

Are we meeting the needs of adult ESOL students in their literacy classes?

by Margo DelliCarpini and Stephanie Engelmann

Their numbers swelled by the huge wave of immigration in recent years, ESOL learners have become the country's fastest growing student population. In grades pre-K–12, ESOL enrollment soared 95 percent between 1991 and 2002. Over the same 10 years, total student enrollment grew only 12 percent (Padolsky, 2002).

Among adults, the 2000 Census identified more than 35 million non-native English speakers. In many states, the increase over the previous census was explosive—more than 125 percent in Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Georgia, Kentucky, Nebraska, Nevada, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Utah (Capps, Fix & Passel, 2002). A growing number of these immigrants are entering adult education programs. During the 2003–2004 school year, 44 percent of all participants were English language learners (ELLs), according to the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education (2005). Of this group, most were in the early stages of English acquisition—55 percent participated in either beginning literacy or beginning level ESOL classes (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Although some of these students are new immigrants who reached a high level of academic achievement in their native country, most have limited formal education. At least one third arrive with less than a high school level education, according to recent estimates (National Center for ESL Literacy Education, 2003; Wrigley, Richer, Martinson, Kubo & Strawn, 2003). For this group, traditional English classes are not sufficient. Achieving success and gaining a voice in their new country will require educational services that place the development of literacy skills at the forefront of the curriculum.

Mandates for adult education are established by the federal government and the individual states. The Workforce Reinvestment and Adult Education Act of 2003 (which



amends the Workforce Investment Act of 1998) sets conditions that determine whether or not a state can receive federal funding to implement adult education programs. States in turn are increasingly focusing on accountability and measurable gains in adult education. Their preferred strategy is to align standards for Adult Basic Education (ABE), General Education Diploma (GED) preparation, and English as a Second Language (ESL/ESOL) content and performance with the standards they have established for grades pre-K–12.

As a result of these constraints, two major issues confront adult education for ELLs: Are the current assessment system and prevalent program design in use in many federally funded programs across the country the best approach to meeting the needs of our growing adult English language learner (ELL) population? If not, how could these needs be met more effectively in today's social and educational context?

Native Language Literacy and the Development of English Literacy Skills

The ESOL field may define the term literacy in a variety of ways. In the U.S., level of oral proficiency is frequently associated with and used interchangeably with student literacy level (Solorzano, 1994). This is problematic for several reasons. Adults who lack oral proficiency skills may have a high level of literacy skills in other areas. Conversely, adults who have a relatively high level of oral skills may be unable to read and write in English—and in their native language as well. Either way, programs that make their placements based on oral skills exclusively will find that many learners are in a class that does not match their abilities and the speed at which they are capable of progressing (Gillespie, 1994). At the same time, instructional practices that concentrate mainly on oral/aural (auditory) skill development and de-emphasize other areas, such as reading instruction, may hamper the ability of non-English speakers to improve their English reading and writing skills (Solorzano, 1994).

The *Adult Education Content Standards Warehouse* (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education) takes a broader approach, stating that ESOL student literacy should encompass reading and writing in addition to listening and speaking skills and abilities. This more expansive definition makes sense intuitively; however, it must be said that little research is available to back it up.



Studies that specifically investigate second language early literacy development for adult learners are scarce. A review of the research on reading and adult ELLs conducted by the Center for Applied Linguistics (Adams & Burt, 2002) found only 24 studies conducted in traditional adult education contexts (non-post secondary) between the years 1980 and 2000; only five of them focused on pre-literate learners. Even so, a number of ideas are generally accepted in the field.

Traditionally, the term “functional” literacy referred to the application of basic skills to one’s social, community, and working environment. More recently, researchers such as James Paul Gee (2000, 1996, & 1993) and Paolo Freire (1987, 1970) have won a great deal of support among educators and society in general for the perspective that literacy involves more than the acquisition of a discrete set of skills. It requires knowledge of a culturally situated set of social practices. As a culture and society evolve, so does the meaning of literacy. The constant is that literacy provides people with a voice. It gives them access to the society in which they find themselves, whether that society is based on their native culture or the culture of their new home. By this definition, literacy in the U.S. today includes the ability to decode and interpret print.

In a new country that places a great emphasis on the ability to read and write for communication, social interaction, and critical analysis, students who are not functionally literate in their native language need a path to literacy development that draws on their rich schema and gives them access to participation in the community. In other words, they need the skills essential to acquiring information and, perhaps most importantly, to achieving economic self-sufficiency. These include the basic skills necessary to decode text and then progress through the *learning to read* stage and on to *reading to learn*. To provide these skills, the literacy level adult ESOL classroom must consistently offer instruction in reading as well as appropriate support and assessment practices.

This does not mean that native language literacy should be ignored. On the contrary, studies have shown a high degree of transfer of basic reading skills between the first language (L1) and the second language (L2), regardless how much their writing systems differ (Carlo & Skilton-Sylvester, 1994; Wagner & Venezky, 1999). Researchers who studied literacy level adult ESOL students reported that participants who had some literacy ability in their first language were able to acquire English reading skills more



rapidly than participants who did not have any prior literacy in their native language (Burtoff, 1985; Robson, 1982).

