



Center for Applied Linguistics, Washington, DC

Promising Practices for Instruction of Adults Learning English

March, 2010

There has been limited research on effective instructional strategies with adult English language learners, especially learners with limited literacy. However, literature on learning in general, second language acquisition, and literacy development for English language learners describes the following instructional strategies for promoting language and literacy development.

Find Out What Learners Want and Need to Know

Adults have considerable life experience and are often self-directed, practical, and accustomed to solving problems. They have reservoirs of experience to help them learn new things. They also want to know why specific knowledge and skills need to be learned and how it will be applicable to their lives. Learner knowledge and skills assessment (tests) and needs assessment (surveys or interviews that ask them what they need and want to learn) can be used to plan instruction. It is also helpful to tell learners why they are learning what they are learning in every lesson.

Build on Learners' Knowledge and Experiences

Move from the known to the unknown. Select texts on familiar subjects and then share stories and use pictures and graphics to bring learners into texts through their own experiences.

Teach Learning Strategies Deliberately

Learners at all literacy levels need to know how to use a variety of strategies for approaching and understanding written texts. Give learners an oral introduction to a text, and then ask them to look at the structure of the text (e.g., to find the beginning and the end); pick out words they recognize; and see if pictures, graphs, or maps in the text are helpful. Teach vocabulary words deliberately and regularly to learners.

Teach Word Recognition Skills and Alphabetic Literacy

Depending on learners' literacy levels, teachers may need to begin with pre-literacy exercises that provide practice with directionality and recognition of shapes and sizes. Next introduce beginning literacy skills by teaching the alphabet; consonants, vowels, and sight words; and then longer utterances, perhaps using flashcards and dialogue strips.

Focus on Form

Draw learner's attention specifically to grammar and vocabulary. Focus on form may be planned ahead and focused on pre-selected language structures, or it may be incidental, arising spontaneously at any point in a communicative activity. Encourage learners to notice forms in a text (e.g., prepositions of location such as *in*, *on*, *under*) and explicitly teach these forms. Then provide opportunities for meaningful practice in reading, writing, and oral production. In speaking or listening, teach learners the rules for word stress, intonation, and rhythm in English as well as focusing on specific sounds that may be difficult for them.

Provide a Real-World Context for Literacy Activities in Class: Bring the Outside In

Learners need to make connections between the words and structures they are using in class and their own realities in the world. Tie whatever is being learned to its real-life applications. Bring into the classroom information and artifacts such as memos, flyers, and newspapers from places that learners live and work. Use these as starting points for oral language and literacy development.

Create Opportunities for Peer-to-Peer Communication

Peer collaborative learning can support the development of language and literacy. For example, learners with limited literacy can first watch a skill modeled by the teacher or a more capable peer, then ask for information and clarification, and then begin to participate with support and feedback from the teacher and each other. (For example, when learning new vocabulary words, a less capable learner can watch and listen as a more knowledgeable peer sounds out the new words and receives feedback from the teacher.)

Assess Learner Progress

Learner assessment keeps the teacher and learners informed of what has been achieved and areas that still need work. Teachers can use different types of activities to assess learner progress, including cloze exercises, substitution drills, and role plays. Ongoing observation is also part of assessment. For learners, self-assessment provides opportunities to develop reflection and self-evaluation skills. Learners can engage in self-assessment by completing checklists (e.g., marking skills they feel they have improved - " X I can read the safety signs at work" and those they still want to learn – " X I want to be able to talk with my supervisor"). Meetings between teachers and individual learners to discuss progress are also helpful.

Integrate the Four Language Skills

In life, the activities we engage in involve using reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills. For example, a trip to the health clinic includes reading and filling out health forms, explaining symptoms, and understanding the doctor's response. Classroom activities should involve all of these skills.

What does an effective literacy lesson look like?

The following is a sample lesson that employs activities involving listening, speaking, reading, and writing and strategies discussed above.

1. As a class, learners brainstorm vocabulary on a specific topic such as shopping for food.
2. Flashcard practice (with a whole class, in small groups, or pairs) gives opportunities to practice using vocabulary and to learn new words related to food.
3. The class groups food words that begin with similar sounds; e.g., *cheese*, *chicken*, and *cherries*.
4. Learners practice a three-line scripted dialogue ("I am going shopping." "What do you need?" "I need bread, beans, and chicken.") This is said first as a whole group, then is acted out by volunteers, and finally in pairs learners substitute other food vocabulary.
5. Learners complete cloze worksheets, inserting words that have been deleted from the dialogue.
6. For homework, learners create their own shopping list of five food items they actually need. They can copy new food words from packages, etc.

References and Resources

The following articles were used to prepare this paper. For more information and suggestions and lists of the research supporting these practices, see the following:

- Burt, M., Peyton, J.K., & Schaetzel, K. (2008). *Working with adult English language earners with limited literacy: Research, practice, and professional development*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics. Retrieved February 27, 2010, from <http://www.cal.org/caelanetwork/resources/limitedliteracy.htm>
- Burt, M., Peyton, J.K., & Van Duzer, C. (2005). *How should adult ESL reading instruction differ from ABE reading instruction*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics. Retrieved February 27, 2010, from <http://www.cal.org/caela/esl%5Fresources/briefs/readingdif.html>
- Condelli, L., & Wrigley, H. (2009). "What works" for adult literacy students of English as a second language. In S. Reder & J. Bynner (Eds.), *Tracking adult literacy and numeracy skills: Findings from longitudinal research*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Florez, M., & Terrill, L. (2002) *Working with literacy level adult English language learners*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics. Retrieved February 27, 2010, from http://www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/digests/litQA.html
- National Center for Family Literacy and Center for Applied Linguistics. (2007) *Practitioner toolkit: Working with adult English language learners*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved February 27, 2010 from http://www.cal.org/caela/tools/instructional/prac_toolkit.html
- Rodríguez, A. G. (2009). *Teaching grammar to adult English language learners: Focus on form*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics. Retrieved February 27, 2010, from <http://www.cal.org/caelanetwork/resources/teachinggrammar.html>
- Schaetzel, K. & Low, E.L. (2009) *Teaching pronunciation to adult English language learners*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics. Retrieved February 27, 2010, from <http://www.cal.org/caelanetwork/resources/pronunciation.html>

Weinstein, G. (1999). *Learners' lives as curriculum: Six journeys to immigrant literacy*. Washington, DC & McHenry, IL: Center for Applied Linguistics & Delta Systems.