

## Applying Research Findings to Instruction for Adult English Language Students

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### Background on Adult Students

Adult education programs serve both students 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 get high school equivalency certificates or to achieve other goals related to job, family, or further education. English language students attend English as a second language (ESL) or ABE classes to improve their oral and written skills in English and to achieve goals similar to those of native English speakers. Sometimes ABE classes include both native English speakers and English language learners.

### Audience for This Brief

This brief is written for the practitioners: teachers, teacher trainers, curriculum writers, and program administrators who work with adult English language students in ESL classes or in mixed ABE classes (with native English speakers and English language learners).

If educators are not experienced with using research findings to guide instruction, they need to know more about how research can be accessed, understood, evaluated, and used. This brief describes why research is important to instruction, defines scientifically based research and evidence-based instruction, explains what we know about how to help teachers use research, gives an example of teachers using research to improve their practice, and lists places where research-based resources can be accessed.

### Reasons Adult ESL Practitioners Need to Understand and Use Research

Teachers and administrators working in programs that serve adults learning English want to know how to help their students acquire proficiency in the language. The following are some reasons that these practitioners need to know what research has to offer. Teachers and program administrators...

- want to **know more about their students** and about what helps them stay in programs and succeed in reaching their goals. Research provides information that teachers often do not have time to gather about who students are.
- want to **know how to help students learn** and what works effectively in instruction. They often seek such information from other teachers, from professional development opportunities, and from publications. Research also provides information about what works in different contexts with different students.
- often experiment with new techniques to **learn what best helps their students learn**. Research describes what others have learned when they have used new techniques.
- are under increasing pressure to **demonstrate that students are making gains** in language proficiency and achieving their work, family, civic, and personal goals as effectively and quickly as possible. Research findings can inform teachers and program administrators about the types of programs, instruction, and support services that help students succeed and make demonstrable gains.
- are being asked to **demonstrate that they use evidence-based practice** in their work. Research findings are part of evidence-based practice.

### Evidence-based Practice and Scientifically Based Research

Recent legislation and policy (the No Child Left Behind and Workforce Investment Acts) stress the importance of evidence-based practice and scientifically based research in education. The U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences defines "evidence-based education" as

*The integration of professional wisdom with the best available empirical evidence in making decisions about how to deliver instruction.*

(Grover (Russ) Whitehurst (Asst. Secretary of Education, Director of the Institute of Education Sciences); currently available at <http://www.ed.gov/nclb/methods/whatworks/eb/edlite-slide003.html>)

"Professional wisdom" is defined as

- *the judgment that individuals acquire through experience and*
- *consensus views of effective strategies and techniques to use in instruction.*

Professional wisdom can also be reflected in the effective identification and incorporation of local circumstances into instruction. (<http://www.ed.gov/nclb/methods/whatworks/eb/edlite-slide004.html>)

Empirical evidence comes preferably from "scientifically based research," defined in the No Child Left Behind Act as

*The application of rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures to obtain reliable and valid knowledge relevant to education activities and programs...uses experimental or quasi-experimental designs...with a preference for random assignment experiments... and has been accepted by a peer-reviewed journal or approved by a panel of independent experts.* ([http://www.nps.k12.va.us/NCLB/NCLB\\_glossary.htm](http://www.nps.k12.va.us/NCLB/NCLB_glossary.htm), <http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/pg107.html>)

These definitions make clear that instructional practice should be driven by professional wisdom as well as by evidence from scientifically based research. However, research that fits the strict definition of scientifically based research is not available on every question or problem that teachers and programs face. In such cases, results of other types of research—case studies, qualitative studies, and research in the process of being peer-reviewed—are the best available evidence for teachers to use.

In summary, in order to engage in evidence-based practice, teachers need to integrate their own knowledge of what is effective for the particular students with whom they work with the findings from the research that is available. How can they do this?

### What We Know About Helping Teachers Use Research

How can teachers learn more about research so that they can use it, along with professional wisdom, to make decisions about instruction? Zeuli and Tiezzi (1993) studied teachers' perspectives about research and found that teachers generally have one of three different perspectives.

