

English Literacy and Civics Education

Center for Adult English Language Acquisition (CAELA)

Background on 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 get high school equivalency certificates or achieve other goals related to job, family, or further education. Sometimes ABE classes include both native English speakers and English language learners. English language learners 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.

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 civics education for adult English language learners

Introduction

The purpose of the U.S. Department of Education's English Literacy and Civics (EL/Civics) Education program is to support projects that provide and increase access to English literacy programs in which civics education takes place. *Civics education* is defined by the *Federal Register* (1999) as "an educational program that emphasizes contextualized instruction on the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, naturalization procedures, civic participation, and U.S. history and government to help students acquire the skills and knowledge to become active and informed parents, workers, and community members." EL/civics classes introduce students to civics-related content and provide them with opportunities to apply that knowledge in their daily lives while building their English language and literacy skills.

The U.S. Department of Education EL/Civics Education program was established in 2000; now, as reauthorization of the program is underway, it is important for states, pro-

grams, and teachers to understand the content and purpose of EL/civics education.

The content of ESL/civics classes includes the history and structure of the U.S. government (i.e., the executive, legislative, and judicial branches); the geographical history and current geopolitical structure of the country; the roles and responsibilities of the president and the White House; and the U.S. legal and education systems. These are the components of a curriculum designed to guide learners in becoming knowledgeable citizens and active community members. (See Terrill, 2000, for further discussion of civics education and citizenship preparation programs.)

In designing EL/civics classes, program administrators and teachers need to ensure that the content is appropriate for the learners as determined by a needs assessment (see *Practitioner Toolkit*, 2004, pp. II.5–II.28, for discussion and examples of needs assessments).

While EL/civics education must cover civics content in a structured, deliberate way, learners' goals and needs should also be determined and addressed. For example, some students in EL/civics courses may need focused instruction on the content and the procedures required for an upcoming citizenship exam. Others may want to learn about U.S. history and government to ease the process of settling into the country and to become informed, confident members of society (see Tolbert, 2001, for a discussion of learner needs assessment and selecting topics for civics instruction).

Once the content and structure of a course are determined, EL/civics education designers and teachers must also ensure that instruction is appropriate to the English proficiency levels of the learners. Following are some ways that teachers can develop EL/civics classes appropriate for learners at beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels of English proficiency.

Beginning Levels

Practitioners can help literacy-level learners understand U.S. communities, government, and history while they participate in hands-on activities, pre-reading activities, and activities that help them develop the fine motor skills needed

for writing. Using pictures cut from magazines, learners can make collages that represent their communities. They can alphabetize names of states; label maps; practice sight word recognition of local, state, and federal office holders or of community institutions such as the library and the community center; or match pictures of institutions and people with their names or titles. Simple games, such as Bingo and Concentration, can be played to reinforce words learners have been working with in the content unit. To make course material more meaningful, tours of community places or events, both virtual (via the Internet) and real, can be arranged for the students.

To help beginning-level English language learners in EL/civics classes learn about the branches of the U.S. government, teachers may want to focus on each branch separately. Looking at the judicial system, the teacher shows a picture to the class of the Supreme Court justices and ask questions such as, "Who are these people?" "What are they doing?" "Why are they wearing robes?" With some vocabulary assistance (e.g., lists of relevant words like *law*, *robe*, *bench*, *judge*, *rule*, *decide*) and some role-play by the teacher and more proficient students, the class discusses the members and activities of the Supreme Court, possibly comparing them with the practices of courts in their own countries. Later, the class or small groups might work together on reading, fill-in-the-blank, or dictation activities. Finally, students can produce a brief written statement about the work of the Supreme Court.

To relate information about the U.S. government directly to their own lives and experiences, beginning learners can participate in language experience activities that address, for example, understanding their basic rights and responsibilities in the United States. Students may first watch a television program or listen to personal accounts of events they might experience, i.e., getting a driver's license, registering a child for school, going to the doctor and filling a prescription, or reporting a consumer rights violation. After prioritizing those issues of greatest importance to them, students can be guided through a unit that teaches them about their rights and responsibilities in these matters and provides information and tools for handling them. The unit may include language structures on requesting help and clarification or vocabulary for understanding necessary forms and documents (for more information, see Holt, 1995).

