reports suggest variable and ineffective teaching (e.g., Kendall & McGrath, 2014; National Research Council, 2012) must be considered as possible factors in the persistence of reading difficulties. The diversity of reading needs in the adult population (Sabatini et al., 2010) also means that assessing component reading skills for individual readers must form a critical part of instructional planning (e.g. MacArthur et al., 2012). Despite this, a recent study by McHardy and Chapman (2016) found that adult-reading teachers’ beliefs about teaching reading and about adult readers in general were a more important factor in informing teaching practice than specific diagnostic information about a reader’s needs.

Understanding how teachers teach, and why they teach the way they do, is central to understanding the impact (or lack of impact) of the teaching (Benseman 2013). More research on the effects of various forms of teacher training and professional development, therefore, is needed (Kruidenier, MacArthur, & Wrigley, 2010). Understanding how adult-reading teachers teach word reading is also an important part of discussions about developing word reading skills (Beder, Lipnevich, & Robinson-Geller, 2007). Useful starting points in understanding the limited impact of existing adult reading programs will require unpacking the teaching foci that teachers adopt when presented with a specific profile of reading difficulties, and to examine the teacher attributes that contribute to this decision making. The current study examined the teaching foci that adult-reading teachers indicated that they would adopt for a hypothetical adult with limited phonological processing skills, as well as the relationship between their background characteristics and these reported foci. The specific research questions addressed were:

1. What teaching foci do adult-reading teachers prioritise when teaching specific word reading skills?
2. Do the teaching foci that adult-reading teachers prioritise when teaching specific word reading skills vary with the age, sex, years of experience, employment status, and qualifications and training of the teachers?

**Design**

This study was part of a wider study in which an online survey was used to explore adult-reading teacher instructional approaches (McHardy & Chapman, 2016). The survey was designed and reviewed by experienced literacy teachers, and those experienced in developing surveys, to elicit responses from teachers about how they would teach a ‘typical’ less-skilled adult reader (‘John’). In the survey a routine adult teaching scenario was created. It was stated that John wished to improve his reading skills for recreational reading. His word level reading difficulties were then described using common measures of word reading and phonological awareness appropriate to adult readers. These include regular, irregular and non-word reading scores and levels of phonemic awareness (MacArthur et al., 2012). Using results from typical readers with difficulties at the word level, a set of fictional results was devised: regular word reading 29/40, irregular word reading 22/40, non-word reading 2/40, and phoneme deletion task 5/18. In addition, a sample from John’s word reading performance, which indicated word omissions and word substitutions, was given, along with examples of incorrect reading attempts from the word reading test taken (e.g. for the word ‘plot’ John read ‘pilot’).

The primary goal of the study was to identify the level of importance that teachers placed on different approaches that the teachers indicated they would adopt to meet John’s needs, as well as to identify any attributes that appeared to influence these foci. In the survey, teachers were asked to consider John’s needs, and use a dropdown facility to assign a ranking to indicate the priority they would assign to each of six factors in teaching John:

- Developing John’s ability to use strategies to construct meaning from print
- Building skill in understanding how the sound of words are connected to print
- Developing John’s skill in decoding unfamiliar words
- Building John’s ability to read smoothly and accurately
- Teaching John the strategy of ‘reading on’ to see if he can work out an unknown word
- Developing John’s ability to hear and distinguish the sounds within words

Data collection
An email explaining the topic was sent to participants, which included a link to the online survey. The survey was available for a six month period. An introductory statement explained the study and encouraged full, honest answers. The statement addressed ethical issues and required that teachers provide informed consent before proceeding with the survey.

Participants
The first author has wide networks in the adult literacy sector in West Australia and New Zealand, and drew upon these networks to recruit participants. Sixty adult-reading teachers completed the survey. Demographic details for participants who reported upon their employment status, age, sex, years of experience, and qualifications are shown in Table 4-1. There were no mandatory fields in the survey, so not all participants responded to every question. As a result, a small number of missing cases appeared with respect to some of the questions.

Thirteen of the 60 participants were male, while 47 were female. Three participants were aged 20-29 years, six were 30-39 years, ten were 40-49 years, 14 were 50-59 years, and 27 were aged over 60 years. Thirty-three participants were volunteers, six were casual, 11 worked part-time and ten were full-time employees. Of the 60 participants six had less than one year of experience, 13 had one-two years, another 13 had two-five years, 15 had five-ten years, and 12 participants had over 10 years of experience.

Participants provided a wide variety of adult literacy and teaching training/qualification information from many countries, to answer the question ‘What qualifications do you have to teach literacy?’ All replies were taken at face value (i.e., there was no requirement for the teachers to document their qualifications – and given that the survey was anonymous, there appeared to be no clear motivation for participants to misrepresent qualifications). Descriptions ranged from comprehensive explanations of university qualifications to less-detailed replies identifying a localised certificate course. Some participants gave multiple
qualifications, including qualifications not related to teaching or adult literacy. Given that the interest in this study was on the teaching foci adopted by adult-reading teachers with some teacher training/qualifications, those who reported having no background whatsoever in teaching generally, or in teaching literacy specifically, were excluded in the analyses performed. Three qualification groupings were identified based on the descriptions given by participants:

1. Some sort of specialist adult literacy training/qualification, with or without a university qualification of any type or level; or

2. Some sort of specialist adult literacy training/qualification and a teaching qualification of any type; or

3. Some teaching qualification of any type but no specialist adult literacy training/qualification.

The specialist adult literacy training/qualifications cited by participants varied widely from four days of intensive workshops, to weekly, one hour sessions over a year, to formal accredited courses. Twenty six participants cited a specialist adult literacy training/qualification, with or without an accompanying degree and were placed in Category one.

Teaching qualifications for both the school and tertiary sector were given by some participants. While the description ranged from merely ‘teaching qual’ to a breakdown of the full title and accreditation e.g. Grad Dip in Ed (sec ed), groupings of these participants was made based on citing a qualification to teach. Participants were assigned to either category two or three dependent on whether an additional adult literacy qualification was offered. Seven participants were placed in category two with a specialist adult literacy qualification and a teaching qualification of any type, while 21 participants only offered a teaching qualification of any type as their qualification to teach adult literacy. These 21 participants were placed in category three. Six participants did not provide any training/qualifications related to teaching or adult literacy and were excluded from this particular analysis.
### Table 4-1. Demographic details of participants

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<th>Background Category</th>
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<td></td>
<td>26</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Results

The aim of the current study was to (i) examine the teaching foci that adult-reading teachers prioritised when teaching specific word reading skills, and (ii) examine whether the teaching foci that adult-reading teachers prioritised varied with the age, sex, years of experience, employment status, and training/qualifications of the reading teachers.

The teaching foci that adult-reading teachers prioritised was considered first. Three of the content options presented to the teachers were associated with strengthening phonological processing: ‘Building skill in understanding how the sounds of words are connected to print’, ‘Developing skill in decoding unfamiliar words’, and ‘Developing John’s ability to distinguish the sounds within words’. It is possible to design many ways to provide explicit reading instruction focused on John’s word level needs - effective word reading instruction links the use of letters and the learning of letter-sound correspondences. To draw a clearer differentiation between respondents who prioritised word level reading skills over those who prioritised other components (i.e., fluency or comprehension), two groups were formed based on the rankings. Group 1 comprised all respondents who had ranked any one of the three word reading skills (i.e., understanding how sounds connect to print, decoding unfamiliar words, or distinguishing sounds within words) as most important in addressing John’s needs. Group 2 comprised all respondents who had not ranked any of the three word reading skills.
as most important in addressing John’s needs. Respondents in the latter group ranked one of the other three (i.e., fluency, reading on, or making meaning) as most important.

Table 4-2 presents the frequencies and percentages for the ranks that teachers assigned to each teaching focus presented. As indicated, there was considerable diversity in the rated importance of each teaching focus across respondents.

This grouping indicated that only 59.32% of respondents ranked *any one* of the three word reading foci as most important. The other 40.67% ranked one of the other three foci (i.e., fluency, reading on, or making meaning) as most important. Of particular interest here is that over half the participants (54.86%) ranked building John’s ability to read smoothly and accurately as either the least important focus, or as not important at all.

To determine whether the teaching foci that adult-reading teachers prioritise varied with the respondent’s stated training/qualifications, age, sex, years of experience in teaching literacy, or employment status, a series of Kruskal-Wallis non-parametric comparisons was performed on the binary-coded variable created (i.e., on whether the respondent ranked *any one of the three word reading skills* as most important amongst the six ranked strategies) against these background variables. The results indicated that rankings did not differ significantly with age,
sex, years of experience or employment status. They did, however, differ significantly with training/qualifications, \( p = .028 \). The percentages across categories who assigned priority to one of the three word reading skills are shown in Table 4-3.

As indicated, of the 26 participants (48.14% of the total sample) in category one (Some sort of specialist adult literacy training/qualification, with or without a university qualification of any type or level), 20 (76.92% of the category) indicated that they would prioritise word level components when teaching John, while six (23.07% of the category) indicated that they would prioritise one of the non-word reading components (i.e., fluency, reading on, or making meaning). Only seven participants in all (12.96% of the total sample) were in category two (Some sort of specialist adult literacy certificate and a teaching qualification of any type). Of these seven, two (28.57% of the category) indicated that they would prioritise word level components, while five (71.43% of the category) indicated that they would focus on non-word level components. Category three (Some teaching qualification of any type but no specialist adult literacy certificate) comprised 21 teachers (38.88% of the total sample). Ten of these teachers (47.62% of the category) indicated that they would prioritise word-level components in their teaching, while 11 (52.38% of the category) indicated that they would prioritise non-word level components.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualification Category</th>
<th>No priority assigned to phonological strategy</th>
<th>Priority assigned to one phonological strategy</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Some sort of specialist adult literacy training/qualification, with or without a university qualification of any type or level</td>
<td>6 (23.07% of qualification category)</td>
<td>20 (76.92% of qualification category)</td>
<td>26 (48.14% of sample)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some sort of specialist adult literacy training/qualification and a teaching qualification of any type</td>
<td>5 (71.43% of qualification category)</td>
<td>2 (28.57% of qualification category)</td>
<td>7 (12.96% of sample)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some teaching qualification of any type but no specialist adult literacy certificate</td>
<td>11 (52.38% of qualification category)</td>
<td>10 (47.62% of qualification category)</td>
<td>21 (38.88% of sample)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4-3. Percentages of qualification categories who assigned priority to phonological processing.
Discussion

The importance of assessing multiple components of reading to plan appropriate instruction is well established (e.g. Kruidenier et al., 2010; MacArthur et al., 2012). Similarly, the requirement to develop phonological processing and teach word level strategies, including decoding and blending, for those adults who need to develop their word reading skills, is strongly supported in the research (National Research Council 2012). Despite the available professional knowledge, around 41% of adult-reading teachers in this study indicated that they would not prioritise developing word level skills when presented with a hypothetical reader who had word level reading difficulties. These findings support previous results highlighting variable teacher practice in adult reading programs (McHardy & Chapman, 2016). The very low ranking of the fluency component of reading by teachers also highlighted these variable foci. There is strong support for the notion that reading interventions that increase the readers’ fluency helps to build overall reading comprehension (MacArthur et al., 2010), while specific strategies such as ‘reading on’, which was ranked higher by participants, does not have strong research backing as an effective comprehension building strategy. Developing all components of reading is important, but having a clear understanding of the reading process is necessary to ensure a balanced, informed approach. Lack of reading teacher knowledge about the reading process has been reported elsewhere (e.g. Bell et al., 2013), offering one explanation as to why teachers in the current study made the instructional choices they did: the teachers might simply have been unaware of research informed instruction options for developing word reading skills, and reading skills in general.

The training/qualifications to teach adult literacy that teachers reported, offered some addition insights into the foci adopted by the participating teachers. Twenty six (48.14% of the total sample) reported having specialist adult literacy training/qualifications (category one), and findings indicated that 76.92% of this category focused on teaching John word reading skills. It is possible that the specialist training/qualifications possessed by these teachers led them to the conclusion that, given John’s profile, he must be explicitly taught word level skills as a priority.

Twenty one participants (38.88% of the total sample) had teaching qualifications but cited no specific training/qualification to teach adult literacy (category three). The absence of requirements for those working in the adult literacy sector to have specific training to teach
less-skilled adults is reported elsewhere (National Research Council, 2012). These previous reports have suggested a common assumption that all teachers should be able to teach adults with learning difficulties. In the current study, those with only teaching training/qualifications were split fairly evenly in the teaching foci they would adopt; 11 indicated that they would not prioritise word level instruction when teaching John, while 10 indicated that they would focus on developing word level skills. This variable practice is not aligned with the strong evidence confirming that, for readers with word reading difficulties (i.e. indicated by diagnostics), word level skills must be explicitly taught as a priority (e.g. MacArthur et al., 2012). In this case, 52.38% of the trained/qualified teachers without specialist adult literacy training/qualifications indicated that they would not choose to do this.

Only seven participants (12.96% of the total sample) were in category two (Some sort of specialist adult literacy training/qualification and a teaching qualification of any type). Given this small sample size, findings with respect to this category should be interpreted with caution. Five teachers in this category prioritised non-word reading skills, while only two focused on building word reading skills. Further studies are needed to explore the relative influence of knowledge about teaching reading in the non-specialised teacher training/qualification (i.e. teaching reading to those without reading difficulties) and specialist adult literacy training/qualification, in informing teacher practice.

The results of this study suggest that possessing a generic teaching qualification does not necessarily provide adult-reading teachers with the knowledge and skills required to effectively teach an adult with reading difficulties. It appears from the results that teachers who had some level of specific adult literacy qualification were more informed about what research reports, on how John’s reading skills may be developed. Studies have identified adult literacy practitioners in general, as having high levels of tertiary education (Canadian Literacy and Learning Network, 2013). However, tertiary qualifications in themselves, do not necessarily equip individuals to teach highly specialised literacy skills. The findings of this study suggest that those with qualifications with a specific adult literacy focus were more likely to plan reading instruction based on specific information about the reader’s needs.

With increasing evidence that less-skilled child readers have frequently not received adequate targeted reading instruction (Tunmer & Nicholson, 2011) it is possible that many school level teachers simply have not acquired knowledge about how to teach those with reading
difficulties. More specifically, these teachers, with no specialist adult literacy training/qualification, are often unaware of adult related reading research, and will not have received the knowledge and skills required to respond to the diverse reading difficulties with which adults present in adult literacy programs (Scarborough et al., 2013). An alternative possibility is that teachers may prioritise a particular teaching focus because of personal beliefs, rather than professionally-acquired knowledge (Belzer, 2006; Greenberg et al., 2011; McHardy & Chapman, 2016; Van Kan, Ponte, & Verloop, 2013).

