

Curriculum and Instructional Strategies for Teaching Adult English Learners

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to identify important characteristics of a successful adult English Language Learning (ELL) curriculum and the best practices that have been shown to be effective for teaching adult English Language Learners (ELLs). This article investigates the criteria for the establishment of an effective adult ELL curriculum and analyzes best practices for teaching adult English learners from various journal articles. The investigation and analysis show several effective strategies including the use of curricula that emphasize practicing English in authentic situations and that emphasize the academic, professional, and other specific needs of the adult ELLs. Furthermore, high-intensity instruction focusing on incidental vocabulary learning, which leads to the enhancement of reading and writing English proficiency skills, and the extensive use of technology for both learner instruction and teacher training are also shown to be effective strategies in creating a successful adult ELL curriculum.

Introduction

There are varieties of reasons that lead Adult English Learners (ELL) to enroll in ESL programs. Some ELLs simply desire to improve their literacy and proficiency skills in reading, writing, listening comprehension, and speaking in English. Others want to learn English to maintain a job or obtain a better job; and yet others desire to become proficient enough to communicate with the people at work or their children's teachers or to help their children with their school.

Many adult ELLs are first generation immigrants who must face the demands of living in an unfamiliar country. Numerous researchers have explored the challenges faced by adult ELLs. Bigelow and Schwarz (2010) noted that many ELLs are handicapped in American society not only because they

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cannot communicate effectively in English, but also because they lack print literacy and formal education. Orem (2000) stated that the lack of language proficiency impacts access to housing and employment for ELLs as well as hinders the role that they play in their children's education. Compounding the challenges faced by adult ELLs is the fact that because they cannot effectively communicate in English and have little or no formal education, even in their mother tongue, they must work multiple, low-paying jobs in order to survive.

Bigelow and Schwarz also believed that educators and policymakers are similarly challenged in terms of how best to help these adults acquire English. Unfortunately, these challenges are often not overcome, and it is not unusual for adult ELL programs at community colleges to either have a poor curriculum or no curriculum at all.

In order to employ promising program design and instructional strategies for adult English language learners, it is imperative that one identifies the effective curricula and instructional practices that have been used in the field of adult ELL. An effective curriculum should place the needs of the English learners first (as opposed to the institution or the instructors) and encourage learners to get involved in the program design. A good program design allows both students and instructors the opportunities to interact with each other in a classroom in which the instructional strategies promote authentic materials and activities to help students accomplish their personal goals and needs.

ELL Curriculum

ELL Programs can be provided in various formats -- in community colleges, school systems, community centers, correctional facilities, and workplaces. These programs are run based on good faith, on profit, managed by local agencies, or supported by the community (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2010). Regardless, in general, the adult ELL programs at community colleges face challenges when dealing with the knowledge of the adult learners, second language acquisition process, learner recruitment, intake, and orientation, assessment of learners and goals, learner retention, transition processes and support system, curriculum and instructional contents, staffing and employment conditions, and professional development supervision, evaluation, and support from administrators.

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Administrators are faced with the need to serve a large number of adult learners with diversity in terms of cultural backgrounds. Administrators of adult ELL programming have fundamental responsibilities to achieve success with the various components of the program. These responsibilities must move the organization towards the goals it has established (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2010).

Graves (2000) and Richards (2001) suggested that ELL curricula should begin by identifying the essential characteristics of the district. These characteristics include the institutional/teaching philosophy, goals of the ELL program, learner characteristics, standards, teaching preferences, and mainstream curricula. Hoffman and Dahlman (2007) further listed some questions to discuss at the very beginning of the review process. These questions have been adapted to the need of adult ELL education:

- (1) What is the goal of ELL instruction in the adult ELL program?
- (2) What are the crucial characteristics of this program? What are the beliefs and expectations of the college, the state, and the federal government?

To properly do justice to the recommendations ensuing from this effort, the following subordinate questions must also be addressed to guide my research questions:

- (1) What is the role of ELL instruction in relationship to College Career and Readiness (CCR) standards and standardized test results?
- (2) What is the ELL program philosophy?
- (3) What are the state requirements regarding the education of ELLs?
- (4) What are the skills and knowledge described in the state/national ELL standards?
- (5) What do we know about what is best for ELLs?

