



Beginning to Work with Adult English Language Learners: Some Considerations

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In many parts of the United States, the number of nonnative adult learners seeking English language instruction is growing. States such as North Carolina, Arkansas, Georgia, Tennessee, Nebraska, and Iowa, not historically associated with immigrant influxes, have been experiencing increased growth rates with these populations in the last decade (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). In 1998, 47% of the participants in federally funded adult education programs were there to learn English as a second language (ESL) (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 1999). As immigrant populations seek English language instruction, the need for teachers to serve them is drawing people into the adult ESL teaching field. Some of these teachers have training and experience working with adults learning English. However, many are working with these learners for the first time.

What do teachers who are beginning to work with adult English language learners need to know? This Q&A discusses recommendations in four areas: application of principles of adult learning in ESL contexts, second language acquisition, culture and working with multicultural groups, and instructional approaches that support language development in adults. It is not intended to be comprehensive. Rather, it gives teachers an overview of important points, suggests basic strategies to use, and provides resources to consult for further information.

How do the principles of adult learning apply to adult English language learners?

Malcolm Knowles' (1973) principles of andragogy, the art and science of facilitating adult learning, are still seminal to many of today's theories about learning and instruction for adults.

- Adults are self-directed in their learning.
- Adults have reservoirs of experience that serve as resources as they learn.
- Adults are practical, problem-solving-oriented learners.
- Adults want their learning to be immediately applicable to their lives.
- Adults want to know why something needs to be learned.

In general, this picture of the practical, purposeful, self-directed learner is representative of adults, whether they are native or nonnative English speakers. All adult learners need adult-appropriate content, materials, and activities that speak to their needs and interests and allow them to demonstrate their knowledge and abilities.

So what is different for English language learners? Obviously, they need help with the language as they learn content. Teachers working with English language learners also need to think about how Knowles' adult learner characteristics are filtered through culture, language, and experience. For example, it is not uncommon to find nonnative learners who may be hesitant to take charge of their own learning. Their educational experiences in their countries may have taught them that the teacher is the unquestioned expert. They may be resistant to a learner-centered classroom where they are expected to develop goals and work in groups with other learners (Shank & Terrill, 1995).

Nonnative learners also may resist the lifeskill-oriented instruction that is common in many adult ESL programs. Coming from cultures where learning is a high-status, academic endeavor, they may expect a more academically oriented environment (Hardman, 1999). Because of this, teachers should explain to learners why they are learning what they are learning in this new way. Similarly, because many English language learners may have studied English grammar and are familiar with the terms describing language components, instructors should be prepared, when appropriate, to answer learners' questions about sentence structure and vocabulary.

What do instructors need to know about second language acquisition (SLA)?

Theories about how languages are learned can be complex. However, having some understanding of how people acquire and use languages can be useful to the teachers of adult English language learners.

Second language acquisition theories address cognitive issues (how the brain processes information in general and language in particular), affective issues (how emotions factor into second language processing and learning), and linguistic issues (how learners interact with and internalize new language systems). The following are some suggestions that instructors can use in the classroom. They are drawn from theories of second language acquisition generally accepted as relevant for most second language learners (summarized from Brown, 2001; Lightbown, 2000; Krashen, 1981).

- ***Meaningful interaction and natural communication in the target language are necessary for successful language acquisition.***

Learners need to use the language, not simply talk about it. Give learners opportunities and purposes for communication that reflect or relate to their lives (e.g., role-playing a doctor/patient exchange or creating a chart with information on local medical services). Use authentic materials in activities whenever possible (e.g., listening for details in a recorded telephone message or reading classified ads from the local newspaper).