Another possible reason why teachers might not prioritise word level skill development is that teachers may not have been able to use the diagnostic information provided for the hypothetical reader in this study, or alternatively, choose to ignore this information (Mendelovits, 2011). Reports of teachers who are opposed to using assessment information in their instruction have attributed this opposition in part to the perceived lack of adult-appropriate tests, and in part to the fact that for some less-skilled adults, testing might have negative associations with formal schooling. The evidence is clear that effective instruction includes diagnosis which allows provision of targeted strategies to learners (Nanda, Greenberg, & Morris, 2010; National Research Council, 2012; Scarborough et al., 2013). In addition, there is increasingly robust support for the measures commonly used to assess reading components with less-skilled adult readers (MacArthur et al., 2012). Given these findings, adult-reading teachers must be supported to move beyond any opposition to using assessment results in planning their instruction.

The issue of targeted assessment in adult reading instruction is complex. Adult-reading teachers have been found generally to bring high levels of commitment, interest and passion to their roles (Belzer, 2006) and to place high importance on empathetic, caring relationships with those they teach (McHardy & Chapman, 2016). The diverse nature of those who present with reading difficulties necessitates that teachers are able to make connections quickly with the learner and put them at ease. In general, adult-reading teachers want to help less-skilled adults build reading skills. To do this, however, effective instruction that is targeted to learner needs is essential. Appropriate assessment can be sympathetically administered in a manner that considers the learner and informs the teacher, and teacher training must convince teachers of this. The undoubted importance of qualities and empathy a teacher must possess, sits alongside the crucial role of learner assessment.
Adult-reading teachers must be trained to teach those with reading difficulties. Assessment of learners must occur, and training of adult-reading teachers must be structured so it is never the case that the teacher does not know how to access and use the diagnostic information necessary to effectively address specific reading difficulties. However, to understand and use assessments, adult-reading teachers need to first understand about the reading process and the components which build to successful reading. Teacher training can then focus on the commonly used assessments and how to administer and interpret them. Once teachers understand the reading process, and have information about the aspects of reading that the learner has difficulties with, appropriate instructional approaches and program content can be employed. Teachers must be equipped with knowledge of how to proceed with learners once it is identified where the reading difficulties lie.

Less-skilled readers who attend reading programs have reading difficulties otherwise they would have acquired reading skills as children. The specific reading difficulties must be identified for each less-skilled reader and instruction planned accordingly. Assessment is about effective teaching (Carpentieri, 2013). The informed, analytical thinking of the teacher who understands how and why learners are responding to the program is necessary for effective learning to take place. Despite this, existing qualification prerequisites for adult teachers do not appear to match the requirements of the role, and teachers are not well prepared for the task of developing reading skills for adults with reading difficulties.

Adult reading instruction has been reported to be inconsistent and much of it remains ineffective (National Research Council, 2012). The findings of the current study support the pressing need for specificity in adult-reading teacher preparation. Merely being a trained teacher may not be enough when dealing with specific reading difficulties. A wide variety of courses and qualifications exist, and more needs to be understood about the effectiveness of these programs in preparing adult-reading teachers. Future investigation, including more explicit information about the content, duration and level of qualifications, and the relationship of various training to reader outcomes, is required.
References


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McHardy, J., & Chapman, E. (2016). Adult reading teachers’ beliefs about how less-skilled adult readers can be taught to read. Literacy & Numeracy Studies, 24(2), 24-42.

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Chapter Five: Adult-reading teachers’ beliefs about how less-skilled adult readers can be taught to read

Foreword

Chapter Five explores the approaches adult-reading teachers believe will build word reading skill. This chapter was published as:


This paper received the Western Australian Institute of Educational Research (WAIER) Postgraduate Award for the best piece of research published by a higher degree candidate in Education at UWA during 2016.
Adult-reading teachers’ beliefs about how less-skilled adult readers can be taught to read.

Abstract

Despite large-scale interventions, significant numbers of adults worldwide continue to have problems with basic literacy, in particular in the area of reading. To be effective, adult-reading teachers need expert knowledge at practitioner level. However, practices in adult reading education vary widely, often reflecting the individual beliefs of each teacher about how an adult can learn to read. In this study, phenomenographic analysis was used to identify categories of approaches to teaching adult reading, used by a group of 60 teachers in Western Australia and New Zealand. Four approaches were identified: reassurance, task-based, theory-based and responsive. It is argued that for teachers to become effective and consistent in responding to learner needs, they must understand their own beliefs and the consequences of these. The identification of different approaches in adult reading education is an important step in this process.

Introduction

Full participation in 21st century society and the labour market requires the capacity to accumulate knowledge and to develop and maintain a broad range of skills (Australian Industry Group, 2013; Satherley & Lawes, 2007). Literacy skills are fundamental in this process. There are numerous social and economic benefits, both for individuals and communities, associated with possessing strong literacy skills (e.g. National Research Council, 2012; Perkins, 2009; Tertiary Education Commission, 2010). Low adult literacy levels have been linked to unemployment, social isolation, poverty and broader health issues (Chesters, Ryan, & Sinning, 2013; Miller, McCardle, & Hernandez, 2010; Perkins, 2009).

Reading is a key literacy component. Difficulties in reading persist through the lifespan, contributing to ongoing low literacy levels (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013; National Research Council, 2012). The importance of reading has prompted various efforts to address low reading skills across many countries, and various large-scale, organised, and funded national projects have been established (e.g. Australian Industry Group, 2013; McShane, 2005; National Research Council, 2012). Despite considerable investments in adult-reading
programs, reports of insufficient impact and progress appear consistently within the literature (Australian Industry Group, 2013; Palameta, Myers, & Conte, 2013).

Explanations for the limited impact of these adult-reading programs are multi-layered and complex. Reading is an intricate cognitive skill (Binder & Borecki, 2008). Large-scale programs rely heavily on teachers who often receive minimal training to enable them to respond to the assortment of reading difficulties which may present (Sabatini, Sawaki, Shore, & Scarborough, 2010). While no theory or model of cognitive processing is complex enough to account for all that is occurring when someone reads, there is agreement that skilled reading involves competent co-ordination of the reading components of decoding, word recognition, vocabulary knowledge, fluency and reading comprehension (National Research Council, 2012; Sabatini et al., 2010).

Given the complexity of the reading process, to be effective, adult-reading teachers must be informed about the reading process and be able to respond to specific reading-skill needs in their teaching (Condelli, Kirshstein, Silver-Pacuilla, Reder, & Spruck Wrigley, 2010; National Research Council, 2012). Despite this, with generic, minimal training often provided, adult-reading teachers’ practices vary substantially (Kendall & McGrath, 2014), commonly reflecting their own idiosyncratic beliefs about how adults learn to read (Beder, Lipnevich, & Robinson-Geller, 2007; Belzer, 2006; Greenberg et al., 2011; Van Kan, Ponte, & Verloop, 2013). In the teaching context, and for the purposes of this paper, belief is taken to be “an attitude consistently applied to an activity” (Eisenhart, Shrum, Harding, & Cuthbert, 1988, p. 54). Teacher beliefs are generally seen as precursors to teacher action (Fives & Buehl, 2012) and teachers teach, receive, and respond to new ideas about teaching, in ways that relate to their existing beliefs and practices (Abernathy-Dyer, Ortlieb, & Cheek, 2013; Bandura, 1995; Gove, 1983; Kuzborska, 2011; Pajares, 1992).

The way something is taught and the beliefs behind why it is taught in that way are fundamental to understanding the impact of the teaching on learners (Benseman, 2013; Bliuc, Casey, Bachfischer, Goodyear, & Ellis, 2012). Teachers, unlike other professional groups, have been immersed in the education profession for most of their lives (not just during their time as teachers) and draw on this experience to inform their own opinions and beliefs; they often teach the way they were taught (Barnyak & Paquette, 2010). However, it is likely that
teachers of less-skilled readers have had, in the main, learning journeys very different from the learners that they teach. Further, teachers respond to new ideas and attempts to change teaching programs, based on their beliefs about how something should be taught (Abernathy-Dyer et al., 2013). Multiple studies, largely with teachers at school level, have demonstrated the crucial role beliefs and values of individual teachers play in determining what happens in the program (Fives & Buehl, 2012).

In a recent example of such a study, questionnaires were used to explore literacy-related beliefs of 581 kindergarten and school teachers in the USA (Bingham & Hall-Kenyon, 2013). Among the beliefs explored were those about the relative importance of key skill components for literacy learning and the instructional strategies necessary to be effective in developing them. The self-reported practices of teachers appeared to endorse an approach to instruction consistent with their belief in a component-based understanding of literacy. The beliefs of these teachers about literacy skills determined what happened in their programs. Similarly, Gaitas and Martins (2015) explored the beliefs of 255 Portuguese primary school teachers on preferred teaching activities in relation to writing instruction and identified a significant association between beliefs and teaching activities.

Longitudinal studies have also confirmed the role of beliefs in teacher practice. The impact of previously held beliefs was found to be enduring when four school teachers were observed over a two-year period implementing a new and specific method of teaching reading (Stephens et al., 2000). Despite the teachers receiving special training, new practice was not comprehensively sustained, with one teacher reverting to practice based on prior-held beliefs at the end of the training period.

Similar reliance on earlier beliefs has been observed in studies of preservice teachers. In a two-year study on development of professional belief systems about reading instruction the teachers appeared to create fictive images of themselves as teachers consistent with their prior knowledge of teachers and reading and the experiences they had on teaching practicum (Stoube, 2009). These factors seemed more important in forming these teachers’ notions about teaching reading, than formal reading courses undertaken as part of teacher training. In a similar fashion, research with preservice teachers at two American universities found that
previous, personal experience and beliefs continued to influence content and instructional choices of these participants (Barnyak & Paquette, 2010).

Comparatively few studies exist on beliefs of adult literacy teachers and the role beliefs of teachers play in determining what happens in adult programs. In the few studies which exist, beliefs tend to be implicit in the issues being studied rather than the focus. For example, Beder et al. (2007), using an on-line survey, examined instructional approaches used by 598 teachers of adult literacy in the USA. Beliefs about appropriate ways to teach influenced the organisational culture of the workplace and were observable in instructional practices used by teachers. Teachers organised their practice and taught in ways consistent with their beliefs.

Fewer studies still have focused on beliefs about teaching adult reading. In a recent British study involving eight teachers of adult reading, Kendall and McGrath (2014) used semi-structured interviews to explore teachers’ conceptions, including teachers’ ideas about reading and teaching reading. From a critical discourse analysis, the researchers suggested the teachers had fixed views of reading linked back to their own literacy education with notions of what to teach only partially referenced to curriculum. Beliefs influenced practice in spite of training. Little reflection appeared to occur on the teaching of reading. One participant when asked “what we do when we read” replied “that is was a very strange question”.

Despite the fact that adult literacy learners have frequently had limited success in ‘school-learning’, teachers in this study appeared to conform to limited notions of how reading is learned in schools (Kendall & McGrath, 2014, p. 69).

Practice in adult reading programs has insufficient impact. Central to our understanding of the impact of teaching, is understanding about how and why teachers teach the way they do (Benseman, 2013). Given the link between practice and beliefs, and the lack of existing research, more needs to be known about beliefs of the teachers who teach adult reading. A useful starting point in understanding the limited impact of existing adult reading programs is to unpack the approaches teachers currently use and the beliefs that underlie them. The aim of this study is to do this. Understanding personal beliefs and the consequences for teaching practice must become a necessary addition in training and professional development in the adult literacy sector.
Method

Design

Phenomenography was used as an analytic framework for this study. It is a relatively new approach to educational research with the first descriptions of the approach appearing in journals in the early 1980s (Akerlind, 2012). In phenomenography, description and understanding is a focus of the research rather than generation of theory (Ireland, Tambyah, Neofa, & Harding, 2009). The object of phenomenographic research is variation in human meaning, understanding and conceptions, and the research is designed to identify the qualitatively different ways in which people perceive and understand a phenomenon. To do this, phenomenography seeks to distinguish the variations in the ways humans experience reality and build understanding from the participant’s perspective. It is about different ways of understanding. A ‘second order perspective’ is a key difference in the phenomenographic approach. ‘First order’ research involves a researcher making statements about phenomena while ‘second order’ involves the researcher making statements about other people’s experiences of the world, attempting to arrive at a “valid and rich understanding of the meaning the phenomenon holds” for the respondents (Ireland et al., 2009, p. 12). That is, it enables an interpretation of the phenomenon (in this case, adult reading) from the participants’ perspectives (adult-reading teachers), instead of from the researcher’s position (Ireland et al., 2009). There is a focus in this approach on capturing diversity in conceptions across a collective of individuals, rather than a focus on any individual experiences. In other words, the aim is to delve into the range of meanings present within a group, as a group (Akerlind, 2012).

Survey

A survey was delivered online, with a focus on instructional approaches and practices adopted for a specific learner. The development of the survey consisted of several steps. First, a scenario of a typical less-skilled reader was created based on observations and results from actual less-skilled readers (see Figure 5-1). Phenomenography seeks to reveal the variations in which a phenomenon is experienced. Getting all participants to focus on a specific learner with specific reading difficulties ensured clear boundaries for the phenomenon being experienced (the specific reading skills of the specific learner). Second, questions were developed related to instructional practices which might be employed in a reading program.
with the learner depicted within the survey. Third, the survey went through reviews (both from people experienced in developing surveys, and from those with expertise in adult literacy), and minor changes were made to the wording in response to this feedback.

You are to start working with John, who has joined a year-long literacy programme with a learning goal of wanting to “be a better reader and to be able to read about his hobby which is sport, especially basketball and cricket”. John is 45 years old and speaks English as his only language.

An initial interview has been conducted with John by the programme coordinator and you are given the following information:

- Regular word reading 29/40
- Irregular word reading 22/40
- Non-word reading 2/40
- Phoneme deletion task 5/18

In addition, John has read a piece he chose from the sports section of the newspaper about basketball: THE NEWSPAPER STATES: If the Breakers could play Cairns at home every week their long shot at the playoffs would become a sure thing. The defending champions started their unlikely quest for a finals berth in dominant fashion tonight, taming the Taipans 96-78 at Vector Arena.

John read (ERRORS SHOWN IN CAPITALS): If the Breakers could play Cairns at home every week their long SHOOT at the playoffs would become a sure thing. The DEFEATED CHAMPS started their UNLIKE QUESTION for a finals BID in “I DON'T KNOW THAT WORD” FAST tonight, TELLING the Taipans 96-78 at Vector Arena.

When questioned, John said that it means that the Breakers are doing well and he knows they beat the Taipans because he saw it on T.V.

Given the information you already have, what further information might you seek from John?

What would you do with John in the next session and why?

Figure 5-1. Details of the scenario and sample of learner information presented in the survey.

The survey included the following:

- Basic demographics were gathered including age group, gender, years of experience, and employment status.
- **Teacher beliefs** about teaching reading were explored through open-ended questions about approaches to reading instruction (e.g. ‘given this information... what would you do with John in the next session and why?’). Respondents were asked to consider the specific learner profiled in the survey. Using supplied diagnostic assessment information about the specified learner, respondents were asked to report on the approach they would use with this learner for specific sessions.

