

# Literacy: The Key to Inclusion for Adults with Intellectual Disabilities

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 2020

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**Categories:** Connections



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Literacy may be the most necessary skill that human beings acquire. Tom Gilbert has discovered a teaching method that can help some individuals with intellectual disabilities acquire literacy skills. He has tutored over 50 people, each on a long-term basis, and has logged about 10,000 hours of one-on-one tutoring sessions.

This method of teaching adult learners with intellectual disabilities to read follows a developmental progression, beginning with the learners memorizing basic “whole” sight words that they read in books, stories, or other printed materials. The learner’s

understanding of the sentences or passages being read helps them identify the printed words, so it is important to choose materials that are interesting to the learner. The passages are read aloud by the tutor and the learner over and over again, and the exposure to words “impresses” upon the learner a knowledge of the letters and the sounds found within the words. The learner and tutor read together, and their voices form a melody. What they say, they say together. They also converse about the meaning of what they are reading. Picture cues help support reading the words.

## **Holistic Teaching and Learning**

This holistic, “impress” teaching approach stands in contrast with common practices for facilitating literacy in adults with intellectual disabilities. Commonly, instructional practices teach adults to memorize small units of print, such as single letters, or survival words, such as *exit* or *men*, with little intent to inspire reading of sentences and passages. In contrast, the holistic, impress method begins with exposure to meaningful sentences and passages. In time, moving whole to part, learners progress from reading whole words to then reading word parts. Learners become aware of how to break words into their individual letters and syllables. One way to begin syllabication is by taking apart simple compound words (e.g., breaking *baseball* into *base* and *ball*). With practice, they learn patterns for how letters represent sounds and can begin to spell the words they already know how to read.

## **Meaningful Reading**

The most important instructional component is the frequent and repeated reading of interesting, rich materials. Interest is the key for achieving literary skills and furthering literacy acquisition. The only actual prerequisite skill is the learner’s ability to carry on a give-and-take conversation with the tutor. Even for those persons who can only read at a basic level, they need to really read, and to do so often. This means reading along with the tutor, sharing saying the words aloud, and enjoying the meaning of the text. For persons who are nonverbal and do not speak or use another method of communicating, being read to by others is a meaningful experience, because listening to text enriches their knowledge and participation.

Our research and experiences with persons with intellectual disabilities have led us to perceive that literacy can be acquired by persons in this population by following this developmental progression, beginning with memorization of basic “whole” sight words,

followed by shared reading of repetitive, contextually rich materials. This practice is the key for achieving literary skills and furthering a learner's interest in literacy. Our evidence, gathered by observing over 50 learners, suggests that learners acquire literacy more readily if meaningful, shared reading is introduced first, instead of letter-to-sound drills.

### **Free Access to Literacy Materials**

The contribution of reading to the quality of life of persons with intellectual disabilities is immeasurable. We hope to inspire adults with intellectual disabilities and those who advocate for them to try this holistic approach to reading. To obtain teaching procedures, resources, and materials free of charge, please contact Tom Gilbert at [thomasgilbert2052@yahoo.com](mailto:thomasgilbert2052@yahoo.com).

*Thomas W. Gilbert, M.A., has taught literacy skills to individuals with intellectual disabilities for over three decades and manages literacy programing for persons who reside in group homes. He is the author of literacy curricula and materials and has presented his instructional techniques to national and international audiences.*

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