



Evidence-Based Instructional Strategies for Enhancing English Language Reading Skills among Learners in Adult and Continuing Education Centers in Kakamega County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Background: Adult literacy remains a key pillar for socio-economic development and lifelong learning. While many educational policy papers and programme evaluations propose teaching strategies for improving adult literacy, but few are grounded in rigorous, localised evidence. In rural regions such as Kakamega County, Kenya, adult learners continue to face challenges in acquiring effective English language reading skills due to socio-economic constraints, limited instructional resources, and diverse linguistic backgrounds.

Objective: This study investigated evidence-based instructional strategies for enhancing English language reading skills among adult learners in Adult and Continuing Education Centres (ACECs) in Kakamega County, Kenya.

Method: The study adopted a descriptive survey research design and targeted adult learners and English language instructors across selected sub-counties in Kakamega County. A multistage sampling technique was used to select 116 participants from 16 ACECs. Data were collected using interviews and document analysis, and analysed using descriptive techniques.

Results: Findings revealed that the envisaged instructional strategies such as the use of learners' daily-life reading materials, integration of language learning with livelihood skills, and participatory teaching methods were rarely implemented. The study further established that challenges including inconsistent learner attendance, limited professional training for instructors, and inadequate learning materials significantly hampered instructional effectiveness and learner participation in the reading process.

Conclusion: The study concludes that despite the existence of recommended literacy teaching strategies, their non-implementation continues to undermine the development of English language reading skills among adult learners in ACECs in Kakamega County. This situation limits the contribution of adult literacy programmes to national literacy and development goals.

Unique Contribution: This study provides localised empirical evidence on the gap between policy-driven instructional strategies and classroom practice in adult literacy education. It highlights the background realities influencing instructional delivery in rural ACECs in Kenya.

Key Recommendation: The study recommends the adoption of learner-tailored, contextually relevant, and evidence-based instructional practices, supported by regular instructor training, improved learning resources, and strengthened learner support systems to enhance reading outcomes in Adult and Continuing Education Centres.

Key Words: Adult Learners, Evidence-Based Strategies, English Language, Reading Skills



INTRODUCTION

Adult and Continuing Education Centers (ACECs) serve as vital platforms for addressing literacy deficiencies among adult populations, particularly in rural settings like Kakamega County, Kenya. Adult learners face distinctive challenges when acquiring English language reading skills due to a combination of socio-economic constraints, delayed entry into formal education, and cognitive differences associated with adult learning. Wambugu and Kimani (2021) observed that these challenges are often compounded by linguistic diversity, where many adult learners speak local languages as their first language, thus making English acquisition more demanding.

To address these barriers, a range of instructional strategies has been proposed and implemented, some with greater success than others. One widely supported method is explicit instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics. This strategy involves systematic teaching of letter-sound relationships, blending of sounds, and decoding techniques. Kruidenier (2022) highlights the significance of this approach, particularly among adult learners with low literacy levels, noting that adults benefit more from structured and direct instruction than from discovery-based methods. By focusing on foundational reading skills, phonics instruction helps learners build confidence and fluency in reading English texts.

Thematic instruction has also emerged as another effective instructional strategy in ACECs. This approach embeds vocabulary development and reading comprehension within relevant and meaningful themes, such as employment, healthcare, and civic participation. According to Burt, Peyton, and Van Duzer (2025), thematic instruction enhances both motivation and retention among adult learners by making learning more applicable to real-life contexts. For example, instructors might teach reading through job application forms or health pamphlets, thereby reinforcing practical vocabulary and comprehension.

Technological integration has further transformed the landscape of adult education. Online platforms such as ReadWorks and USA Learns provide interactive materials equipped with features like audio narration, visual aids, and self-paced quizzes. Rosenthal and Ahearn (2021) argue that these tools not only support differentiated instruction but also cater to the irregular attendance patterns of adult learners who may juggle work and family responsibilities. Digital tools thus expand access and offer a flexible learning environment, which is particularly valuable in ACECs that may lack physical resources.

For ACE learning to be effective, instructional approaches must be rooted in evidence rather than abstract theory or imported prescriptions. Evidence-based instructional strategies are those supported by empirical research, showing measurable gains in adult learners' literacy outcomes (Snow, 2021). Such strategies not only improve efficiency in teaching but also ensure that instructional practices align with the diverse needs of learners. This study aimed to propose such strategies that are rooted in evidence, and proven to be effective.

