

READING COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT FOR TEACHERS OF ADULT LEARNERS: A METACOGNITIVE APPROACH TO PROFESSIONAL PREPARATION

Kurbanbayeva Dilnoza Sharofidinovna
Uzbekistan State World Languages University
PhD Researcher (Junior Doctoral Student)

Email: dilnozakurbanbayeva7@gmail.com
Tel: +998 97 732 74 41

Abstract: This article examines the critical need for specialized reading competence development among teachers who work with adult learners, focusing on the unique challenges and opportunities inherent in adult education contexts. The study explores how metacognitive approaches can enhance teachers' ability to effectively support adult reading development.

Keywords: adult education, reading competence, teacher preparation, metacognitive approach, professional development, literacy instruction

Introduction. The landscape of adult education has undergone significant transformation in recent decades, driven by technological advancement, economic shifts, and changing workforce demands. As more adults return to formal and informal learning environments to acquire new skills, complete interrupted education, or adapt to career changes, the need for highly competent reading instructors has become increasingly critical (Beder, 2019). Unlike traditional K-12 education, adult learning contexts present unique challenges that require specialized pedagogical approaches and instructor competencies.

Reading competence among adult learners varies dramatically, ranging from basic literacy development to advanced academic reading skills. This diversity necessitates that teachers possess not only strong foundational knowledge of reading processes but also sophisticated understanding of adult learning principles, cultural responsiveness, and adaptive instruction strategies (Kruidenier et al., 2010). The complexity of adult learning environments demands that instructors develop metacognitive awareness of their own teaching practices, enabling them to make informed decisions about instructional approaches and respond effectively to diverse learner needs.

Despite the growing importance of adult education, teacher preparation programs have historically focused primarily on K-12 contexts, leaving a significant gap in specialized preparation for adult education instructors (Smith & Gillespie, 2017). This gap becomes particularly pronounced when considering reading instruction, as adult learners bring complex life experiences, varied educational backgrounds, and diverse motivational factors that differ substantially from younger learners.

The purpose of this article is to examine the current state of reading competence development for teachers of adult learners, identify key challenges and opportunities, and propose evidence-based approaches for improving teacher preparation and professional development. Through a

comprehensive analysis of existing literature and best practices, this study aims to contribute to the growing body of knowledge supporting effective adult literacy instruction.

Adult learning theory provides the foundational framework for understanding how teachers must adapt their reading instruction approaches when working with mature learners. Knowles' (1984) andragogy theory identifies several key principles that distinguish adult learning from pedagogy: adults are self-directed learners, they bring rich life experiences to learning situations, their learning is problem-centered rather than subject-centered, and they are motivated by internal factors rather than external pressures.

These principles have profound implications for reading instruction. Adult learners typically approach reading tasks with specific goals in mind, whether related to workplace demands, academic requirements, or personal interests (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). This goal-oriented approach requires teachers to develop competencies in connecting reading instruction to real-world applications and learner-identified needs.

Transformative learning theory, developed by Mezirow (1991), provides additional insight into adult learning processes. Adults often experience disorienting dilemmas that challenge existing perspectives and require critical reflection on assumptions. For reading teachers, this theory suggests the importance of helping adult learners examine their beliefs about reading, learning, and their own capabilities as readers (Taylor, 2017).

Reading competence for teachers of adult learners encompasses multiple dimensions beyond traditional literacy instruction skills. Sabatini et al. (2011) identified several critical components: understanding of adult literacy development, knowledge of assessment strategies appropriate for adult learners, ability to integrate technology effectively, and skills in addressing diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Adult reading development differs significantly from child literacy development in several key ways. Adults possess extensive oral vocabulary and world knowledge that can support comprehension, yet may lack decoding skills or reading fluency (Strucker et al., 2007). This creates unique instructional challenges requiring teachers to leverage adult strengths while addressing specific skill gaps.

Research by Reder (2012) demonstrated that adult reading development is non-linear and often occurs in cycles of engagement and disengagement. Teachers working with adult learners must understand these patterns and develop competencies in maintaining learner motivation during periods of difficulty or plateau.

Metacognitive approaches to teacher development focus on building educators' awareness of their own thinking processes, decision-making strategies, and instructional choices. Flavell (1976) defined metacognition as "thinking about thinking," encompassing both metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive regulation.

For reading teachers, metacognitive competence involves understanding how they process text, make instructional decisions, and adapt teaching strategies based on learner needs (Pressley,

2006). This self-awareness enables teachers to model metacognitive reading strategies for their students and make more informed instructional choices.

Studies by Wilson and Bai (2010) found that teachers who received metacognitive strategy instruction showed improved ability to differentiate instruction and respond to diverse learner needs. This finding is particularly relevant for adult education contexts, where learner diversity is typically extensive.

