

Uses of Technology in the Instruction of Adult English Language Learners

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Background on Adult Learners

Adult education programs serve both native English speakers and learners whose first, or native, language is not English. Native English speakers attend adult basic education (ABE) classes to learn basic skills needed to improve their literacy levels and adult secondary education (ASE) classes to earn high school equivalency certificates. Both ABE and ASE instruction help learners achieve other goals related to job, family, or further education. English language learners attend English as a second language (ESL), ABE, or workforce preparation classes to improve their oral and literacy skills in English and to achieve goals similar to those of native English speakers.

Audience for This Brief

This brief is written for teachers, program administrators, education researchers, and policy makers to provide information on how technology can be used in the instruction of adult English language learners to facilitate their acquisition of English.

Introduction

In program year 2006-2007, 46% of the adults enrolled in federally funded, state-administered adult education programs in the United States were enrolled in ESL programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). These adult English language learners represent a wide range of ages, nationalities, native languages, and English proficiency levels. In order to learn the language, content, and skills needed to be successful in U.S. society and the workforce, these adults need time to devote to learning. However, time spent in formal programs is often limited. For example, adult learners in English as a second language (ESL) classes in the 2005-2006 program year received an average of 72 hours of classroom instruction, less than 2 hours per week (O'Donnell, 2006).

Integrating technology in instruction for adult English language learners may offer the flexibility to extend learning beyond that available in a formal program and thus increase opportunities for language and literacy learning (Cummins, Brown, & Sayers, 2007). Technology also offers access to new, dynamic opportunities for interaction among students and between teachers and students (Kern, Ware, & Warschauer, 2004). The use of technology

with adults learning English can also reduce the digital divide (Hawkins & Oblinger, 2006; Khalsa, Maloney-Krichmar, & Peyton, 2007; Warschauer, Knobel, & Stone, 2004) by helping these students develop a basic understanding of computers and technology. Finally, there is evidence that the use of technology with adult English language learners may facilitate their progress toward proficiency in English (Petty, Johnston, & Shafer, 2004; Rudes, Hopstock, Stephenson, & Zehler, 1999).

This brief discusses three ways of using technology with adults learning English—onsite, blended, and online—and briefly describes examples of some specific technologies and programs for adults learning English. (Please note that these are provided solely as examples; their inclusion here is not intended as a product endorsement.) The brief concludes by identifying issues to consider when using technology and by offering suggestions for further research.

Ways of Using Technology

Onsite Uses

Onsite uses of technology involve learning that takes place in the classroom or computer lab in a teacher-led, whole-group setting. Technology-based activities usually serve as a supplement to the core curriculum and are carried out within normal course meeting times. Early examples of onsite technology uses include computer-assisted instruction (CAI), which involved the use of computers to teach English vocabulary and structures (e.g., verb conjugations). This focus was augmented by computer-assisted language learning (CALL), which emphasized second language acquisition processes and provided opportunities for learners to work together on specific topics and projects (Egbert, Hanson-Smith, & Chao, 2007). Today, CALL typically involves use of the computer, Internet, or software programs to provide authentic and interactive opportunities for language learning.

Perhaps the most widespread application of technology in onsite settings to date is the use of software programs designed for language learning. Three examples of software used in adult ESL settings are *The New Oxford Picture Dictionary CD-ROM*, *Rosetta Stone*, and the *English Language Learning and Instruction System*.

The New Oxford Picture Dictionary CD-ROM covers more than 2,400 words and is organized into 13 themes such as people, housing, and food, with each theme divided into several topics. The CD-ROM includes sound, animation, interactive exercises, games, and assessments. (For more information, see www.esl.net/new_oxford_cd.html.)

Rosetta Stone software has been adapted for use with English learners at K–12, adult education, and postsecondary levels. The *Rosetta Stone* company asserts that use of its software accelerates the progress of learning English by using interactive English lessons. Learners acquire English and also develop learning strategies that help them understand unfamiliar words in context that they may encounter beyond the lessons in the software (Marcy, 2007). (See www.rosettastone.com for more information.)

