

The Alberta Reading Benchmarks approach to reading is task based and it focuses on reading skills. This guide outlines the strategies for levels 1a to 2b<sup>1</sup> practitioners can use to increase learners' reading skills and therefore the number and types of reading tasks they are able to complete with different reading materials. These strategies are provided as suggestions for literacy practitioners to adopt as starting points in their work with adult learners in general. They are by no means meant to be prescriptive. When working with individuals, practitioners develop their own awareness of what methods do or don't resonate with learners.

## General Approaches for Teaching Reading

*Teaching strategies* are those the practitioner uses during lessons (e.g., using alphabet cards, word banks, or cut-up sentences). *Learning strategies* are taught to the learner for use when reading or completing reading tasks (e.g., sounding out words or using visual clues).

A *top-down approach* to teaching reading means that the focus is the whole message, whereas a *bottom-up approach* focuses on the individual words and phrases that make up the message (Scrivener 2005, 178). The best practices combine both approaches. A balanced approach allows the practitioner to select the strategies that are best suited to individual learners, the reading task assigned, and the learner context (Campbell 2003, 1).

*Vocabulary Teaching.* Learning activities that focus on words themselves are essential for increasing the learners' vocabularies and improving their reading ability. Repeated exposure to the same vocabulary is necessary for the learner to recognize a word and remember its meaning (Sonbul and Schmitt 2010, 253).

*Explicit Strategy Instruction* is the practice of clearly and systematically teaching students the learning strategies they need to complete reading tasks. It is important to start with what the learner already knows so that the practitioner builds upon the learner's existing abilities. If the learner can also determine how s/he knows something, s/he can then apply the same strategies to discover the unknown.

*Scaffolding* refers to the amount of support the practitioner provides to learners. As learners become more skilled and confident, practitioners reduce support incrementally. Types of practitioner support include pre- and post-teaching activities, modelling, supported practice, and explicit strategy instruction.

*Recycling* refers to practising the same vocabulary and reading skills in many ways to provide repeated, but varied, instruction and practice of strategies and skills.

*Spiralling* refers to the idea that strategies are introduced and subsequently presented repeatedly through the Alberta Reading Benchmarks levels. As the level increases, the difficulty of the vocabulary, the complexity and length of the text, and expectations of the learner also increase. You'll notice in this guide that the same teaching and learning strategies are recommended at many levels of the Alberta Reading Benchmarks; the same method is used at increasing levels of difficulty.

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<sup>1</sup> The higher levels are not addressed here because they are considered above the level of basic literacy.

## Glossary

**Authentic Materials:** Texts from everyday life that are not created specifically for educational purposes (e.g., a daily newspaper, text messages, instructions).

**Decoding:** Using various strategies to identify a printed word.

**Document:** Text such as graphs, charts or forms.

**Eliciting:** Using guiding questions to reveal the learner's knowledge or lead the learner to an answer.

**Practitioner:** An individual who teaches or tutors.

**Prose:** Continuous text in sentences or paragraphs.

**Sight Words:** Words that are identified instantly without any need for decoding.

**Task-based Activity:** Any activity that builds capacity to complete real-life tasks.

**Text:** Anything that can be read.

**Word Ring:** A collection of single words written on flashcards and kept on a metal ring.

**Word Bank:** A collection of words in a notebook, on a wall, or in another location.

## References

Campbell, Pat. 2003. *Teaching Reading to Adults: A Balanced Approach*. Edmonton, AB: Grass Roots Press.

Sonbul, Suhad, and Norbert Schmitt. 2010. "Direct Teaching of Vocabulary After Reading: Is It Worth the Effort?" *ELT Journal* 64 (3): 253-260.

Fagan, Barbara 2003. "Scaffolds to Help ELL Readers." *Voices from the Middle* 11 (1): 38-42.

# Level 1A

## At a Glance ARB Teaching Strategies

### Alphabet and Sound Letter Correspondence

- Use alphabet cards for these activities. Cards can be store bought, but creating them as a learner group activity may be more meaningful for participants. Cards should include both lower-case and upper-case samples of each letter, common blends such as *sh, ch, er,* and *ar,* and vowel pairs such as *ea, ee,* and *ai.*
- If possible, have students work in pairs or groups calling out letter sounds or letter names and finding the corresponding card. Start by using familiar letters and blends and then add complexity by adding more letters as learners become more confident and comfortable.

To increase difficulty:

- Add additional letters in different fonts. For example *G, g, g, G.*
- Use letter cards and corresponding picture cards and have learners match. For example: the **Dd** card matches a card with a picture of a dog. The simpler and cleaner the image the better.