Despite numerous national and international efforts aimed at improving adult literacy, many adult learners in Kenya, continue to struggle with foundational English language reading skills. The inability to read proficiently in English hinders their access to critical information, limits



employment opportunities, and undermines their full participation in civic and socio-economic development (UNESCO, 2021). Adult and Continuing Education Centers (ACECs) were established as inclusive platforms to address these challenges. However, evidence suggests that instructional practices in these centers are not sufficiently responsive to the diverse needs of adult learners, leading to persistently low literacy outcomes (Ministry of Education, 2020). Therefore, this study aimed at investigating evidence-based instructional strategies that enhance English language reading skills among learners in Adult and Continuing Education Centers in Kakamega County, Kenya.

Interactive teaching methods have gained attention as effective strategies. Lin and Sun (2024), in their study of adult learners in virtual classrooms, found that discussion-based techniques—such as problem-based learning, video discussions, and self-created content like memes—enhanced engagement and motivation. While their study was conducted online, the principles of learner participation and content ownership are transferable to physical ACEC settings, where instructors can incorporate small group discussions, role-plays, and storytelling to create a dynamic and inclusive learning environment.

Despite the availability of several instructional strategies in ACE, many challenges remain in their implementation. Maphosa and Ndebele (2014) noted that ACE instructors often contend with large class sizes, inadequate teaching materials, and limited training on adult pedagogy. These barriers reduce the potential effectiveness of evidence-based approaches. Furthermore, the diverse linguistic backgrounds of learners necessitate additional scaffolding and differentiated instruction, which are not always feasible given the current resource limitations in Kenyan ACECs.

Policy gaps and limited localisation of international best practices also hinder progress. While global literature presents a robust evidence base for effective adult literacy instruction, there is a paucity of localised studies examining the contextual applicability of these methods in Kenyan rural settings. Waweru and Evans (2019) emphasise the need for context-sensitive strategies tailored to the socio-cultural and economic realities of adult learners in regions like Kakamega County. Without such adaptations, even the most proven instructional strategies may fall short of achieving the desired learning outcomes.

The twenty first century has greatly been changed by the advancing science and technology with several inventions which makes teaching process creative and digitalized. According to study by Oyebamiji & Ezeala (2024), modern teaching aids include; use of power point presentations, visual and audio presentations, virtual learning among others. The study denoted that analogue adult instructors in the present twenty first century may never teach well because of the new literacy skills required in the modern learning era. The study further explored the implication of digital literacy for sustained ACE education. The study underscored the need to have digitally literate ACE practitioners in all ACE institutions in order for them to manage the new technologies for improved delivery of teaching and learning.

In the modern world, technological advancement is highly regarded as a strategy to mitigate challenges associated with old age. According to Xu et al. (2024), the study reviewed articles



from the years 2014 to 2024 to delineate areas of digital literacy skills which older adults acquire, the challenges they encounter and their reasons for being persistent. Among the challenges encountered by adult learners in learning digital literacy were unfamiliarity with technology, cognitive decline, emotional hindrances, and limited access to digital learning resources among others. The study concluded that such challenges would result in frustration in adult learners use of digital devices and apps, which contributes to their willingness to learn.

Furthermore, use of problem based learning strategies provides learners with opportunities for selecting and creating own projects thereby having autonomy in doing tasks leading to success (Bruce, 2008). Problem based learning also provide interactive learning opportunities amongst themselves ultimately leading to improvement in their literacy skills. The interpersonal interaction among learners develops in them individual learning responsibility, a virtue needed in the society. Also, in problem based learning learners practice a variety of literacy skills while creating and executing the learning projects. This way, learners not only teach skills to their fellow learners but also to themselves (Bell, 2010).

Collaborative learning addresses how students learn and how they construct knowledge together (Adams and Hamm, 2019). Furthermore, various strategies of learning suggest cooperative contact among peers in smaller groups, and learning is positively or negatively achieved depending on the group organization. Collaborative learning leads to innovativeness because it depends on teamwork and close collaboration among the learners. Also, knowledge is an innovative concept generating new ideas and information (Adams & Hamm, 2019). Among the common collaborative strategies are think pair share, jig saw, among more others.

Govender and Amedo-Moreno (2025) observed that contextual analysis was an essential skill for language acquisition. One of the strategies to embrace contextual analysis involves extensive reading which requires learner participation. According their study, Govender and Amedo-Moreno (2025) presented a game-based extensive reading approach which was designed to promote learner participation via visual presentations. This encouraged habitual reading and fostered English language curiosity among the adult learners. The findings showed results where both the instructors and the learners applauded the learning model and termed the learning sessions as being full of enjoyment. The present study opined that use of gamification in learning among adults would enhance mastery of content.