The English Language Learning and Instruction System (ELLIS) emerged in 2001 as a learning package to support adults learning English in England. In today's American market, it includes two products: *ELLIS Essentials* and *ELLIS Academic*. The latter targets secondary school and adult learners. It includes five modules with native language support in five languages (Cantonese, Haitian Creole, Hmong, Spanish, and Vietnamese) plus digital self-paced lessons that incorporate audio and multimedia learning, voice recording, and dialogic role play. Lessons are designed so that learners hear interactions in a variety of everyday settings and explanations of vocabulary and grammatical structures, which allows them to experience the application of the materials in real-world settings. Learners can play recordings at different speeds and record and play back their own language (Ibarz & Webb, 2007, p. 8). Versions of the software available in the United States contain course management and assessment tools for instructor use. (See www.ellis.com for more information.)

Blended Uses

In blended uses, technology serves as a supplement to the primary course curriculum and is used both within classes or labs and outside the classroom (e.g., in the home, library, or community center) without the teacher. Technologies that lend themselves to blended uses include software such as the programs described above; computer-mediated communication (CMC), in which learners in a program interact online among themselves or with learners in other programs and settings (Chapelle, 2008); and Web-based learning. Three examples of Web-based learning—project-based Web learning, Webquests, and Web-based games—are described below. Because they require a certain level of literacy to be used effectively, teachers should consider the ability of their students to participate before decid-

ing whether to make use of Web-based learning. Jakob Nielsen's Alertbox describes considerations for low literacy learners at www.useit.com/alertbox/20050314.html.

In *project-based Web learning*, learners work together to complete tasks that are primarily Internet-based and may involve the use of e-mail and word processing (Gaer, 2007). While working on projects, students engage in meaningful language through reading and writing. Final products can be posted on the Web as examples for future students and for use in future projects and collaboration (Gaer, 2007, p. 81). Susan Gaer has compiled an Email Projects Home Page that showcases a variety of projects: an intergenerational culture project, an annotated booklist, international home remedies, cookbooks, and virtual school visits (www.susangaer.com/studentprojects). Other relevant sites can be found by typing "project-based Web learning" into a search engine. Online projects are useful for adults learning English, because lessons can be designed to promote the sharing of cultural heritage and tradition and civic and community integration. Though examples can be found online, teachers can also design projects themselves using free online Web pages and resources.

Webquests are a specific type of project-based Web learning that focus on inquiry and group work and involve gathering information and resources from the Internet (Gaer, 2007). Webquests are intended to promote learner engagement through reliance on teamwork and through the authenticity of topics and activities. Project guidelines may facilitate learning by listing specific Web sites that learners should visit in order to complete the quest and by encouraging groups to work together orally and in writing. Appropriate quests for adult learners are based on themes that involve the learning of life skills such as literacy, parenting, or consumer rights. The Adult Literacy and Technology Network (www.altn.org/webquests/downloads) provides free Webquest materials. A free Webquest lesson planning resource is available at <http://zunal.com>. Webquests are useful in settings with adult learners from diverse backgrounds who would benefit from opportunities to engage in language and literacy interactions. Students with strong oral language skills in need of reading and writing development would also benefit from engaging in Webquests.

Web-based games can be accessed from the classroom and other locations (Smith-Stoner & Willer, 2005). They are appropriate for beginning-level adult English language learners and can also be productive for parents to use with children who are learning English. Examples include crossword puzzles (<http://iteslj.org/cw/>); games based on grammar, vocabulary, and spelling (www.free-english.com/english/Games.aspx); matching games

(www.englishclub.com/esl-games/matching.htm); and hangman (www.englishclub.com/esl-games/hangman.htm). The National Adult Literacy Database offers a variety of links to free games and other resources (www.nald.ca/index.htm).

Online Learning

Online learning is entirely Internet-based. While there may or may not be teacher involvement, teachers and students rarely meet onsite. Communication and the transmission of course content take place online. Reynard (2003) has named this type of learning computer-mediated distance education (CMDE). CMDE gives adult English learners the opportunity to learn anywhere, anytime. Three examples of online learning programs are *English for All*, *USA Learns*, and *Learner Web*.