The Outreach and Technical Assistance Network (OTAN) of the California Adult Education Office offers examples of how topics related to individual rights and responsibilities can be incorporated into beginning-level adult ESL classes through civics-related lesson plans, and Project SHINE (Students Helping In the Naturalization of Elders) offers lesson plans on topics related to the Bill of Rights (see Resources).

Intermediate Levels

For intermediate-level students, practitioners can provide background information on, for example, the U.S. executive and legislative branches of government, by building on basic concepts and vocabulary. Practitioners can also develop activities on the different branches' respective roles, the requirements to become president or a member of the House of Representatives, and the ways that public officials are elected.

Teachers can devise information-gap activities (see Moss & Ross-Feldman, 2003) about the executive and legislative branches and include additional information about American culture and history. For example, a teacher writes two paragraphs about how presidents are elected, controlling the level of vocabulary, structure, and content of each paragraph to address the English level of the students. Partner A reads the first paragraph to Partner B. Partner B has the same text, but certain words and phrases have been omitted (structural words such as conjunctions, adverbs, and auxiliary verbs or content words such as *election*, *campaign*, and *candidate*). Partner B listens, perhaps asking some questions for clarification, and writes the missing words. Then Partner B reads the second paragraph to Partner A, who must listen, understand, and write a different set of words or phrases that are missing from his or her text. Learners absorb content knowledge and practice language skills as they read silently and aloud, listen, write, and later compare notes. They also get practice working together to complete a task, a skill that is useful in the community and the workplace (see *Practitioner Toolkit*, 2004, pp. II.41–II.46, for examples of information-gap and other activities).

Learners can work alone, in pairs, or in small groups to research different aspects of their municipal and state government systems. They can read information, take notes, conduct debates, or give short oral presentations to the class. Many county and municipal governments offer online information about their services. Topics of interest might include how to obtain various licenses and permits, taxation regulations, voting, or enrolling children in day-care centers and public schools. Learners can choose issues that are important to them, access the information they need, hone their technology skills, and be active participants in their community while at the same time improving reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. Lesson plans and teaching material related to the U.S. government may be found online. For example, the Web site of the Arlington Education and Employment Program (REEP), an adult ESL program in Arlington, Virginia, provides a number of pages with useful links, including one focusing on U.S. history and government (see Resources).

Advanced Levels

Advanced English language learners are usually concerned about writing, listening, speaking, and grammatical accuracy in complex or academic contexts. With advanced learners, representatives of the local government, such as the county council or the board of education, can be invited to speak to the class about how decisions are made locally, and debates can be conducted on issues facing the county and the state. To help students gain knowledge about the federal government, teachers can have them research and write reports on different sections of the U.S. Constitution, on landmark cases tried in the Supreme Court, or on events and individuals in U.S. history. Information about the work of the U.S. federal government is readily available online. Adult ESL teachers can also find online resources for teaching about the different branches of government (see Resources).

Other options for EL/civics classes with advanced-level students include having students attend and participate in local school board meetings or volunteer in community organizations. They can also write letters to the editor of a local newspaper or email community leaders about issues of interest to the class. Activities such as these encourage learners to participate in their community while using and improving communication skills.

Conclusion

Recent government initiatives and funding for EL/civics education reflect the increasing importance of civics instruction. It is equally important that practitioners who work with English language learners understand ways to teach the subject. Whether designing an EL/civics curriculum or developing a single lesson plan, administrators and teachers should be sure that choices regarding topics, approaches, and materials are based on the learners' specific needs. Having determined these needs, practitioners can find a wide variety of ideas and teaching materials for use with learners at all levels, both online and through local sources such as public libraries, community centers, schools, courthouses, and police stations. Designed with learners' needs in mind, EL/civics education classes can provide interesting opportunities to teach English language learners about U.S. history, civic responsibility, and government, while at the same time helping them improve their literacy and oral language skills.

References

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Resources

Web Sites

Arlington Education and Employment Program (REEP)

www.arlington.k12.va.us/instruct/ctae/adult_ed/REEP/reepcurriculum/histgovbow.htm

The REEP Web site offers a number of resources, as well as links to other sites on U.S. history and government.