Teachers of adult learners face numerous challenges that require specialized competencies. Comings et al. (2007) identified several persistent challenges: irregular attendance patterns, competing life demands, diverse educational backgrounds, and varying levels of motivation. These factors necessitate flexible instructional approaches and strong relationship-building skills.

Cultural and linguistic diversity presents additional challenges. Adult learners often bring complex linguistic repertoires and cultural perspectives that must be valued and incorporated into instruction (Perry, 2012). Teachers require competencies in culturally responsive pedagogy and understanding of second language reading development.

Technological literacy represents another significant challenge area. While technology offers powerful tools for reading instruction, many adult learners have limited technological skills, requiring teachers to integrate digital literacy instruction with reading development (Vanek, 2014).

Research reveals significant gaps in teacher preparation for adult education contexts. A study by Smith-Davis et al. (2019) found that fewer than 30% of adult education instructors had received specialized training in adult learning principles or adult literacy instruction. Most teachers in adult education settings possess general teaching credentials but lack specific preparation for adult learning environments.

Professional development opportunities for adult education teachers are often limited and fragmented. Unlike K-12 education, which benefits from systematic professional development structures, adult education frequently operates with minimal ongoing support for instructor development (Belzer, 2006).

The lack of specialized preparation is particularly problematic given the unique demands of adult reading instruction. Teachers require understanding of adult learning theory, knowledge of diverse adult literacy development patterns, skills in working with non-traditional student populations, and ability to integrate real-world applications into instruction (Beder et al., 2006).

This comprehensive review employed a systematic approach to identify and analyze relevant literature on reading competence development for teachers of adult learners. The methodology incorporated multiple search strategies and inclusion criteria to ensure comprehensive coverage of available research.

Electronic databases including ERIC, PsycINFO, Academic Search Complete, and Education Database were searched using combinations of key terms: "adult education," "adult learning,"

"reading instruction," "literacy," "teacher preparation," "professional development," "metacognitive," and "reading competence." The search was limited to peer-reviewed articles published between 2000 and 2023 to ensure currency while capturing foundational research.

Additional sources were identified through reference list reviews, citation searches, and examination of relevant professional organizations' publications including the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education, the International Reading Association, and the Coalition on Adult Basic Education.

Articles were included if they addressed reading instruction in adult education contexts, teacher preparation or professional development for adult educators, metacognitive approaches to reading instruction, or comparative analyses between adult and traditional educational contexts. Both empirical studies and theoretical papers were included to provide comprehensive coverage.

The review employed thematic analysis to identify key patterns and findings across the literature. Articles were coded according to theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches, participant populations, and key findings. Particular attention was paid to identification of best practices, challenges, and recommendations for teacher development.

The analysis revealed several essential competencies that distinguish effective teachers of adult learners from those working in traditional educational settings. These competencies reflect the unique characteristics and needs of adult learning environments.

Effective teachers of adult learners demonstrate deep understanding of andragogical principles and their application to reading instruction. This includes recognition that adult learners are self-directed, experience-rich, problem-centered, and internally motivated. Teachers who successfully apply these principles report higher levels of student engagement and achievement (Knowles et al., 2015).

Practical application of adult learning principles requires teachers to involve learners in goal-setting, connect reading activities to real-world applications, and respect learners' prior experiences and knowledge. Teachers must develop competencies in facilitating rather than directing learning, supporting learner autonomy while providing necessary structure and support.

Adult learners enter programs with highly diverse literacy backgrounds, requiring teachers to possess sophisticated assessment and diagnostic skills. Unlike standardized assessments common in K-12 settings, adult education requires more flexible, authentic assessment approaches that can capture the full range of adult literacy experiences (Mellard & Patterson, 2008).

Effective teachers demonstrate competencies in informal assessment techniques, portfolio development, and progress monitoring strategies that accommodate irregular attendance patterns and varying learning goals. They understand how to use assessment information to inform instruction while maintaining learner dignity and motivation.

Cultural competence emerges as a critical factor in successful adult reading instruction. Adult learners bring diverse cultural backgrounds, life experiences, and perspectives that must be acknowledged and valued in the learning environment (Gay, 2018). Teachers require competencies in culturally responsive pedagogy that goes beyond surface-level multicultural awareness.

This includes understanding how cultural backgrounds influence reading processes, incorporating diverse texts and perspectives, and creating inclusive learning environments where all learners feel valued. Teachers must also develop skills in working with learners who may have experienced educational trauma or discrimination.

The digital age has transformed adult learning environments, requiring teachers to develop competencies in technology integration. However, technology use in adult education must account for varying levels of digital literacy among learners (Rosen & Stewart, 2015).