English for All (www.myefa.org/login.cfm) offers free membership and self-directed lessons for adults. Five stand-alone videotapes (available for purchase) facilitate lessons designed to help learners develop vocabulary, grammar, reading comprehension, and life skills. Sections, called episodes, include free, printable materials that align with the content. *English for All* can be used with adult English learners from high-beginning through high-intermediate levels of English proficiency. Because the videos are interspersed with vocabulary and grammar lessons, which can be less interactive than other activities but are nonetheless valuable to the language learning process, they are well-suited for motivated learners who are self-starters. The platform is part of the Cyberstep project funded by the U.S. Department of Education and developed by the Division of Adult Career Education of the Los Angeles Unified School District.

USA Learns (www.usalearns.org) is a free Web portal designed for adults learning English. It offers online membership and curricula for three different English proficiency levels: beginning English skills, low-intermediate English skills, and intermediate reading skills. There are clear distinctions among the three levels in terms of the listening, reading, and writing activities included. Lessons are introduced with brief videos followed by a list of new words. Depending on the level, words are introduced with pictures, audio, video, or written definitions. After new words are introduced, learners complete quizzes by matching the new words with the correct image or definition. Embedded in the English lessons are relevant life skills, such as finding a job, renting a place to live, and managing money.

Learner Web (www.learnerweb.org) is a free Internet application that provides support for adults with a variety of educational goals including learning English. It connects learners with resources and is maintained regionally by community-based organizations. Unlike

the above-referenced Web-based learning opportunities, *Learner Web* is capable of providing learners with both online and in-person support through its community-based partnerships. Users complete individual profiles that include their native language and personal goals for participation in the program. When learners log on to the Web site, they spend most of their time in areas selected specifically for them based on their profile. Each goal includes a range of steps that learners must complete. Each step includes Web-based activities followed by quizzes to assess learning. In their own online workspace, learners compile portfolios that align with their individual profiles and goals. *Learner Web* is particularly useful for adult English learners who are in need of additional coursework, such as GED support or civics lessons, because in addition to English lessons, it includes a variety of other courses. Another key aspect of *Learner Web* is the community support available to students, which benefits adult learners in urban areas with access to libraries and community centers.

Considerations

Several issues need to be considered when using technology to support instruction in adult education programs.

- With all three types of uses (onsite, blended, and online), deliberate attempts should be made to promote group work and interaction, both online and face to face. Otherwise, the use of technology may result in isolated language learning and limited opportunities for meaningful in-person interaction in English, a key element of language learning (Ellis, 2008). Especially in distance settings, a lack of in-person interaction can be a challenge to some learners, and little to no onsite interaction can affect the potential for community building and a sense of group inclusion (Khalsa, Maloney-Krichmar, & Peyton, 2007).
- Teachers need to be able to adapt curricula so that technology use supports learning goals, and technology is used as a tool and not as a substitute for instruction (Lam, 2000; Reynard, 2003).
- Because the use of technology is relatively new in adult education settings, there may be limited access to computers, video capabilities, audio, Internet, software licenses, and technology support (Warschauer, Knobel, & Stone, 2004). Computer labs, with the associated licenses and software, are expensive and require teacher knowledge to use and administrator and administrative support to be maintained.
- Adults learning English may have limited access to technology outside of the education setting (Webb, 2006). Teachers planning to include technology in

onsite instruction need to understand the extent to which students have access to computers and the Internet.

A useful first resource for adult educators integrating technology in the classroom is the Outreach and Technical Assistance Network for Adult Educators (www.otan.dni.us), which addresses many of the issues described here.

Conclusion

Technology is increasingly used in adult English language learning either as a complement to teacher-mediated instruction or as the sole means of learning. Although access to technology may present challenges to adult education programs and practitioners, these can be overcome. Online platforms have progressed considerably in recent years and promise to offer increasingly useful, affordable, and accessible applications and tools for language learning. Teachers using technology need to continue to provide opportunities for in-person interaction to promote language and literacy development. Further research is needed on the impact of different uses of technology and on uses that promote English acquisition over time. Given the rapid rate of innovations in software and Internet access, long-term research studies are needed to understand more about the role and impact of using technology with adults learning English.

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