- **Beliefs about the reading process** were further explored through a rating exercise, in which teachers’ beliefs on the relative importance of teaching different reading components were gathered. Teachers indicated the priority they assigned in their own instructional approaches to each of eight factors: building rapport, confidence, specific phonological skills, decoding, fluency and comprehension (one being the highest priority; eight being the lowest).

**Participants**

Respondents who teach less-skilled adult readers were recruited through the primary author’s networks in Western Australia and New Zealand. To capture a variety of beliefs, the survey was sent to adult-reading teachers with varying years of experience, employment status, and teaching contexts ranging from community volunteers to formal tertiary settings. In some cases, the survey was sent directly to the respondents by the primary author, and in other cases, forwarded to the respondents by an adult literacy organisation or tertiary institution. Exact numbers of those who received the request to participate are therefore unavailable but the organisations each have networks numbering hundreds of literacy teachers.

Of the 96 prospective participants who entered and viewed the survey, 60 gave consent and provided responses to all questions. Forty-seven of the 60 participants were female and 13 were male. Three participants were aged 20-29 years, six were 30-39 years, ten were 40-49 years, 14 were 50-59 years, and 27 were aged over 60 years. Thirty-three participants were volunteers, six were casual, 11 worked part-time and ten were full-time employees. Six of the 60 participants had less than one year of experience, 13 had one-two years, another 13 had two-five years, 15 had five-ten years, and 12 participants had over ten years’ experience. One participant did not list their years of experience.
Data collection

A request explaining the topic was sent via email to participants and included a link to the survey through the online survey tool. The survey was made available for six months. The survey began with a contextualising statement designed to explain the study, and to stress that there are no wrong responses: ‘There is no single correct answer to the questions below. I am interested in getting alternative view points and would like you to answer as fully and honestly as you can’. The introductory statement also addressed ethical issues and obtained informed consent.

Analysis

Analysis of the survey responses was done as recommended in phenomenographic methodology using several iterations (e.g. Parisio, 2011). First, all survey responses were read line by line, several times to gain familiarity with the content, to gather ‘pools of meaning’ (Parisio, 2011), and to identify utterances with insights into the phenomenon being investigated. The aim was to go beyond the words and rankings in survey responses to search for meaning and variation in the teachers’ beliefs in regard to approaches each teacher might use with a profiled learner, to teach reading skills. One question framed this step in the analysis: What did respondents believe was the most suitable approach to build the skills of the learner depicted in the survey? Each reading and rereading of the responses began with silent questions to provide a focus: ‘what does this teacher believe should occur for this learner to learn to read?’ and ‘how does this teacher believe this learner can be taught to read?’ This focus on the what and how aspects of reading and reading instruction provided an approach to managing the large amount of data (Bliuc et al., 2012).

Second, as recommended by Akerlind (2012) both the similarities and differences of ideas and meanings within these ‘pools’ were brought together into groups of conceptions. These conceptions were considered within the context of the survey scenario. Some conceptions were merged as they described similar experiences. Third, categories were constructed. Categories are a concrete way of describing the abstract experience and give a structured description of the different ways approaches to teaching can be understood. In this case a set of categories which represented the qualitatively different ways of conceiving the phenomenon of adult reading teaching were constructed from the conceptions (Ireland et al.,
Category construction was done by arranging, rearranging and narrowing, and testing against the original data until the “system of meanings was stabilised” (Parisio, 2011, p. 3). The logical relationships between the categories was considered allowing arrangement in hierarchical order. Each category in the hierarchy is distinct, and includes but extends the previous category in the hierarchy.

**Results and discussion**

Four different categories of approach exemplifying the beliefs of these adult-reading teachers about how a less-skilled adult reader can be taught to read were revealed: the reassurance approach, the task-based approach, the theory-based approach and the responsive approach. (see Figure 4-2). The categories are on a continuum of increasing complexity from reassurance through to responsive. Each category includes elements of the previous, less complex category, but provides an increasingly more detailed description of how these teachers believe they can teach reading to a less-skilled adult reader.

![Figure 5-2. Four categories of description.](image)

**The reassurance approach**

Teachers adopting the reassurance approach believed the adult reader learns if a suitable environment is provided, with many opportunities to read but with limited focus put on what
specific reading skills are required and taught. A positive relationship between teacher and learner was a key focus, and content learner-determined, with the teacher acting as a support. Encouragement of reading efforts builds confidence, and reading skill develops over time. The learner learns by being given both opportunities and support to read. Responses typifying this approach included:

Allow oneself to get close, one needs to understand or have some feeling as to why he is in this situation. Sit down with him when he arrives and have a cuppa with a snack to eat. Talk about what we could be doing today from a choice of options to meet with curriculum requirements.

My approach is to make the student as comfortable as possible. Ensure they realise that they already have skills and knowledge that can be utilised to strengthen their reading abilities.

The task-based approach

In this approach there was a focus on teacher-directed activities and tasks to instruct the learner who then acquires reading skills and is able to apply them. If knowledge is provided then reading skills will develop. The teacher with a ‘task’ focus may have only partial knowledge of the reading process, depend on their own ideas about what the learner requires, and may rely on a limited selection of tasks. The task-based approach was typified by comments such as this, in reply to the question: What would you do with John in the next session and why?

I'd bring in a short text on a topic of his interest (e.g. basketball.) I'd discuss the topic with him first, then get him to silently read the text and underline any words he isn't sure of. We'd then discuss these words, break them into syllables, make sure he can hear and repeat each syllable as we say the words. I'd write them out, /sound them out with him etc. Then I'd get him to read the text with support. Afterwards I'd give several activities using those words, e.g. cloze of the text, letter cloze of the words, missing out a particular syllable, getting him to write in the missing syllable, look at word families of any of the difficult words.
The theory-based approach

The theory-based approach to the reading session was informed by, and may be restricted by, a particular understanding of how reading skills develop. The approach may reflect an adherence to an understanding of reading as a set of skills that must be mastered (bottom-up models e.g. Gough & Tunmer, 1986), and planning and teaching conducted accordingly. Alternatively, reading may be viewed as a practice where meaning and context are the focus for teaching sessions, and skills instruction may be seen as secondary or unnecessary (top-down models e.g. Goodman, 1976). The approach chosen draws on aspects of theoretical perspectives and content is taught accordingly. Theory-based approach was evident in references such as: ‘go back to basics’, ‘explicitly teach’. Specific approaches, such as phonics or whole language, which reflect a particular theoretical perspective were discussed.

I’d get John to set his priority list and work with that but I’d stress phonics recognition, essential ‘look and say’ words he needs for his work/interests so that he sees the benefit of improving his reading.

...maybe get him to read out the sentence again and see which bits make sense with the words he has put in, and if they don't, which words he thinks might go there. Reiterate that reading is based a lot on expectation of which words will appear.

...I would ask him to read it and then tell me what he thought of what the journalist had written, if he agreed, and what he thought about the match as a whole, and how the current team performed as a whole. I would be looking for opportunities to make him aware of how much he knows about the subject matter, how that contributes to his ability to read about it, and that that knowledge will support his reading skills development.

The responsive approach

This was the most complex and comprehensive category to emerge, and included elements of all other categories. Practitioners demonstrating this approach used reassurance, were task-based, were informed about theories, and able to be flexible and respond to each specific
learner profile (‘Informed by the results begin to...’). Practice in this category was typified by discussion of ‘many approaches... [that] may need to be adapted...to suit the needs of the student’ and of working ‘with the most effective options for [the learner’s] particular area of need’. In the responsive approach there are two-way interactions with the learners demonstrated by terms such as ‘discuss’, ‘explain’, and ‘look for opportunities’.

I might get him to write a little report on a game if he is comfortable enough to do that, or do some activities, play some games to find out what word attack skills he has. This may help add to the picture of his basic word knowledge, his phonetic knowledge and ability to combine sounds. I would probably give him a piece of “levelled” reading to get a more specific picture about strategies he is using to read. Over the next couple of sessions I would be assessing specific phonic knowledge and ability to use, e.g. what blends does he know...what high frequency words can he read and write automatically.

Each category of description represents one way of experiencing the phenomenon and within each category are aspects of the phenomenon common to all, yet which vary in some way across each category. The distinction between categories was determined from themes and variations in the ways of experiencing, which emerged from the data. This determination was done in a manner consistent with the phenomenographic methodology described in Beutel (2010). This determination aimed at identifying the overarching themes (unifying ideas) with the distinct differences (the variations) in approaches (the categories) to teaching adult reading.

**Themes**

Two key themes of philosophy (individual ideas: ‘I think that...’) and knowledge (understanding of information: ‘I would investigate...’) previously identified in other studies of adult literacy teachers (e.g. Belzer, 2007) unify the variations between the four distinct categories described above. These categories represent adult-reading teachers’ approaches based on beliefs about how an adult can learn to read. The categories of reassurance, task-based, theory-based and responsive are characterised to varying degrees by these two themes: (i) philosophy about reading and how we learn to read, and (ii) knowledge of the components
of reading and how they can be taught and learned. The adult-reading teachers’ stance and competence, and the interaction of these, inform qualitatively different approaches to teaching adult readers. These variations are discussed below.

**Variation between categories**

The four categories of description were distinguished from each other through variations that emerged from the data. Two distinct themes underpin the four variations. The themes and variations are summarised in Table 5-1 below.

The philosophy theme (individual ideas) encompasses the two variations of ‘understanding of the role of the adult literacy teacher’, and of ‘teacher perceptions about the needs of the less-skilled adult reader’. The later includes teachers’ attention to assessment data when planning and teaching. The knowledge theme (understanding of information) contains the variations of ‘teacher knowledge of the components of reading’, and ‘teacher knowledge and use of instructional best-practices’. The four variations are discussed below.

Understanding the role of the adult-reading teacher.

Noticeably different understandings of the role of the adult-reading teacher emerged. This is to be expected as perception of the role is linked to individual philosophy about adult literacy in general, and explanations of what comprises adult literacy are contentious and confused (Perkins, 2009). In addition, Kendall and McGrath (2014) found adult literacy teachers framing of their work was intertwined with their own learning experiences rather than any training about literacy.

In this study, building rapport with the learner and developing supportive relationships was important to the role across all hierarchical categories exemplified in comments such as ‘build a relationship so he feels comfortable’. There was a pattern of strong empathy for less-skilled readers. The desire to help learners build reading skills emerged as intrinsic to the role: ‘Develop a safe non-threatening environment and assist the adult to learn’. This emphasis on relationships, encouragement, and praise is reported elsewhere (Burton, Davey, Lewis, Ritchie, & Brooks, 2008; McShane, 2005). Adult-reading teachers bring high levels of commitment, interest and passion to their roles (Belzer, 2006; 2007).
Table 5-1. Distinguishing themes and variations underpinning the categories of description of approaches of adult-reading teachers when teaching adult reading

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories of description increasing complexity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Philosophy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philosophy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
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</table>

Adapted from Beutel (2010)

However, the role of the adult-reading teacher requires much more than building rapport and feelings of security. The theory-based approach is distinguished from the two previous categories of reassurance and task-based by a shift to a belief that the adult-reading teacher is responsible for teaching and learning, (‘explicitly teach’), not just for creating the environment in which this can happen. Understanding of the role is extended in the responsive approach with acknowledgement of the need to remain flexible to be able to
respond to individual needs: ‘It would depend on ... [progress]... whether we address these as we go’, ‘always modifying my ideas’.

Teacher perceptions about the needs of the less-skilled adult reader. Previous research found adult literacy teachers’ concepts about their teaching are informed by their own education and experiences rather than by the realities of individual learners’ contexts or practices. In addition, there is evidence of fixed understandings of what constitutes literacy needs (Kendall & McGrath, 2014). This approach emerged in this study with assumptions made about learners:

I would tell John the word. This is because he will become stressed/frustrated/discouraged if forced to continue.

Get to know a little more about John. Find out more about how his illiteracy is affecting his life.

In this current study variations identified in teacher perceptions suggested some teachers tended to focus their understanding of a learner’s needs around meeting practical and emotional needs (‘get him to relax and chat’, ‘...make him comfortable’), and also around what the teacher thought should happen. This is demonstrated in response to the question: (The fictional learner, John, in the survey has a stated learning goal of wanting to “be a better reader and to be able to read about his hobby which is sport, especially basketball and cricket”). If you only have 6 hour-long sessions to work with John what would be the focus of the sessions? (list up to 5 priorities, in order of importance).

1. literacy required to find work. 2. literacy for enjoyment. 3. informal learning through games and applications - both hands on and technology. 4. writing/saying the word - similar to that of a spelling test but in a real life context; written in a sentence; saying it in a sentence (conversational). 5. text exploration - identify texts that he is interested in that have unfamiliar words that he can explore and put into a real life context.
The reassurance and task-based approaches pay scant attention to diagnostic assessment results (‘...follow what the student perceives to be the most useful thing to learn’). Indeed, limited understanding of how to interpret and use assessment results was directly discussed:

I would seek information first from my program coordinator asking for clarification on what the initial interview results mean, as I am not myself familiar with the grading system.

Confusion about how to analyse and use diagnostic assessment results was evident in responses. Despite the information already been supplied in the survey, teachers indicated they would:

Begin a basic phonics assessment to see if basic knowledge is there to use "sounding out" strategy.

... test his letter names and sounds level .... follow with double letter recognition progressing as quickly and as far as is necessary to get a clearer picture of his ability ... i.e. is it lack of knowledge or confidence or laziness or a combination of some or all of the above.

It is only in the theory-based approach that the specific reading needs were linked to the goals of the learner ... ‘I’d get [the learner] to set his priority list and work with that but I’d also introduce...’ The responsive approach meets the specific targeted needs and wants of the learner choosing a program that is informed from the assessment data: ‘Informed by the phonemic awareness results begin ...’

Knowledge of the components of reading.
Earlier studies of adult-reading teachers found most participants had no working definition of reading (Kendall & McGrath, 2014), and a lack of awareness of what they actually knew about the components of reading and the reading process, and what they thought they knew (Bell, Ziegler, & McCallum, 2004). Adult-reading teachers in the present study were influenced by their knowledge about teaching reading. This individual knowledge contributed
to individual teachers’ beliefs about how a less-skilled adult reader can be taught to build reading skill.

