IES Institute of Education Sciences

Montana ELA Standards Revision: Brief 4
Components of Adolescent Literacy Development

April 2024

Introduction

For the fourth of five briefs, REL Northwest summarized research and common theoretical frameworks to respond to the following question: *What are the critical components for adolescent literacy development?*

The set of briefs aims to provide the Montana Office of Public Instruction (OPI) with relevant research to help their English Language Arts (ELA) standards development team generate actionable, evidence-based state standards that will form the foundation for literacy instruction.

The brief is organized into two sections:

1. Overview of adolescent literacy and its components
2. Evidence-based reading instructional practices that support the development of adolescent literacy skills

Throughout the brief, REL Northwest has defined key terms to establish shared understanding of relevant concepts and has embedded guided questions that prompt the reader to pause, reflect on what was read, and consider how the information presented can be used to inform the standards revision process.

As sources for evidence, this brief draws upon

- large **meta-analyses**, which are quantitative syntheses of empirical studies from multiple independent researchers who used causal (e.g., quasi-experimental, experimental) methods to evaluate a particular literacy approach and effects on specific learner outcomes;
- **Institute of Education Sciences practice guides** developed by the U.S. Department of Education to synthesize hundreds of individual studies and translate the available rigorous research evidence over the past few decades into actionable recommendations for practitioners; and
- **individual peer-reviewed research studies and research reviews** on underlying theoretical frameworks, extensions and considerations for reading instruction, and additional evidence identified by subject matter experts or included in other briefs within this series.

Overview of adolescent literacy and its components

This section outlines the multiple competencies necessary for adolescent literacy—namely decoding and encoding skills, fluency, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and motivation and engagement—and how each contributes to overall reading development (Buckingham, 2020; Cartwright & Duke, 2019).

It pulls primarily from two practice guides*: Providing Reading Interventions for Students in Grades 4–9* (Vaughn et al., 2022), which includes recommendations based on 45 causal studies on adolescent reading interventions; and *Improving Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom and Intervention Practices* (Kamil et al., 2008), which includes recommendations based on 29 causal studies on effective literacy practices in upper elementary (grades 4 and 5), middle school, and high school.

It also includes information from peer-reviewed articles and seminal reports identified by subject matter experts that provide theoretical support and practical considerations around adolescent literacy development.

⇒ To learn more about discipline-specific literacy in adolescence, see Brief 5, entitled *Disciplinary Literacy Processes and Procedures,* within this series.

Components of adolescent literacy

- **Decoding:** Ability to translate written language into spoken language by breaking down words into individual sounds and blending those sounds together to form word.
- **Encoding**: Ability to convert spoken language into written language by using knowledge of sounds and their appropriate letters or letter combinations to spell words correctly.
- **Fluency**: Accuracy, automaticity, and expression (e.g., using appropriate pitch, tempo, and pauses when reading).
- **Vocabulary**: The knowledge of individual words used to communicate effectively when listening, speaking, reading, and writing.
- **Reading comprehension**: The process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning

Decoding and encoding

Decoding refers to the ability to translate written language into spoken language by breaking down words into their individual sounds and blending those sounds together to form a word. Conversely, encoding refers to the ability to convert spoken language into written language by using knowledge of sounds and their appropriate letters or letter combinations to spell words correctly. Explicit decoding and encoding instruction develop learners' abilities to break apart and sound out multisyllabic words and to practice spelling (Vaughn et al., 2022). While decoding and encoding are emphasized in lower grades in the form of explicit phonics and phonemic awareness instruction, adolescent literacy texts include increasingly complex words that also require decoding and encoding, and adolescents may need direct instruction and support for higher-level application of these skills.

Fluency

Fluency refers to the accuracy, automaticity, and expression with which readers read. Fluency activities build on decoding activities to support adolescent learners in moving from accurately sounding out words to making sense of what they are reading (Vaughn et al., 2022), especially as the amount of reading associated with coursework increases.

Vocabulary

Vocabulary refers to the knowledge of individual words used to communicate effectively when listening, speaking, reading, and writing. As youth access more complex texts in the upper grades, they increasingly encounter words that are not part of their everyday vocabulary (Kamil et al., 2008). Youth with larger vocabularies demonstrate stronger reading comprehension and overall literacy achievement (Ford-Connors & Paratore, 2015).

Reading comprehension

Reading comprehension refers to the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language. Reading comprehension is a priority for middle and high school teachers because adolescent learners often struggle with understanding their content area texts (Kamil et al., 2008).

Motivation and engagement

Motivation in the context of literacy refers to expecting value in, having interest in, and having desire to read. Motivation facilitates engagement, or the active participation in reading and interacting with text. Instructional approaches that spark learner interest are especially important for adolescent learners, as evidence suggests that literacy motivation declines as students move from elementary to middle school (Kamil et al., 2008).