METHODS

This study employed a descriptive survey research design to evaluate evidence-based instructional strategies for enhancing English language reading skills among adult learners in Adult and Continuing Education Centers (ACECs) in Kakamega County. In this study, the descriptive survey allowed the researcher to explore and document the instructional strategies in use. The design also enabled the identification of trends and gaps in adult literacy instruction from the perspectives of both teachers and learners. The target population of the study comprised of one hundred and sixteen (116) ACE English language instructors and center coordinators with a focus on Kakamega County. To effectively elicit data for the research objective, instructor and center coordinator interview schedules, and document analysis, were



employed. The choice of these instruments was guided by their ability to capture qualitative data, thereby enriching the study findings. Piloting was conducted to ascertain the validity and reliability of the research instruments and the trustworthiness of the interview schedule.

RESULTS

This section provides findings that provide proposed strategies for teaching English language reading skills among adult learners in ACECs in Kakamega county Kenya. However, some of the proposed strategies were applied in other areas outside the research area. The findings were developed basing on the qualitative data collected through document analysis, and structured interviews with the key informants.

Table 1: Evidence based teaching strategies in ACECs

Evidence Based strategy	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Learner-Centred Instruction	29	25.2%
Culturally Relevant & Authentic Materials	22	18.9%
Outdated / Teacher-Centred Methods	33	28.4%
Integration of Technology	8	6.9%
Assessment Practices	12	10.3%
Institutional & Structural Challenges	12	10.3%
	116	100.00%

The findings of this study revealed notable gaps between recommended evidence-based strategies and actual instructional practices in Adult and Continuing Education Centres (ACECs) in Kakamega County, Kenya, based on a total sample of 116 participants including instructors and centre coordinators. Learner-Centred Instruction: Only 29 participants (25.2%) reported regularly employing learner-centred instructional strategies, such as participatory reading exercises, guided reading, and group discussions. This indicates that while ACEC curricula emphasize learner-driven teaching, actual classroom practices largely remain teacher-led. Research suggests that adult learners benefit most from interactive and participatory learning approaches that allow them to contextualize knowledge within their daily lives (Merriam, Bierema, & Baumgartner, 2023). The low adoption of learner-centred strategies in ACECs underscores a persistent challenge in aligning curriculum expectations with classroom realities.

Culturally Relevant and Authentic Materials: Evidence from 22 participants (18.9%) indicated the occasional use of culturally relevant or authentic reading materials, including newspapers, community documents, and learners' personal narratives. However, most centres continue to rely primarily on traditional textbooks. This finding aligns with Guthrie et al. (2022), who argue that the use of authentic and contextually meaningful texts enhances learner engagement and promotes literacy development, particularly among adult learners with diverse educational backgrounds.



Outdated / Teacher-Centred Methods: A significant proportion, 33 participants (28.4%), reported that teaching in ACECs still heavily relied on teacher-centred strategies, such as lectures, rote memorization, and reading aloud. While these methods were effective in earlier formal schooling contexts, they are insufficient for adult learners who bring diverse literacy levels, prior experiences, and cognitive abilities to the classroom (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2022). This reliance on traditional methods demonstrates a misalignment between policy intentions and actual instructional practice.

Integration of Technology: Only 8 participants (6.9%) reported using digital tools, including audio-visual aids or projectors, to enhance reading instruction. Most rural ACECs lack access to computers or internet connectivity. Recent studies emphasize that the integration of technology in adult education can enhance engagement, support multimodal learning, and improve literacy outcomes (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2022). The limited use of technology in ACECs highlights a missed opportunity to improve reading skills through digital and interactive resources.

Assessment Practices: Assessment strategies were predominantly summative and recall-based, with 12 participants (10.3%) reporting the use of practical or formative assessments that measure learners' ability to apply reading skills in real-life contexts. Illeris (2023) notes that authentic and formative assessments are critical in adult learning as they provide feedback for differentiated instruction and encourage the practical application of skills. The lack of such assessment practices in ACECs limits opportunities for learners to demonstrate meaningful literacy progress.

Institutional and Structural Challenges: Similarly, 12 participants (10.3%) identified structural and institutional barriers, including inconsistent learner attendance, inadequate learning materials, and untrained instructors, which hinder effective teaching and learning of reading skills. These findings are consistent with studies highlighting systemic constraints in rural adult education programs, which significantly impact literacy acquisition and program effectiveness (Merriam et al., 2023; Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2022).

Thematic Presentation and Discussion

This section presents the findings on proposed strategies for teaching English language reading skills among adult learners in Adult and Continuing Education Centres (ACECs) in Kakamega County, Kenya. The results were organised thematically and are based on qualitative data obtained through document analysis and interviews with key informants who were ACEC instructors, and ACE centre coordinators. This excerpts were provided to illustrate participants' lived experiences and perspectives.

