

Working with learners who are reading at entry level

This resource for educators was developed by the National Centre of Literacy and Numeracy for Adults in 2010. It contains 4 modules:

- Module 1: Identifying strengths and learning needs
- Module 2: Vocabulary
- Module 3: Comprehension
- Module 4: The Reading Programme

Module 2: Vocabulary

Learners' vocabulary knowledge is a critical component of their ability to read. This module covers:

- assessing learners' vocabulary
- different approaches to building learners' vocabulary

Module 2 has 20 short chapters:

1. Vocabulary
2. What vocabulary is
3. What it means to "know" a word
4. Vocabulary issues for adults reading at entry level
5. The vocabulary vicious circle
6. Assessing vocabulary
7. The Vocabulary Assessment Tool
8. Items in the assessment tool
9. Learner reports using the Vocabulary Assessment
10. Vocabulary Assessment categories: extended
11. Vocabulary Assessment categories: expanded
12. Vocabulary Assessment categories: emerging
13. Strengthening vocabulary for adult learners
14. Building vocabulary through oral language activities
15. Teaching reading vocabulary: before reading
16. Teaching reading vocabulary: during reading
17. Words with multiple meanings
18. Building vocabulary: word families
19. Building vocabulary: developing word associations
20. Next steps

1. Introduction

This module looks at the critical role that vocabulary plays in reading.

In Module 1 we touched on the importance of oral language and suggested some ways to find out about adult learners' language – in particular their listening or oral vocabulary – as a first step in any investigation to determine why they might be having difficulty reading.

This section further explores vocabulary and describes ways to build learners' vocabulary in order to support their reading comprehension.

2. What vocabulary is

- **Vocabulary** refers to the words and phrases that people know and use. It includes an understanding of how words work in relation to each other and within specific contexts.
- Vocabulary is described as being either
 - receptive (listening and reading) or
 - productive (speaking and writing)
- It's also sometimes described as being either
 - oral (speaking and listening) or
 - reading (print)

3. What it means to "know" a word

- "Knowing" a word is complex. There are different levels of knowledge about a word from knowing what a word means in a single, everyday context to understanding the different meanings of a word, including how it is used in quite specialised contexts and how it is used in connection with other words.
- Multiple exposures to a word are necessary if the word is to become part of an individual's vocabulary. Research shows that after 40 encounters with a word, learners are still extending their knowledge of it.
- Most early readers have a bigger oral (listening and speaking) vocabulary than reading vocabulary, but this difference narrows as they develop their reading expertise.

4. Vocabulary issues for adults reading at entry level

- Some adults have decoding difficulties, but can understand words if the words are read to them.
- Some adults can decode text, but do not understand the words they've decoded.
- Some adults have both decoding and comprehension issues, including difficulties understanding at the word level (that is vocabulary).

5. The vocabulary vicious circle

Vocabulary issues for adults are compounded when they're not fluent readers. Why?

Our richest source of learning new words beyond the age of 10 is through reading (e.g., newspapers, books, magazines). Adults with decoding difficulties have been unable to access these print sources. Over time this can have a negative impact on vocabulary.

6. Assessing vocabulary

Although it's difficult to get an exact assessment of someone's vocabulary, it's still important to find out as much as you can about their knowledge of words and phrases. This is because vocabulary knowledge is a key factor in being a fluent and independent reader.

(You can read more about the challenges of assessing vocabulary on pages 61-62 in *Applying Research in Reading Instruction for Adults* (NIFL 2005). The full document can be found at:

<https://lincs.ed.gov/publications/pdf/applyingresearch.pdf>

7. The Vocabulary Assessment Tool

- A vocabulary assessment has been developed as part of the Literacy and Numeracy for Adults Assessment Tool (LNAAT). This assessment has been particularly designed to gather information about the vocabulary of learners at entry level and the early steps of the Progressions.
- Unlike the other assessments in the tool, the Vocabulary Assessment does not use the Learning Progressions as its underlying framework. Instead, the vocabulary assessment will provide an estimate as to whether the learners' **receptive** vocabulary is emerging, extended or expanding.
- The Assessment Tool can be accessed [here](#).

8. Items in the LNAAT

The Vocabulary Assessment draws from a bank of around 200 items, selected from internationally recognised word lists including the General Services List (GSL), Academic Word List (AWL) and British National Corpus (BNC). These words represent the 7000 most used word families.

- All items have been trialled with New Zealand learners, including learners who have English as an additional language.
- The items are either multi-choice, where the learner selects a synonym for a word or words underlined in a sentence, or they are asked to select an image that illustrates the meaning of a word.
- Because the tool is designed to assess receptive vocabulary, learners can either read or listen to the items.