Pause and reflect

What are the key competencies for developing adolescent readers?
How might the components work together to support building literacy?

Evidence-based reading instructional practices that support the development of adolescent literacy skills

This section shares an approach to adolescent literacy instruction and examples of evidenced-based practices for each component listed in the previous section focusing on classroom instruction for all learners and for learners needing additional support. It then provides considerations for supporting the development across the disciplines, within digital spaces, among multilingual learners, and in conjunction with writing.

It pulls primarily from four practice guides: *Providing Reading Interventions for Students in Grades 4–9* (Vaughn et al., 2022), which includes recommendations based on 45 causal studies on adolescent reading intervention; *Improving Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom and Intervention Practices* (Kamil et al., 2008), which includes recommendations based on 29 causal studies on literacy practices in upper elementary (grades 4 and 5), middle, and high school; *Teaching Academic Content and Literacy to English Learners in Elementary and Middle School* (Baker et al., 2014), which includes 15 causal studies on instructional practices for supporting English learner students' literacy development; and *Teaching Secondary Students to Write Effectively* (Graham et al., 2016), which includes recommendations based on 15 causal studies on teaching adolescents to write.

It also includes information from peer-reviewed articles and seminal reports identified by subject matter experts who provide theoretical support and practical considerations around adolescent literacy development.

Supporting adolescent literacy skills development

Evidence-based practices include general, predictable routines to organize instructional activities that begin with whole-class, teacher-led instruction followed by teacher-guided practice and independent or group practice (Herrera et al., 2016). Typically, adolescent teachers might not include practices focused on "how to read." However, some adolescents are still developing foundational skills and may need additional decoding or encoding support through core instruction or intervention based on the individual learner abilities. Additionally, as the complexity of text increases, all adolescents need opportunities to build fluency, and they need explicit instruction to develop vocabulary and comprehension. At the same time, engagement is critical in keeping youth motivated. Teachers may consider how potential practices work together to provide opportunities to build adolescent literacy. Below are examples of evidence-based reading instructional practices—organized by component—that help develop adolescent literacy skills.

Decoding and encoding

- **Review or reteach vowel and consonant letter sounds and combinations with increasing complexity** in small groups based on learners' reading abilities (Vaughn et al., 2022). Using the formal names of the letter combinations (e.g., schwa sound, diphthong) will ensure that adolescent learners do not feel like they are being treated like children in early elementary grades as they review decoding (Vaughn et al., 2022).
- **Teach decoding routines** that give learners steps for breaking apart words and combining word parts to sound out words with accuracy (Vaughn et al., 2022).
- **Engage in explicit spelling instruction** (or encoding of print) that should continue into middle and high school, with opportunities to practice spelling embedded in lessons. Spelling instruction can be combined with decoding instruction so that learners can practice both skills. For example, encoding exercises guide learners in first reading words aloud, spelling them, thinking about the different word parts, writing the words, and generating other words with similar letter-sound combinations (Vaughn et al., 2022).

Fluency

- **Encourage repeated reading with a specified purpose**. While the primary goal of repeated reading is to increase reading speed and effortlessness, rereading with different purposes in mind will prevent the repetitive task from becoming boring and can lead to increased comprehension of the text (Vaughn et al., 2022).
- **Provide instruction in reading with expression, or prosody**. Prosody instruction teaches reading with expression using appropriate pitch, tempo, and pauses to help readers understand what they are reading. For example, learners practice pausing at commas, stopping at periods, raising or lowering their voice at question marks, and showing emotion at exclamation marks (Vaughn et al., 2022).

Explicit instruction: Instruction that is teacher-directed and includes modeling, guided practice, and independent application with immediate corrective feedback.

Prosody instruction: Prosody instruction teaches learners how to read with expression, including using appropriate pitch, tempo, and pauses.

Morphological instruction: Morphology refers to knowledge of the meaningful word parts in a language. Through morphological instruction, learners are taught how to break down words into meaningful sublexical parts (e.g., prefixes, bases, and suffixes).

Vocabulary

- **Provide explicit vocabulary instruction** to help learners acquire new vocabulary while engaging with text (Kamil et al., 2008). Selection of vocabulary words should build on adolescent learners' existing knowledge and learning environments and should include words that are contextually rich (Ford-Connors & Paratore, 2015). Strategies for youth to learn new word meanings independently include analyzing syntactic, semantic, and context clues in a variety of different texts (Kamil et al., 2008; Ford-Connors & Paratore, 2015).
- **Explicitly teach morphology**, which builds morphological awareness (i.e., the use of word parts such as roots, prefixes, and suffixes), which strengthens vocabulary and–together with the use of context clues—supports reading comprehension and spelling (Ford-Connors & Paratore, 2015; Vaughn et al., 2022).
- **Repeatedly expose learners to new words** through a range of reading, writing, visual, verbal, oral, physical, and digital experiences to promote vocabulary learning (Kamil et al., 2008). Direct vocabulary instruction is also a key component of improving writing quality (Graham et al., 2016).