Effective teachers demonstrate ability to scaffold technology use, integrate digital tools seamlessly with reading instruction, and support learners in developing both reading and digital literacy skills simultaneously. They understand how to use technology to enhance rather than complicate the learning process.

The analysis revealed strong evidence supporting metacognitive approaches to developing reading competence among teachers of adult learners. These approaches focus on building teachers' awareness of their own thinking processes and instructional decision-making.

Metacognitive teacher development emphasizes reflective practice as a cornerstone of professional growth. Teachers who engage in systematic reflection on their instructional practices demonstrate improved ability to adapt instruction to meet diverse learner needs (Schön, 1983).

Reflective practice in adult education contexts requires teachers to examine not only their instructional techniques but also their assumptions about adult learners, their own role as facilitators, and the broader social and economic factors affecting their students. This deeper level of reflection leads to more responsive and effective instruction.

Metacognitive approaches emphasize the importance of teachers understanding and modeling reading strategies. Teachers who possess explicit knowledge of their own reading processes are better equipped to teach these strategies to adult learners (Duke & Pearson, 2002).

This approach requires teachers to develop awareness of their own strategy use during reading, ability to make these strategies explicit for learners, and skills in providing appropriate scaffolding as learners develop independent strategy use. The metacognitive approach proves particularly effective with adult learners who benefit from understanding the "why" behind instructional activities.

Metacognitive teacher development builds capacity for adaptive instruction - the ability to modify teaching approaches based on ongoing assessment of learner needs and response (Duffy

et al., 2009). This capability proves essential in adult education contexts where learner diversity requires constant instructional adjustments.

Teachers who demonstrate strong metacognitive awareness show improved ability to recognize when instruction is not meeting learner needs, identify alternative approaches, and make real-time adjustments to improve learning outcomes. This flexibility proves crucial in maintaining adult learner engagement and motivation.

The analysis identified several promising models for developing reading competence among teachers of adult learners. These models incorporate best practices from adult learning theory and metacognitive development approaches.

Professional learning communities specifically focused on adult reading instruction have shown promise in developing teacher competencies. These communities provide opportunities for collaborative problem-solving, sharing of effective practices, and ongoing professional support (Wenger, 1998).

Effective communities of practice in adult education focus on real classroom challenges, incorporate action research approaches, and provide sustained support over time. They recognize that teacher development, like adult learning, requires ongoing engagement and practical application opportunities.

Mentoring programs that pair experienced adult education teachers with novices have demonstrated effectiveness in developing reading competence. These programs provide individualized support, modeling of effective practices, and guidance in applying theoretical knowledge to practical situations (Zepeda, 2012).

Effective mentoring programs incorporate structured observation, reflective conferences, and collaborative planning opportunities. They recognize the unique challenges of adult education environments and provide specific support for developing competencies in this context.

Action research provides a powerful framework for developing teacher competencies while simultaneously improving instructional practices. Teachers who engage in systematic inquiry into their own practice demonstrate improved understanding of adult learning processes and enhanced ability to meet learner needs (Stringer, 2007).

Adult education programs often operate with minimal resources, limiting opportunities for comprehensive teacher development. Unlike K-12 education, which benefits from systematic funding for professional development, adult education frequently relies on grants and temporary funding sources (Tyler, 2005).

This resource limitation affects both initial teacher preparation and ongoing professional development opportunities. Many adult education teachers work part-time or in multiple programs, further complicating professional development participation.

Few institutions offer specialized preparation programs for adult education teachers, particularly those focused on reading instruction. Most teachers enter adult education with

general teaching credentials or content area expertise but without specific preparation for adult learning contexts (Smith & Gillespie, 2017).

This gap in specialized preparation means that teachers often learn through trial and error rather than systematic preparation. While some teachers develop effective practices through experience, others struggle without appropriate foundational knowledge and skills.

Unlike K-12 education, which operates under established professional standards and certification requirements, adult education lacks consistent standards for teacher preparation and ongoing development. This inconsistency creates challenges in ensuring quality instruction and professional growth opportunities (Belzer, 2006).

The absence of clear standards also limits the development of systematic preparation programs and makes it difficult to assess the effectiveness of different development approaches.

The findings of this review have significant implications for multiple stakeholders in adult education, including teacher preparation programs, professional development providers, program administrators, and policymakers.

Universities and colleges offering teacher preparation programs should consider developing specialized tracks or endorsements for adult education. These programs should incorporate adult learning theory, specialized assessment techniques, cultural responsiveness training, and metacognitive development approaches.

Programs should also provide practical experience in adult learning environments, recognizing that the skills and competencies required differ significantly from those needed in K-12 settings. Field experiences should include diverse adult education contexts, from basic literacy programs to workplace education initiatives.