Theme 1: Emphasis on Learner-Centred Instructional Strategies

Analysis of the ACE curriculum guides, lesson plans, and teaching schemes revealed a strong policy emphasis on learner-centred instructional approaches. These strategies are designed to shift instruction from teacher-dominated lessons to participatory and learner-driven activities. This was further supported during the interviews whereby one instructor noted:



“The curriculum expects us to involve learners more in reading lessons, but in reality, most lessons are still teacher-led because learners come with different abilities and we lack enough support materials.”

Yet one centre coordinator stated:

“Adult learners understand better when they are involved in discussions and group reading, but many teachers still rely on lecture methods because that is what they are used to.”

Although the curriculum promoted learner-centred strategies, classroom practice remained largely traditional, limiting learner participation and engagement.

Theme 2: Use of Culturally Relevant and Authentic Reading Materials

Document analysis revealed that ACEC instructional guidelines recommend the use of culturally relevant texts and real-life reading materials to enhance learner engagement and comprehension. These included newspapers, health brochures, agricultural manuals, and community notices. However, interviews revealed limited application of these recommendations. One instructor explained:

“Most of the time we read from old textbooks. We would prefer reading things like farming guides or health information because that is what we use in our daily lives.”

Another instructor added:

“We are encouraged to use real-life materials, but many centres do not have access to newspapers, pamphlets, or digital content.”

This finding confirms that while policy documents supported contextualized learning, limited resources hindered effective implementation.

Theme 3: Continued Use of Outdated and Teacher-Centred Teaching Methods

Despite curriculum reforms, document analysis showed a continued reliance on traditional teaching approaches such as lecturing, rote memorisation, reading aloud, and deductive instruction. These methods dominated lesson delivery in most the rural ACECs. Similarly, one centre coordinator remarked:

“Most teachers still use the methods they learned in teacher training many years ago. There is little refresher training on adult learning methods.”

These findings indicate that outdated instructional practices remain a major barrier to effective adult literacy development.

DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study reveal significant gaps between recommended instructional strategies and actual practices in Adult and Continuing Education Centres (ACECs) in Kakamega County, Kenya. Analysis of data from 116 participants highlighted six key themes, each reflecting the



extent to which evidence-based practices have been implemented, and these results can be compared with findings from similar studies in other African and international adult education contexts. Learner-Centred Instruction was reported by only 25.2% of participants. This indicates that most instructors still rely on teacher-led methods rather than participatory approaches such as guided reading, group discussions, and collaborative learning. Similar findings have been reported by Merriam, Bierema, and Baumgartner (2023), who emphasize that adult learners are more engaged and retain information better when learning is interactive and learner-driven. In rural Kenya, Osborn and Broad (2022) also observed that the predominance of teacher-centred instruction limited adult learners' engagement and negatively affected literacy outcomes. Collectively, these findings suggest that despite policy recommendations, learner-centred strategies remain underutilized in ACECs.

Culturally Relevant and Authentic Materials were employed by 18.9% of participants, suggesting limited incorporation of real-life texts into learning. Guthrie et al. (2022) argue that culturally meaningful materials enhance motivation and improve literacy comprehension among adult learners. This aligns with studies in Uganda and Nigeria, where Namatovu (2020) and Okeke (2021) found that learners achieved higher literacy outcomes when instructional materials reflected local realities, such as newspapers, local stories, and community documents. The present study similarly highlights that authentic materials are crucial for adult learners, who benefit from reading content aligned with their lived experiences.

Outdated Teacher-Centred Methods were reported by 28.4% of participants, confirming that lectures, rote memorization, and reading aloud continue to dominate ACEC classrooms. Agolla and Ong'ondo (2021) found that teacher-centred approaches in Kenyan adult education programs limited learners' ability to engage critically with texts and apply literacy skills. Similarly, Okeke (2021) reported that adult learners in rural Nigerian settings exposed to lecture-based methods demonstrated limited critical thinking and lower functional literacy. These findings illustrate that teacher-centred methods remain a barrier to effective reading instruction in rural adult education.

Integration of Technology was minimal, with only 6.9% of participants using digital tools such as projectors, audio-visual aids, or e-books. Ginsberg and Wlodkowski (2022) note that technology-enhanced instruction supports multimodal learning and improves engagement for learners with diverse literacy backgrounds. In South Africa, Moyo and Van der Walt (2021) reported that adult learners' literacy outcomes were constrained by limited access to digital resources, highlighting the need for infrastructural investment and training for instructors. These studies corroborate the current findings, emphasizing the importance of digital integration in rural adult education.