### Alphabetization

- Provide a model alphabet for initial reference.
- Use a set of alphabet cards (all one case).
- How you choose to approach practice depends on the learner's confidence and knowledge of letters. Some possible suggestions, which can be done individually or in groups or pairs, include:
  - Giving the learner(s) the first third of the alphabet scrambled. The learner(s) puts them in order. Then give the learner(s) the next third, then the final letters.
  - Giving the learner(s) all of the scrambled letters to put in order.
  - Giving the learner(s) only some letters randomly to put in order (e.g., *b, g, k, r, i, n, u, w*). Once s/he has put these in order with spaces left in between, give another random group of letters to fill in the spaces, and then another group, until the alphabet is complete and in sequence.

To increase difficulty:

- Use a set of simple, single-syllable word cards instead of alphabet cards. Make sure no two words start with the same letter. Have learners place these words in alphabetical order based on the first letter of each word (for example: *dog, mole, rat*).

### Vocabulary Building

#### Word Ring

A word ring is a collection of flashcards that are hole-punched and put on a ring. They can be large cards or cut into small pieces to fit in a pocket, pouch, or purse. Words included on a word ring can be chosen based on frequency of use, importance, and relevance to the learner.

- For strengthening a learner's vocabulary it's best if the learner has an active role in identifying words that are meaningful to him or her. For example, when starting a program, a student could be encouraged to tell a story one-on-one with the practitioner about a topic s/he identifies with (e.g., family, community, a funny incident, children). From this story, the practitioner will help the learner transcribe the story and create a word ring.
- The learner can be encouraged to read words on the word ring daily.
- Add new words as they arise and the learner expresses an interest in learning how to read certain words.
- When the learner reads a word without hesitation, place a check mark on the back of the card. When a card has ten check marks, the word can be removed from the ring and stored for future review.

# Level 1A

## At a Glance ARB Teaching Strategies

### Labelling

Labelling involves writing the names of common items on slips of paper and asking the learner to place the piece of paper on the corresponding object. For example, the word *door* placed by a door, the word *pencil* placed by a *pencil*, etc. The same can be done with details in a picture (*cat*, *car*, *tree*, etc.).

- This practice can be used to complement word-ring practice, either by using words on the word ring or by adding new words from this activity to the word ring.

### Decoding

To become confident readers of English, learners are encouraged to use a combination of decoding strategies.

- Sounding it out relies on a learner's phonetic skills and ability to identify sound-letter correspondences. This skill is limited to a learner's knowledge of the alphabet, the oddities in English spelling, and pronunciation.
- Using visual cues is a common strategy people use to make sense of unknown words. Learners can be encouraged to look for accompanying pictures or graphics for hints about what a word means. For example, the word *push* is on a door, but the visual cue for the meaning of the word *push* is the door itself.
- Using background knowledge requires a learner to think about and apply what they know from experience to decode unknown words. For example, past experience lets the learner know that doors either pull or push open.

By combining these strategies, readers at any level will increase their success in decoding words. As learners become more comfortable with the sounds of letters and letter combinations in the English alphabet, their ability to sound out words will increase. By combining these skills with observation of where a word occurs, what information (visual) accompanies the word, and what a learner already knows about the context the word is situated in, a learner will gradually become more and more adept at decoding. This type of learning complements the idea that each learner enters complete with knowledge; it is the practitioner's job to help the learner bring that knowledge out.

### Games

The Northwest Territories Literacy Council ([www.nwt.literacy.ca](http://www.nwt.literacy.ca)) has some very useful suggestions for Literacy work with adult learners in their "How-to Kit" series. Their "Literacy Games for Adults" in this series provides game suggestions that can be adapted for beginning and more experienced readers (bingo, scrabble, paper bag skits, and penny storytelling.) The resources in this series have Indigenous content and offer fun interactive approaches to developing reading skills in English.

# Level 1B and 1C

## At a Glance ARB Teaching Strategies

### Vocabulary Building and Decoding

In addition to increasing the difficulty of strategies listed in Level 1A, the following strategy can also be used for building vocabulary and decoding skills.

#### *Word Banks*

Word banks are collections of words from student lessons or stories. At the 1B level, grouping words by noun categories (*food, animals, people*); by sound (phonetic); or by the tense of simple verbs (walk, walking, walked) helps keep confidence strong because learners can make inferences based on the type of grouping and through association.