Center for Adult English Language Acquisition (CAELA)

www.cal.org/caela

The CAELA Web site provides information about CAELA's state capacity building initiative and offers tools for adult ESL instructors and program administrators. It provides a wide variety of online resources—annotated bibliographies, research briefs, articles, and the quarterly newsletter, *CAELA Currents*—and the opportunity to ask CAELA staff questions about teaching adult English language learners. Also on the CAELA Web site is *Civics Education for Adult English Language Learners* at www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/collections/civics.html

English Literacy and Civics Education Demonstration Grants Program

www.ed.gov/programs/elcivics/index.html

This U.S. Department of Education Web site describes the English Literacy and Civics Education Demonstration Grants program, including its purpose, funding, and regulations. The Web site also includes links to the 12 programs originally funded by the grants.

ESL/CivicsLink

<http://civicslink.ket.org/login.xml>

This site functions as an online professional development program for adult ESL practitioners, offering self-study

units on topics such as integrating civics and English literacy, building cross-cultural awareness, and teaching a citizenship class. It includes information and guidelines for teaching about the *Bill of Rights*. A small registration fee is required for access to the site.

Literacy Links

www-tcall.tamu.edu/newsletr/win02/win02j.htm

The Winter 2002 edition of the *Literacy Links* newsletter, published quarterly by the Texas Adult Literacy Clearinghouse, focuses on the topic of civics education and includes a number of interesting essays on how and why to provide adult English language learners with civics education.

National Standards for Civics and Government

www.civiced.org/stds.html

This Web site is focused on civics instruction in K–12 contexts. It is also useful to teachers of adult English language learners both for its detailed overview of the rationale behind civics instruction and for its clearly organized outlines of specific areas of civics content.

Outreach and Technical Assistance Network

www.otan.us

This Web site is managed by the California Adult Education Office and can be accessed after completing a free registration form. The site includes resources on civics education, such as lesson plans, classroom activities, graphics for downloading, project-based learning ideas, and software recommendations.

Project SHINE

www.projectshine.org/FAP/index.htm

Students Helping In the Naturalization of Elders (SHINE) is a project linking college students with older immigrants and refugees for English language and civics education assistance.

Street Law

www.streetlaw.com

This Web site and accompanying textbook offer resources and lesson plans for teaching young people about the law and its role in their daily lives. Included are downloadable materials for teaching about the Constitution and citizens' rights and responsibilities.

Writings by Teachers From the New England Citizenship Project

www.nelrc.org/cpcc/necpindex.htm

This Web site features a collection of essays by 10 teachers who report on their experiences with planning and teaching courses on civics and citizenship.

Additional information about the work of the U.S. federal government is available through Web sites such as

The National Archives www.archives.gov

Smithsonian www.si.edu

Supreme Court of the United States www.supremecourtus.gov

Books

Center for Applied Linguistics, Cultural Orientation Resource Center. (2004). *Welcome to the United States: A guidebook for refugees*. Washington, DC: Author.

This guidebook provides useful information for all newcomers to the United States. It includes chapters on community services, housing, transportation, employment, education, health care, and cultural adjustment, as well as specific information on legal rights for refugees entering the country. Available in English and 10 other languages. The English version is available in DVD or VHS through the Center for Applied Linguistics at <http://calstore.cal.org/store> and may be downloaded from www.culturalorientation.net

Short, D. J., Seufert-Bosco, M., & Grognet, A. G. (1995). *By the people, for the people: U.S. government and citizenship*. Washington, DC, and McHenry, IL: Center for Applied Linguistics and Delta Systems.

With a variety of exercises, maps, and timelines, this textbook helps students practice and improve their English speaking, listening, and reading skills while providing them with information on U.S. history and government. The textbook can be purchased through the Center for Applied Linguistics Web site at <http://calstore.cal.org/store>

U.S. Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, Office of Citizenship. (2005). *Welcome to the United States: A guide for new immigrants*. Washington, DC: Author.

This guide contains information to help immigrants settle into everyday life in the United States. It provides basic civics information that introduces immigrants to the U.S. system of government and tips on how to get involved in their new communities and how to meet their responsibilities and exercise their rights as permanent residents. The guide can be downloaded for free at <http://uscis.gov/graphics/citizenship/welcomeguide/index.htm>