



Teaching Essential Reading Skills to Adult English Language Learners

May 8, 2026, Dr. Meg Eubank



My Context

- ▶ Professor
- ▶ Former Executive Director of ESL Nonprofit
- ▶ Taught students from over 100 countries, all levels, all ages
- ▶ Online (asynchronous and synchronous) and face to face instruction

- ▶ What is your context?



Zoom tips:
Waterfall
Private messages

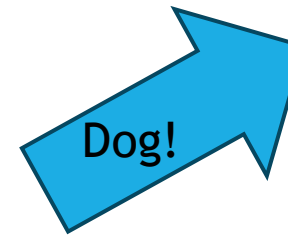
What are some of the challenges adult ELLs face while reading in English?

Share one idea in the chat.

ELL Challenges in Reading

Some of my ideas, in no particular order:

- ▶ Vocabulary/Language Barriers
- ▶ Comprehension and decoding issues
- ▶ Lack of background knowledge or cultural references
- ▶ No understanding of the American academic structure of text
- ▶ Confidence levels
- ▶ Differing educational backgrounds and experiences



How to approach these many issues?

Everything is intertwined. Spiraling (revisiting topics again and again, growing in difficulty) and scaffolding (building skills with structured support) is needed. Skills and knowledge work together to create solid readers.



Active Reading

Movie Analogy

Before reading: (trailer of the movie)

- Preview (titles, images, headings)
- Activate background knowledge

During reading: (watching the movie)

- Ask questions
- Monitor understanding

After reading: (talking to friends about the movie)

- Summarize
- Discuss



Finding the Main Idea

- ▶ **Main Idea** is the topic and claim (author's message about the topic).
- ▶ The **Topic** is the person, place, event or idea repeated throughout the reading. It answers the question: Who or what is the passage about?
- ▶ The **topic sentence** (in one paragraph) or **thesis statement** (in multi-paragraph writings) is the stated main idea.

Let's practice finding the main idea of an essay. The following page has an introduction paragraph to an essay that Meg is writing.

Dogs Make Great Pets (Introduction)

by Meg Eubank

Many Americans have dogs as pets. In fact, they are one of the most popular pets in households across the United States. There are many breeds of dogs and people can find a dog to fit all lifestyles and living situations. Regardless of a person's age or family size, canines can be great companions to people for a number of reasons. Dogs make great pets because they can be trained, they have great personalities, and they are very cute and cuddly.

- ▶ What is the **TOPIC** of this essay? (the thing that is being discussed)
- ▶ What is the **CLAIM** of this essay? (what is Meg saying about the topic?)
- ▶ What is the **MAIN IDEA** of this essay? (the topic and claim combined)



American Academic Text Structure

Most paragraphs are made up of three parts:

- ▶ **Topic** - the subject (who or what the paragraph is about)
- ▶ **Main idea** - the author's main point which is either stated directly or implied (suggested)
- ▶ **Supporting details** - statements that explain, develop, and illustrate the author's main idea (can be facts or opinions)

To help locate the supporting details of a paragraph, first identify the main idea. Then turn the main idea statement into a **question**. *You can use a "w" word to do this (who, what, when, where, why or how).*



Dogs Make Great Pets (Continued)

by Meg Eubank

Many Americans have dogs as pets. In fact, they are one of the most popular pets in households across the United States. There are many breeds of dogs and people can find a dog to fit all lifestyles and living situations. Regardless of a person's age or family size, canines can be great companions to people for a number of reasons. Dogs make great pets because they can be trained, they have great personalities, and they are very cute and cuddly.

The first reason dogs make great pets is because they can be trained to do a variety of tasks. Many household pets can learn simple commands like "sit," "stay," and "roll over." For example, the class mascot Mara will listen to the command "sit" to receive a treat. In addition to simple commands, dogs have been trained in complex rescue skills to sniff out bombs or save people from the rubble during disasters. For instance, over 300 search and rescue dogs assisted during the 9/11 attacks in New York in 2001. Dogs are intelligent and can learn many skills.

First Literacy Professional Development Workshop



Transitions/Signal Words

▶ Patterns of Organization



Listing	Time Order	Examples
<i>First</i> <i>Second</i> <i>Third</i> <i>Next</i> <i>Finally</i> <i>Last</i> Also <u>In addition</u> Furthermore One reason Moreover	<i>First</i> <i>Second</i> <i>Third</i> <i>Next</i> <i>Finally</i> <i>Last</i> Before After Soon While Since Later	<u>For example</u> <u>For instance</u> Such as To illustrate As an illustration Illustrated by As an example

Example Chart of Patterns of Organization with Transition/Signal Words

Pattern of Organization	Purpose	Transitions/Signal Words	Example
Listing	Lists a series or set of reasons, details or points. The order of the details does NOT matter.	<i>First, Second, Third</i> <i>Next, Finally</i> <i>Last, Also, In addition,</i> Furthermore, One reason, Moreover	Exercising has many physical health benefits including toned muscles. It also has mental health benefits.
Time Order/ Chronological/ Sequence:	Series of events, narration, stages, steps, directions. Shows a chain of events. The order IS important.	<i>First, Second, Third</i> <i>Next, Finally, Last,</i> Before, After, Soon While, Since, Later	After class, I plan to get my homework completed.