The reading processes of less-skilled adult readers involve a range of separate reading components (Mellard, Fall, & Woods, 2010) which can be identified by assessment and be targeted in instruction (National Research Council, 2012). This knowledge was evident in the theory-based category, albeit, with a particular focus. For example: ‘Start with his ability to decode...’ reflecting attention to word level components of reading or a skills based approach (bottom-up models), as opposed to ‘First, encourage him to ... get a general idea of what was written’ reflecting a meaning based approach (top-down models). Knowledge of the reading process was limited in the two previous categories of task-based and reassurance, where there is an ad hoc, untargeted approach to reading components (‘Choose some big words ... break them up, make little words from big words, start lists of...’). Selected components of reading are drawn on in the first three categories, but the responsive approach reflects knowledge about the reading process and employs a balanced program taking account of all key components (‘needs to stop using context to decode words (to check comprehension yes) ... so I would have him use letter-sound knowledge to decode the word’). The responsive approach is informed, flexible and focused on learner needs (‘Informed by ... begin to develop these skills. But first of course explain ... and get agreement on the plan’).

Knowledge and use of instructional best practices.
The range of approaches evident in this study supports existing evidence that teachers in the adult literacy sector view ‘best-practice’ in different ways (Greenberg et al., 2011; McShane, 2005; National Research Council, 2012). There was no shared, clear vision of what is understood by good teaching. The reassurance approach has a focus on practical and emotional concerns that although important are only part of the learning process for the less-skilled adult reader. The task-based approach relies largely on teachers’ own ideas of what works’ (‘I have always found...’). This experience factor is valid but must be balanced with evidence-based practice (Biesta, 2010). As the categories become more complex so do instructional practices and the range of practices utilised. Previous work (Belzer, 2006) has found that reading teachers may be knowledgeable about a range of strategies to use to build skill but rely on only a limited number of these in their teaching. A characteristic of the responsive approach is that teachers do draw on their knowledge and select appropriate
strategies responding to specific learner need. The responsive approach reflects teacher confidence in analysing assessment results, drawing on knowledge of reading and effective adult instruction, and planning and teaching sessions accordingly.

**Conclusion**

Adult reading programs to date have had limited impact in building reading skill (Australian Industry Group, 2013; Palameta et al., 2013). Central to understanding the impact of programs is knowing how and why teachers teach the way they do (Benseman, 2013). It is established that beliefs about what is being taught and how to teach it affect the learning experience (Bliuc et al., 2012) but greater awareness of the beliefs which inform teachers and teaching is required (Bingham & Hall-Kenyon, 2013). A useful first step in the process of understanding the impact of programs is to know about the beliefs of those teaching the programs. This study examined the beliefs of a group of adult-reading teachers on how less-skilled adult readers can be taught to read.

Reading and how it can be taught, can be viewed through different lenses and there is no one way to teach it (Greenberg et al., 2011; Tracey & Morrow, 2012) but utterances of adult-reading teachers in this study clearly revealed that, at times, teacher practice was largely informed by adherence to an approach or perceived learner need, regardless of the learner who presents, or their goals or diagnostic assessment results. The goals and existing skills of the fictional learner ‘John’ in the survey did not always inform the teaching described. Practices of some adult teachers in this group relied on existing personal beliefs about how an adult can learn to read rather than on informed knowledge about the reading process and effective practice.

Four hierarchical categories were revealed from utterances of the adult-reading teachers to give a structured description of different ways the approaches to teaching can be understood. The categories of approaches to teaching adult reading which emerged were: the reassurance approach, the task-based, the theory-based, and the responsive approach. These categories may serve at least three key functions in efforts to enhance the efficacy of adult-reading teachers. First, the descriptions provide a common language for extending discussions about teaching adult reading towards achieving shared understanding of what adult reading is, and
how to achieve quality teaching and learning. A common language and shared understanding is important; what has been discussed and shared is more likely to be applied. Second, the existence of distinct approaches serves to challenge adult-reading teachers’ current notions about how they teach and why they teach in this way. Among other things, reflection on existing beliefs and practises serves to make teachers more receptive to new practices (Kuzborska, 2011). Self-awareness, being able to reflect on their own beliefs, enables teachers to focus on key aspects of their teaching and teachers are more likely to implement new, more complex approaches. Third, the persistence of approaches, despite training, has clear implications for teacher training and on-going professional development. Teachers must be led to challenge their initial beliefs and explore alternative views on teaching and learning.

For this challenge to explore alternative views to be effective and produce results, and for a teacher to be able to make informed judgements about what and how to teach, personal understanding about individual beliefs and practices must be underpinned by knowledge of recommended practices and why they are effective (Fives & Buehl, 2012). Analysis of the categories and the variations which distinguish them, described in this study, suggests that adult-reading teachers who employ a responsive approach are more likely to make the most of knowledge and use approaches conducive to effective and meaningful reading skill development, providing learners with experiences of reading enabling them to cope better with the complexity of reading.

A good starting point in building more self-aware and responsive adult-reading teachers is for teachers to be encouraged, and led, to take an active role in increasing the connection between their beliefs and practices. Understanding their own beliefs and the consequences of these is a key step in the process of teachers becoming consistent in adopting a responsive approach in their practice. The identification, in this study, of adult-reading teachers’ beliefs about how learners can be taught is an important action in building our understanding of how teachers currently approach the teaching of adult reading. Until the adult-reading teachers become aware of the approaches they adopt and the beliefs which drive these approaches, practices will continue with the variable results currently reported.
Limitations

The information on teacher practices was collected through self-report and although every attempt was made to limit the impact of social desirability by collecting these data through an anonymous survey, teachers may have provided answers different from their practice. Therefore, it is important to interpret the findings from this study with caution.

References


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Tertiary Education Commission. (2010). *Getting results in literacy and numeracy.* Contributing to the vision that all New Zealanders enjoy a level of literacy and numeracy that enables them to participate fully in all aspects of life. Wellington, New Zealand: Author.


Chapter Six: Adult literacy teachers’ perspectives on reading difficulties and the origins of these perspectives.

Foreword

The previous chapter confirmed the importance of beliefs in informing teacher practice and described approaches to instruction adopted by a group of adult-reading teachers. The paper in this chapter follows by exploring perspectives of reading teachers on why adults are less-skilled readers and the origins of the perspectives.

The first revision of this paper has been submitted to *Journal of Research and Practice for Adult Literacy, Secondary and Basic Education* and is titled ‘Adult literacy teachers’ perspectives on reading difficulties and the origins of these perspectives’.

The interview guidelines used in the data collection phase of this study are in Appendix C.
Adult literacy teachers’ perspectives on reading difficulties and the origins of these perspectives

Abstract

Studies of the teaching practices used in adult reading programs suggest that these practices often reflect the personal perspectives of teachers on factors that contribute to less-skilled reading development. In this study, 19 adult reading teachers were interviewed to explore (i) their perspectives on how adults become less-skilled readers; and (ii) the origins of these perspectives. Four themes were identified in terms of teachers’ perspectives, which attributed less-skilled reading respectively to learners’ distinct needs not being met, readers’ ‘life baggage’, under-developed sense of joy in reading, and inappropriate learning environments. Four main types of experiences appeared to have contributed to the development of these perspectives: teachers’ own experiences in learning reading, teachers’ general teaching experience, teachers’ experiences of teaching reading specifically, and teachers’ knowledge of formal reading theories and/or empirical research findings. Potential implications for enhancing the outcomes of adult reading instruction programs are discussed.

Introduction

Literacy skills have long been recognised as an important correlate of social and economic outcomes, both for individuals and for overall communities (e.g., European Union High Level Group of Experts on Literacy, 2012; National Research Council, 2012). Despite this, a considerable body of research evidence suggests that large numbers of adults worldwide continue to have difficulties in the area of basic literacy. Foremost among this research is a series of international surveys of adult skills, the most recent of which is the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) (OECD Skills Outlook, 2013). PIAAC has prompted a series of national reports examining local contexts. For example, one recent Australian report (Australian Industry Group, 2016) indicated that 44% of Australian adults have literacy skills below the minimum level required to function fully in a modern society. Similar results have been reported in studies from other developed countries. For example, in 2012, the European Union’s High Level Group of Experts on Literacy reported
that 20% of adults in Europe exhibited some difficulties in the area of literacy, while in 2014, Gyarmati et al. reported that nearly half of the working-age population in Canada had identifiable literacy difficulties. Results such as these underscore the urgent need for research into ways to enhance literacy skills within the adult population.

This paper focuses on adult reading as a critical facet of literacy. Reading skills, or the skills needed to understand and interpret printed material, are essential for overall literacy development and growth (Galletly & Knight, 2013). Less-developed reading skills have been posed to limit an adult’s ability to live a fully productive and secure life (National Research Council, 2012). Apart from the more obvious correlates of low reading levels (e.g., reduced earnings, unemployment and poverty; Centre for Longitudinal Studies, 2014; Shomos & Forbes, 2014), low adult reading skills have now been linked to negative outcomes in various other facets of individuals’ lives. These facets include health and social life quality (Clark & Dugdale, 2008; Miller, McCardle, & Hernandez, 2010). Various hypotheses have been posed with respect to the precise mechanisms responsible for the association between reading levels and outcomes within these diverse areas. For example, it has been proposed that the correlation between adults’ reading levels and adults’ health outcomes may be attributable in part to the need for sound reading skills to make full use of available public health information, complete medical forms, and understand instructions provided on prescription medicines (Gyarmati et al., 2014). Research on the correlates of reading skills point to the wide-ranging impact that reading skills can have on the social, economic, and personal quality of life enjoyed by affected individuals.

Whilst a considerable body of research has now emerged on the importance of possessing strong adult reading skills, research on how reading skills can best be developed has traditionally focussed on child readers. Research on less-skilled adult readers is relatively scarce (MacArthur, Konold, Glutting, & Alamprese, 2012). In addition to the relatively scarce literature available on adult reading difficulties, confusion over the approaches that should be used in adult reading programs has been propagated through many decades of debate on how reading skills are acquired and developed through the lifespan (e.g. Goodman & Goodman, 1979; Gough & Hillinger, 1980; Share, 1995; Stanovich, 1980). Despite an
emerging consensus that a balanced view of reading is necessary to develop effective reading programs (i.e., ones that focus on the competent co-ordination of decoding, word recognition, vocabulary knowledge, fluency and reading comprehension processes: e.g. Pressley, 2006), research suggests that this view is not reflected in the development of many adult reading programs across the world (National Research Council, 2012).

Regardless of the particular reading theory adopted, practitioners and scholars alike agree that in principle, effective reading instruction relies upon teachers who are well-informed with regard to the reading process, and able to respond on this basis to learners’ specific reading needs (Condelli, Kirshstein, Silver-Pacuilla, Reder, & Spruck Wrigley, 2010; National Research Council, 2012). Educators with higher levels of professional experience and knowledge are more likely to be able to target appropriate and important reading skills in their instruction, and to adopt effective approaches in their efforts to assist readers in developing these skills (Kruidenier, MacArthur, & Wrigley, 2010). Despite this, research suggests that the training provided to adult-reading teachers is often inadequate, with professional learning opportunities reported also to be limited. Not surprisingly, the practices adopted by teachers in adult literacy programs have also been reported to vary considerably, an outcome often attributed to the inadequate training and development opportunities provided within these programs (Kendall & McGrath, 2014). Studies of the teaching practices used in adult reading programs have also suggested that the teaching methods used are generally not evidence-based (National Research Council, 2012), more often reflecting the personal beliefs and perspectives of teachers on how adults can, or should be taught to read (Beder, Lipnevich, & Robinson-Geller, 2007; Belzer, 2006; Greenberg et al., 2011; Van Kan, Ponte, & Verloop, 2013). Findings such as these suggest that, in order to improve the outcomes achieved in adult reading programs, it is first necessary to explore the beliefs and perspectives that reading teachers bring to the programs, as well as the origins of these beliefs and perspectives.

In one previous study conducted by the authors, 60 adult-reading teachers were asked to discuss their beliefs about how less-skilled adult readers should be taught to read (McHardy & Chapman, 2016). In this phenomenographic study, the adult-reading teachers responded to
an online survey on the instructional approaches they would use to teach a specific, profiled adult reader. Four broad approaches to teaching adult reading were identified from the responses obtained:

(i) In the least complex of the approaches identified, the *reassurance* approach, the focus was primarily upon developing positive relationships with the learners. This reflected a belief in the notion that adult readers acquire reading skills naturally when the learning environment is conducive. There was no specific focus on providing instruction in targeted reading skill areas.

(ii) *Task-based* instructional approaches also had a focus on creating reassuring learning environments, but were more directed and focused upon reading instruction, than wholly reassurance-based approaches. Task-based approaches relied heavily on teachers’ views of what readers needed, and generally focused on a limited selection of tasks.

(iii) *Theory-based* approaches to teaching reading were informed by particular understandings of the reading process. These approaches were grounded in well-developed, but in many cases, narrow views on the reading process and on how readers should be taught to read. These approaches did not necessarily focus on specific reading difficulties.

(iv) The most complex approach was labelled the *responsive* approach, and was characterised by the incorporation of elements from all three previous approaches, as well as a focus on providing instruction to bolster specified processes that are critical for effective word reading (e.g., decoding, syllable awareness). The responsive approach relied upon a high level of knowledge about the reading process, and about strategies for teaching reading. This approach also relied heavily on flexibility, allowing an appropriate ‘response’ to individual learners’ needs.

The diverse approaches identified in this and other previous research may provide insights into why adult reading programs continue to have limited impacts on adults’ reading skills (Palameta, Myers, & Conte, 2013). More specifically, the variable results obtained in adult
reading programs may be a product, at least in part, of teachers not targeting specific, critical reading difficulties in their instructional approaches (e.g., MacArthur et al., 2012).

Other research has suggested that problems with a lack of sound theoretical and empirical knowledge of the reading process on the part of reading teachers many be compounded by teachers’ lack of awareness of the assumptions that they bring to teaching situations (Sanger & Osguthorpe, 2011; Stephens et al., 2000). Various researchers have suggested that teachers’ ability to engage in this form of reflection is a critical determinant in the success or failure of instructional reading programs (Sanger & Osguthorpe, 2011). Findings of this kind highlight the need not only to provide better training and support for teachers within adult reading programs, but also, to bolster teachers’ own ability to reflect upon, evaluate, and improve their instructional approaches. In this view, teachers need to be provided with frameworks for acknowledging and analysing their own reading-related beliefs and perspectives, as well as the origins of these, to be able to evaluate and improve upon the instructional approaches they adopt.

Given the research evidence which suggests that adult-reading teachers often rely upon their own beliefs about the reading process in deciding upon their instructional strategies, rather than on evidence garnered from well-controlled research within the field (Benseman, 2013; McHardy & Chapman, 2016; Van Kan et al., 2012), to change teachers’ practices and facilitate the adoption of responsive approaches in adult reading programs, it will first be necessary to extend our own understanding of the perspectives adopted by reading teachers (Barnyak & Paquette, 2010). There is limited reference to the origins of reading-related beliefs and perspectives in the adult teacher education literature. Beliefs about reading and reading development processes have been reported in child reading research to derive from personal childhood experiences, experiences and observations as a teacher, and teachers’ own literacy education and school experiences (Barnyak & Paquette, 2010; Mansfield & Volet, 2010; Sanger & Osguthorpe, 2011; Stephens et al., 2000), although professional readings (Stephens et al., 2000), formal knowledge (Mansfield & Volet, 2010) and previous training (Sanger & Osguthorpe, 2011) have also been identified in some studies. Overall, however, there has been little attempt in the research literature to unpack the sources of adult-reading
teachers’ beliefs in this area. Based on an extensive search of the adult reading literature, no studies were identified by the authors that had focused specifically on the origins of reading-teachers’ beliefs and perspectives on why less-skilled adult readers had not developed reading skills.