### Active Reading

Readers Theatre has been identified as a motivational exercise for readers of all reading levels. By participating in reading, action, visualizing, and characterization, readers become more engaged in the content and therefore more willing to take risks and have fun with reading.

The native tale called “The Long Winter,” as told by Elaine L. Lindy and adapted into a play by Lindsay Parker, is appropriate for level 1B readers and addresses the theme of community. Web links that tie into this particular story are provided at <http://www.storiestogrowby.com/script.html>. Many other Readers Theatre plays are available on the Internet and are often identified by the culture from which they originate. In order to access some of these plays you’ll require a subscription.

The Northwest Territories (NWT) Literacy Council has created a document called “How to Kit—Readers Theatre” that describes in helpful detail the advantages of working in Readers Theatre with students and how to create your own plays. The link is <http://www.nwt.literacy.ca/resources/familit/howtokit/theatre/cover.htm>.

### Comprehension

#### *Predicting and activating background knowledge*

These strategies are teaching and learning strategies to encourage learners to think about what they already know and apply it to what they are reading. They are a good way to introduce new reading material.

1. Show or tell the learner the title and picture (if there is one). For example, if the material is a lost dog notice, the title might be *Lost Dog*.
2. Ask the learner what information s/he expects to find on the notice. Use questions to lead the learner to the answers: date lost, location last seen, description of the dog, the dog’s name, telephone number to call, etc.
3. Move on to reading the notice and completing the reading tasks.

#### *Pre-teach vocabulary*

Before beginning to read, a practitioner should pre-teach vocabulary that is topic specific and key to understanding the text. For example, if the text is about rental listings, the pre-taught vocabulary might include the acronyms *NS, NP, W/D*, and words like *damage deposit*, etc. Published teaching-reading materials often identify these words for you, either in bold or at the start of the text.

# Level 1B and 1C

## At a Glance ARB Teaching Strategies

### *Cut-up sentences*

Cut-up sentences are a good practice activity that encourages the learner to attend to print.

1. Either select a sentence or have the learner select a sentence from the day's reading activity. The learner copies the sentence, including punctuation, onto a strip of paper. Put the reading material away.
2. Check for errors and then cut up the sentence into noun and verb phrases. Scramble the pieces.
3. The learner must unscramble the words back into the/a correct sentence.
4. The cut-up sentence can be taken home for the learner to practise for homework.

### *Language experience*

Language experience involves writing about an experience and then using the learner-generated text as reading material. Often learners go on a field trip or attend a special event as the experience to write about, but they could also describe a personal experience. This strategy bridges a learner's oral language skills and their reading abilities, so it is particularly appropriate for those from cultures with strong oral traditions such as Indigenous learners. The learner generates sentences and the practitioner acts as a scribe. Although practitioners want to model correct grammatical structures, including slang used by the learner will make the text authentic for him or her. This example uses a field trip to a farmers' market.

1. Tell the learner you are going to write about the trip to the farmers' market. Ask the learner what to write.
2. The learner generates sentences verbally for you to record.
3. Write simple, correct sentences.
4. Read the written text aloud together.

The resulting text might look something like this:

The farmers' market is on Main Street.  
The farmers' market has apples and  
bananas. The farmers' market has eggs  
and cheese and stuff. You can buy pie  
there too. It is a good place to buy  
food.

5. Complete reading tasks appropriate for this level using the learner-generated text as the reading material.

# Level 2A

## At a Glance ARB Teaching Strategies

### Vocabulary Building

#### *Word banks*

Word banks are collections of words from student lessons. At this level words could be grouped either by categories (food, clothing, housing), spelling patterns (*light, night, flight*), or in word families (*talk, talking, talked*).

### Decoding and Meaning Making

#### *Sound it out*

The use of phonics or sound-letter correspondence is essential, but limited by the learner's knowledge of the alphabet, the oddities of English spelling, and pronunciation errors.

#### *Use visual clues*

If a word is unknown the learner looks to accompanying pictures or graphics for a hint about what the word is.

#### *Visualize*

Good readers make a picture in their head as they read which helps them to construct meaning. See level 1B/1C for an example.

#### *Part of the word known*

In this strategy the learner looks for something familiar in the word and then uses other strategies to complete decoding the word. See level 1B/1C for an example.

#### *Chunking*

Chunking is a similar strategy to "parts of the word known" except that with chunking the learner looks at the morphemes, or the parts of the word that alter the meaning of the root word. For example, if the learner encounters the word *learner* and s/he knows what the word *learn* means and knows that the suffix *-er* means a person who does the root word, then s/he knows the meaning of *learner*.

