Supporting Adult English Language Learners' Transitions to Postsecondary Education

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Adult Learners

Adult education programs serve both learners who are native English speakers and those whose first, or native, language is not English. Native English speakers attend adult basic education (ABE) classes to learn basic skills so they can earn high school equivalency certificates or achieve other goals related to job, family, or further education. English language learners attend English as a second language (ESL) or ABE classes to improve their oral and written skills in English and to accomplish goals similar to those of native English speakers.

Audience for this Brief

This brief is written for the following audiences:

- Practitioners—teachers, teacher trainers, and program administrators—who work with adult English language learners in ESL classes
- Educational researchers focusing on instruction for adult English language learners

Background

Adult immigrants studying English in the United States have diverse educational backgrounds. Some have earned graduate degrees, while others have had little or no access to education. Their goals and expectations for future education and employment are also diverse. As shown in Figure 1, some adult English language learners need English skills to gain admission into a specific work training or certification program. Others take English classes to be able to enroll in postsecondary education, either directly or after first attending adult basic education (ABE) classes or earning General Educational Development (GED) credentials.

What can adult English language learners expect when transitioning out of ESL classes to other education or work opportunities, and in what ways might their expectations and experiences be similar to or different from those of native English speaking adult learners? For adult English
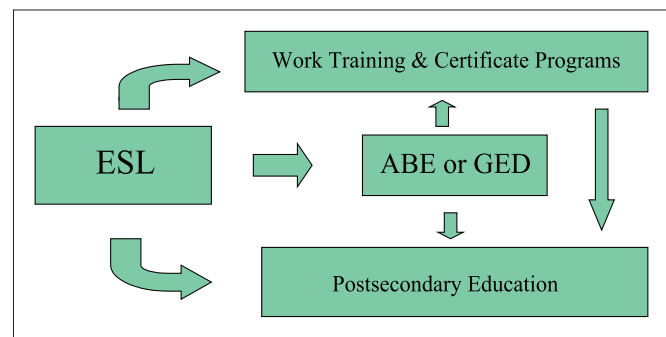

Figure 1. Education Paths for Adult English Language Learners

language learners with previous higher education or college preparatory classes, the experience may be different from that of native English speakers in adult education programs. Adult English language learners may be familiar with expectations of academic settings; strategies for managing academic coursework; and the process of selecting, applying for, and registering for appropriate classes. Those who have had fewer opportunities to study academic content may share experiences with native English speaking adult learners.

- This brief focuses on one type of transition—from adult ESL programs to postsecondary education. This transition is especially important as statistics show that the income gap between individuals with and those without postsecondary education is growing rapidly: It doubled between 1979 and 1999 and continues to grow rapidly (Middle of the Class, 2005). The majority of jobs that pay enough to support a family require skills that cannot be obtained with just a high school education (Carnevale & Derochers, 2003). This brief discusses research-based strategies for the ESL classroom to support students' transitions. It concludes with a description of program features that administrators might consider when supporting English language learners' transitions to post-secondary education.

Classroom-level Approaches to Promote Transitions: What Teachers Can Do

Based on the understanding that the purpose and content of the adult ESL curriculum is significantly different from the curricula of GED and postsecondary courses, Rance-Roney (1995) noted that transitional programs should emphasize skills that help learners enter and be successful in academic programs. These skills should

- focus on language accuracy and careful use of language,
- include extensive reading and genre-based writing,
- develop vocabulary centered on less-frequently used academic terminology, and
- develop conceptual and critical thinking skills.

Recent research in second language acquisition and related areas adds further support to these recommendations, as described below.