1. Research is not useful. Researchers don't understand my teaching context, and the only way to improve my teaching is through my own experience with students.
2. Research can be useful, if it is presented in the form of specific and practical strategies, techniques, and approaches I can readily use in the classroom.

3. Research is useful, but I don't need it to give me practical strategies. I want it to challenge my assumptions and help me build my theories about teaching.

Zeuli and Tiezzi found that the level of formal education that the teacher had completed was not related to the teacher's having one or another of these perspectives. They did find, however, that those teachers who had participated in some type of research themselves were more likely to view research as useful.

Similar results were found in another study that specifically surveyed 143 adult education teachers, tutors, and administrators about how they read and used research. St. Clair, Chen, and Taylor (2003) found that more experienced practitioners and those who had specific training or experience in conducting research were more likely to read and use research, but that level of formal education was "not a predictor of the use of research" (p. 8).

In a review of the literature on how teachers use research, Garner, Bingman, Comings, Rowe, and Smith (2001) found that teachers do not approach research in a linear way; rather, they "scan the environment" (p. 8) for new ideas from the research and are more apt to apply its findings when they have a chance to discuss those findings and their implications with colleagues. Teachers also are more likely to use research to guide their instruction when they have opportunities for "sustained interactivity" with researchers – i.e., when they work closely with researchers and are treated as partners in, and not as "targets" of research (p. 8). Finally, teachers seek truth in and utility of the research -- "research findings that fit with their experience and, better still, are vouched for by trusted colleagues" (p. 9) and "that can help them improve their current practice" (p. 9). Other research from the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) confirms the importance of using study circles and practitioner research training as part of professional development to help teachers "access, understand, judge, and use research" (Smith, Bingman, Hofer, Medina, & Practitioner Students, 2002, p. 76).

## **An Example of Teachers Using Research: Implementation and Study of Pair Work**

When teachers work with researchers to learn about and apply research findings to practice, it increases the value of both the research and professional wisdom in evidence-based practice. This collaboration also facilitates the application of research findings to the classroom and in the program. A recent initiative by NCSALL gives an example of how this can happen.

NCSALL sponsors the Lab School at Portland State University (PSU) ([www.labschool.pdx.edu/overview/intro.html](http://www.labschool.pdx.edu/overview/intro.html)). The Lab School involves a collaboration between a local English as a second language (ESL) program (Portland Community College, which is in the Portland, Oregon area) and researchers at PSU, one of NCSALL's partners. The research conducted at the Lab School focuses on how beginning-level adult ESL students acquire English as a second language.

In order to bring teachers and researchers together and help the teachers know about and begin to use the findings emerging from studies conducted at the Lab School, NCSALL worked with five western states—California, Idaho, Oregon, Washington, and Wyoming—to hold a Practitioner Knowledge Institute for teachers and professional developers. In October 2004 and May 2005, NCSALL held institutes where teachers, professional developers, and researchers reviewed the latest research from the Lab School, planned ways to use strategies suggested by the research in their own instruction, and shared their experiences using these strategies.

Teachers learned about findings from the research literature and from the Lab School's research on pair work in beginning-level ESL classes. Pair work is an instructional strategy in which the teacher

gives students a task to complete in pairs, usually in 10- to 20-minute blocks of time. For example, a pair might take turns asking (and answering) each other questions about what they did when they got up that morning, or practicing past tense verbs and vocabulary about activities in daily life. Teachers provide materials such as simple clocks, pictures, or other prompts to help the students complete the task. Research about pair work indicates that