#### *Skip an unknown word*

Skipping an unknown word encourages learners to use the rest of the sentence and other strategies to decode a word and prevents the learner from getting stuck on unknown vocabulary. See level 1B/1C for an example.

#### *Context clues*

Context clues are used when the learner does not know the meaning of a word in a sentence. See level 1B/1C for more information.

#### *Multiple strategy use*

Good readers use a combination of strategies. For example, a reader may look at the first sound, recognize part of the word s/he knows, and look at a picture to decode a single word.

# Level 2A

## At a Glance ARB Teaching Strategies

### Comprehension

#### *Predicting and activating background knowledge*

These strategies are teaching and learning strategies to encourage the learner to think about what s/he already knows and apply it to what s/he is reading. They are a good way to introduce new reading material. See level 1B/1C for an example of these strategies.

#### *Pre-teach vocabulary*

Pre-teach vocabulary that is topic specific and key to understanding the text before beginning to read. Published teaching-reading materials often identify these words for you, either in bold or at the start of the text. See the level 1B/1C section for an example.

#### *Retelling*

Retelling is a good teaching strategy for checking comprehension and for consolidating learning. When retelling, the learner puts the text away and tells what the text was about—from memory and in their own words. This can be tricky for learners who often try to memorize rather than understand a text if they know they'll have to retell the information or message they read.

#### *Language experience*

Language experience involves writing about an experience and then using the learner-generated text as reading material. The learner generates the sentences verbally and the practitioner acts as a scribe. See the level 1B/1C section for more information and an example.

#### *Running records*

Running records are a good strategy for error analysis and can provide the learner with positive feedback. It will show practitioners the learner's repetitive errors to be focused on.

Two copies of the text are necessary for a running record. Ideally the practitioner copy is a plain copy with widely spaced text. As the learner reads aloud, the practitioner:

- puts a checkmark above each word read correctly;
- crosses out words that have been omitted;
- crosses out words that are substituted with another word – the substituted word is written above the crossed-out word;
- writes in additional words.

If the learner makes many print-based errors like substituting *went* for *want*, lessons should focus on reading for meaning using learning strategies like skipping an unknown word and teaching strategies like the use of clozes. If the learner makes meaning-based errors like *shut the back door* instead of *lock the door*, lessons should focus on attending closely to print. Tracking with a finger as they read may help reduce these kinds of errors. Another excellent strategy is to read the text aloud back to the learner as s/he reads it, including any error. Most often the learner can then self-correct the mistake.

#### *Clozes*

Clozes are texts with some words blanked out that can be determined using the meaning of the sentence. Clozes can be found in many published texts or created by practitioners. To create a cloze yourself, blank out a limited number of predictable words in a text appropriate to the learner level. Leave the first line complete to provide the learner with the context.



# Level 2A

## At a Glance ARB Teaching Strategies

### *Repeated readings*

As the learner can read increasingly longer texts, it is important to provide opportunities for repeated readings of the same text to increase learner fluency and comprehension. Repeated exposure to the same words and phrases is critical to processing them automatically. Automaticity reduces a learner's need to decode frequently. (Frequent decoding reduces reading comprehension.) Following are some suggested ways a learner can read the same text.

- Read silently.
- Read aloud to oneself.
- Read aloud to the practitioner, other learners, or someone at home.
- Answer questions about the text.
- Write questions about the text.
- Sketch a picture or diagram of the information presented in the text.

### **Task Completion**

#### *Scanning*

- Scanning is the strategy used by good readers to locate information quickly and easily. Instead of reading every word of a text, they look for key words, dates, numbers, or other hints such as capital letters for proper nouns to find the information they need.

# Level 2B

## At a Glance ARB Teaching Strategies

### Vocabulary Building

#### *Word banks*

Word banks are collections of words from current student lessons. At this level word banks grouped by synonyms or word families are appropriate. Word banks can be compiled on paper for easy reference in the front or back of a binder or in a separate booklet.

### Decoding and Meaning Making

#### *Part of the word known*

In this strategy the learner looks for something familiar in the word and then uses other strategies to complete decoding the word. For example, with the word *embedded* the reader may recognize the word *bed* and then sound out surrounding letters to arrive at the word.

#### *Chunking*

Chunking is a similar strategy to “parts of the word known” except that with chunking the learner looks at the morphemes, or the parts of the word that alter the meaning of the root word. For example: *employability* may look confusing, but the reader may know the root of the word *employ* from which s/he can then sound out the ending.