Focus on language accuracy and careful use of language

Language acquisition researchers argue that immersion in the English-speaking culture and opportunities for discussion in the classroom are not sufficient for adult learners to gain the level of language competency needed for academic study. Long and Robinson (1998) first argued that instruction needs to focus on language form (grammar, syntax, and spelling) as well as meaning. Since then other educators have emphasized that instruction needs to focus on the specific features of language during communicative activities and on the systematic teaching of grammatical features and rules for their use. Basturkmen, Loewen, and Ellis (2002); Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen (2001); Laufer (2005); Lim (2001); and Long (2000) provide evidence that when instruction focuses on form as well as meaning adult English language learners achieve greater accuracy in their use of the language they need to succeed in academic classes. (For more information on strategies and activities that focus on form in adult ESL classes, see Moss and Ross-Feldman, 2003.)

Include extensive reading and genre-based writing

Many researchers (e.g., Green, 2005; Rao, 2005) argue that reading is the most important skill for adult language learners moving into academic contexts. Rao (2005) showed that reading is key to academic success and that explicit instruction in reading strategies helps adult learners achieve greater levels of success in postsecondary education. Rao suggests providing students with opportunities to engage in the following types of activities:

- Reading the types of texts they will have to read in post-secondary classes
- Making connections to prior learning
- Making connections between reading and writing
- Engaging in critical inquiry
- Reviewing checklists of reading strategies
- Setting their own goals

Instruction in writing skills also is important for students transitioning to academic studies. This includes teaching the rhetorical organization of American English texts, written sentence structures, punctuation, and cohesion words; and developing familiarity with academic writing tasks. All of these recommendations can be at least partly addressed through the introduction of a genre-based pedagogy (as described by Cheng, 2006). Using this pedagogy, students are made aware of the common features and styles of different genres such as academic essays and personal narratives, provided with models of them, and given opportunities collaboratively and individually to analyze and produce samples of the different genres. So (2005) also argues that a genre-based approach to teaching school-based texts, such as editorials and argumentative essays, not only helps students become aware of the rhetorical structures and purposes of these types of texts, but also develops skills that can be transferred to understanding and producing other types of texts.

Develop vocabulary centered on less-frequently used academic terminology

Although vocabulary knowledge plays an important role in English language learners' academic success (e.g., Clark & Ishida, 2005; Santos, 2005), a gap exists between the written English vocabulary of fluent native speakers (10,000–100,000 words) and that of second language learners who are beginning academic studies (2,000–7,000 words) (Hadley, 1993). Adult English language learners need to increase their vocabulary, and extensive reading is one way to do this. Horst (2005) used individualized checklists for students in an extensive reading program and found that the growth rates of learners' vocabulary knowledge were higher than the growth rates noted in earlier experimental studies of alternative vocabulary learning techniques.

Other suggestions for developing vocabulary can be found in a study by Fan (2003). Through studying adult language learners in a foreign language context, Fan's large-scale study provides insights into effective strategies for learning low-frequency academic vocabulary. Fan found that successful students used strategies that involve conscious management of vocabulary learning such as

- purposefully thinking about and planning one's progress in learning vocabulary,
- drawing on knowledge of grammar and morphology to determine the meaning of unknown words, and
- using dictionaries to check for definitions, pronunciation, derivations, and correct word usage.

In contrast, memorization strategies such as repetition, grouping, and word association were more frequently used by less successful students.

Fan's findings on the importance of explicit strategy instruction for increasing learners' academic vocabulary knowledge are consistent with those of a recent synthesis of research on vocabulary acquisition (Hunt & Beglar, 2005). According to Hunt and Beglar, academic vocabulary is best taught by promoting both explicit and implicit instruction on words and learning strategies. In particular, they recommend teaching explicit strategies of using dictionaries and inferring from context. To provide reading practice, they also recommend narrow reading, in which learners read a number of texts on a specific topic or genre, for example, in connection with their academic or employment training; and extensive reading, in which learners read many different types of texts on many different topics.