Learning Vocabulary



- ▶ You can teach a list of words, but... more often learners will be encountering unfamiliar words "in the wild" (this is how a baby learns language!)
- ▶ Vocabulary in Context
 - Weather example, Café example to understand context - this is a skill students already have!



Strategies to teach Vocabulary In Context

- ▶ Structural clues (understanding prefixes, suffixes, and roots)
 - Example: : It is important to *preteach* the vocabulary before the lesson begins. (What does preteach mean? What clues helped you come to the understanding of that meaning? *Pre* – meaning before, also the semantic clue of *before* the lesson)
- ▶ Phonic clues (using phonic patterns to aid in pronunciation)
 - Example: It is rude to *stare* at people. (How do you pronounce stare? R-controlled vowels rules, “-are” pronounced “-air.” What are some other words that fit this pattern? Bare, care, glare, dare, prepare, etc.)

Strategies continued

- ▶ Semantic clues (synonyms or other clues to meanings)
 - ▶ Example: The secret society planned for their *clandestine* meeting in a hidden place where no one would easily find them. (What are some clues that help you figure out the meaning of *clandestine*? Synonyms of *secret*, *hidden*)
- ▶ Syntactical clues (determining part of speech)
 - ▶ Example: The *outgoing*, enthusiastic boy liked to socialize with friends and be the center of attention in a crowd. (What type of word/part of speech is *outgoing*? It is placed before a noun, *boy*, and an adjective, *enthusiastic*, so it is probably also an adjective. What does an adjective do? Describes a noun. Look at the description of the boy and see if you can figure out what *outgoing* might mean based on the knowledge that it is an adjective/describing word and the rest of the sentence.)



Word Parts

▶ Structural Analysis

- Prefixes, Suffixes, Root Words



What are the names of these three items?

What do their names have in common?

What does each item do?

(Television allows you to see things that are not there with you, a Telephone allows you to hear people who are not in your house with you, and a Telescope allows you to see things that are far away in outer space. Look for similarities and notice patterns. Also see if students recognize any other parts of the words, ex. *Television* has the word *vision* in it.)

Tele comes from the Greek word that means “from far away.” Look at the influence of that word part on the meanings of each of the words.

Context Clues:

definition, synonym, antonym, example, and general sense of the sentence

▶ Definition = Meaning

- A *remedy* is a medicine or treatment used to treat an illness or problem.

▶ Synonym = Same/Comparison

- The math test was *arduous*; students spent the entire class working on the difficult exam, and many needed extra time just to complete it.

▶ Antonym = Opposite/Contrast

- The class completed the easy grammar test in thirty minutes, but the *arduous* math test took the entire class period.

▶ Example = Illustration

- Our pond is home to *amphibious* creatures such as frogs and turtles, who enjoy swimming in the clear water and then sunning themselves on the rocks.

▶ General Sense = General Knowledge

- The student received an *expeditious* answer to her email because her instructor was online at that exact time and was answering student questions.
- The earthquake was *devastating*.




Transition/Signal Words that provide context clues

Definition	Synonym/ Comparison	Antonym/ Contrast	Example
____, or _____ Defined as Is Known as The term means Is stated as Is used to mean	Like Both Similar Same	However Different Yet But Unlike	Such as For example To illustrate For instance Illustrated by As an example



Context Clues Exercise

- ▶ In breakout rooms, practice figuring out the vocabulary word in italics based on context clues.
 - Highlight important context clues.
 - Circle any signal words or punctuation in the sentence that helps you determine the meaning of the unknown word (in italics).
 - Write down the approximate definition of the word.
 - Write what type of context clue the author used (Definition, Example, Synonym/Comparison, or Antonym/Contrast)
 - Identify the clues that helped you.



Remember, you
will not get an
exact dictionary
definition!



Real life
application



Adapting Lessons for All Levels

- ▶ Beginner reading level but keep adult appropriate
- ▶ Basic but not too "cute"
- ▶ Pictures
- ▶ Limited text
- ▶ Chunk longer readings into parts

Dogs Make Great Pets (for Beginners)

Original (Flesch Kincaid 9th grade level): Many Americans have dogs as pets. In fact, they are one of the most popular pets in households across the United States. There are many breeds of dogs and people can find a dog to fit all lifestyles and living situations. Regardless of a person's age or family size, canines can be great companions to people for a number of reasons. Dogs make great pets because they can be trained, they have great personalities, and they are very cute and cuddly.

