

Parent Education Instructional Strategies

English language learners come from a variety of cultural backgrounds and have a variety of approaches to learning. It is important that adult education and family literacy program staff new to working with English language learners understand the impact of culture on learning in order to best serve learners' needs. Programs can enhance parents' learning by incorporating learners' prior knowledge and experiences into the curriculum, thereby providing a culturally responsive learning environment. Teachers can help parents by recognizing and positively affirming the role of culture in learning. To begin this section, some general considerations for adult education family literacy practitioners are listed.

Implementing programs of sufficient duration to enhance learner progress. This is particularly important with adult English language learners, because they may need time to understand American school culture and expectations while they are increasing their literacy skills.

Building on parents' language and literacy. Many immigrant parents have literacy skills in one or more languages other than English. Others are not literate in any language. Researchers and practitioners are exploring the value of learning to read in a first language other than English both for its own sake (i.e., as a vehicle for passing on culture and knowledge) and to facilitate becoming literate in English.

Respect parents' cultures and ways of knowing. Immigrant parents are eager to understand U.S. culture in general, and specifically, the complexities and expectations of school. Family literacy practitioners and parents themselves need to understand that telling stories and sharing cultural traditions with children in any language help prepare children to do well in school, even when the language is not English, and even when this is done orally rather than through print (Weinstein & Quintero, 1995).

Cultural Considerations

Immigrant parents enter education programs with many strengths. Their knowledge about learning and child rearing may be different, but not deficient. By understanding this, adult education and family literacy practitioners can learn about and respect these parents and their cultures, which often include strong, intact, multigenerational family structures. These parents want to learn, but they also have much to teach (National Center for ESL Literacy Education, 2002). The variety of cultural backgrounds may be seen in the following areas.

Culture and Family. In some cultures, family is the first priority. Children are celebrated and sheltered, the wife fulfills a domestic role and family mobility is limited.

Culture and Education. Teachers/tutors may find that parents come from countries in which the education culture is based on memorization with a lot of emphasis on theory and a rigid, teacher-centered curriculum.

Work/Leisure. Some parents may feel that they work to live and that leisure is considered essential for a full life. Other parents may feel that they live to work and leisure is the reward for hard work.

Competition. Teachers/tutors may find parents from a culture in which personal competition is avoided, while others come from cultures where it is important to prove oneself in competitive situations.

Time. Some parents may come from cultures in which time is a relative concept and deadlines are flexible. Others may believe that deadlines and commitments are firm.

Instructional Approaches

In order to develop a curriculum that supports learners' goals and that relates to their lives outside the educational setting, programs should select approaches appropriate for program needs, student needs, and program intensity. The following approaches are widely used today. (See Crandall & Peyton, 1993, for a detailed discussion of these approaches.)

Competency-based approaches stress the importance of learning the language in order to accomplish real-life tasks (also known as life skills or survival skills), such as completing applications, reading schedules, and asking for information.

Freirean and participatory approaches start with real issues in the learners' lives and develop the curriculum and language skills to address those issues, such as advocating for children, speaking up on the job, or dealing with legal problems. These approaches are based on the work of Paulo Freire. (For more information, see www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/digests/freireQA.html.)

Integrated, theme-based approaches link language learning to topics of interest to the learners, such as cultural comparisons, health practices, or citizenship attainment.

Language experience approaches use shared events and experiences from learners' lives as starting points for creating stories. The language experience approach builds on learners' experiences and oral language to develop reading texts. Typically the teacher elicits a story from students by asking them questions about an experience they have had together, or that they have shared knowledge about, and that they have the language to talk about (e.g., a class field trip, shopping for food, coming to the United States). The teacher writes the story on the board, a flip chart, or an overhead transparency; reads the story to the students; and works with the students so that they can copy and read the story. (See *Language Experience Approach*, pages II–51 and II–64, for a more detailed description and examples of activities that can be used with this approach.)

Task-based and project-based approaches require learners to use English to solve a problem or complete a project as a team. For example, teams can research strategies for

immigrant parents to work more effectively with schools, compile stories for a newsletter or book, or prepare visual presentations or events (Florez, 1998; Seufert, 1999).

Strategies

When developing instructional strategies, there are some specific considerations to address before attempting to implement these practices. One of the most important considerations is to focus on the information and skills parents will need to help their children, rather than focusing on cultural differences. Some specific considerations are listed below.

Get to know parents and their needs. Knowing what they need to function both inside and outside the classroom is key to successful strategy choice and implementation. For example, parents need to learn how to purchase groceries and ask for assistance when needed.

Use visuals to support your instruction. Bring authentic materials to the classroom. Use materials parents encounter every day, newspapers, magazines, flyers, pamphlets, utility bills, school notes. Also, be aware of the learning preferences of parents and try to engage them in learning activities that use various modalities (visual, oral, tactile).

Foster a safe classroom environment. Encourage parents to try new things, and praise them for their efforts. Don't overwhelm parents with too much new material. Be aware of their educational experiences, and respect their learning differences.

Balance variety and routine in classroom activities. Allow parents to work individually and in groups, and keep lessons dynamic by varying group size and group members.

Celebrate success. Each accomplishment, however small, is worthy of recognition. Staff must recognize parents' achievements.

(Adapted from Florez & Burt, 2001.)

