

# **Using Reading Skills for Today's Adults to Help Build Fluency and Comprehension with ESL Students**

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## **Teaching Context**

In a large ABE program in Minneapolis, approximately 530 ESL students, or 46% of the student population served in the last year, didn't finish high school. And of that 46%, approximately 425, or 80% have less than 9 years of education. All these students are placed in general ESL classes based on CASAS scores, and many who enter the system in the lower level of ESL classes and progress into intermediate classes, but stop there. Often, these students are fluent, conversational speakers, but don't have the reading, writing, and general academic skills to progress onto advanced ESL or adult secondary education. This population of primarily East African and Latino students led to this research interest. What can educators do to help these students gain the literacy and reading skills necessary for academic success? These students have a few common factors:

- They didn't finish high school in their countries due to interruptions such as economic situation, family hardship, or civil war.
- They often have lived in the U.S. a long time and have high oral proficiency in English.
- They have reading scores of 215-225 on CASAS (high-intermediate ESL level). According to CASAS, these scores correlate to a 5.0-6.0 grade equivalent (GE) reading level.
- They score much lower on the reading section of Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE), around 1.0-3.0 GE level.

## **Research Question**

This discrepancy between life skills reading (CASAS) and academic reading (TABE) points to the need for reading instruction to improve academic reading skills with this population, which leads to the research question:

*“What happens to reading comprehension in intermediate level adult ESL students as measured by TABE and fluency measured in words correct per minute when students receive supplemental reading practice that includes fluency instruction?”*

## **Method and Data Collection**

Eighteen students participated in the project – nine in an experimental group that received supplemental instruction, and nine in a control group that did not. All participants pre- and post-tested with CASAS and TABE, and completed pre- and post- project surveys written by the researcher about their feelings about reading and reading practices (surveys can be found in Appendix 1).

The experimental group met for approximately 10 hours over 6 weeks outside of regular ESL classes for supplemental reading practice using *Reading Skills for Today's Adults*, a reading program that incorporates the following reading components: pre-reading questions, vocabulary words, silent reading, timed oral reading, listening-while-reading, post-reading questions, and a writing task (Southwest ABE – Marshall Region, 2003).

The process of instruction during each session is as follows:

1. Make predictions about the text by answering the preview questions and discussing new vocabulary presented.
2. Read the text silently once.
3. Initial timing: read the text aloud for one minute and instructor evaluates and calculates words correct per minutes (WCPM).
4. Read the text three times while listening to audio recording or instructor reading aloud.
5. Practice reading the text aloud.
6. Answer the comprehension questions and do the follow-up writing.
7. Final timing: read the text aloud for one minute and instructor evaluates and calculates WCPM.
8. Graph initial and final WCPM on chart.

### **Data Analysis**

The following data was tabulated:

- CASAS pre and post tests
- TABE pre and post tests
- Pre- and post- surveys on reading attitudes and practices
- Fluency, measured in words correct per minute (WCPM) for the experimental group.

During the analysis, the experimental group participant TABE scores were divided into two groups- those of participants with lower education (3-9 years of formal schooling) and those of participants with higher education (10+ years of formal schooling).

### **Findings**

#### ***Pre and Post Tests***

The results showed very little change in CASAS scores for both experimental and control groups pre-to-post study. Larger gains were experienced with the TABE test, as shown below:

CASAS	< 1.5% gain for all participants
TABE	9% average gain – experimental group 0% average gain – control group
	17% average gain – experimental group 3-9 yrs education 3% average gain – experimental group 10+ yrs education

***Finding 1: Reading practice with focused fluency instruction may lead to increased academic reading skills comprehension as measured by the TABE test.***

***Finding 2: Standardized reading scores from assessment tools that test “life skills” reading in a functional context (CASAS) and more “academic” reading skills such as identifying main idea, guessing word meaning from context, summarizing, etc. (TABE) can vary greatly with ESL adult students. This shows the variety of reading skills needed for different learning and assessment purposes.***