The present study aimed to extend our current understanding of why adult-reading teachers adopt given approaches and practices in their reading instruction (e.g. Kendall & McGrath, 2014; McHardy & Chapman, 2016). The two specific research questions addressed in the study were: (i) What are adult-reading teachers’ perspectives on how adults become less-skilled readers?, and (ii) What are the origins of these perspectives?

**Method**

**Participants**

The data for this study were generated from a series of interviews with teachers of less-skilled adult readers. Nineteen adult-reading teachers from one Western Australian city and one New Zealand city participated in the study. Of the 19, four were males and 15 were females. Participants’ ages varied widely; three teachers were aged 20-29 years, one teacher was aged 30-39 years, two teachers were aged 40-49 years, seven teachers were aged 50-59 years and six teachers were aged over 60.

Participants were recruited through the lead researcher’s networks in Western Australia and New Zealand. Through these networks, relevant organisations were contacted via email and asked to distribute information about the study to reading teachers who worked in that organisation. To capture a range of perspectives, adult-reading teachers with varying years of experience, employment status, and teaching contexts ranging from community volunteers to formal tertiary settings were invited to participate. While all participants had some experience in teaching adult reading, the number of years of experience in adult literacy varied considerably across the sample. One teacher reported having less than one year of experience, two teachers reported 1-2 years of experience; five teachers had 2-5 years of experience; six
teachers had 5-10 years of experience; three teachers had 10-20 years of experience; and two teachers reported having more than 20 years of experience.

**Interview Design**

The research questions were pursued through a series of semi-structured interviews. Given the research questions posed, in the design of the interviews with participants, importance was placed upon understanding the *perspectives* of the adult-reading teachers on the reading process, and on the *origins* of these perspectives. Thus, the interview questions were designed to capture the unpinning ideas, behaviours and contexts associated with particular acts taken by the participating teachers. ‘Perspectives’ were viewed here in alignment with Blackledge and Hunt’s (1985) framework, which depicts a perspective to incorporate notions of aims and intentions, significance, reasons and strategies. Guiding questions used in the interviews to address these elements of participants’ perspectives are shown in Table 6-1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guiding questions</th>
<th>Conversational questions:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What are the aims of adult-reading teachers when they work with a less-skilled</td>
<td>I want you to think about adult reading: When you are working with a learner what are you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adult reader? What reasons do they give for having these aims? What challenges do</td>
<td>hoping to achieve in your sessions? Why do you think the things you mention are important?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>they have in trying to realise their aims?</td>
<td>What do you think makes you think that way?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Are you aware of learning about this? What makes it hard to achieve what you want to, in a</td>
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<td></td>
<td>session?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What strategies do adult-reading teachers adopt in trying to realise their aims?</td>
<td>You have told me what you are hoping to achieve in regards to adult reading in your</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What reasons do they give for adopting these strategies? What challenges do they</td>
<td>sessions. Now, tell me what you use, or do in your sessions so that you achieve what you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>face in adopting them?</td>
<td>want to? Why do you choose to do these things? Why do you think they are important and/or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>appropriate? Are you aware of learning about this? What are the issues, challenges, problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>you have found using or trying to use these?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What significance do adult-reading teachers attach to their aims and strategies? What reasons do they give for their position on this? What challenges do they face in trying to maintain this position?

Think about what you have told me about what you want to achieve in regards to adult reading and the things you do in your sessions (which help you achieve what you want to). Tell me about how important it is to you that you achieve the aims. Tell me about ‘bits’ which are more important than other ‘bits’. Why is it important to you that you achieve the aims? Why do you think the ‘bits’ you describe are more or less important? What are some of the barriers to achieving the aims you prioritise? Tell me which of the things/ways of teaching (strategies) you have described are more important to you. Why are these more important to you? Are you aware of learning about this? What are some of the barriers to using these things/ways of teaching?

What outcomes do adult-reading teachers expect from pursuing their aims and strategies? What reasons do they give for expecting these outcomes? What challenges do they face in trying to realise them?

When you are working with an adult reader and all the things we have talked about (what you hope to achieve, what things you will do and use) “fall into place” what do you think the result(s) or outcome(s) of your work with your learner will be? Why do you think this will be the outcome(s)? What issues do you have in attempting to arrive at these outcomes?

**Interview Procedures**

Interviews were conducted over a three month period. Once an email response to the information sent out by organisations was received, the primary researcher organised to meet with the teacher at a convenient time and location. Interviews took between 20 and 60 minutes in all. As described above, to address the primary aims of the study, the interview questions focused upon eliciting information about the aims and intentions of the teachers in the context of a particular lesson. Other aspects of teachers’ perspectives explored through the interview questions included the strategies that teachers used to achieve their aims, as well as significance of these strategies in the teachers’ views. Throughout the interviews, the participants were prompted to elaborate their responses through frequent ‘why’ questioning, with the goal of encouraging the teachers to think deeply about the factors that underpinned their responses to particular situations.
Analysis Approach

All interviews were audio taped and transcribed for coding purposes. Coding procedures were then used to identify common themes. Transcribed interviews were read and re-read multiple times and were coded on a line-by-line basis. Within each interview, the researcher attempted to put herself in the position of the participant, and to interpret the actions of that participant and grasp the meaning(s) of the participant’s actions through the lens adopted by the participant. The key research questions were used as a focus throughout each reading to enable the researcher to identify viewpoints that were then reduced into themes. Miles and Huberman’s (1994) three stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing were used to guide the analysis process. Emergent viewpoints and themes were listed at the side of the page containing the raw data and revisited and reworked over successive readings. Relationships between the categories were then identified for the purpose of generating the themes that were identified.

Results

Four themes emerged with respect to Research Question One: What are adult-reading teachers’ perspectives on how adults become less-skilled readers? These responses suggested the beliefs that, to become a skilled reader, distinct learner needs must have been met, that ‘life-baggage’ must be managed, that learning environments must meet physical, psychological and learning requirements, and that the pleasure of reading must be developed. Twelve participants made comments that reflected the distinct needs theme, 11 participants spoke of factors that suggested the pleasure of reading theme, and all 19 participants spoke of aspects signifying both ‘life baggage’ and inappropriate learning environments themes.

Four themes emerged with respect to Research Question Two: What are the origins of these perspectives? These themes suggested that adult-reading teachers’ perspectives originated in teachers' own experiences in learning and reading (reflected in comments from 10 participants), their experiences as teachers (comments from 15 participants), teachers’ knowledge of teaching reading (comments from nine participants), and their knowledge of reading frameworks and theory (comments from nine participants).
The themes are summarised in Figure 6-1 below.

**Figure 6-1.** Adult-reading teachers’ perspectives and the sources of perspectives, on why adults are less-skilled readers.

In the next section, the perspectives expressed are considered together with reported origins of each perspective to emphasise the connection between the two. Differing origins emerged in discussions of any one perspective theme; the expressed perspective of any one participant as to why an adult was a less-skilled reader did not always have the same origin as the same perspective expressed by another participant. The origins of perspectives were not exclusive to any perspective theme.

**Perspective Theme 1: Distinct needs**

Two overlapping viewpoints characterised this teacher perspective: Reading skill development may have been limited by first, a cognitive or physical disability such as dyslexia or speech difficulties and second, by lack of attention to individual learning requirements. Nine participants spoke about specific disabilities as possible explanations as to
why an adult had not developed skills in reading. That individual learning requirements may not have been met was suggested by seven participants. The viewpoints were characterised by comments on the need to target the teaching to each individual with reference to different abilities, learning demands, learning styles, context, and cultural factors.

Oh, every session is different…one size doesn’t fit all… often the learners come here, they might have a disability or something …and sometimes I can be blown away…and what I have thought would be good for them, or not good for them, but be helpful to them, is not.

The source of these perspectives was degrees of combinations of experiences as a teacher and particular understandings of theory and frameworks of adult learning and learning needs.

I have read a lot of research - that says it is but I found over and over again. I wouldn’t teach everyone the same way: I could have another learner and I wouldn’t be teaching them like this. They would know the alphabet, maybe. The learning demands could be quite different - learning requirements could be quite different.

**Perspective Theme 2: ‘Life-baggage’**

Three viewpoints emerged and are collectively labelled as ‘life-baggage’ which less-skilled readers ‘carry’ and which restricted opportunity to build reading skills. The viewpoints were that first, reading skill development had been limited by earlier experiences where reading was not valued or encouraged, second, by current life stresses and concerns which take priority or distract the adult learner and third, by poor self-esteem and confidence which has left the adult-reading learner terrified, frightened and powerless.

OK, so, the first thing that makes that difficult is self-esteem in the learner, bad experiences that they’ve had, and mostly an identity decision that
they’ve made that they do not read and they’re not a reader, and they are one of those ‘other’ people.

The source of these viewpoints was largely based on teachers’ experiences with teaching and learners. The three ‘life baggage’ viewpoints are discussed in more detail below.

**Limited earlier reading experiences of learner.** Six participants expressed the viewpoint that learners may not have had much exposure to text. The origins of the perspective were combinations of two sources: teachers’ own experiences of reading and learning, and knowledge of reading theory. Teachers discussed their own early, positive experiences as a reader (*I grew up reading. I read all the time... and find it hard to imagine a life lived without text*). There is a sense by teachers that this childhood history of reading was not a universal experience and learners have been left out.

There can be negative experiences that have an impact, not just motivation but attitude towards reading. They may have a home environment, a home background where reading is not so valued. They may not do so much reading...

Teachers prioritised exposure to text and links were made to theory:

There is that bootstrapping effect where the more they read, the more they engage in reading, and the more likely they are to develop automaticity [of] those kinds of skills.

**Current life stresses.** The second viewpoint on the ‘life baggage’ that learners ‘carry’ was that of current life stresses which lead to many issues for learners including poor attendance. Eleven teachers spoke of current life stresses. The source of this perspective was experience as a teacher:
When the learners are stressed, it’s very hard to… which is often…very hard for them to concentrate. It makes it very difficult to teach, because there’s never a day where everyone’s on the same page. In addition, people, especially people who don’t have much money, [are] too busy to be able to have any time for what for them is quite a new thing. New things take a lot of energy. I’ve been through a lot of learners, and I’ve… it’s an observation.

**Poor self-esteem and confidence.** All 19 teachers expressed a third viewpoint in the ‘life-baggage’ theme which saw poor self-esteem and low confidence as limiters to reading skill acquisition. Less-skilled readers have had bad experiences, and are ashamed and terrified when the next challenge comes up. Teachers know this from histories of failure told to them by learners.

They have had a lifetime of poor self-esteem, negativity … that you have to get over. [I] do think that there is a lot of stuff for adult learners where they’re self-limiting... where people just do not attempt to do things, because they believe they can’t... the moment there’s a word that is difficult, or a sentence that makes no sense whatsoever, they just throw their hands up and go “it must be me, I’m stupid, I can’t do this” ...if we can give people evidence that it’s not their stupidity that stops them from being able to do it, that reading is a task like any other thing [that] you can learn to do, and some strategies will help …that there will be things that are more difficult than others and some stuff is impossible, but it may not be your fault. It is all to do with what happens in the session, how the learner feels in the session [and I] wouldn’t frighten them with something too hard.

**Perspective Theme 3: Undeveloped sense of joy of reading**

The third theme, expressed by 11 participants, described a perspective that less-skilled readers have not developed a sense of joy about their reading and this has limited their development as skilled readers.
I believe that he [the learner] gets no joy or pleasure out of reading things. My hope is that they [learners] get a taste for reading; that they start to enjoy reading. I think that’s important too, because they need to continue their reading development when you’ve finished with them. There’s the dream; the dream is that these adults will begin to find books that [they] will love and read, then reread them. I’d like people to begin to develop a self-sustaining interest in reading.

The source of this perspective was teachers own experience as a learner and reader:

…there’s a lot of satisfaction that can be gained from being able to read. You know what sort of joys and pleasures you get from it, and how much information you get, leisure time, work as well.

**Perspective Theme 4: Inappropriate learning environment**

The many ideas which emerged to characterise this theme are summarised into two general viewpoints: i) Less-skilled readers have not had appropriate physical and psychological environments provided to foster learning, ii) nor have they had a teaching and learning environment which appropriately addressed their needs as a learner.

**Appropriate physical and psychological environments.** All 19 teachers spoke of the need to create a comfortable, calm, relaxed, safe reading place with the implication that this has not been the prior learning environment for learners. These ideas came from experience as a learner and teacher, and also from adult learning theory.

Warm positive relationships must be established as relationship[s] and rapport can overcome some of the ‘things’ limiting the reader. This is common sense. If an adult feels uncomfortable, in any way, they’re not going to learn, and there is a need to be settled into feeling comfortable with each other. I was raised in a very positive environment myself.
There’s the big rapport-relationship component with adults, I think, it has to be there, and part of that is trying to enter their world, to figure out what motivates them and what encourages them…

**Appropriate teaching and learning environment.** Two groups of ideas emerged from comments of 17 participants to describe this viewpoint: First, less-skilled adult readers have not been taught in an informed, planned, professional way with targeted, assessment-informed content demonstrating understanding of specific needs, and second, the learners have not been taught in an engaging way and ‘hooked-in’ to learning. The teaching has not motivated learners to learn. Experience, knowledge of teaching and theoretical knowledge were all sources of these perspectives.

The first group of ideas was that informed, planned, professional teaching underpinned by assessment is needed for effective teaching with the implication that lack of this has limited the less-skilled reader.

Learners can get shoved aside, like what probably happened at school. Teaching must be specialised but flexible enough to deviate if need be so as to create momentum and success. It’s their [the teachers] job to do their best every time, to bring quality stuff, no matter what. Teachers have to have training and education … have to be research-informed with a combination of a ton of reading…

The second group of ideas was that less-skilled adult readers have not been taught in an engaging way and ‘hooked-in’ to learning. Teachers drew on their experience.

It is important for your student to see the purpose behind it: even though I explained it to him, now and again he would say “what’s the point of all this”. So for students to see the overall picture, and relevance in their life, and how it’s going to help them in the program as well… Pay attention to what they [are] interested in. If it’s not interesting, they’ll struggle with
things. Sessions need to be interesting or funny or very little learning occurs. Teachers need to talk [to learners] quite a bit to see where the interests lie and try to find something that’s relevant. There are programs with at least half the students bored and half the students struggling. Adults will learn if it’s realistic, authentic, and real life strategies, and content is used. Keep it real for them.