- ***Effective language use involves an automatic processing of language.***

To become proficient, learners need to move from a concentrated focus on grammar, forms, and structures to using language as a tool to accomplish communication tasks. Think about the purpose of each lesson (e.g., is it important that the learner produce a specific grammar point or communicate an idea?) and interject error correction to serve those purposes. For example, if the activity is an oral substitution drill practicing the correct use of irregular past tense forms, it is appropriate to correct the verb form being used. However, if the focus of the lesson is making small talk on the job—a communication that involves use of irregular past tense verbs—correction may simply consist of a repetition of the correct form by the teacher (e.g., "I go to a movie last Saturday" is corrected by, "Oh, you went to a movie. What movie did you see?").

- ***Language learners can monitor their speech for correctness when they have time to focus their attention on form and know the language rules involved.***

Give learners sufficient time for activities, to communicate, and to monitor their performance. Integrate lessons on grammar, structures, and language rules that are relevant to the communication task at hand (e.g., present lessons on imperatives when discussing giving directions) so that learners become familiar with correct structures. Focus activity objectives so that learners are not asked to process and monitor too many points at one time (e.g., asking learners to use new vocabulary and correctly use present and present progressive verb forms in an unfamiliar dialogue format can be overwhelming).

- ***Second language acquisition occurs when learners are exposed to language that is at and slightly above their level of comprehension.***

In the materials you use and in your own speech, expose learners to language that is both at and slightly above what they can comfortably understand. Offer a balance of easier reading and listening activities with more challenging ones. Provide pictures, gestures, and prompts when learners are asked to use more complex language.

- ***People have affective filters (created by a variety of factors such as motivation, self-confidence, or anxiety) that can support or disrupt acquisition of a second language.***

Create a classroom environment in which learners feel comfortable using and taking risks with

English. Use activities that ask learners to work together or share information to build a sense of familiarity and community. Make sure the physical environment is as comfortable as possible. Avoid constant error correction and include activities that focus on overall ability to communicate meaning. Recycle topics or activities that motivate learners.

- ***There are "interlanguage" periods during which learners make systematic errors that are a natural part of language learning.***

These may be similar to those of a child learning a first language (e.g., adding ed to signify all past tense verbs) or similar to patterns in a learner's native language (e.g., Spanish speakers placing adjectives after nouns, such as shirt blue). If errors appear to be normal and developmental, provide feedback and modeling of correct structures to support learners as they move through these steps. If an error persists, consider more structured practice on the point.

- ***There is a silent period during which learners are absorbing the new language prior to producing it.***

The length of this period may vary for each learner. Allow learners time to adjust to the new language and begin to internalize its sounds and patterns. Use activities that allow them to demonstrate comprehension without having to produce language (e.g., say new vocabulary and ask learners to hold up picture cards that illustrate each word).

- ***Second language acquisition theories are based on research that investigates specific questions with specific populations in defined circumstances.***

Some theories may be accepted as applicable across populations and contexts; the broad application of others may be debatable. Evaluate how a theory may or may not relate to adult English language learners in general and to learners in your class specifically. Use second language acquisition theories to help make decisions about balancing different language learning activities; observe and respond to learner progress; and set realistic expectations of what learners can accomplish.

What do instructors need to know about culture and working with multicultural groups?

Culture and language are closely related. Learning a new language involves learning about (but not necessarily wholeheartedly embracing) new ways of thinking, feeling, and expressing. This process can put tremendous pressure on an adult who has a well-developed sense of self in the native language and culture. Because immigrants are, to varying degrees and not always consciously, re-configuring their views of themselves in relation to a new social context, they may at times be ambivalent, confused, or even hostile to the process of adapting to a new culture (Ullman, 1997). This includes language learning. Teachers can help ease this process in a variety of ways:

- Become acquainted with learners' cultures to better understand their perspectives and expectations both inside and outside the classroom (e.g., traditional literacy practices, gender roles, teacher and learner roles, historic interactions with other cultural groups, rhetorical patterns, religious beliefs and customs). Avoid generalizing and stereotyping learners. Acknowledge and respect differences. When discussing cultural differences and traditions in class, focus on descriptions rather than judgments.
- Learners may not be willing or able to participate in activities that involve discussion of taboo subjects, revelation of personal information, or reliving of painful experiences. For example, a refugee who lost family in a war may be very uncomfortable when a teacher asks learners to bring in pictures of their families for an activity. Be aware of the possible implications of activities or topics and offer learners options through which they can respond neutrally, such as bringing a photo of a family from a magazine instead of a personal photo.
- Remember that culture can play a role in all facets of language, including response time. Many English language learners will come from cultures where silence is not uncomfortable. When this factor is coupled with the reality of a slower processing time for listening comprehension in a second language, it suggests that waiting after asking a question (possibly as long as 10 seconds) before repeating or restating the question is advisable.