Fundamental Criteria for ELL Curriculum

Hoffman and Dahlman (2007) proposed criteria of language skills and assessment to address the unique needs of language minority students in the area who come from limited formal schooling backgrounds. The majority of the adult ELLs have a limited formal schooling background; nonetheless, there are some ELLs with college degrees. The criteria proposed by Hoffman and Dahlman covered the overall program, vocabulary content based instruction, reading and writing, listening and speaking/oral

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language development, grammar, assessment, instruction of skills and other criteria to consider. Overall, the program should have the following criteria:

- Clearly stated philosophy and approach of the program
- Have goals,
- Clearly defined the audience,
- Have high expectations evident,
- Address a sufficient number of objectives or learning outcomes
- Foster a community of learners and a climate of respect
- Align with district curriculum standards
- The vocabulary and content based instruction should go from broad to specific, integrate the content and language, build background knowledge, and have a spiraling of vocabulary and content.
- The reading and writing should display how the curriculum addresses reading and writing, the nature of the instructional model, completeness of presentation, and adequacy of practice.
- The listening and speaking/oral language development should demonstrate the adequacy of how the curriculum addresses oral language development, completeness of presentation, adequacy of practice, and how the program addresses pronunciation.
- The grammar should display the presentation of structures, appropriate sequencing, and adequacy of drills and practice.
- The assessment should assess students' prior knowledge and readiness, and be related to the instruction.
- The instruction of skills should provide scaffolding, include higher level thinking skills, include guided practice, varied and challenging, include controlled and free practice, and provide explicit instruction of learning strategies.
- Another criterion to consider is that the appearance of the materials should be culturally respectful.

Instructional Strategies for teaching Adult ELLs

A. Real-life Materials and Authentic Activities

Adults are motivated to learn if they are able to identify their personal and professional needs with the learning in the classroom. Huang (2013) explained that the principle of using authentic learning

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and materials applies to all levels of English learners. He found that using real-life materials and authentic activities in adult programs or classes impacts the language learning of the students. In addition to this principle, Berns and Erickson (2001) stated that, to help teachers connect subject matter content to real world situations, they can apply Contextualized Teaching and Learning (CLT) as a concept of teaching and learning in the classroom. They also said that when students acquire knowledge and skills by integrating subject matter with real-life situations, students are likely to apply the content knowledge in real life. CTL proposes that students construct their own knowledge by testing concepts they have learned or experienced in the past.

Extending the need for authentic tasks, Huang, Tindall & Nisbet (2011) investigated different authentic material and activities. Five specific categories related to the how and what of authentic curriculum and instruction in adult ELL classrooms were identified as (a) Employment, (b) Technology, (c) Consumer-Related Goods, (d) Consumer-Related Services, and (e) Citizenship/Civic Participation. Many adult English learners take language classes to further their careers or pursue job opportunities. Thus, they need experience with the job seeking process to enhance their employment opportunities and to develop their language skills.

Activities that are authentic and meaningful maximize students' engagement. The five categories mentioned above provide opportunities to connect with authentic materials and connect with their language learning in genuine communication. These activities also give the opportunities to the students to learn and practice vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, pragmatic, and semantic elements. Through authentic and contextualized activities, students will also have the opportunities to express and pursue their own goals inside and outside the language learning classroom (Huang, Tindall, & Nisbet, 2011).

B. Vocabulary Instruction for Adult English Language Learners

Ramos Restrepo (2015) noted that vocabulary is a key aspect in Second Language Acquisition; his research showed that vocabulary acquisition happens mainly through extensive reading and by guessing the meaning of the unknown words. Shahrokni (2009) stated a large portion of the vocabulary learned by first language learners is incidental in nature. According to him, it is generally acknowledged

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that a large percentage of second language learners gain more vocabulary through extensive reading and guessing the meaning of the unknown words. Incidental vocabulary learning is a process of learning vocabulary words unintentionally. It is also learning vocabulary from context with the intention to learn one thing while intending to learn another.

Moreover, Ramos Restrepo (2015) explained that incidental acquisition occurred mainly through extensive reading with a focus on meaning and form but also was dependent on variables such as the appropriate context surrounding each word, the nature of the learner's attention, and what kind of task required the reading. He claimed that to promote incidental vocabulary learning, English language learners need to be exposed to words in informative contexts. This exposure is promoted by reading and enhanced through expanding the use of multiple-choice gloss. Jacobs (1994) explained that a 'vocabulary gloss' can be defined as a short definition or an explanation of the meaning of a word; glossing provides definitions or explanations of difficult words within context.

Yoshii (2013) looked into the two primary types of vocabulary glosses: (1) single translation gloss and (2) multiple-choice gloss. He explained that single translation glosses are glosses with one definition and multiple-choice glosses have more than one meaning where the readers have to choose the meaning that fits the context where the word appears. The theoretical underpinning of multiple-choice glosses is the Load Hypothesis. The theory states that learners can learn vocabulary words when they are involved in lexical information processes; multiple glosses create more involvement of learners than single translation glosses (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001). They also noted that inferences and hypothesis-testing of word meaning lead to better word retention.

