Part I: What Is Evidence-Based Reading Instruction?

Any discussion of evidence-based reading instruction should begin with a definition of "reading" and a clarification of what the term "evidence-based" means.

The Partnership for Reading (National Institute for Literacy, 2005) defines reading as a complex system of deriving meaning from print. It requires:

- an understanding of how phonemes, or speech sounds, are connected to print
- the ability to decode unfamiliar words
- the ability to read fluently
- sufficient background information and vocabulary to foster reading comprehension
- the development of appropriate active strategies to construct meaning from print
- the development and maintenance of a motivation to read
  (Reading Excellence Act; retrieved Oct. 9, 2011;
  http://www2.ed.gov/offices/OESE/REA/reading_act.pdf)

What is taught in an Evidence-based approach?

1. Phonological Awareness
2. Sound-Symbol Association
3. Syllable Types
4. Morphology
5. Syntax
6. Semantics

"Evidence-based" refers to practices that have been shown to be successful in improving reading achievement. The success of these practices is demonstrated in two ways: by research-study data collected according to rigorous design, and by consensus among expert practitioners who monitor outcomes as part of their practice. These results—whether scientific data or expert consensus—must be valid and reliable and come from a variety of sources (Reading Excellence Act, 1999).

What Is Evidence-Based Reading Instruction and How Do You Know It When You See It?

The research produced findings that together form the basis of evidence-based practices. Among them:

- There are four key component areas of reading: alphabetics (phonemic awareness, phonics, decoding), fluency (the ability to read accurately, at an appropriate rate, and with prosody), vocabulary, and comprehension.
- Learners' strengths and weaknesses need to be assessed in each of the four components.
- Instruction should be based on assessment results.
- Instruction should be systematic, sequenced, direct, and explicit.
- Instruction and materials need to be engaging and relevant to learners' needs.
- Instruction must be continuously monitored, by teacher and learners, to gauge its effectiveness.

The research suggests that effective adult reading instruction is more nuanced than traditionally delivered in most adult basic education classrooms. For example, most, if not all, instructional decisions generally have been based on a single assessment, specifically a silent reading comprehension test, such as TABE. The research, however, tells us that a single assessment provides an in-complete picture of a learner's strengths and weaknesses. It is critical to assess a student's strengths and weaknesses in all components for the simple reason that the strengths and weaknesses a student exhibits in one component affect his or her ability in the other components. Multiple assessments provide more instructionally relevant information about a learner's needs (Kruidenier, MacArthur, &Wrigley, 2010). For example, a student who is not a fluent reader will likely have difficulty comprehending much of what he or she is reading. The poor comprehension is in part due to the lack of fluency. Helping a non-fluent reader to improve his or her fluency skills will also help raise that student's comprehension level.

Alphabetics Fluency

READING

Vocabulary Comprehension
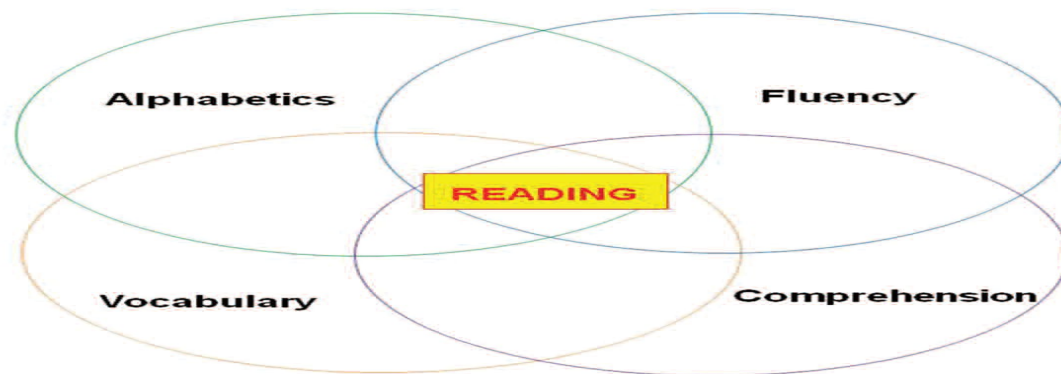
A key concept of EBRI is "teach the reader, not the reading." In other words, the focus of evidenced-based instruction is not to have students master content area subject matter; rather, EBRI focuses on helping students master reading strategies that build reading skill. For example, when the student learns the comprehension strategy of summarizing, he or she transfers it to another situation, thereby allowing the student to make meaning from a variety of texts.

Similarly, vocabulary instruction should focus on the corpus of high-utility, high-frequency words that learners will find useful in many contexts (National Reading Panel, 2000). These are often referred to as Tier 2 Words (Beck &McKeown, 1985). Words such as analyze, recognize, and transform have numerous applications, and students will encounter them in a wide range of materials across content areas. Spending precious class time teaching specialized words like metamorphosis or scythe is counterproductive when it comes to building a rich, useful vocabulary. These content-area words can be explained at the time they are encountered in a text (Beck et al., 2002).

That is not to say that content-related materials should not be introduced into an EBRI classroom. One of the purposes of assessment is to determine a student's mastery and instructional levels in the component areas. Content- or job-related materials have a place in an EBRI classroom as long as they are at the appropriate levels for the students who will be using them.