Translated to Easier Level (Flesch Kincaid 4th grade level) :

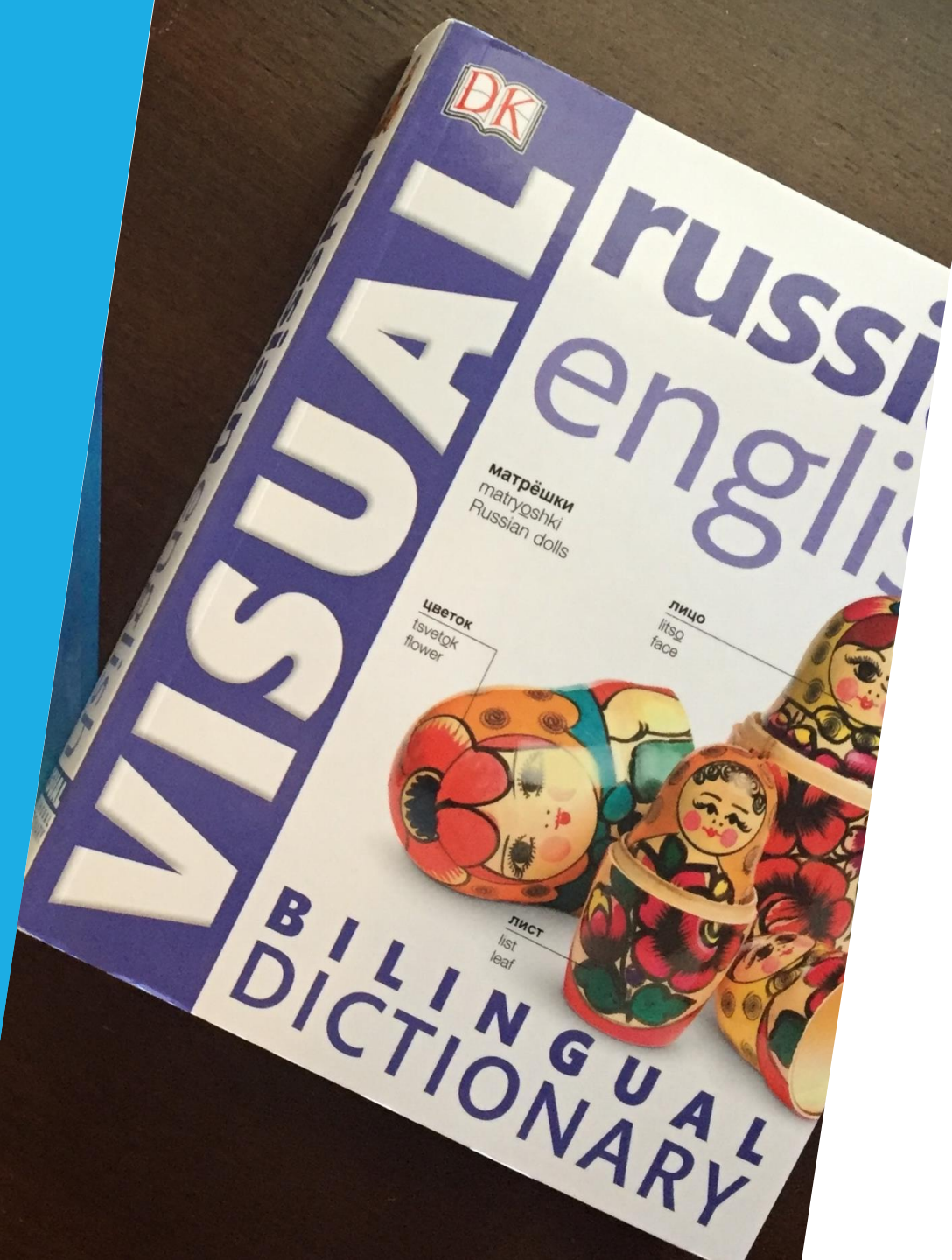
Many people in America have dogs as pets. They are one of the most popular pets in homes in the United States.

There are many kinds of dogs. People can find a dog that fits how they live and where they live.

Dogs can be great friends for many reasons.

Dogs are great pets because **they can learn things**, **they have great personalities**, and **they are very cute and cuddly**.