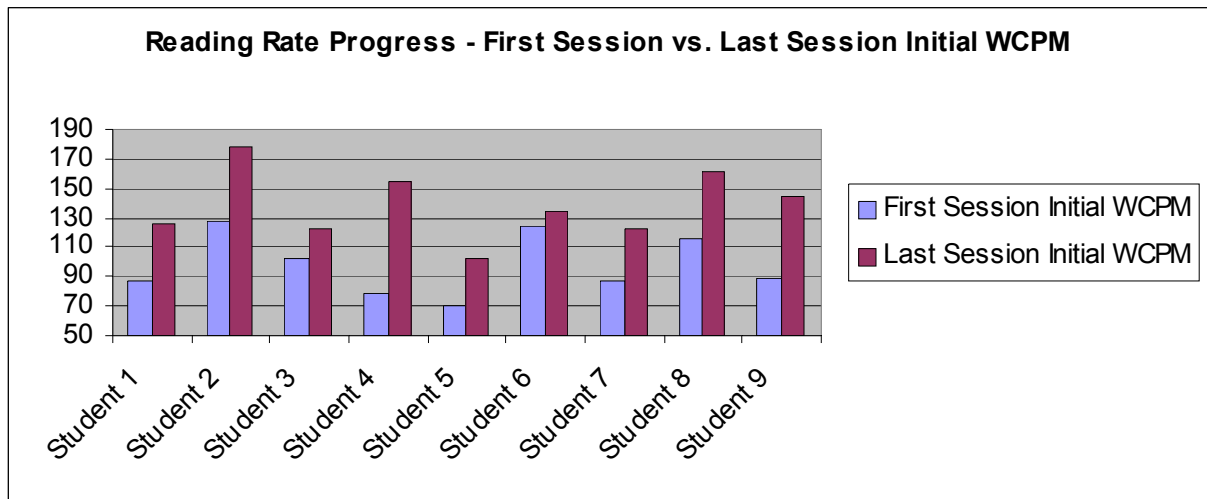
### ***Fluency***

All experimental group participants experienced gains in their reading fluency. Results are as follows:

Increase in reading speed – 91% of timings

Average increase during a session – 14.1 WCPM

All participants increased reading speed pre- to post- study (see following graph)



***Finding 3: Focused fluency instruction of repeated readings and listening while reading (as part of a reading program) can improve the reading fluency of adult ESL students.***

### ***Reading Attitudes and Practices***

All participants enjoyed the experience of working with their reading through the study - answering the surveys, testing their reading level, or participating in the supplemental sessions. The experimental group said they felt the extra reading practice was very beneficial to their reading, and requested that the sessions continue. Results from the surveys are as follows:

Increased reading ability feeling – 9 experimental, 7 control

Increase in reading materials (outside of school) with experimental group

Increased reading frequency (outside of school) – 3 experimental, 2 control

*What worked?* Experimental group said charting, listening-while-reading, reading aloud, and individual pronunciation assistance were helpful.

***Finding 4: Adult ESL students show multiple benefits from supplemental reading practice, including higher reading frequency and wider variety of materials read.***

## **Conclusions**

In light of the increased fluency, increase in TABE test scores (especially lower education participants), and positive response from participants, this study indicates possibilities for the use of a program like *Reading Skills for Today's Adults* to help develop academic reading skills with adult ESL students. The supplemental reading practice appeared to be beneficial for the students and they enjoyed it enough to continue to the end of the study.

While the study shows a possible connection between reading practice and reading proficiency, some limitations are the short duration of six weeks, and small sample groups. A longer term, larger study to examine the effects of a program such as *Reading Skills for Today's Adults* on fluency and overall proficiency would be a beneficial follow up. Further study into the other components of the program – prereading, vocabulary, comprehension questions, and writing task - and their effects on comprehension and fluency would be important as well.

## **Next Steps**

Because of the positive student response and promising results in this study, the supplemental reading practice has continued in my ABE program, but on a smaller scale with volunteer-led sessions. In addition, teachers incorporate materials and techniques from *Reading Skills for Today's Adults* into their reading instruction.

## References

Information on the program Reading Skills for Today's Adults, including downloadable texts and instructions, can be found from the following source:

Southwest ABE - Marshall Region. (2003). Reading Skills for Today's Adults.  
<http://www.marshalladulthoodeducation.org>