Discussion

Responses to questions about what teachers hope to achieve in adult reading programs, how they expect to do this and why they act in the way they do, reveal varying perspectives on why teachers in this study teach the way they do and varying origins of these perspectives. These teachers teach the way they do because of perspectives that less-skilled adult readers have not had distinct learning needs met, have issues which hinder learning, have no joy of reading, and have had inappropriate learning environments. The origins of these perspectives are personal experience as a learner, reader and teacher, and knowledge of teaching reading, and knowledge of theory and frameworks.

While these findings support, in part, those from studies of teachers of children (Barnyak & Paquette, 2010; Mansfield & Volet, 2010; Sanger & Osguthorpe, 2011; Stephens et al., 2000) the findings make an original contribution to the existing literature on adult-reading teachers and specifically on teacher perspectives on why adults may be less-skilled readers. Although perspectives regarding teaching and learning are fundamental to every teacher (Abernathy-Dyer, Ortlieb, & Cheek, 2013) there is frequently a lack of awareness of individual perspectives and where they come from (Sanger & Osguthorpe, 2011; Stephens et al., 2000). The identification and graphic organization of adult-reading teacher perspectives in this study, provides a useful tool for further reflection in general. More importantly, identification of the origins of the perspectives, where the ideas come from, enables teachers to evaluate the merit of views underpinning teaching practice; understanding the origins of the perspectives allows candid reflection on the value and relevance of such perspectives for teaching. The
graphic tool facilitates teachers in confronting their own views about how they teach and how they view adult reading learners.

Viewing perspectives alongside their origins highlights particular implications for adult-reading teachers and programs. First, the findings demonstrate that despite discussing how they draw on levels of teaching-reading knowledge and frameworks, adult-reading teachers may often rely principally on personal experiences and assumptions about learner lives to make decisions about how to teach. Despite quoting theories of adult learning and reading development, teachers talk about using approaches which worked for themselves as child learners, of how they themselves like to learn, and of their own positive childhood experiences. Teachers own personal joy of reading is drawn on to speculate on approaches to motivate and enthuse less-skilled adult readers; adults who have reading difficulties, unlike the teachers who were likely readers whose reading skills followed normal development patterns. Further, generalisations are made about negative life experiences of learners and the need to compensate for this. While personal sources of information and perspectives are important in providing the empathy and rapport-building aspects of the teacher-learner relationship they are not sufficient to inform instruction which can address reading difficulties effectively. Adult-reading teachers need to be watchful of the over-dependence on personal feelings and beliefs which is evident in this study.

Second, teachers in this study contend that they teach the way they do because they are informed by professional experience and observations. Indeed, professional wisdom, acquired through experience, traditionally informs teacher perspectives. While teacher experience is useful, previous studies have established that it does not necessarily match the relevant research (Benseman, 2013) and teachers need to be aware of an over-reliance on professional observations and experience described by teachers in this study.

Third, despite describing the importance of using research-backed, targeted teaching, assumptions are made about learners and how to teach them which appear to have no bearing on the reality of that learner or on their specific learning difficulties. Useful adult reading instruction includes careful recognition of what reading skills an individual has mastered, and
which skills need further development. To address entrenched reading difficulties, programs must be informed by diagnostic assessment (Kruidenier et al., 2010, National Research Council, 2012) not merely by teachers’ subjective views of what the problem is and how to address it. The lack of reliance on diagnostic assessments, and inability to interpret and apply findings, illustrated in adult teacher responses supports the case for more focus on diagnosing reading difficulties in training and ongoing professional learning.

Adult-reading teachers must be aware of, and open to, alternative teaching options and approaches depending on the needs of the learner. To be open to new ideas teachers must be aware of their own knowledge and limitations, and to what informs individual’s teaching decisions (Fives & Buehl, 2012). Both teacher education programs and professional learning must prepare teachers by helping them become aware of when personal perspective and research-based practices are incompatible. More research on the perspectives of teachers and the origins of perspectives is required in order to advance our understanding of teaching practice. A specific focus on possible associations of beliefs with teacher characteristics and training, may inform future targeted professional learning; the more teachers know about themselves, the better the ability to reflect on and modify teaching decisions. In addition, trials are required to evaluate the potential of self-reflective frameworks, such as that created in this paper, in teacher professional learning. Understanding and addressing perspectives and their origins, and how these influence teaching practices, may help teachers identify shortcomings in their perspectives on why adults are less-skilled readers and provide a platform for adult-reading teachers to build new information and improve effectiveness of adult reading teaching.

References


Chapter Seven: Concluding comments

Introduction

The overarching aim of the research presented in the preceding chapters was to explore and examine experiences and practices of less-skilled adult word readers, and the teachers who work with them, with the view to increase awareness and understanding of current adult reading instruction, towards maximising learning in adult reading programs. The research presented is significant and meaningful. Strong reading skills are necessary for all people to be able to participate actively in society (EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy, 2012), and despite decades of literacy interventions, low reading levels continue to be reported for tens of millions of adults across developed countries (OECD Skills Outlook, 2013). Even with the extent and importance of the issue of less-skilled adult readers, little research has been conducted in this field to date (MacArthur, Konold, Glutting, & Alamprese, 2012).

Addressing adult reading difficulties is complex (EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy, 2012). Reading is multifaceted and involves being able to coordinate many components and cognitive processes (Tracey & Morrow, 2012), but much evidence suggests the inability to automatically read words is a primary factor in the breakdown of adult reading skill development (e.g. MacArthur et al., 2012; Macaruso & Shankweiler, 2010; Mellard, Fall & Woods, 2010; National Research Council, 2012). Poor word recognition impedes reading comprehension, leading to unsuccessful reading efforts. Many less-skilled adult readers have difficulties at word level (Macaruso & Shankweiler, 2010) and more needs to be understood about these word reading difficulties and how to address them.

Less-skilled adult readers who present at reading programs are a heterogeneous group with diverse reading skills (Scarborough et al., 2013) and optimal reading instruction must be planned and differentiated to meet individuals’ particular reading needs (National Research Council, 2012). However, the task of providing effective reading instruction challenges adult-reading teachers who have generally received limited training (Bell, McCallum, Ziegler,
In reality, teacher practice is often not consistent with the available research (National Research Council, 2012) and varies considerably (Kendall & McGrath, 2014), and both teacher practices and the beliefs underpinning them warrant further examination.

To achieve the overarching aim of the research to find out more about experiences and practices of less-skilled adult word readers, and the teachers who work with them, a series of interrelated studies was designed, conducted and reported in five papers. Two studies (Papers One and Two) investigated the everyday word reading experiences, and the thinking and strategies used by adult readers. A third study (Paper Three) delved into how adult-reading teachers responded to word reading difficulties in their teaching. This third study also examined particular characteristics of teachers in relation to teaching choices made.

The fourth and fifth studies (Papers Four and Five) explored the adult-reading teachers’ beliefs and origins of beliefs regarding why the adults are less-skilled readers and how best the reading difficulties can be addressed. These final two studies sought to gain increased insight and understanding of adult-reading teacher practices.

This final chapter will now provide summaries of the findings of the five papers described above. The implications of the findings reported in this thesis will then be discussed followed by suggestions for future research. The chapter concludes with a closing statement.

**Summary of Findings**

**Paper One: How less-skilled adult readers experience word-reading**

The aim of the study presented in Chapter Two (Paper One) was to gain understanding of experiences of individuals who are less-skilled word readers. The individual reader and the benefits of their experience are frequently overlooked. In this study, word reading experiences from 36 adult readers were collected. Four narratives were created, which told about guessing, concealing, confusions, and relying on a small bank of known words. All stories demonstrated limited and partial decoding skills.
However, the study aimed to not merely report the reading difficulties but to build understanding of how the word reading is experienced for individuals. In order to organise the experiences, and to provide descriptions that skilled readers can relate to, the study used a metaphor of trying to follow a path through woodland, and depicted readers on a progression of four distinct journeys encountering diverse difficulties. The findings reported some readers as being ‘locked out’ from the start without sufficient knowledge to enter the woodland and find their way through. ‘Locked out’ readers did not have understanding about how letters and sounds connect to make words. A second group of readers were ‘anxious’ and unsure about the journey. ‘Anxious’ readers recognised a small bank of common words but were unable to ‘work out’ most new words they saw. A third group of ‘wandering’ word readers had incomplete and incorrect information, often got lost and were unable to complete the journey. A fourth group of word readers who ‘persist’ to find the way, had mastered many word reading skills but their experience of the journey was draining.

In the stories of individual word readers, an assortment of word reading experiences were described, and revealed levels of shortfalls in processing and skills, as well as the impact of the reading difficulty on the word-reader. In many cases, individuals in the study had been attending adult reading programs for longer than a year but the instruction had not effectively addressed confusion and misunderstanding about word reading. By recounting individuals’ experiences, the findings of Paper Two, highlighted the diversity of word reading practices, the persistence of the practices and the confusions and misunderstandings of readers. The progression of difficulties portrayed in the four narratives provided a unique means for understanding the difficulties of less-skilled word readers.

**Paper Two: What strategies do less-skilled adult readers use to read words, and how aware are they of these strategies?**

The study presented in Chapter Three (Paper Two) followed on from the experiences recounted in Paper One, and again focusing on what individual readers are doing as they read words, examined actual word reading awareness and practices of 38 less-skilled word readers. The research questions were i) Which strategies used by less-skilled adult readers best predict word reading performance on standardised reading tests? And ii) What word
reading strategies do less-skilled adult readers report using, and to what extent do they correlate with direct observations of reading behaviours?

To achieve the aims to examine awareness and strategy use, word reading measures were administered to all participants to measure reading performance. The assessments were followed by semi-structured interviews with individual readers to discuss the strategies used to read the words presented to them in the testing. In addition, observations of word reading efforts were made throughout both the testing and interviews. Readers were observed using six strategies to read the words, three lexical and three non-lexical. Although the two most frequently used strategies were lexical (Use of Analogy and Use of Letter Patterns), of the six, it was two non-lexical strategies (Use of Syllables and Use of Sounds/Break down) that contributed significantly to successful word reading performance.

Self-reported strategy use was then compared to actual strategy use. The results highlighted the fact that the two most important strategy predictors of word reading performance (Use of Syllables and Use of Sounds/Break down) were the two strategies where readers demonstrated the least strategy awareness. The findings of this study (Paper Two) supported the importance of phonological processes in word reading success but more importantly the findings contributed to the under researched questions of what strategies adults are using to read words and how aware the readers are of these strategies.

**Paper Three: The teaching focus of adult-reading teachers when developing word reading skills**

The findings from Papers One and Two indicated that, despite attending adult reading programs, many adult readers remain unclear and unaware of what to do, to be able to read words. Generally, research reports that adult-reading teacher practices vary greatly and results of adult reading programs are inconsistent. The aim of Paper Three was to examine specific teacher practices in addressing word reading and shifted the focus from the less-skilled adult readers to the adult-reading teachers who work with them. The research questions were i) What teaching focus do adult-reading teachers prioritise when teaching specific word reading skills? And ii) Do the teaching foci that adult-reading teachers
prioritise when teaching specific word reading skills vary with the age, sex, years of experience of teachers, employment status, and qualifications and training teachers receive to teach adult reading?

Sixty adult-reading teachers completed a survey designed to examine word teaching practices, provided the demographic information sought, and also indicated how they would prioritise content from a list, when teaching a profiled reader with detailed word reading difficulties. The teaching content included three practices to build word level skills, one item to build fluency and two comprehension strategies. Just under 60% of the teachers prioritised building word level skills. Despite clear information detailing the difficulties the profiled reader had at word level, the remaining 40% of teachers prioritised building fluency or teaching comprehension strategies. Results, whether explained as lack of understanding of how to interpret diagnostic results, or that teachers may believe a meaning based approach is better, provided new insights into the content choices made when teaching word reading. Forty percent of teachers made instruction choices not consistent with current research.

No significant association was found between the teaching content prioritised and teacher characteristics of age, sex, years of experience or employment status. However, results of the examination of training/qualifications provided new understandings of teacher practice. A group of 21 teachers in this study (Paper Three) had teaching qualifications but not specific adult literacy training. This group were evenly split as to whether they prioritised word reading skill development or focused on other reading components. Instruction from a trained teacher without specialist adult literacy training, had only around 50% likelihood that delivery would be targeted to specifically building word level skills. A group of 33 teachers had specific adult literacy qualifications and the findings showed this group were more likely to teach to address specific word reading needs. The examination of teacher practices in addressing word reading difficulties demonstrated that content delivery was variable and training/qualification of adult-reading teachers likely played a role in instruction choices.
Paper Four: Adult-reading teachers’ beliefs about how less-skilled adult readers can be taught to read

The findings of Paper Three extended understanding of variable practice found elsewhere and revealed potential links between training/qualifications and practice. One explanation for why teachers teach the way they do, is that teacher decision making is influenced by personal beliefs concerning how something can be learnt, or how someone should be taught. Very little is understood about adult reading-teachers’ beliefs concerning less-skilled adult readers and how they can learn to read. In addition to variability in adult teacher practice there are multiple reports of ineffective teaching. The study reported in Paper Four aimed to understand more about the impact of adult reading programs and explored approaches teachers used, and the beliefs informing the practice.

Sixty adult-reading teachers completed a survey and answered open-ended questions about teaching an adult reader with specific word reading difficulties. The fictional less-skilled word reader was described in detail in the survey. The analysis of survey responses found four categories of approach to teaching that characterised the beliefs of the teachers about how a less-skilled adult reader could be taught to read. The categories increased in complexity, extending from reassurance, through the task-based approach, the theory-based approach to the responsive approach. Reassurance was the least complex approach and displayed a strong belief that the reader would learn if opportunities are presented in a supportive, caring environment. In the task-based approach there was belief that reading skill would develop if tasks were provided and completed. The theory based approach demonstrated a rigid belief in a particular theory of reading development while the responsive approach was comprehensive and underpinned by beliefs that there are many teaching approaches and that teachers must be flexible to address specific reading difficulties of individual readers. Two themes of knowledge (what was known) and philosophy (what was thought) emerged and characterised the variation in the approaches.

The approaches chosen by the adult-reading teachers in this study (Paper Four) were not necessarily informed by either the reading needs or goals of the less-skilled word reader that the teachers were asked to consider. Practices of some adult teachers aligned to personal
beliefs about how an adult can learn to read, rather than to informed knowledge about the reading process. The categorisation of the four approaches to adult reading teaching demonstrated the influence of belief, and the increasing complexity of the understandings and knowledge required for effective targeted delivery.