- **Foster classroom discussion** to develop learners' vocabulary by providing a language-rich context to explore word meanings and connect vocabulary to content (Ford-Connors & Paratore, 2015). Through teacher-facilitated conversations, youth can hear and practice using vocabulary words in authentic contexts related to their experience as adolescents. These discussions also lead to improved comprehension of texts and content (Ford-Connors & Paratore, 2015).

Reading comprehension

- **Explicitly teach reading comprehension skills** such as summarizing, asking and answering questions using textual evidence, paraphrasing, drawing inferences, finding the main idea, and using graphic organizers. Teach by modeling, providing explicit explanation and feedback, and facilitating guided practice (Kamil et al., 2008; Vaughn et al., 2022).
- **Develop both world knowledge and word knowledge** by developing both knowledge of the topics discussed in the texts (world knowledge) and knowledge of word meanings (word knowledge), which mutually reinforce one another to improve overall comprehension (Vaughn et al., 2022). World and word knowledge should be briefly developed before and after reading the text.
- **Engage learners in whole-classroom or small-group discussion** around the topic using simpler texts or multimedia, teaching the meaning of words that are essential to understanding the topic, both before and during reading (Vaughn et al., 2022). Whole-classroom or small-group discussion should provide learners with sustained opportunities (vs. quick instructor-led question/answer activities) to present and defend their points of view using reasoning and evidence from the text, as well as opportunities to listen to peer perspectives (Kamil et al., 2008).
- **Provide learners with authentic tasks or structured discussion prompts** in small group formats in which they can ask authentic follow-up questions that extend the discussion (Kamil et al., 2008). Working collaboratively, learners can engage in meaningful conversations aimed at asking and answering questions about the text (Vaughn et al., 2022).

Motivation and engagement

- **Ensure a supportive environment** that provides opportunities for self-directed learning and encourages learners to participate and grow in confidence by seeing mistakes as learning opportunities (Kamil et al., 2008). Creating a supporting environment is important for writing achievement (Graham et al., 2016). For example, writing teachers can establish a stimulating mood and set high expectations; give learners opportunities to share, display, and publish their writing; create a positive classroom where learners are encouraged to put forth effort, self-regulate, and reflect on progress; promote peer learning and positive interactions among peers; and adapt instruction to learner interests and needs (Graham et al., 2016).
- **Spark learners' interests by aligning instruction with their lived experience and by providing ongoing positive reinforcement** (Kamil et al., 2008). Supporting learners in establishing meaningful content learning goals and monitoring and communicating with them about their progress also promotes motivation (Kamil et al., 2008).

Pause and reflect

Consider the standards, guidance, and materials that support implementation of instructional practices. How do they reflect the evidence base?

Considerations for disciplinary adolescent literacy instruction

Youth need tools to engage meaningfully with the increasingly sophisticated texts in the various content areas they encounter in middle and high school. Disciplinary literacy requires knowledge in a particular content area: if youth are not familiar with the content, they will have trouble understanding the texts (Lee & Spratley, 2010). Combining general and discipline-specific reading strategies can support adolescent learners struggling to comprehend a variety of types of texts in content areas (Lee & Spratley, 2010). Providing learners with peer and teacher-supported opportunities to engage with stretch texts—passages that are challenging for learners to read and understand independently—is one way to introduce learners to complex vocabulary, sentence structures, and ideas, building skills for approaching similar texts in content area classrooms (Vaughn et al., 2022).

⇒ To learn more about disciplinary literacy across different grade bands, see Brief 5, entitled *Disciplinary Literacy Processes and Procedures,* within this series.

Considerations for technology and adolescent reading instruction

Today's adolescent literacy environments increasingly include both print and digital texts. Both types of texts have value, regardless of their mode, their length, or their style. Digital texts include many additional features compared to print text, such as hyperlinks that connect learners to additional digital texts. Given the widespread and daily consumption of digital texts (in addition to print text), important considerations for educators include how learners recursively **encounter, engage with, and evaluate** digital text (Turner et al., 2019). For example, encountering texts refers to the manner in which a reader first makes contact with a text, whether by receiving text from other readers or searching, surfing, or stumbling upon a text. Engaging refers to the activities that happen before, during, and after reading a text, which can include reading, curating, deciding and sharing texts with other readers. Finally, evaluating refers to finding value in the text, which includes judging the text, employing digital tools, determining value, and managing distractions.