Develop conceptual and critical thinking skills

Critical thinking skills—such as evaluation, synthesis, and analysis, which have long been recognized as important in education—are noted by Rance-Roney (1995) as important skills to be promoted in programs for students who are transitioning to academic environments. A recent study with ESL students further supports this idea and provides a suggestion for promoting critical thinking in the classroom. Kasper and Weiss (2005) describe an experiment involving an interclass collaboration project as a means for encouraging college-level ESL students to think critically, conceptualize, analyze, and find solutions to problems. The project brought two ESL classes together for a 2-hour event, in which students worked in small groups to discuss a controversial topic (the Kyoto Protocol). Before the event, students in the two classes had been given different background readings on the subject. Based on the teachers' observations, student evaluations, and subsequent student essays, the authors report that the nature of the exercise and topic led to increased student use of critical thinking skills, such as interpreting information, formulating opinions, and articulating and supporting points of view.

Program Features to Promote Transitions: What Administrators Can Do

Several studies emphasize the key role of community colleges in promoting transitions for adult students (e.g., Chisman, 2004; Jenkins, 2003; Liebowitz & Taylor, 2004; Morest, 2004; Walker & Strawn, 2004). Few of these programs are designed specifically for ESL students (e.g., Goldschmidt, Notzold, & Miller, 2003); most focus on programs for both ABE and ESL students.

In fact, the number of adult English language learners enrolling in postsecondary education is still relatively small. Tyler's (2001) synthesis of the literature on GED students (including both native and nonnative English speakers) showed that, in Washington, only between 5% and 10% of those leaving a GED program completed at least 1 year of postsecondary education. A large-scale study of students in Washington State community and technical colleges found that only 12% of ESL students went on to enroll in college-credit courses (Price & Jenkins, 2005). Interestingly, another large longitudinal study of community college students (Patthey-Chavez, Dillon, & Spiegel, 2005) showed that the ESL students who did go on to take regular content courses at the college level tended to outperform the native English speaking students in terms of grades and course completion. Bailey and Weininger (2002) reached a similar finding in their study of students at the City University of New York (CUNY). Foreign-born students in general, and foreign-born high school students with a high school education from a foreign country in particular, showed the greatest likelihood of completing their programs in CUNY's 2-year colleges.

The following is a description of factors that administrators should consider when planning programs to promote adult English language learners' transitions to postsecondary education:

Address nonacademic factors

Nonacademic factors include such issues as lack of transportation, child care, and limited time to attend classes. The Arkansas Career Pathways Initiative, www.arpathways.com, for example, provides childcare facilities for its students, and Tacoma Community College offers integrated adult education and technical training programs in the evening for students who work during the day. Time management often figures prominently in the structure of transition programs. Because of the need to juggle work, school, and family, adult students frequently have high attrition rates from education programs, even after short periods of time. In response, programs like those in the Breaking Through

project (www.jff.org/Documents/BreakingThrough.pdf) offer collaborative adult education and technical training in an accelerated learning format of several mini-courses given over short time periods. Time management also is addressed by the National College Transition Network, another program seeking to meet the needs of transitioning ABE and adult ESL learners. The transition student portfolio model is one of the practices highlighted on the network's Web site as useful for ABE and adult ESL learners (www.collegetransition.org/promising/practice.html). The model provides students with a step-by-step framework for organizing assignments and responsibilities for the entire transition program and for applying to postsecondary programs. In the first year after its implementation, the number of students applying for and being accepted into community college postsecondary programs rose from 38% to 67% (Fina, 2004).

Provide orientation to students

Most transition programs attempt to provide adult students with some form of orientation to introduce them to the college experience and to help them with academic, career planning, and life management skills. Extended orientation programs (Chavez, 2003) provide counseling and mentoring services, which are generally recommended for adult learners who are transitioning to postsecondary education (Alamprese, 2005). Alamprese points out that counseling services should supply students with information on financial aid, stress and time management, study skills, personal support, and orientation to college life. Mentoring services, in which more experienced students are matched with incoming students to help orient them to college activities and to offer encouragement and support, can also play an important role. These services provide incoming students with important information about the academic community. Furthermore, the mentoring student presents an example of success that can motivate and raise the confidence of the incoming student. The National College Transition Network, for GED students (combined native and nonnative English speakers) at Cape Cod Community College in Massachusetts (www.collegetransition.org/promising/practice.html), is a model of an intensive, two-day orientation program that combines the above services. An additional feature that can be incorporated into orientation programs, popular in a transition program created specifically for ESL students, is having the orientation designed and conducted by experienced students (Goldschmidt, Notzold, & Miller, 2003).