Assessment Practices were primarily summative, with only 10.3% of participants reporting formative or practical assessments. Illeris (2023) emphasizes that authentic assessments allow adult learners to demonstrate applied skills and provide feedback for differentiated instruction. Oduro and Owusu (2021) similarly found that Ghanaian adult learners performed better when assessments reflected real-life tasks rather than standardized recall tests. The current findings



suggest that ACECs in Kakamega County need to adopt more formative and contextually meaningful assessment strategies to promote functional literacy.

Institutional and Structural Challenges were highlighted by 10.3% of participants, including inconsistent learner attendance, inadequate learning materials, and untrained instructors. Merriam et al. (2023) note that structural and systemic barriers, such as resource scarcity and socio-economic constraints, significantly affect adult literacy outcomes. Ginsberg and Wlodkowski (2022) also reported that rural adult education programs face similar challenges, limiting the implementation of recommended teaching strategies. These findings indicate that addressing systemic constraints is crucial for improving instructional effectiveness in ACECs.

Therefore, the findings of this study align closely with those of similar studies across the world, demonstrating that while policy documents advocate for learner-centred, culturally relevant, and technology-enhanced instructional strategies, practical implementation remains limited. The persistence of teacher-centred methods, minimal use of authentic materials and technology, and structural challenges all constrain effective English reading instruction. These results underscore the need for targeted interventions, including instructor training in adult learning principles, integration of authentic and contextually relevant materials, incorporation of digital tools, adoption of formative assessments, and systemic support for rural ACECs. Addressing these areas is essential to bridge the gap between policy and practice and to enhance literacy outcomes for adult learners.

The thematic findings revealed a clear gap between policy intentions and classroom practice in ACECs. While curriculum documents advocated for learner-centred, technology-enhanced, and contextually relevant instruction, most centres continue to rely on traditional teacher-centred approaches. The limited use of authentic reading materials, digital tools, and formative assessment further constrains the development of functional reading skills among adult learners.

The study therefore highlights the urgent need for evidence-based instructional strategies tailored to adult learners' realities. These include guided reading, collaborative learning strategies, experiential learning, and continuous teacher professional development. Without addressing these institutional and pedagogical barriers, adult literacy programmes will remain unable to achieve their intended outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, the study concluded that the implementation of evidence-based instructional strategies for enhancing English language reading skills among adult learners in Adult and Continuing Education Centres (ACECs) in Kakamega County was limited and inconsistent. Specifically, while curriculum and policy documents advocate for learner-centred approaches, only 25.2% of instructors consistently apply participatory teaching methods, indicating a gap between policy and practice. Similarly, the integration of culturally relevant and authentic reading materials (18.9%) and digital technologies (6.9%) remained minimal, reducing learner engagement and limiting opportunities for multimodal literacy development. The study further concludes that traditional teacher-centred methods (28.4%), reliance on summative



assessments (10.3%), and structural challenges (10.3%) including untrained instructors, insufficient learning resources, and inconsistent learner attendance continue to constrain effective literacy instruction. These barriers demonstrate that adult learners are not receiving optimal instruction aligned with modern adult learning principles, thereby affecting their reading outcomes.

Therefore, enhancing English reading skills in rural ACECs requires contextually adapted, evidence-based interventions, including the adoption of guided reading, collaborative and experiential learning strategies, integration of authentic materials, use of digital tools, and ongoing professional development for instructors. Addressing institutional and structural constraints was also essential to ensure consistent and effective literacy instruction, contributing to the achievement of national literacy goals in Kenya.

Ethical Clearance

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research principles and approved by the Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology Institutional Ethics Review Committee (IERC) (Protocol Prior to data collection, written informed consent was obtained from all adult learners participating in the study. Permission was also sought from the management of the Adult and Continuing Education Centers involved in the research. Participants were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this study. The research was conducted objectively without any financial, personal, or professional relationships that could potentially influence or bias the findings presented herein

Authors contribution

Authors were responsible for the conceptualization of the research idea, development of the research design, and formulation of the methodology. We conducted the data collection process, performed the data analysis, prepared the original draft of the manuscript, and managed the overall project administration and contributed to the literature review, provided methodological



guidance and review, supported the data analysis process, and participated in reviewing and editing the manuscript and supervised the entire research process, validated the findings, conducted a critical review of the manuscript, and provided final approval for submission. All authors have thoroughly read, reviewed, and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.

Data availability statement

The datasets on which conclusions were made for this study are available on reasonable request.

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