9. Learner reports using the Vocabulary Assessment

- The assessment locates a learner's score on a measurement scale and categorises their vocabulary knowledge as *emerging*, *extended*, or *expanding*.
- The tool can generate reports for individuals or groups in the same way as the other assessments.

10. Vocabulary Assessment categories: extended

- Extended (scores ≥ 616 scale units)
- Learners in this range have an extended vocabulary that allows them to make sense of many general academic and specialised words. They are likely to understand when words and phrases have been used figuratively and can make sense of a range of idioms. Learners towards the top end of this step will have access to many low frequency words.

11. Vocabulary Assessment categories: expanding

- Expanding (scores ≥ 509 but < 616)
- Learners in this range have an expanding vocabulary that is likely to include some general academic and specialised words. They understand that words can have more than one meaning and can sometimes recognise when a word has been used figuratively. They are beginning to make sense of some popular idioms, such as "business as usual" and "look up to".

12. Vocabulary Assessment categories: emerging

- Emerging (scores < 509)
- Learners in this range have an emerging vocabulary. They will be most comfortable with concrete nouns and frequently used verbs, adjectives and adverbs. These will usually be words used at home and in the community, or words specific to workplaces with which they are familiar. Learners towards the top end of this step will be able to make sense of some lower frequency words, particularly when these are presented with contextual supports.

13. Strengthening vocabulary for adult learners

Research shows that it's possible to develop adults' vocabulary. If vocabulary is an issue in their being able to read, something can be done.

In the next few chapters we'll look at what to focus on with adults who are reading at this entry level or starting points.

Stages of knowing a word (Dale & O'Rourke, 1986)

Stage 1: Never saw it before

Stage 2: Seen it but don't know what it means

Stage 3: Know the word has something to do with...

Stage 4: Know the word well

14. Building vocabulary through oral language activities

All literacy programmes should provide plenty of opportunities for learners to develop their vocabulary through oral language activities. These include listening to texts read aloud and discussing the ideas and language used.

Play with words and deliberately build vocabulary on different topics of interest.

15. Teaching reading vocabulary: before reading

Readers need to know 90-95% of the words in a text in order to understand it. This means that there are two clear implications for selecting texts for instructional purposes. Either:

1. select texts on topics that learners are interested in and already know quite a lot about – in which case many of the words and phrases should already be in their receptive vocabulary; or
2. select texts that learners need to read (and hopefully will also find interesting), and pre-teach vocabulary that they might not know.

The important point is that educators should use texts to strengthen vocabulary. Here's Dr Sue Dymock to explain why:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BDo_CKkYNEY

16. Teaching reading vocabulary: during reading

Take the opportunities to unpack words in texts that adults are reading, rather than getting learners to complete de-contextualised word activities.

This means that texts need to be carefully selected so that they provide such opportunities. In particular, look for texts that enable learners at this level to explore:

- words with multiple meanings
- word families
- word associations

17. Words with multiple meanings

- Around 67% of the 9000 everyday words we use have multiple meanings. It's important to explore these with learners, using texts they are reading.
- Some learners will be "fixed" on one meaning. These learners will particularly benefit from explicit teaching focussed on the words in the texts that have multiple meanings.
- Watch Dr Sue Dymock talk about teaching words with multiple meanings using the article "Sowing Seeds" in [Collections 4](#):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F28reT6ixFA>

18. Building vocabulary: word families

- The second key vocabulary-building strategy to focus on with learners at entry-level is developing their understanding of word families.
- Look for words in the learners' texts that provide examples of how root words can have prefixes or suffixes attached to them. Focus on the most common prefixes and suffixes, including *un-, re-, in-, dis-, -s, -ed, -ing, -ly*
- Watch a video of Sue Dymock discussing the word families of the word "cover" in the context of [the *Sowing Seeds* text](#):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4h5utk0FNFM>

19. Building vocabulary: developing word associations

The third key strategy to use to build learners' vocabulary is to develop word associations.

Use the activities described in *Teaching Adults to Read with Understanding: Using the Learning Progressions*. These include "[Word Maps](#)" on pages 31 and 32; "[Clustering](#)" on page 35; and "[Clines](#)" on page 37.

Watch the video of Sue Dymock talking about exploring different types of gardens using "Sowing Seeds". We've used this article in each of Sue's illustrations to underline the point that the same text can be used for different instructional purposes: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GGepGir7agA>

20. Next steps

- Remember to focus on a few instructional strategies with adult learners at this level, using meaningful contexts and the texts that they are reading.
- The next module will look at developing learners' comprehension. Again, we will focus on just a few key strategies.