- Adult ESL students can work productively in pairs, even at beginning levels of instruction (Harris, 2005a; Garland, 2002).
- Students working in pairs often must negotiate how to work together and how to communicate meaning, rephrase statements, ask for clarification, and search for the correct words as they jointly determine the best way to complete the task (Harris, 2005a).
- Communicating meaning, and negotiating meaning with another person to ensure that one's message is understood, appear to be important elements of language learning and favorable to second language acquisition (Gass, Mackey, Pica, & Magnan, 1998; Long, 1983; Mackey, 1999; Nakahama, Tyler, & Van Lier, 2001; Pica, 1994; Swain, 1995). The need to negotiate meaning is not a negative activity, contrary to how some teachers might view such back-and-forth attempts at understanding between students. When students have the freedom to negotiate the meaning and form of what they are saying to each other, this leads them to "notice the gap" (Schmidt & Frota, 1986, p. 311) between what they are able to say in the language and correct, or target-like, use of the language – and to focus on the specific areas of their language that need to be developed. As they hear what their conversation partner does not understand, students find out what is wrong with their speech and what will fix the problem (e.g., changing their pronunciation or restating the point).
- Student pairs will negotiate different aspects of the same pair activity. Therefore, pair activities help students with their specific language learning needs (Harris, 2005b). In other words, teachers can expect that students will learn the things that they each need from pair activities, rather than all having the same learning experience.
- When teachers approach a pair of students working together, the nature of the students' interaction changes. Students often stop negotiating and instead (a) ask the teacher to solve the problem they are having (which prevents them from figuring out the solution on their own), (b) attempt to perform successfully for the teacher (which ends the authentic interaction in which students were engaged), or (c) start to have an independent interaction with the teacher (which ends the conversation and work on the task) (Garland, 2002).

After the teachers participating in the Practitioner Knowledge Institute reviewed this research, they began to think about the implications for instruction: Teachers should use pair work as a classroom activity, even in beginning-level classes; and they should allow pairs to work together without the teacher being present.

Many of the teachers attending the institute were already using pair work activities in their classes, and these teachers chose a range of new strategies to try in their classes. These included new ways to pair students, such as pairing students with different levels of English proficiency or different native languages, rather than always letting students choose their own partners. Teachers who had not been using pair work in their instruction needed to learn how to set up tasks for pairs to do together, how much demonstration to do before the task, and how much text or how many pictures to provide students to work with.

When the teachers returned to the institute after seven months to

share what they had learned, all of them noted how difficult it had been to maintain their distance from students during pair work. They had spent years monitoring students working in pairs and in small groups, correcting their pronunciation, supplying words that students were searching for, and making sure that students were on track or saying sentences correctly. However, after staying away from student pairs while they worked, the teachers felt strongly that not intervening contributed to the students' learning, even when students were conversing together about topics not related to the task. As Solberg (2005), one of the teachers put it, "the student is challenged to answer the question, 'Why didn't my partner understand me?'" Or, as Stinard (2005) commented,

Even though I was far from the students, keeping myself busy so they could relax, I was able to observe and overhear their conversations. I heard many students struggling and helping each other with pronunciation and working hard to understand each other. I soon realized how valuable this is and that it does not matter if they miss a word or change the word order a little bit. They are working hard at negotiating meaning, just as they need to do out in the real world.

Individual teachers reached the following conclusions about pair work:

- "Students worked longer without teacher intervention; in other words, being left alone translated into longer pair work time" (McFadden, 2005).
- "Less teacher intervention appeared to promote more sustained interaction between students in pairs" (Claussen, 2005).
- "Students seem to enjoy pair work more on their own. It offered the most opportunity for off-task conversation and led them into broader topics. It gave them problem-solving opportunities with their peers because I was not interfering. Students helped each other with pronunciation, word meaning, and questions for clarification. It gave them active listening practice" (Grief, 2005).

Questions remain regarding students' use of their native languages in pair work -- How much native language use should be allowed and for what purposes? How should students be paired? Is it better for teachers to choose the pairs or let the students select their own partners? An evaluation conducted at the end of the institute indicated that while the teachers felt that they had learned and shared their professional wisdom about using pair work in beginning-level ESL classes, they also recognized that there were still facets of this practice that they needed to learn more about.

## How Teachers Can Access, Understand, Evaluate, and Use Research

There are a number of ways that teachers can find out about research and have access to it, understand the key points of research studies and the implications for their instruction, evaluate the validity and relevance of the research, and use it to guide their practice.