To further explain the different types of glosses, researchers looked into Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) gloss and non-CALL gloss. Kost, Foss, and Lenzini (1999) compared three types on non-CALL glosses, which are text-only, picture only (both are single glosses), and text-and-picture gloss. Text only and picture only are single translation glosses while text and picture gloss is a multiple choice gloss. They claimed that the text-and-picture gloss is the most effective of the three types which is supported by the Load Hypothesis. The CALL gloss uses a computerized and interactive

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program. Through different investigations, Shahrokni (2009) concluded that students who worked with multimedia programs were able to retain vocabulary words better than the ones who used non-CALL gloss. His studies furthermore reported the positive role of multiples-choice glosses and CALL glosses in improving incidental vocabulary learning. He explained that combination glosses of textual and pictorial are more beneficial for English learners due to the fact that they receive two modes of input.

C. Technology Use in the Instruction of Adult ELLs

Technology can be used in the instruction of adult ELLs to facilitate English language acquisition. Cummins, Brown & Sayers (2007) noted that integrating technology in the classroom may offer more flexibility in learning than formal programs. An increase in flexibility often results in an opportunity for language and literacy learning. Many schools have started using computers, laptops, Smartphones, or tablets in the classroom to enhance academic performance. However, the introduction of recent forms of technology in adult ELL education has not been widely embraced. One of the obstacles to incorporation of technology is the educators' concern with the complexities of its integration into the classroom. Other barriers are the assumptions that adult English learners do not have access to computers or internet connection.

Zickur and Smith (2012) reported that according to the Pew Internet Project, the people who own Smartphone are young adults, minorities, those without a college degree, and those with low social economic status. Thus, adult English learners have the access and know how to use Smartphones. With this access to technology, educators can utilize this access to incorporate technology in the classroom. As for the age factor, Brown (2007) pointed out that older learners use their metalinguistic knowledge, memory strategies, problem-solving skills; they make the most of the second language learning. Garrett (1991) suggested that technology should be used to support the methods and approaches that the instructors normally use in the classroom and the learning outcome should dictate what technology is appropriate, not the other way around. With this statement in mind, McClanahan (2014) presented a few of the technologies that can be used to enhance foreign language learning:

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- (1) Laptop, Desktop, or tablet computer and portable projector; the instructor can share what appears on the screen with the class. The instructors can also generate documents like grammar explanations, practice exercises, quizzes, etc.
- (2) Interactive Whiteboards; they encourage adult ELLs to interact with language on the display in various ways. They can use interactive pens to highlight, virtual keyboards to type letters, words, sentences, and use the click-and-drag function to allow learners to manipulate words and phrases. The students' written work can be filed and then retrieved. There are also memory games and customized game templates that can be played on the smartboard.
- (3) Websites; numerous websites are designed specifically for the needs of the adult English learners (e.g.: <http://soundsofspeech.uiowa.edu/#> is a pronunciation practice web page, www.manythings.org is a vocabulary and grammar exercises, www.wordle.net is a word cloud base which generates words based on their frequency, and www.youtube.com has various free video resources that can provide visual support for authentic language input and to explore many different topics, etc.
- (4) Smartphones; they are a digital tool that can be used for language learning which the students are very familiar with and are available to them. Adult ELLs can use their smartphones to communicate with their teachers using various apps, take pictures and make videos for a project, record their voice or interviews with each other, etc. Using the learners' smartphones in the classroom constitutes a valuable means to connect ELs with each other.

Nisbet and Austin (2012) further presented some applications or apps that can enhance vocabulary learning such as dictionaries, thesauruses, translators, whiteboards, interactive quizzes, flashcards, and books. Nisbet and Austin chose these apps based on their high utility for promoting vocabulary learning, affordability, quality, and ease to use.

- (1) Dictionary Apps; two popular apps that can take place of many reference books are dictionary.com—dictionary and thesaurus—and TheFreeDictionary which contains dictionary, thesaurus, acronyms, abbreviations, idioms, an encyclopedia, and literature reference library.
- (2) Translation Apps; these apps can be useful for English learners who have limited English proficiency and have an immediate need to communicate in English. The apps are Google Translate which offers free 70 languages text translations and 40 translations spoken aloud and a Translator with Speech which translates text into 72 languages and pronounces the translation.
- (3) The English LaunchPad App; this app contains 700 flashcards with pictures in 20 categories covering various topics, flashcards for 51 irregular verbs, and 900 questions on grammar structures. There are additional tools such as an electronic whiteboard, quiz generator, and an electronic file for sending lesson plans to students.
- (4) The Clear Speech App; this app is based on the Cambridge University Press designed to help English learners improve their listening skills and refine pronunciation. It contains interactive listening games with 10 level of difficulty.

