Reading Characteristics of GED-Level Learners

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In many adult learning systems, learners are assigned to literacy programs according to their scores on group-administered tests such as the TABE, ABLE, or CASAS. Often, learners with reading scores at or above the 8th grade level are placed in GED® test-preparation programs (sometimes known as "Fast Track programs"), while those scoring below 8th grade are assigned to basic or intermediate literacy programs to build foundational knowledge and skills.

The reality is that many—perhaps most—adult learners do not have time to participate in extended literacy programs (Comings & Soricone, 2007), and thus Fast Track programs fulfill a critical need for GED-level learners. The GED credential alone does not make a large difference in earning power (Tyler, 2005). And the highly competitive global workplace demands increasingly higher skills of its workers (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007; Stites, 2004). Nevertheless, earning a GED certificate continues to be widely viewed as a legitimate educational milestone—more or less equivalent to a high school diploma. GED earners experience intangible benefits, such as higher self esteem, as well as pragmatic ones, such as access to advanced learning.

Notwithstanding these merits and the recruiting and credentialing successes of GED Fast Track programs, policy ,makers, practitioners, and literacy learners need to address the long-term literacy needs of GED completers and GED-level learners—needs that typically are *not* addressed in GED test-preparation programs and may *not* be required to pass the test. Unfortunately for learners (and employers), these literacy skills *are* required for sustained success in higher education and in technologically advanced workplaces (Smith, 2003). The remainder of this article hints at the size of this problem by describing gaps in reading proficiency among 47 GED-level learners in prison-based literacy programs.

In 2004, I studied the reading characteristics of 120 literacy learners incarcerated in the Federal Bureau of Prisons (FBOP). A battery of eleven tests was used to assess the learners' achievement in overall reading comprehension and in component areas of reading such as: phonemic awareness, word recognition (sight word reading), word attack (decoding), reading rate (a proxy for fluency), word meaning (oral receptive and expressive vocabulary), and memory. A full description of the tests, assessment protocols, data analysis methods, and validity concerns are reported elsewhere (Muth, 2004).

In the FBOP study, 47 of 120 learners achieved reading comprehension scores at or above the 8.0 grade equivalent level, which would have made them eligible for placement in the FBOP's GED-level literacy program.[1] However, an examination of their component-level reading skills revealed that many of these learners had extensive instructional needs in reading, despite their relatively strong performance on tests of reading comprehension. These component-level needs (in areas such as decoding and fluency) went well beyond the scope of GED test-preparation programs that focus on the ability to comprehend content-area (science, history, literature, etc.)

[1] It should be noted that nine of the 47 learners were placed in intermediate literacy programs at the time of the testing. However, based on their reading comprehension scores they would have qualified for upper-level (GED-level) test-preparation programs.

passages. In such programs, reading comprehension strategies (such as text look-backs) are often presented as test-taking strategies.

In my study, a third (16 of 47) of the GED-level learners[2] scored *at or below fourth grade* on tests of both sight word recognition *and* word attack. In addition, none of these16 read above 150 words per minute, and many had much lower rates (as low as 71 words per minute). This may be compared to an optimal reading rate among U.S. adults and college students of about 200-250 words-per-minute (Harris & Sipay, 1990). Further, 14 GED-level learners scored below 4th grade on word meaning (vocabulary) tests.

However, we cannot deduce from this that a third of all GED-level learners in the U.S. have need for formal instruction in decoding, fluency, and vocabulary (in addition to comprehension). The sample was not large enough to make generalizations to the larger population of adult literacy learners in the U.S. On the other hand, far more than a third of the FBOP GED-level learners had difficulties with one or more component of reading.

The mean scores for the 47 GED-level learners are presented in Table 1. Note that, as a group, the average score for *every* component area was well below the reading comprehension score typically used to place learners in GED test-preparation programs. Further, these across-the-components low-intermediate needs were found consistently among both native English learners and English language learners (Table 2). As a group, however, the native English speakers achieved higher scores in vocabulary, while the English language learners had slightly faster reading rates.

Table 1.
Component Scores for FBOP GED-Level Learners.

		Word Rec (GE)	Word Attack (GE)	Word Meaning (GE)	Words per Minute	Silent Reading Comp. (GE)
	n		*M* (*SD*)	*M* (*SD*)	*M* (*SD*)	*M* (*SD*)
M **(*SD*)**	47	5.6 (2.5)	4.7 (2.8)	6.4 (2.7)	135 (27.1)	10.1 (1.5)

GE = mean grade equivalent; *M* = Mean; *SD* = Standard Deviation.