Assessment Instruments and Their Impact

Controversial and confusing ESOL assessment practices have contributed to the dilemma of how to best serve learners. The controversy has arisen over the areas being evaluated on the assessments, and purpose of evaluating them (Solorzano, 1994). Assessments of adult ESOL learners can be useful for both practical and theoretical reasons. Five major ones cited by Solorzano (1994) are to:

- Diagnose weaknesses and strengths in the English language
- Place learners in an ESOL sequential curriculum
- Assess English listening and/or speaking proficiency
- Judge competencies in real life situations
- Satisfy funder testing requirements

As Solorzano points out, this range of purposes makes it possible to use an assessment to formulate a course of study specific to the individual ESOL learner in a meaningful way, or solely to satisfy external requirements—which he considers inappropriate.

When externally imposed assessment results are used to determine funding, their formulation can play a powerful role in shaping what is taught and how. Based on case studies and their own observations of classroom practices, scholars such as Gillespie and Solorzano have concluded that oral proficiency is the predominant focus of ESOL instruction in the U. S. Funding requirements at both the federal level (National Center of Applied Linguistics and National Reporting System requirements) and the state level (as demonstrated by the Employment Preparation Education/EPE aid guidelines) support that conclusion. Many programs respond by under-emphasizing (written) English literacy (Solorzano, 1994). The Center for Applied Linguistics has called for using different assessment tools that reliably measure English literacy for adult ESOL students (CAL, 2003). Many experts are also encouraging the states to go beyond what is considered “basic compliance” with National Reporting System (NRS) guidelines in their assessment procedures. This could include incorporation of meaningful English literacy assessments.



Over time, this would presumably broaden the range of skills developed in the adult ESOL classroom.

In New York State and many others, all of the major public funding sources that finance ESOL programs, including the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), EL/CIVICS funding, Adult Literacy Education (ALE) funding, Welfare Education Program (WEP) funding, federal Even Start, and Employment Preparation Aid (EPE), require that every participating program use the Center of Applied Linguistics (CAL)-endorsed BEST Plus assessment instrument as part of its application and documentation process. The BEST Plus oral proficiency test and the BEST Plus literacy test are the only compulsory assessment tools. Gains are expected at each level after 100 hours of instruction. The New York State Education Department defines the ESOL levels as follows:

- Beginning Literacy
- Beginning Basic Education
- Intermediate Low
- Intermediate High
- Low Advanced
- High Advanced

The expected percentages of ESOL adult learners at each level are:

- Beginning Literacy–39%
- Beginning Basic Education–45%
- Intermediate Low–51%
- Intermediate High–52%
- Low Advanced–45%
- High Advanced–19%

New York is not an exceptional case. Of the four other states with the largest population of adult ELLs enrolled in state administered adult education programs, Florida, Illinois, and Texas have approved use of the BEST Plus. California mandates use of the CASAS Adult Life Skills-Listening Test, an assessment of English listening comprehension in common, authentic situations. (Solorzano, 1994). Florida allows programs to use CASAS. Illinois has also approved the Combined English Language Skills Assessment (CELSA).



Regardless of any usefulness it might have in measuring the generic success of programs, no assessment tool is able to account for all of the specific learning variables present in this heterogeneous student population. As Crabbe notes, “the extent to which an institution can be held to be responsible for the outcomes achieved by a cohort of students is limited by such factors as initial competence, general motivation, attitude and ability” (Crabbe, 2003, p. 13). The testing instruments may also provide inaccurate results due to a lack of sensitivity to cultural implications of questions or an assumption of background knowledge (schema) that many learners do not possess. These cultural insensitivities may be content-based, or stem from an assumption that adult ESOL learners have had similar testing experiences in their native country, which is often not the case (Solorzano, 1993).

Some scholars go further, contending that language proficiency is such a complex concept that no fixed definition is possible (Cummins, 1984; Oller & Damico, 1991), and it is unrealistic to think a single assessment tool can measure it. If standardized language proficiency assessments are necessary, created, and used, it should be understood that none of them could be perfect. Educators and administrators should use them with care and avoid making important decisions on the basis of a single instrument (Del Vecchio & Guerrero, 1995).

In New York State, all publicly funded ESOL programs are required to use oral proficiency testing, but virtually no assessment tools that measure writing or reading comprehension skills are mandated. As a result, students may find themselves in a class where speaking and listening skills are fairly homogeneous, but literacy abilities vary considerably. Within such a class, authentic reading instruction becomes a major challenge. Teachers who want to reach all students at the same time find that it is more practical and efficient to focus on oral/aural language skills, since this is the common feature among participants. The pressure to emphasize oral literacy is intensified when an oral assessment is the only tool used to assess program success. Instructors under pressure to show the yearly progress required to meet funding guidelines may consciously or unconsciously teach to the test.



