When we were little, we learned to read. When we grow up, we gradually read to learn. Through reading, we acquire crucial knowledge that helps us survive and advance in our communities. Despite the importance of reading abilities, the current statistics suggested one in six adults in the United States has weak literacy skills (at level 1), which is equivalent to about 52.4 millions of adults (OECD 2013). Moreover, the United States’ mean proficiency scores of 16-65 year-olds in literacy and numeracy are significantly below the average when compared with other OECD countries participating in the same survey (OECD 2013). This revealed literacy programs for adults might have not created any significant impact, which might be due to their limited availability. Then, the question is: with such restricted availability, are these programs teaching adults in the most effective and productive possible ways? Probably not! Since our knowledge of adults’ reading comprehension is limited.

This study tried to fill in the knowledge gap by examining relationships among vocabulary breadth, vocabulary depth, and reading comprehension in adults. The focus of the study was to determine the construct of vocabulary knowledge and how these components influence reading comprehension among Adult Basic Education (ABE) students. Participants were 71 adults who were currently enrolled in ABE programs in Massachusetts. They were asked to complete a total of 12 tasks known to measure vocabulary breadth, depth, and reading comprehension. First, we found that our assessments were reliable in testing vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. Moreover, results showed vocabulary knowledge consisted of at least two dimensions: vocabulary breadth and vocabulary depth. Second, we also found that each component made a significant independent contribution to explain reading comprehension. Finally, the research proposed some suggestion for vocabulary instruction for ABE participants.