[2] For the remainder of the article, the term “GED-level learner” will be used to refer to those who achieved an 8.0 or higher grade equivalent score in reading comprehension. It should not be misconstrued as an endorsement of this convention by the author.

Table 2.
Component Scores for Native English v. English Language Learners.

	n	Word Rec (GE)	Word Attack (GE) *M* (*SD*)	Word Meaning (GE) *M* (*SD*)	Words per Minute *M* (*SD*)	Silent Reading Comp. (GE) *M* (*SD*)
NE	37	5.6 (2.6)	4.9 (3.1)	7.1 (2.6)	132 (28.7)	10.2 (1.5)
ELL	10	5.2 (1.9)	4.7 (1.6)	4.0 (1.7)	146 (16.3)	9.7 (1.5)

NE = Native English Speakers. ELL = English Language Learners.

Only eleven of the 47 GED-level learners achieved consistent scores at or above the 8th grade level in all component areas. But, compared to adults in the general U.S. population, these learners, on average, were slower readers and scored in the low end of the average range on measures of word recognition, vocabulary, and memory. None of these eleven learners—the strongest readers of the 120-member FBOP sample—were English language learners (ELLs), confirming earlier findings that ELLs present even greater challenges with English-based literacy than native English speaking literacy learners (Collier & Thomas, 2001; Davidson & Bruce, 2003).

Even these eleven "strongest" learners presented histories of learning difficulties as children. Five of the eleven learners repeated one or more grades in school as children, three received special education support in school, and three received Title One or Chapter One help. Seven reported a serious head injury in the past, and eight reported problems with substance abuse.

As a group, the achievement of these eleven strongest literacy learners was still in the low-average/average range when compared to same-age peers in the general adult U.S. population. For example, their aggregate performances on three tests that provided scores standardized among U.S. adults were as follows: Woodcock Johnson-III Word Attack standard scores (mean = 94, *SD* = 5.9) in the low-average/average range; Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test standard scores (mean = 87, *SD* = 7.4) in the moderately low/low average range; and Weschler Adult Intelligence Scales Digit Span scaled scores (mean = 7.7, *SD* = 1.8) in the low average range. Further, these eleven read, on average, 154 words-per-minute (*SD* = 25), compared to the optimal reading rate of U.S. adults and college students of about 200-250 words-per-minute (Harris & Sipay, 1990).

Perhaps in the job market of 100 years ago, literacy gaps such as those described above would not have impeded these GED-level learners from competing for above-entry-level work. However, in the fiercely competitive and increasingly technical world of work today, these gaps matter a great deal. Strucker, Yamamoto, and Kirsch (2007) argued that adult literacy learners who achieve proficiency across all of the component areas of reading experience "dramatic improvements in many aspects of life, including higher income and less unemployment,

increased access to lifelong learning, greater amounts of personal reading for pleasure, and increased civic participation" (p. 3).

The implications for reading assessment and instruction at the component-level is clear. Strucker, Yamamoto, and Kirsch (2007) again argue:

> At the present time, many adult literacy teachers in the U.S. tend to offer [adult literacy learners] instruction that is primarily organized around reading comprehension strategies, such as finding the main idea, using inferences, and detecting the sequence, and techniques for learning vocabulary through context. The teachers may be unaware of their students' underlying needs in [component areas of reading such as decoding, vocabulary, and fluency] or they may believe that these component skills will develop naturally in the course of reading connected texts.
>
> Our findings suggest that a different approach should be explored for these…adults, such as the approach developed by Chall in the Harvard Adult Reading Laboratory (Chall, 1994) and later extended and adapted for adolescent group instruction at Boys and Girls Town in Nebraska by Curtis (Curtis & Longo, 1999). Instead of focusing primarily on comprehension itself, Chall and Curtis' approach addresses the root causes of poor comprehension: lack of fluent, accurate word recognition and limited knowledge of word meanings. Direct instruction is provided in each of these areas, accompanied by extensive reading and discussion of complete texts at appropriate levels of challenge. (p. 29)

Our Fast Track GED programs should be congratulated for the way they have inspired and encouraged many adult literacy learners to return to school and earn their GED credential. However, U.S. policy makers and literacy practitioners need to find ways to extend this support to literacy learners—including those "at the top" of the class—who continue to have gaps in one or more component areas of reading. Without this support, these learners may not realize the greatest benefit of the GED credential—access to higher learning and meaningful work.

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