What instructional approaches support second language development in adults?

Adult English language learners come to ESL classes to master a tool that will help them satisfy other needs, wants, and goals. Therefore, they need to learn about the English language, to practice it, and to use it.

A variety of instructional approaches and techniques support language learning and language use (see Crandall & Peyton, 1993). Teachers need to examine these options and decide which approaches are most appropriate for them, their learners, and their settings. The following is a summary of general strategies to use with learners:

1. **Get to know your students and their needs.** English language learners' abilities, experiences, and expectations can affect learning. Get to know their backgrounds and goals as well as proficiency levels and skill needs.
2. **Use visuals to support your instruction.** English language learners need context in their learning process. Using gestures, expressions, pictures, and realia makes words and concepts concrete and connections more obvious and memorable. Encourage learners to do the same as they try to communicate meaning.
3. **Model tasks before asking your learners to do them.** Learners need to become familiar with vocabulary, conversational patterns, grammar structures, and even activity formats before producing them. Demonstrate a task before asking learners to respond.
4. **Foster a safe classroom environment.** Like many adult learners, some English language learners have had negative educational experiences. Many will be unfamiliar with classroom activities and with expectations common in the United States. Include time for activities that allow learners to get to know one another.
5. **Watch both your teacher talk and your writing** Teacher talk refers to the directions, explanations, and general comments and conversations that a teacher may engage in within the classroom. Keep teacher talk simple and clear; use pictures, gestures, demonstrations, and facial expressions to reinforce messages whenever possible. Use print letters, with space between letters and words, and do not overload the chalkboard with too much or disorganized text.

Although it is important for the teacher to understand the structure of the English language, it may not always be appropriate to provide complex explanations of vocabulary and grammar rules, especially to beginning-level learners. In other words, don't feel you have to explain everything at all times. At times it is enough for learners to know the response needed.

6. **Use scaffolding techniques to support tasks.** Build sequencing, structure, and support in learning activities. Ask learners to fill in words in a skeletal dialogue and then create a dialogue of a similar situation, or supply key vocabulary before asking learners to complete a form. Recycle vocabulary, structures, and concepts in the course of instruction. Build redundancy into the curriculum to help learners practice using learned vocabulary or skills in new situations or for different purposes.
7. **Bring authentic materials to the classroom.** Use materials like newspapers, signs, sale flyers, telephone books, and brochures in the classroom. These help learners connect what they are learning to the real world and familiarize them with the formats and information in such publications. However, do prepare learners beforehand (e.g., pre-teach vocabulary) and carefully structure lessons (e.g., select relevant, manageable chunks of the authentic material) to make this work.
8. **Don't overload learners.** Strike a balance in each activity between elements that are familiar and mastered and those that are new. Asking learners to use both new vocabulary and a new grammatical structure in a role-playing activity where they have to develop original dialogue may be too much for them to do successfully.
9. **Balance variety and routine in your activities.** Patterns and routines provide familiarity and security and support learners as they tackle new items. But English language learners, like all learners, have a variety of preferences for processing and learning information. They also can get bored. Give learners opportunities to experience and demonstrate their mastery of language

in different ways. Challenge them with activities that speak to their lives, concerns, and goals as adults.

10. **Celebrate success.** Progress for language learners can be slow and incremental. Learners need to know that they are moving forward. Make sure expectations are realistic; create opportunities for success; set short-term as well as long-term goals; and help learners recognize and acknowledge their own progress.

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