Bangun - Curriculum and Instructional Strategies for Teaching Adult English Learners

- (5) The Idioms App; This app introduces students to the top 100 most frequently used idioms by native English speakers.
- (6) The iTooch TOEFL Prep App; this app is a prep app available only for iPhone or iPad users. It is designed to help students prepare for the Test of English as Foreign Language (TOEFL). The questions address speaking, listening, reading, and writing.
- (7) The Learn American English-Free Word Power App; this app is designed to engage students in learning vocabulary and correct spoken English grammar. Adult ELLs can view vocabulary words, hear a native speaker pronounce them, and record his or her voice and compare the pronunciation with the native English speakers.

To maximize the integration of such technology, an adult education program must implement planning, train their educators, and provide technical support to maintain and optimize the use of the technology. Training and planning are indispensable to the successful implementation of technology in an adult. Adult ELL programs that incorporate technology in their programs offer adult English language learners the opportunity to build their language, work, and life skills beyond just generating classroom success.

Implications

Adult immigrants living in the U.S.A need and want to learn English for various reasons. A curriculum, and its instructional content, needs to be designed to meet the language learning, professional, and/or personal needs of adult ELLs. Administrators and educators can work together in designing a curriculum and its instructional content by placing the needs of the adult English learners in the center and encouraging the engagement of ELLs in the curriculum design. A learning curriculum incorporates a student-driven pedagogy where the purpose of the curriculum is to meet the academic needs and help the English learner to be able to assimilate into the community they live in (i.e., EL civics needs) and to be able to contribute to their own welfare.

In order to be able to achieve the desired outcomes, an adult English program should have the following characteristics: clearly stated philosophy and approach of the program, goals, a clearly defined audience, high expectations evident, address a sufficient number of objectives or learning outcomes, foster a community of learners and a climate of respect, align with district curriculum standards,

Bangun - Curriculum and Instructional Strategies for Teaching Adult English Learners

vocabulary and content based instruction that goes from broad to specific, integrated content and language, build background knowledge, and have a spiraling of vocabulary and content. Additionally, the reading and writing should display how the curriculum addresses reading and writing, the nature of the instructional model, completeness of presentation, and adequacy of practice, the listening and speaking/oral language development should demonstrate the adequacy of how the curriculum address oral language development, completeness of presentation, adequacy of practice, and how the program address pronunciation, the grammar should display the presentation of structures, appropriate sequencing, adequacy of drills and practice, the assessment should assess students' prior knowledge and readiness, and be related to the instruction, the instruction of skills should provide scaffolding, include higher levels of thinking skills, include guided practice, varied and challenging, include controlled and free practice, and provide explicit instruction of learning strategies. Another criterion to consider is that the appearance of the materials should be culturally respectful.

Aside from the program design, some instructional content that is most effective in yielding the desired outcomes of English learners is needed. Three instructional contents are promising in helping the success of English learning: real life materials and authentic activities, vocabulary instruction for Adult English language learners, and the integration of technology in the classroom.

Conclusion

Adult English language learners who enroll in ELL programs generally do not persist very long in the programs to make the transition for further education or to be ready career-wise. This statement is particularly troubling because most adult English learners have low English proficiency skills prior to their education. As a result, they struggle economically and socially where English is the dominant language and where jobs with decent pay usually require a fairly certain level of education and English proficiency skills. On the other hand, there are some adult English language learners who persist in the English programs and advance to higher levels of English proficiency and succeed in work and in higher education. The challenge that adult ELL educators face is to make the adult ELL program work better for

Bangun - Curriculum and Instructional Strategies for Teaching Adult English Learners

the language learners to not only retain them in the program but also to help them achieve their personal, academic, and professional goals.

A range of strategies needs to be developed in adult English programs to improve students' outcomes including the emphasis on English language learners' aptitude to acquire a second language and curricula that emphasize practicing English in authentic situations and the academic, professional, and other specific needs of the language learners. In addition, these programs need high-intensity instruction which focuses on incidental vocabulary learning which would lead to the enhancement of reading and writing English proficiency skills, and extensive use of technology for learner instruction and teacher training in which to help the educators focus on implementing listening, pronunciation, reading, and grammar skills enrichment.

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Bangun - Curriculum and Instructional Strategies for Teaching Adult English Learners

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Bangun - Curriculum and Instructional Strategies for Teaching Adult English Learners

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