**Paper Five: Adult literacy teachers’ perspectives on reading difficulties and the origins of these perspectives**

Concerns of variable results described in adult reading programs elsewhere, underpin the studies of adult-reading teachers reported in Papers Four and Five. Paper Four described variation in beliefs about teaching and showed how the beliefs influenced instructional approach. Although teachers are often unconscious of their teaching beliefs and where the beliefs come from, awareness of both is a necessary step if teachers are to evaluate their own practice. Very few studies have focused on adult-reading teacher perspectives of how and why a learner can or cannot learn, or the origins of such views. Paper Five aimed to extend understanding of teacher practice and explored adult-reading teachers’ perspectives about adult readers and the origins of these views.

Nineteen adult-reading teachers were interviewed and asked open questions about their teaching aims and intentions. Questions focused on what teachers hoped to achieve and how they expected to do this. Four themes emerged from the analysis of interview responses to describe the teachers’ perspectives as to why the adult readers are less-skilled. The teachers had perspectives that various learning, environmental and psychological needs were not met and managed for the readers, and enjoyment of reading was not developed. The perspectives accounted for, to varying degrees, why the adults are less-skilled readers in the view of the teachers interviewed. These views came from teachers’ own experiences learning and reading, and experiences as a teacher. In addition, the perspectives originated from knowledge of teaching reading, and knowledge of reading frameworks and theory.

Contradictions emerged in the findings and suggested teachers were not always aware of why they taught the way they did. Teachers cited reliance on reading knowledge and knowledge of teaching adults, but talked about approaches which worked for children and cited personal
positive childhood experiences as justification for teaching decisions. Personal joy in reading inspired teachers who believed the apparent lack of such in learners was an explanation for poor reading performance. When making decisions about appropriate practice, teachers in the study (Paper Five) appeared to have frequently relied on personal experiences as a reader and learner, and made assumptions about less-skilled readers’ lives. Teachers appeared unaware of the discrepancy between what they said they were doing and why they said they did something. The inconsistencies revealed are important understandings in evaluating teacher practice.

**Implications**

The five studies reported in the previous section were designed and conducted to explore and examine experiences and practices of less-skilled adult word readers and adult-reading teachers. Each study had specific aims, but taken as a whole body of work, the results seek to increase awareness and understanding of adult word reading difficulties and interventions to address them.

Over-all, the results discussed in the preceding section found less-skilled adult readers to have diverse confusions and difficulties in word reading which were not being effectively addressed. Adult-reading teachers too, were found to have many misunderstandings about teaching word reading, incomplete knowledge about how to address difficulties, and to have an over-reliance on personal beliefs in informing practice.

The implications to be drawn from the findings of the five studies can be viewed from four distinct, yet interrelated perspectives: implications for the adult reader, for the adult-reading teacher, for adult-reading teacher training and for adult reading instruction. (see Figure 7.1). Each perspective informs, and is informed by, the other in an ongoing cycle of evaluation and refinement. Each perspective must be attended to if word reading difficulties are to be effectively addressed. The perspectives are discussed below.
Implications for learners

There are at least three implications from the results of the studies with regards to less-skilled adult word readers. First, the narratives from Paper One told of the diversity of word reading difficulties and of a lifetime of not being listened to, in respect to what the specific reading difficulties are. Discussions about less-skilled adult reading must start with the individual adult reader. The stories of each reader provide a starting point for instruction and broaden reading teachers’ insights into what questions to ask and what behaviours to look for. The importance of the learner ‘voice’ and the specific reading information given, must be acknowledged as central to any reading intervention. The reader must be empowered to tell their story. Implicit in this, is an initial and ongoing conversation with each individual about the reading difficulties impeding successful reading for that individual.

Second, both Papers One and Two identified diverse, entrenched reader confusions and misunderstandings about how words are read, and limited or no awareness of word reading processes and strategies. One implication of this is that robust, individual diagnostic assessment must be part of each adult reader’s learning plan. What each reader knows and what each reader misunderstands and does not know, must form the basis of each reader’s instruction.

Third, adult reader ‘mis’knowledge and limited awareness at word level were clearly identified. The implication of this, for the reader, is that individuals will continue to have limited reading success without explicit teaching that addresses the confusions and builds awareness and strategy use.

The implications for adult readers highlighted in this thesis are intertwined with implications for adult reading practice that are now considered from the perspective of teachers and reading instruction.
Implications for adult-reading teachers

The findings of Paper Three, Four and Five demonstrated that adult-reading teachers made teaching decisions on how best to address adult word reading difficulties that are, at times, inconsistent with available research. In addition, teaching decisions were frequently informed by personal beliefs, were contradictory, and demonstrated misunderstanding about word reading processes. The implications of these findings include: First, adult-reading teachers
need encouragement and opportunities to increase and update their knowledge of the reading process, and of the best methods to develop reading skills in adults with word reading difficulties. Contradictions and confusions must be eliminated. Professional learning must occur to clarify the misunderstandings that were observed about reading and how to teach it.

Second, adult-reading teachers must become thoughtful and aware, both of their personal beliefs, and the impact of such on practice. Both the hierarchy of approaches described in Paper Four and the perspectives and origins of perspectives identified in Paper Five can serve as self-reflection tools to enable teachers to evaluate the assumptions and beliefs which guide their decision making.

Third, the findings suggest that many adult-reading teachers do not use diagnostic information about reading difficulties to inform reading instruction. Teachers must understand why and how to assess, and what to do with the information they obtain.

Fourth, the findings of over-reliance on beliefs and under reliance on research suggest a strong need for teachers to aspire to be responsive in approach as described in Paper Four. The responsive practitioner has specialist knowledge about word reading, is able to use diagnostic information and is flexible in approach, so as to best meet individual needs.

The findings of Papers One and Two suggested that word reading instruction had been largely ineffective for the adult readers interviewed. Those readers remained unable to read words. These findings, together with those about adult-reading teachers, inform discussions on adult reading teaching in the next section.

Implications for adult reading instruction

An overarching aim of this thesis was to increase understanding of less-skilled adult word readers and adult-reading teachers, in order to inform effective reading interventions. The narratives created in Paper One suggested that each adult reader can contribute much information about individual word reading difficulties to inform specific interventions. To
allow reading stories to be heard, adult reading programs would benefit from established procedures for initial and ongoing conversation between teacher and reader. Interview guidelines would ensure the conversations elicit the required information to help unpack reading difficulties. In addition, adult readers demonstrated diverse difficulties, and to unpack these and target the learning, sensitive diagnostic assessment is necessary and must be part of all programs.

Papers One and Two identified lack of awareness and confusions about word level tasks that require explicit teaching to remediate. Papers Three, Four and Five suggested that such teaching does not always occur. Content of word reading programs must match the needs of the individual readers in the class. Readers must be explicitly taught in ways that increase awareness and understanding of how to read words.

The inconsistencies in teaching approaches and influence of personal beliefs reported in Papers Three, Four and Five suggest a requirement for program content to be structured in ways to ensure appropriate information and teaching options are available to teachers. The ad hoc process described by many teachers in the studies may be explained by lack of resources and specific curriculum suggestions. While content of sessions needs to remain flexible to meet individual needs it must be informed by research. Expertly prepared materials need to be developed and made available to programs.

In addition, the findings of Paper Three suggested that teachers who have some qualification or training about teaching adult literacy are more likely as a group, to have an approach focused on adult word reading. Adult reading instruction may be more effective if it is delivered by those with specific professional learning linked to adult reading difficulties.

The findings of the five papers in this study strongly support the need for expert knowledge at practitioner level and directed individualised teaching. These requirements infer a need for specific training of adult-reading teachers discussed in the next section.
Implications for adult-reading teacher training

The findings of Papers Three, Four and Five describe adult-reading teacher practice which may be informed by personal beliefs and assumptions, by incorrect understanding of adult word reading, or be not focused on reader needs. Teachers who work with adults that have reading difficulties need specific and robust teacher training to build the specialised knowledge and skills required for the diverse reading difficulties and confusions reported by adult readers in Papers One and Two. The knowledge and skills include ability to diagnose difficulties and to design and provide a range of targeted reading interventions. Tens of millions of adults worldwide are less-skilled readers so the specialist training must be widely accessible and be supported by sustained investment in the sector.

The findings of Paper Three reported diverse courses and training at various qualification levels used by adult-reading teachers to inform and legitimise practice. The training ranged from a few days to several years and did not necessarily include content specific to less-skilled adult learners or specifically those with reading difficulties. Findings further suggested that specialised adult literacy training likely played a role in having focused delivery. A regulated structure of relevant, appropriate qualifications, training, and ongoing professional learning must be developed and universally implemented to build effectiveness of delivery.

Papers Four and Five identified approaches to delivery often underpinned by contradictory personal beliefs and conjectures. In general, it is difficult for anyone to evaluate personal behaviours and practice without consciousness of the role and the impact of personal beliefs. Further, to appraise beliefs, individuals must be aware of origins of the beliefs. Self-reflection to build awareness in this regard must be part of adult teacher professional learning. The categories of approach and framework of perspectives serve as useful tools to facilitate discussions about the role and impact of beliefs in teaching. Likewise, the progression of word reading described in Paper One provided insights into the experiences of word readers and has applications for building appreciation of the extent and entrenched nature of word reading difficulties.
The findings of the papers reported in this thesis have serious implications for adult readers, those who teach them, for the training of those teachers, and for adult reading programs. Some major implications have been discussed above. No category or group of implications should be considered in isolation. Structures implemented or actions taken in one area have implications for the individuals and institutions in another area. A consolidated action which considers the learner, the teacher and the teaching is required to address the issues reported in the thesis.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

Considering the importance of developing adult reading, and specifically word reading skills, the field remains largely under-researched (Carpentieri, 2013; Kruidenier, MacArthur, & Wrigley, 2010; MacArthur et al., 2012; National Research Council, 2012). While a wide range of studies in all aspects of the field are required, the results reported here contribute to the research, specifically to building understanding of the complexity of both word reading difficulties and the responses of adult-reading teachers. Suggestions for ongoing research include:

First, a wide variety of studies are required to continue to explore and examine adult word reading difficulties, and the optimal ways to address the difficulties. Chief among these are empirical studies that will inform teaching, by extending understanding of the contributions of different word level processes to less-skilled adult reading performance. Future research contributions should build on the findings of this thesis. Examples include further work to examine the inconsistent use of strategies when reading words, or the exhibited entrenched confusions in word reading tasks. Very little research has focused on developing adult readers’ ability to monitor their own word reading activities. Understanding more about building metacognition of less-skilled adult word readers is an important matter for future research. In addition, previous work measuring the effectiveness of various instructional approaches (e.g. Greenberg et al., 2011; Scarborough et al., 2013) must be expanded with more investigation of effectiveness of interventions using specific content or with a particular focus.
Second, assessment and diagnosis of specific adult word reading difficulties is poorly done and not well understood. Diagnosis allows provision of targeted strategies to learners, and is crucial for effective adult reading instruction (Nanda, Greenberg, & Morris, 2010; National Research Council, 2012; Scarborough et al., 2013). Previous studies have provided strong support for the reliability of measures of multiple reading components in adult readers (MacArthur, Konold, Glutting, & Alamprese, 2010; MacArthur et al., 2012). However, more information is required about the best ways to assess adult readers, both in terms of the approach to the assessment, and the measures to use. This information is required both for use in adult reading programs but also to inform reading teacher training. In addition, confusions and misunderstandings of key word level skills reported in this thesis strongly suggest the need to trial reader interview formats that will draw out such information and help inform the instruction.

Third, to be effective, adult reading instruction requires teachers who use teaching approaches and content consistent with what is known about successful adult reading interventions (National Research Council, 2012). Reports in this thesis describe teachers using approaches based on personal beliefs and, at times, demonstrating lack of knowledge and understanding of adult reading processes. A measure of teacher instructional knowledge has been developed for use in professional learning of adult-reading teachers (Bell et al., 2013) but is currently not widely used. Further research needs to investigate the appropriateness and usefulness of such measures and explore additional tools for use in professional learning. Tools to investigate include the Hierarchy of Approaches and Framework of Perspectives reported in Papers Four and Five. Given the findings of over-reliance on personal beliefs, the use of these two tools in facilitating teacher self-reflection is worthy of further research.

Fourth, systems and structures to improve the variability of teacher practice are required. Previous work supports that teacher expertise is built through, among other things, engagement with professional learning (Wignall, 2015). However, systems of authentic training, validated through transparent qualification structures do not routinely exist in the adult literacy sector. There is an urgent need for robust definition, development, and
refinement of systems that regulate and monitor teacher quality. With no current agreement on the focus, nature and extent of professional learning required, further exploration of the relationship between teacher practice and existing training/qualifications will provide information as to what is currently useful and effective and what needs supplementing and upgrading. One avenue to address, is to come to some agreement on what qualities and attributes are required in the adult teacher. Earlier work discusses the ‘self-reflective practitioner’ and ‘the adaptive teacher’ (Wignall, 2015). Paper Four in this thesis suggested the need for a ‘responsive’ approach to practice and describes the skills and abilities possessed by a teacher using such an approach. A useful focus for future work will be to build on what has been said about ideal attributes of the adult-reading teacher and create a model of essential characteristics to inform the debate about the training/qualifications required.

The suggestions made here for future research provide ideas for specific studies to be conducted but should not detract from the fact that the field of adult literacy, and specifically less-skilled adult reading, will benefit greatly from robust empirical studies to inform teachers and programs.

**Concluding Statement**

The aim of this thesis was to explore and examine experiences and practices of less-skilled adult word readers and adult-reading teachers to enhance the learning that occurs in adult reading programs. Successful adult reading instruction builds reading skills and increases the likelihood of full participation in many aspects of 21st century life.

Papers One and Two reported the diversity of word reading difficulties, the lack of awareness, and the engrained misperceptions among adult readers in the studies. Papers Three, Four and Five again reported diversity and engrained misperceptions, in this case, of the adult-reading teachers and teaching practices. All findings in this thesis highlighted the complexity of addressing adult reading difficulties but findings offer insights into word reading and adult-reading teachers that can inform instruction and training of practitioners.
To build specific reading skills, practitioners need specialised expertise. This includes abilities to diagnose and to provide a range of targeted strategies. Findings of this study strongly suggest reading teachers need support and training to build awareness and knowledge of individual reader’s difficulties and of appropriate reading interventions. Further, teachers in Papers Four and Five over-relied on personal beliefs to inform the approach adopted to teach adult reading. Teachers must be facilitated to become conscious of personal beliefs and how these impact on instruction, and to be able to identify failings in their perspectives and make adjustments. The learnings and knowledge about adult literacy learners and teachers has the potential to improve effectiveness of instruction and build adult reading skill and thereby impact on lives of individuals and communities.

References


Appendices

Appendix A: Letter of information to less-skilled readers

Participant Information Sheet:
Single-word reading strategies of adult readers

Associate Professor Elaine Chapman
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M 0400101402
E Elaine.Chapman@uwa.edu.au
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Reading is a key literacy skill, and the importance of being able to recognise a word accurately for the development of other reading components such as reading comprehension is widely documented. Despite this, there are limited international studies, and fewer still Australian studies, that focus on the word-level components of adult reading. I invite you to participate in a study designed to address this gap. The study is being conducted by myself as Chief Investigator and Janet McHardy, who is completing her PhD in this area. The study aims to discover the strategies used by you to recognise and read words, and how effective the strategies are in successful word reading. The goal is to provide information about single-word reading that will be used to inform teaching practice in adult reading programmes.