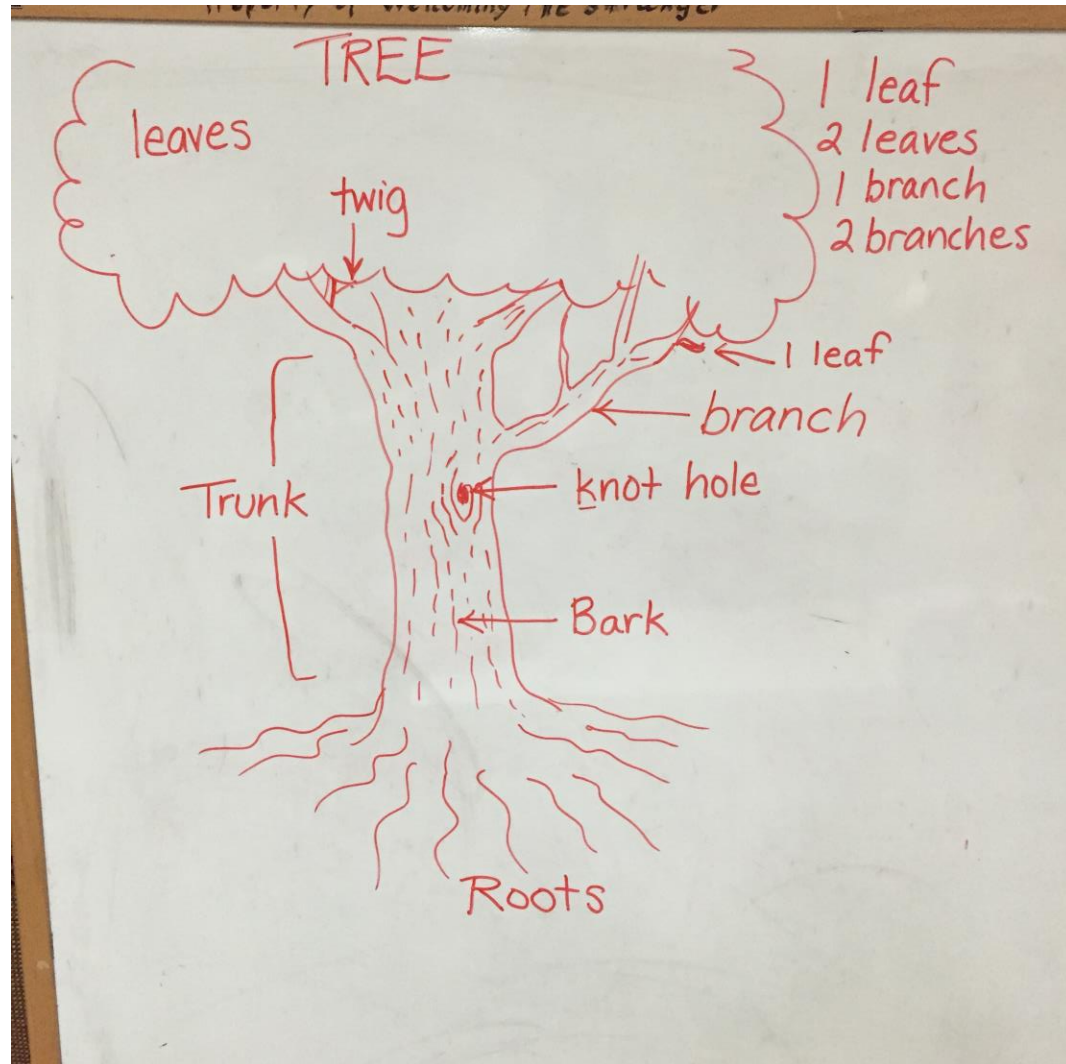
Pre-Literate Beginners

- ▶ Various situations:
 - Limited formal education (Some spoken English skills or no spoken English skills)
 - Educated in L1 but coming in with no English at all, and from a drastically different language (ex. Different alphabet)
- ▶ Start with oral language first (ex. Learning basic words)
- ▶ Bilingual Picture Dictionaries

Pre-Literate Learners continued

- ▶ Alphabet and phonemic awareness
 - Adapting kindergarten and preschool lessons - tracing letters, learning to recognize written name
 - If no formal schooling, teach print awareness (reading left to right, spaces between words, punctuation at the end of a sentence) and other basic "school skills" (how to hold a pencil or hold a book)
- ▶ Use:
 - Pictures
 - Real objects (food, clothes, classroom or household items)
 - Gestures
 - Acting things out
 - Ex. "Chase" story





Teaching Pre-literate Students

Takeaway:

Adult relevant content (jobs, shopping, doctors, etc.)...
but scaffolding like you would for a kindergarten class (phonics, repetition, print word labels, visuals)

Background Knowledge/Cultural References

- ▶ Choose high interest texts that are relevant to students' lives
- ▶ Local interest (ex. Day trips in the area where the students live, local history - for example local Revolutionary War connections)
- ▶ Cultural topics that start conversations (ex. how weddings are celebrated in the US, the concept of a "baby shower," writing thank you notes and ways of thanking people)
- ▶ Reader's Digest articles
- ▶ These methods boost engagement and confidence too!



Questions?

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