While readers use many of the same strategies for encountering, engaging, and evaluating print and digital text, emerging research has identified challenges specific to reading digital texts, all of which can be modeled by educators, such as (Cardona et al., 2023; Turner et al., 2019):

- **critically consuming and sharing digital texts** (e.g., understanding what sites are credible and useful),
- **thoughtfully seeking out and curating** digital texts (e.g., effectively using search engines or library databases),
- **ethically employing digital tools** for strategic planning (e.g., using bookmarks, file management, online notetaking, human-driven artificial intelligence), and
- **managing distractions** in online environments (e.g., self-regulating usage of devices, reflecting on learning).

Pause and reflect

What types of print and digital text engagement will prepare learners for future opportunities?

Considerations for multiliterate adolescent literacy instruction

Supporting multiliterate adolescent learners includes providing scaffolded supports throughout the school day and across content areas that are tailored to their specific needs to develop English language listening, reading, writing, and speaking skills (Baker et al., 2014). Instruction should also be tailored so that it is relevant for specific instructional models (e.g., dual immersion, bilingual, structured immersion). Below are select, evidence-based literacy strategies that are specific to multiliterate learners (Baker et al., 2014).

Of note, the evidence of the effectiveness of these strategies is based on studies with elementary and middle school leaners (through grade 8), which overlaps with but does not fully encompass adolescence.

- **Explicitly teach academic vocabulary** that is commonly used in academic content area discussions and texts, rather than in the informal and conversational settings that adolescents are most familiar with. A set of academic vocabulary words can be taught intensively over several days and through various activities using multiple modalities.
- **Explicitly teach strategies for independently deciphering the meaning of words**, such as using context clues, word parts, and cognates.
- **Integrate English language instruction into content area teaching** through content area vocabulary instruction; language-based, content-specific supports (e.g., videos, visuals, graphic organizers, and sentence starters) to scaffold learning; frequent opportunities to discuss content in pairs or small groups; and application of content knowledge and vocabulary to writing activities.
- **Provide small-group intervention for learners needing additional support**, such as learners identified and served through a response to intervention model, a multi-tiered system of supports, in decoding, listening, reading comprehension, writing, and speaking. This daily instruction for groups of three to five learners should be teacher directed and provide ample scaffolds and opportunities for practice. After identifying learner needs through available measures such as standardized tests and English language assessments, instruction should be tailored to individual needs and should aim to teach both literacy and language needs simultaneously.

Pause and reflect

What are the similarities and differences between adolescent literacy instruction for multiliterate learners and general adolescent literacy instruction?

Considerations for writing instruction in adolescence

Reading and writing are mutually reinforcing processes that draw upon similar strategies to create meaning. Effective writing is a key component of adolescent literacy and helps learners understand, evaluate, and synthesize texts to clearly convey reasoned arguments to various audiences (Graham & Perin, 2007).

⇒ To learn more about the relationship between reading and writing across grade levels, see Brief 2, entitled *Relationship Between Reading and Writing,* within this series.

Several evidence-based recommendations specific to teaching writing in adolescence are listed below (Graham, et al., 2016):

- **Explicitly teach technical writing and cognitive strategies using a "model-practice-reflect" framework** in which writers refer to exemplars and rubrics to select, apply, and practice strategies (e.g., organizing ideas, creating strong sentences and well-structured paragraphs during drafting, selecting the appropriate tone for a specific audience, summarizing reading materials, and using tools for evaluating and revising drafts).
- **Provide multiple opportunities to practice, flexibly adapt, and reflect on** writing strategies in new contexts, such as for different purposes, tasks, audiences, or disciplines. Learners should be able to receive and provide peer feedback on their writing, which they can use to guide and return to certain parts of the writing process as needed (e.g., returning to drafting after receiving peer feedback).

- **Use writing assessments** that highlight strengths and areas for additional skill development, inform teacher planning, and facilitate tailored instruction and targeted feedback to learner needs. These may take the form of on-demand writing prompts that require learners to complete authentic writing tasks or longer writing completed for other classroom assignments or in other content areas. Teams of teachers can review aggregated data and tailor writing instruction across classrooms, disciplines, or grades. Youth can also be involved in reviewing the work of peers and providing feedback.
- **Increase learners' knowledge** about a specific writing topic, a genre, and the words used to convey meaning. Teaching youth the basic elements of different types of texts, engaging them around models for each type of writing, and supporting them in analyzing and imitating components of the models also improves writing quality.

Pause and reflect

How do the practices for writing intersect with the practices for reading? What does this mean for adolescent literacy development?

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