#### *Ask*

Does that make sense? Does it look right? Does it sound right? This simple strategy helps learners to read for meaning and monitor if their decoding has been correct. At the end of each sentence the learner should ask themselves if what they have interpreted makes sense.

#### *Ask questions*

Good readers unconsciously ask themselves questions about what they are reading as they read. For example, as they are reading directions to a job interview, they may be asking themselves “I wonder how long it will take to get there?” Then, when they get to the text that states the expected duration of the trip, they are easily able to make sense of what they are reading.

#### *Skip an unknown word*

Skipping an unknown word encourages learners to use the rest of the sentence and other strategies to decode a word and prevents the learner from getting stuck on unknown vocabulary.

#### *Context clues*

Context clues are used when the learner does not know the meaning of a word in a sentence. Teaching this strategy involves walking students through the context clues in the text, identifying the known information, and then using it to figure out the meaning of the unknown word. Underlining the clues in the sentence will help the learner understand this strategy.

#### *Multiple strategy use*

Good readers use a combination of strategies. For example, a reader may recognize part of the word s/he knows and use the context of the sentence to decode a single word.

# Level 2B

## At a Glance ARB Teaching Strategies

### Comprehension

#### *Predicting and activating background knowledge*

These strategies encourage the learner to think about what s/he already knows and apply it to what s/he is reading. They are a good way to introduce new reading material. This type of exercise is effective when done in a larger group or pairs.

#### *Pre-teach vocabulary*

Before beginning to read, the practitioner pre-teaches vocabulary that is topic specific and key to understanding the text. Published teaching-reading materials often identify these words for you, either in bold or at the start of the text.

#### *Retelling*

Retelling is a good teaching strategy for checking comprehension and for consolidating learning. When retelling, the learner tells what the text was about—from memory and in their own words. The Making Tracks strategy described below helps learners to retell.

#### *Language experience*

Language experience involves writing about an experience and then using the learner-generated text as reading material. The learner generates the sentences verbally and the practitioner acts as a scribe.

#### *Running records*

Running records are a good strategy for error analysis and provide the learner with positive feedback. It will show practitioners the learner's repetitive errors to be focused on in lessons.

#### *Clozes*

Clozes are texts with some words blanked out that can be determined using the meaning of the sentence.

#### *Repeated readings*

As the texts the learner reads grow in length, it's important to provide opportunities for repeated readings of the same text to increase learner fluency and comprehension. Repeated exposure to the same words and phrases is critical to processing them automatically. Automaticity reduces the need to decode frequently which is valuable since decoding reduces reading comprehension.

### Task Completion

#### *Scanning*

Scanning is the strategy used by good readers to locate information quickly and easily. Instead of reading every word of a text, they look for key words, dates, numbers, or other hints such as capital letters for proper nouns to find the information they need.

# Level 2B

## At a Glance ARB Teaching Strategies

### *Skimming*

Where scanning focuses on specific details or bits of information, skimming looks for the topic or idea the text is about by looking for key words, bolded words, and subheadings. For example, a learner may flip through a driving manual for the section on parallel parking, ignoring the unrelated sections to concentrate on the relevant section. Skimming and scanning are often used in tandem—the learner may skim for the parking section of a driving manual and then scan for the word *parallel*.

### *Inferring*

To find information learners at this level may need to make inferences that involve looking at evidence to reach a conclusion that's not explicitly stated. For example, if a community event poster states that children's events are for those ten and under and the learner must answer the question "Can a twelve-year-old attend a Halloween party?" they must infer that a twelve-year-old cannot attend those particular events.

### *Making tracks*

At this level learners are reading longer texts and may have more information to work with than can be mentally tracked. Many good readers manage information by making margin notes. As an alternative to writing in shared books, sticky notes can be used for the same purposes. The following activity provides the learner with practice tracking, identifying key information, and retelling.

1. Provide the learner with a pad of mini sticky notes.
2. Instruct the learner to read the first paragraph of the text.
3. Ask the learner what the important information was in the text.
4. Work with the learner to decide on three to five key words to write on one sticky note that will help them remember the important information. This can be very challenging because most learners find it very difficult to summarize so succinctly and they often choose words that will not help them to retell.
5. Have the learner read the next sections of the text, writing three to five words on each sticky note—one per paragraph.
6. Remove the sticky notes from the text. Lay them out on a blank piece of paper and put away the text.
7. Have the learner retell the content of the text using the sticky notes to aid in recall (Fagan 2003).