Due to all of these factors, the current practice of basing assessment exclusively on oral/aural proficiency narrows the focus of adult ESOL instruction wherever it is implemented.

Skills Necessary for Second Language Literacy Development

A 2003 report from the Center for Applied Linguistics (Burt, Peyton, & Adams, 2003) delineates four types of language learners: preliterate, non-literate, semiliterate, and non-Roman alphabet literate. Birch (2002) has added two more categories: non-alphabet literate and Roman alphabet literate. These six categories of literacy are already influential in determining placement and instructional program design. Instructional strategies to meet the language and literacy needs of learners who have no literacy skills vary greatly from the methods used with learners who have high levels of literacy in their native language. In fact, Cynthia Ingersoll (2001) cites studies, including several completed in New York, that support the theoretical assumption that low level ESOL students who first receive instruction in their native language may be more successful at learning English.

Gillespie (1994) took a different approach, examining three native language instructional models for adult learners: (1) the sequential model, in which learners are instructed in their native language until they reach a high enough literacy level to move into an ESOL class; (2) the bilingual model, which relies on simultaneous native language and English instruction; and (3) the coordinate model, in which learners participate in one class for their native language and another for learning English. In all three models, she found a correlation between proficiency in the native language and progress in learning English (Gillespie, 1994).

Research on the acquisition of language reading skills indicates that adults must attain some degree of mastery in four language domains: phonological awareness, recognition of vocabulary, syntactic processing, and schema activation (Burt, Peyton & Adams, 2003). To be effective, curriculum and instruction must include all four.

Phonological awareness—that is, “awareness of and the ability to manipulate the phonological segments in words” (Blachman, 1991)—begins with an understanding



that words are comprised of sequences of phonemes¹ and the ability to detect the individual phonemes of a given word. It also includes the ability to manipulate the phonemes of a word, real or invented, by blending, segmenting, deleting, adding, substituting, and rhyming. Adult ESOL students who are pre-readers may need explicit instruction in phonological awareness before they can master the decoding stage of reading. This is not necessary for those who have mastered decoding.

Vocabulary knowledge is particularly important for second language learners. Unlike someone reading in his or her own language, a second language learner cannot rely heavily on contextual information to ascertain the meaning of an unknown word. Vocabulary in any language is best learned through creating rich networks of meaning—that is, when words are encountered or used in meaningful, authentic contexts.

Syntactic processing is a reader's use of grammar and morphology (word formation rules, inflectional endings, affixes, etc.) to comprehend the meaning of phrases, paragraphs, or sentences (Burt, Peyton, & Adams 2003). Teachers find that integrating word order, grammar, and sentence structure into the instructional framework develops skills in this domain much more effectively than drills and rote memorization of grammatical rules.

Schema activation, the final element in reading skills development, occurs when a reader is able to use prior knowledge to discern the meaning of a sentence or paragraph. This ability to “read between the lines” (Burt, Peyton, & Adams, 2003) is directly related to a learner's cultural background and life experiences. As every teacher knows, when students are familiar with a topic or are able to connect the topic to events or situations in their own life, their comprehension and motivation go up. The best way to engage older ELLs is to allow them to construct the essential questions and identify the “big ideas” to be discussed. When they do, learning can take place within the context of their own experience. Similarly, by integrating authentic materials that build on the strengths of learners and activate their schema into classroom activities, an instructor can encourage students to make connections with the texts and derive meaning from them in a collaborative, constructivist inquiry that involves their peers as well as the teacher.

¹ Phoneme can be described as a distinctive sound in a language. For example, the letter /t/ corresponds to the sound [t]. The letters /th/ correspond to the sound [θ].



Even though considerable research supports the common sense conclusion that all four of these skills are essential to second language reading acquisition, by placing so much emphasis on oral/aural language development, our current assessment and accountability system creates strong pressures to devote little time to them. Some programs are forced to omit them from the curriculum entirely.

Conclusions

Determining best practices in any form of instruction is a challenge. Validating them becomes even more complex when the learners are ESOL students with diverse ethnic and cultural identities, as well as a wide range of literacy skill levels.

Even though research within the field of adult ESOL literacy is limited, common themes have already emerged:

- Adult students' ease in acquiring English (L2) correlates with their literacy level in their native language (L1)
- Instruction in adult students' native language through a variety of teaching modalities prepares them for learning a second language
- The development of literacy requires specific, identified skills, all of which should be integrated into programs
- Encouraged by state and federal requirements, the vast majority of ESOL adult education programs focus on oral/aural English proficiency
- Current adult education classroom practice places insufficient emphasis on the full range of literacy skills essential to improving reading and writing ability

We do not deny the importance of oral/aural language proficiency. Our concern is that by privileging a single assessment tool focusing on this area exclusively, public ESOL funding sources exert heavy pressure on programs to narrow their curricula. If programs respond by paying little or no attention to other important skills, we will not be able to meet the literacy development needs of our older ESOL students.



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