Address academic factors

Research has shown the effectiveness of using content-based ESL instruction to improve the academic preparedness of adults (Brinton & Masters, 1997; Lewis, 1997). In such courses, students' attention is focused on a particular content subject, such as history, anthropology, or psychology, and ESL instruction is woven into the assignments and discussions. Another model of content-based instruction involves using paired or integrated courses, in which students take ESL classes that run parallel to content courses and provide extra linguistic support. One study showed that a group of adult English language learners who attended 10 weeks of integrated vocational and ESL classes scored significantly higher on a posttest of vocational vocabulary and general reading than did groups of students receiving equal hours of only ESL classes or attending only vocational classes (Sticht, McDonald, & Erickson, 1998). Success using such paired courses has also been documented in the Tacoma Community College experimental technical training program. Adult English language learners follow a curriculum that combines ESL classes (9 hours weekly), early childhood education classes (3 hours weekly), and a 10-hour practicum. Upon completion, students earn a certificate, entitling them to higher wages at local childcare centers and nine college credits toward a regular 2-year college degree (Liebowitz & Taylor, 2004). A report on an integrated ESL and workplace training program in Washington also shows a dramatic increase in the percentage of learners successfully completing skills training—from 3% completion rates among adult learners attending traditional ESL classes, to 44% completion rates for those in paired classes (I BEST, 2005).

Strengthen programs through cooperation

To support practices such as integrated or paired classes or comprehensive orientation and counseling services, strong collaborative relationships between the ESL program and associated postsecondary education institutions are needed. How one program administrator institutionalized collaboration between the adult learning center and a local community college is described on the National College Transition Network Web site (www.collegetransition.org/promising/practice.html). Steps included signing an official memorandum of agreement with the president of a community college in a formal ceremony; inviting the president to speak at the graduations of students from the program; and regularly holding luncheons for key staff in admissions, academic affairs, financial aid, and the presi-

dent's office in order to give them the opportunity to meet the transition program students.

Solidify economic benefits of postsecondary education

As discussed above, many adult students make the transition to postsecondary education to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to obtain a better job. The various programs of the Breaking Through initiative (Liebowitz & Taylor, 2004) emphasize bridge training to guide ABE and ESL students toward a goal of gaining postsecondary credentials. The Portland and Mt. Hood Community Colleges in Oregon, for example, have nine technical career pathway programs; four are specifically designed for nonnative-English-speaking adults. The programs identify jobs that are critical to the local economy and the postsecondary certificates or degrees necessary to enter or advance within those jobs. Pathway program administrators break down the demands of regular postsecondary degree programs into manageable course modules and internships. Program administrators work to develop careful integration between the ESL classes—which are viewed positively as "feeders" for the community college's occupational programs—and the local business community. Students are provided with extensive counseling services, including guidance on career and academic planning, financial aid, and job placement. Economic motivators are provided throughout the program to promote further study. For example, students completing a GED earn 19 free college credits toward the first module of the pathway program.

Conclusion

While obtaining a 4-year college degree is not the goal of all adult students in ESL classes, some post-ESL study is needed by many adult English language learners. This study might include GED preparation, vocational training, and certification or recertification courses. Adult ESL teachers and administrators need to ensure that students are aware of the options that exist and prepare them with the tools and strategies that they need to make the transition. Research on reading, writing, and vocabulary instruction provides guidance for teachers helping adult English language learners acquire the linguistic skills necessary for academic coursework. Student orientation, counseling services, and productive integration of adult education programs with content programs in community and technical colleges to meet the particular needs of adult learners are important. Combined, these approaches can effectively serve the needs of adult English learners who are transitioning to postsecondary education.

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