Professional development programs should adopt sustained, job-embedded approaches that recognize the unique challenges of adult education contexts. One-shot workshops prove inadequate for developing the complex competencies required for effective adult reading instruction.

Effective professional development should incorporate communities of practice, mentoring opportunities, and action research approaches. Programs should focus on developing metacognitive awareness and reflective practice capabilities that enable teachers to continue growing throughout their careers.

Adult education program administrators play crucial roles in supporting teacher development. They should prioritize hiring teachers with specialized preparation when possible and provide ongoing support for professional growth.

Administrators should also work to create supportive environments that encourage reflective practice, collaborative problem-solving, and continuous improvement. This includes providing time and resources for professional development activities and recognizing the unique challenges teachers face in adult education contexts.

Policymakers should consider developing professional standards specific to adult education that recognize the unique competencies required for effective practice. These standards should inform certification requirements, funding decisions, and program evaluation criteria.

Policy support should also address the resource limitations that impede teacher development in adult education. Stable funding for professional development, competitive compensation, and career advancement opportunities would help attract and retain high-quality teachers in adult education contexts.

This review has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The literature on reading competence development for teachers of adult learners remains relatively limited compared to K-12 education research. Many studies focus on general adult education practices rather than reading instruction specifically.

Additionally, much of the existing research has been conducted in specific contexts (e.g., community colleges, adult basic education programs) and may not generalize to all adult learning environments. Cultural and regional variations in adult education practices may also limit the applicability of findings across different contexts.

Future research should focus on several key areas. Empirical studies examining the effectiveness of different teacher development approaches would provide valuable evidence for program improvement. Longitudinal studies following teachers through preparation and early career experiences could illuminate the development process and identify critical support needs.

Research should also examine the perspectives of adult learners themselves, investigating how different teacher competencies affect learning outcomes and satisfaction. Comparative studies examining teacher effectiveness across different adult education contexts could help identify universal competencies versus context-specific skills.

Finally, research should investigate innovative approaches to teacher development, including the potential of online and blended learning formats, the use of technology in professional development, and the effectiveness of international collaboration and exchange programs.

7. Conclusion

The development of reading competence among teachers of adult learners represents a critical need in contemporary education. As adult learning environments continue to expand and evolve, the demand for highly competent instructors will only increase. This review has demonstrated that teaching adults to read requires specialized competencies that differ significantly from those needed in traditional K-12 settings.

The unique characteristics of adult learners - their self-direction, life experience, problem-centered orientation, and internal motivation - require teachers to possess sophisticated understanding of adult learning principles and their application to reading instruction. Teachers must also develop cultural competence, technology integration skills, and adaptive instruction capabilities that enable them to respond effectively to diverse learner needs.

Metacognitive approaches to teacher development show particular promise in building these competencies. By developing awareness of their own thinking processes and instructional decision-making, teachers become better equipped to model effective reading strategies and make responsive instructional choices. Reflective practice, strategy instruction, and adaptive instruction capabilities all benefit from metacognitive development approaches.

Despite the clear need for specialized teacher preparation, significant challenges remain. Limited resources, lack of specialized preparation programs, and inconsistent professional standards impede the development of effective teacher development initiatives. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated efforts from multiple stakeholders, including higher education institutions, professional development providers, program administrators, and policymakers.

The evidence presented in this review supports several key recommendations. Teacher preparation programs should develop specialized tracks for adult education that incorporate adult learning theory and metacognitive development approaches. Professional development initiatives should adopt sustained, job-embedded models that recognize the unique challenges of adult education contexts. Administrators should prioritize teacher development and create supportive environments for continuous improvement. Policymakers should develop appropriate professional standards and provide adequate resources for teacher development.

Ultimately, improving reading competence development for teachers of adult learners requires recognition that adult education is a specialized field requiring specialized preparation. By investing in the development of highly competent teachers, we can better serve the growing population of adult learners and support their success in achieving their educational and life goals. The metacognitive approach offers a promising framework for this development, emphasizing the reflective, adaptive, and responsive capabilities that characterize effective adult education practice.

The implications of this work extend beyond individual teacher development to encompass broader questions about the role of adult education in society. As economic and technological changes continue to reshape the workforce, adult learning becomes increasingly critical for individual and societal success. Ensuring that adult learners have access to highly competent reading instruction represents an investment in human capital development and social equity.

Moving forward, the field must continue to develop evidence-based approaches to teacher preparation and professional development that reflect the unique demands and opportunities of adult learning contexts. Through sustained commitment to teacher development, we can enhance the quality of adult reading instruction and better support the diverse learners who depend on these services for their personal and professional growth.

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