Getting access to research: The easiest way to locate research findings is on the Internet. A key resource for information about student populations and studies related to language learning is the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) ([www.cal.org](http://www.cal.org)). The Center for Adult English Language Acquisition (CAELA) at CAL ([www.cal.org/caela](http://www.cal.org/caela)) has downloadable briefs, fact sheets, and research summaries and articles written specifically for practitioners working with adults learning English. Another resource is NCSALL ([www.ncsall.net](http://www.ncsall.net)), which publishes Focus on Basics, a quarterly research magazine for practitioners. Searching the "Subject Index" for "ESOL" on NCSALL's Home Page will produce a list (with links) of ESL-related articles and reports. Teachers without ready access to the Internet can write directly to these organizations and order materi-

als. Other resources include California Adult Literacy Professional Development Project (CALPRO) Research Publications and Digests ([www.calpro-online.org](http://www.calpro-online.org)); the archived resources from the Clearinghouse on Adult, Career and Vocational Education (ACVE) ([www.cete.org/acve/textonly/fulltextresource.asp](http://www.cete.org/acve/textonly/fulltextresource.asp)); and the research (academic, practitioner, and student) page of the LINCS English as a Second Language Special Collection, sponsored by the National Institute for Literacy ([www.eslcollection.org/tt-b.html](http://www.eslcollection.org/tt-b.html)).

Understanding research: Teachers can better understand research studies and findings by asking themselves questions such as the following while reading: Who were the students participating in the study, and do they resemble the students in my class or program? What question(s) were the researchers trying to answer? Do the conclusions that the researchers draw make sense from the information they gathered? When was the research conducted? Teachers also can discuss the research with their colleagues, either informally or during planned professional development activities. Teachers can ask their program director or the professional development specialist in their state to help them find professional development activities, such as workshops, institutes, and study circles that include research as part of the content of the professional development.

Evaluating research: After hearing, reading about, and understanding the research, teachers should ask themselves if the practices suggested by the research are valid for the population of students with whom they work. They can also ask themselves if the findings confirm or contradict the data that the program or teachers already have about what works with their students. They can talk with other teachers in the program or start a study group to look at the research on a specific topic.

Using research: Teachers can begin by trying out just one strategy or approach suggested by research. As they begin to use a strategy, they need to think about what criteria they will use to determine if the strategy works better, worse, or the same as the strategies they have used before. Teachers can also keep a journal of what they learned after trying out a new strategy, or join electronic discussion lists and share strategies with other teachers. (For more suggestions on journal keeping and other reflective strategies, see Florez, 2001).

## Conclusion

Research studies do not address all of the issues that adult ESL teachers face. Research is not likely to describe, for example, a specific strategy that a teacher can implement in class immediately. Furthermore, there are many questions that teachers have about teaching the wide range of adult students learning English; some of these questions may not be informed by research studies. The research that does exist, however, can provide information that teachers can integrate with their own and others' professional wisdom to develop evidence-based practice. Research can also help teachers and program administrators challenge their assumptions about who their students are, how they learn, and what instructional strategies work best for them. Helping teachers become involved directly with research and researchers is an important strategy for opening up the world of research to teachers and program administrators.

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## Additional Resources

CALPRO Research Publications and Digests:  
[www.calpro-online.org/pubs.asp](http://www.calpro-online.org/pubs.asp)

Clearinghouse on Adult, Career and Vocational Education  
Archive: [www.calpro-online.org/eric/index.asp](http://www.calpro-online.org/eric/index.asp)

LINCS ESL Special Collections Research Page:  
[www.eslcollection.org/tt-b.html](http://www.eslcollection.org/tt-b.html)

Teachers without access to the Internet can contact the following organizations to obtain research documents related to students learning English and other languages.

Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL)

[www.cal.org](http://www.cal.org)

4646 40<sup>th</sup> St., NW

Washington, DC 20016

Phone: 202-362-0700

Fax: 202-363-7204

[info@cal.org](mailto:info@cal.org)

Center for Adult English Language Acquisition (CAELA)

[www.cal.org/caela](http://www.cal.org/caela)

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