You will be asked to complete six standardised measures of reading skill: a of regular word reading task, irregular word reading and nonword reading, a phoneme deletion task, a phonological choice task, an orthographic verification task, a spelling task and a sentence comprehension task. Your individual results will be kept entirely confidential. You will also be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview. In this interview, the researcher will ask you about your individual strategies and concepts about word reading. The interview will have two parts. The first will include questions designed to collect information on your background and reading history. The second will involve questions about your word recognition strategies. The interviews will be audiotaped to allow the researcher to transcribe and analyse the data. We see no physical or other risks to you in participating in the study. Participating is anticipated to take no
more than 2 hours of your time, including the completion of both the tasks and the interview.

The results of this research will be published in academic journals, and in the doctoral thesis of Janet McHardy. No individual standardised results will be included within any of these publications – only aggregate results will be presented. Individual quotes may be used in the publications, but these will be written in such a way that no individual participant can be identified.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You are free to withdraw from the research at any time whilst you are completing the tasks or participating in the interview. You are also free to withdraw at any time within one month of completing either the tasks or the interview. Thereafter, the results may be published, and withdrawal may not be possible. Withdrawing from this study will not prejudice you in any way, and you need give no reason or justification for withdrawing. Should you withdraw during the data collection or within a month of completing the data collection, your records will be destroyed, unless you agree that we may retain and use the information obtained prior to your withdrawal.

If you have any questions about this research study, please contact the Chief Investigator (Associate Professor Elaine Chapman) on one of the phone numbers provided at the top of this sheet.

Yours Sincerely,

Elaine Chapman

Approval to conduct this research has been provided by The University of Western Australia, in accordance with its ethics review and approval procedures. Any person considering participation in this research project, or agreeing to participate, may raise any questions or issues with the researchers at any time. In addition, any person not satisfied with the response of researchers may raise ethics issues or concerns, and may make any complaints about this research project by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at The University of Western Australia on (08) 6488 3703 or by emailing to hreo-research@uwa.edu.au. All research participants are entitled to retain a copy of any Participant Information For and/or Participant Consent Form relating to this research project.
Appendix B: Adult-reading teacher survey

Exploring the instructional reading practices of adult literacy teachers

1. Your completed survey is part of a wider study which aims to provide information to literacy tutors to be more effective in teaching reading. It will add to our knowledge of how learners can receive more informed, useful teaching. Your views as a literacy practitioner are very important to me. There is no single correct answer to the questions below. I am interested in getting alternative view points and would like you to answer as fully and honestly as you can. Please make a comment for every question.

Approval to conduct this research has been provided by the University of Western Australia, in accordance with its ethics review and approval procedures. Any person agreeing to participate may raise any questions or issues at any time by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Western Australia on (08) 6488 3703 or by emailing to hreo-research@uwa.edu.au.

PLEASE NOTE THAT IF YOU BEGIN THE SURVEY, AND THEN WISH TO LEAVE IT AND COMPLETE IT AT ANOTHER TIME, YOU MUST:
1. COMPLETE THE ANSWERS TO THE PAGE YOU WERE WORKING ON - YOU CAN THEN SIMPLY CLOSE THE BROWSER PAGE TO CLOSE THE SURVEY. YOUR COMMENTS AND ANSWERS WILL BE SAVED.
2. WHEN YOU WISH TO RE-ENTER THE SURVEY, PLEASE GO BACK TO THE ORIGINAL EMAIL AND USE THE LINK YOU WERE GIVEN. THE SURVEY WILL REOPEN AT THE FIRST UNCOMPLETED PAGE.
3. PLEASE NOTE THAT YOU MUST USE THE SAME COMPUTER THAT YOU WERE WORKING ON WHEN YOU BEGAN THE SURVEY.

☐ I consent to participating in this study
☐ I do not consent to participating in this study
Demographic Information

In order to make the best use of your responses, we would like to gather some general information about you.

* 2. Your Gender
   - Male
   - Female

* 3. Age group
   - 20-29 years
   - 30-39 years
   - 40-49 years
   - 50-59 years
   - Over 60 years

* 4. What are your qualifications related to teaching literacy?

* 5. List any other qualifications you have?

* 6. How many years’ experience do you have as an adult literacy practitioner?

* 7. On what basis are you currently employed to teach adult literacy?
   - Employed full-time
   - Employed part-time
   - Employed casually
   - Volunteer
   If part-time, casual or volunteer, please indicate the number of hours per week on average:

* 8. Are you required to follow a specific curriculum in your adult literacy practice, or are you able to devise your own session content?
   - I need to follow a specific curriculum
   - I am able to plan my own session content

* 9. Are you based in Australia or New Zealand?
Exploring the instructional reading practices of adult literacy teachers

You are to start working with John, who has joined a year-long literacy programme with a learning goal of wanting to “be a better reader and to be able to read about his hobby which is sport, especially basketball and cricket”. John is 45 years old and speaks English as his only language.

An initial interview has been conducted with John by the programme coordinator and you are given the following information:

- Regular word reading 29/40
- Irregular word reading 22/40
- Non-word reading 2/40
- Phoneme deletion task 6/18

In addition, John has read a piece he chose from the sports section of the newspaper about basketball:

**THE NEWSPAPER STATES:** If the Breakers could play Cairns at home every week their long shot at the playoffs would become a sure thing. The defending champions started their unlikely quest for a finals berth in dominant fashion tonight, fanning the Taipans 96-78 at Vector Arena.

**JOHN READ (ERRORS SHOWN IN CAPITALS):** If the Breakers could play Cairns at home every week their long SHOOT at the playoffs would become a sure thing. The DEFEATED CHAMPS started their UNLIKE QUESTION for a finals BID in “I DON'T KNOW THAT WORD” FAST tonight, TELLING the Taipans 96-78 at Vector Arena.

When questioned, John said that it means that the Breakers are doing well and he knows they beat the Taipans because he saw it on TV.

**10. Given the information you already have, what further information might you seek from John?**

**11. What would you do with John in the next session and why?**

The following is an extract from a word reading task John completed. John was told all the words were ‘real’ words. Below are the words read correctly and incorrectly (error made is provided in parentheses for each word), and words that John said he did not know.

Correctly read: see, red, milk, was, jar, letter, city, cliff, listen, wrap, licence, gadget

Incorrect read: then (when), between (beware), plot (pilot), grunt (grant), sour (sugar), privilege (problick), humidity (humble), tough (together)

Unknown words: huge

**12. How might this information help you when working with John?**
THE NEWSPAPER STATES:

"The team appeared to have blown an iron grip on the match when they were dismissed for 105 in their second innings and with Brown having chosen to bat again rather than enforce the follow on. Step forward Williams, whose lung-busting, unbroken 10-over spell on a hot afternoon kept spirits afloat as the batsmen seemed set to make light work of a 407 target. The 40-run win had spirits soaring. Cricket player Adam Smith became just the 20th Australian to score a test century on debut."

John begins to read. He has three attempts to read iron, appears not to be able to work it out so misses out the word and carries on reading. He says the word group instead of grip but doesn't hesitate and seems happy with what he is saying. He stops at spirits and looks at you and does not continue.

13. As the literacy practitioner working with John, what do you do when he stops reading?

14. If you only have 6 hour-long sessions to work with John what would be the focus of the sessions (list up to 5 priorities, in order of importance)?

15. Using the drop-down boxes on the left, rank the following in order of the importance you would place on each, in your work with John. If you place no importance on an item or would not include it in your programme, please tick the N/A box on the right (there can be more than one item you rank as N/A):

- Developing John’s ability to use strategies to construct meaning from print
- Building skill in understanding how the sound of words are connected to print
- Developing John’s skill in decoding unfamiliar words
- Building John’s ability to read smoothly and accurately
- Teaching John the strategy of reading on to see if he can work out an unknown word
- Developing John’s ability to hear and distinguish the sounds within words
- Building rapport with John
- Building John’s confidence in his reading ability

N/A

16. If you have ranked any item as N/A, please briefly explain why:

17. OPTIONAL QUESTION

We realise that a survey of this kind does not permit elaborate responses, or allow you to express fully your approach. We would be very interested to hear more about your approach. Comment below and/or if you are willing to speak with us (either in person or over the phone) to clarify or elaborate on some of your responses, please provide your name and either an email address or a phone number:
Appendix C: Adult-reading teacher interview guidelines

Name ___________________________       Date_________ Venue_____________________

Interviewer________________________ Start time________ Finish time_____________

1. What are the aims of adult-reading teachers when they work with a less-skilled adult reader? What reasons do they give for having these aims? What challenges do they have in trying to realise their aims?

I want you to think about adult reading.

- When you are working with a learner what are you hoping to achieve in your sessions?

- Why do you think *the things you mention* are important?

- What do you think makes you think that way?

- Are you aware of learning about this?

- What makes it hard to achieve what you want to in a session?

2. What strategies do adult-reading teachers adopt in trying to realise their aims? What reasons do they give for adopting these strategies? What challenges do they face in adopting them?
A strategy, as used here, is a general plan and includes approaches taken and instructional practices used.

You have told me what you are hoping to achieve in regards to adult reading in your sessions.

- Now, tell me what you use, or do in your sessions so that you achieve what you want to achieve?

- Why do you choose to do these things?

- Why do you think they are important and/or appropriate?

- Are you aware of learning about this?

- What are the issues, challenges, problems you have found using or trying to use these?

3. What significance do adult-reading teachers attach to their aims and strategies? What reasons do they give for their position on this? What challenges do they face in trying to maintain this position?

Think about what you have told me about what you want to achieve in regards to adult reading and the things you do in your sessions (which help you achieve what you want to).

- Tell me about how important it is to you that you achieve the aims.

- Tell me about `bits` which are more important than other `bits`
- Why is it important to you that you achieve the aims?

- Why do you think the ‘bits’ you describe are more or less important?

- What are some of the barriers to achieving the aims you prioritise?

- Tell me which of the things/ways of teaching (strategies) you have described are more important to you.

- Why are these more important to you?

- Are you aware of learning about this?

- What are some of the barriers to using these things/ways of teaching?

4. What outcomes do adult-reading teachers expect from pursuing their aims and strategies? What reasons do they give for expecting these outcomes? What challenges do they face in trying to realise them?

Think about when you are working with an adult reader and all the things we have talked about (what you hope to achieve, what things you will do and use) “fall into place”.

- What do you think the result(s) or outcome(s) of your work with your learner will be if you are able to achieve what you intended to achieve, using the things you planned to use and do?

- Why do you think this will be the outcome(s)?

- What issues do you have in attempting to arrive at these outcomes?
Appendix D: Submission and Publication Record

Paper One: How less-skilled adult readers experience word-reading

Australian Journal of Language and Literacy - Decision on Manuscript ID AJLL-2016-0047.R3

30-Jul-2017

Dear Mrs. McHardy:

It is a pleasure to accept your manuscript entitled "How less-skilled adult readers experience word-reading" in its current form for publication in the Australian Journal of Language and Literacy.

Thank you for your fine contribution. On behalf of the Editors of the Australian Journal of Language and Literacy, we look forward to your continued contributions to the Journal.

Sincerely,
Dr. Jennifer Rennie
Editor-in-Chief, Australian Journal of Language and Literacy
jennifer.rennie@monash.edu
Paper Two: What strategies do less-skilled adult readers use to read words, and how aware are they of these strategies?

The submission id is: READ-D.17-00182

Please refer to this number in any future correspondence.

Dear Mrs McHardy,

Thank you for submitting your manuscript, What strategies do less-skilled adult readers use to read words, and how aware are they of these strategies?, to Reading and Writing.

During the review process, you can keep track of the status of your manuscript by accessing the following web site:

http://read.edmgr.com/

Your username is: janetmch
Your password is: available at this link http://read.edmgr.com/Default.aspx?pg=accountFinder.aspx&firstname=Janet&lastname=McHardy&email_address=janetmchardy@gmail.com

Should you require any further assistance please feel free to e-mail the Editorial Office by clicking on "Contact Us" in the menu bar at the top of the screen.

With kind regards,
Springer Journals Editorial Office
Reading and Writing
Paper Three: The teaching focus of adult-reading teachers when developing word reading skills
Paper Four: Adult-reading teachers’ beliefs about how less-skilled adult readers can be taught to read

Adult Reading Teachers’ Beliefs about How Less-Skilled Adult Readers can be Taught to Read

JANET MCHARDY and ELAINE CHAPMAN

Abstract

Despite large-scale interventions, significant numbers of adults worldwide continue to have problems with basic literacy, in particular in the area of reading. To be effective, adult reading teachers need expert knowledge at practitioner level. However, practices in adult reading education vary widely, often reflecting the individual beliefs of each teacher about how an adult can learn to read. In this study, phenomenographic analysis was used to identify categories of approaches to teaching adult reading, used by a group of 60 teachers in Western Australia and New Zealand. Four approaches were identified: reassurance, task-based, theory-based and responsive. It is argued that for teachers to become effective and consistent in responding to learner needs, they must understand their own beliefs and the consequences of these. The identification of different approaches in adult reading education is an important step in this process.

Introduction

Full participation in 21st century society and the labour market requires the capacity to accumulate knowledge and to develop and maintain a broad range of skills (Australian Industry Group 2013, Satherley and Lawes 2007). Literacy skills are fundamental in this process. There are numerous social and economic benefits, both for individuals and communities, associated with possessing strong literacy skills (e.g. National Research Council 2012, Perkins 2009, Tertiary Education Commission 2010). Low adult literacy levels have been linked to unemployment, social isolation, poverty and broader health issues (Chesters, Ryan and Sinning 2013, Miller, McCordle and Hernandez 2010, Perkins 2009).

Reading is a key literacy component. Difficulties in reading persist through the lifespan, contributing to ongoing low literacy levels (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2013, National Research Council 2012). The importance of reading has prompted various efforts to address low reading skills across many countries, and various large-scale, organised, and funded national projects have been established (e.g. Australian Industry Group 2013, McShane 2005, National Research Council 2012). Despite considerable investments in adult reading programs reports of insufficient impact and progress appear consistently within the literature (Australian Industry Group 2013, Palameta, Myers and Conte 2013).
Dear Ms. McHardy,
Thank you very much for your prompt resubmission; the manuscript will be sent out to reviewers again and you will hear back from us once those reviews are received and the editorial team has come to a decision. Please feel free to contact us with any questions you may have regarding the process. Thank you again.

Sincerely,

Journal Editorial Team
Amy D. Rose, Northern Illinois University
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Heather Brown, University of North Carolina -Charlotte
Nora Devlin, Editorial Assistant, Rutgers University

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