

ADULT EAL LEARNERS AND SHARABLE LEARNING SUPPLEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

Instructors of adult EAL learners face many challenges. Among them: the limitations of some prescribed teaching materials to inform and support our learners in their learning process. Many instructors therefore turn to free or inexpensive EAL learning supplements from online sources to round out lessons plans. Is reliance upon such resources always the best choice, and if we choose to use them, how can we effectively evaluate which resources we should use and how we should present them? The following article includes one instructor's synthesized thoughts and evaluative questions concerning these issues.

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In the jungle of sharable English as an Additional Language (EAL) learning supplements available online, should an instructor of adult EAL students use such supplements—and if we choose to, how can we more effectively and meaningfully do so? After years of wrestling with these questions, I would like to put forth practical considerations and suggestions from my own professional growth to help fellow instructors develop and refine answers for their own unique teaching situation(s).¹

¹ The author is not affiliated with nor receiving benefits to recommend any ESL website or curriculum source. Any specific resources mentioned are purely drawn from the author's personal experience as examples of application.

TO USE OR NOT TO USE?

Whether the source is printed or digital, most EAL instructors find supplemental materials helpful at one time or another. However, while most text series still include some connected supplemental resources in an instructor package, and we are all capable of creating our own supplemental items and activities, we also face the continual choice about wide use of sharable resources created by others—especially from the vast sea of inexpensive or free files available on the Internet. For some instructors, the choice about the use of these items is fairly automatic and painless. Yet, it is good for us to pause and consider why we are choosing to draw from those resources to help our adult learners further practice and apply what they are learning. To this end, there are several advantages and disadvantages to relying on these materials while we plan.

Beyond the obvious reason that many busy instructors need to save time in lesson planning and curriculum design, there are several other perks when using these types of resources. Some sites and handouts provide solid, additional guided practice for students who need more support. Similarly, review of what was learned is crucial, especially for adult EAL learners, and sometimes a printed worksheet is just the thing to help learners make the jump from a textbook's explanation to real application. Beyond these factors, however, we can consider advantages in terms of specific learner needs. Some of our introverted adult learners may feel more at ease or even have more fun learning if they are able to go through a supplemental activity on their own or with a tutor/partner. Likewise, choosing supplemental activities that represent a variety of activity types for different learning styles is an easy and, often, efficient

way to make sure students from each learning style have their needs met. All of these advantages can serve to help lower the affective filters of adult learners across a given class.

Yet, there are a number of disadvantages for instructors to consider before we come to rely on those sharable learning supplements. Again, I start with the point of our most valuable resource: time. While pre-made materials can save us a lot of time if we “get lucky” in a search or we know of a go-to site, searching for the right or best resource to support a lesson often distracts us or eats up time we need to devote to other tasks or people. In addition, it is common to search in frustration without being able to find a resource that really fits the language level or content reflected in the needs of our adult learners. We also may find good basic resources that have little to no basis for broader application; we don’t want to do busy work just to say we’ve done something, and we want to use supplements as well as texts that will lead our students to some broader use of the language they are learning—and how independently they can think about or use that language.

If the useful resources we find aren’t free ones, we may have limited budgets to use toward paying for use of such materials, and even smaller use fees can add up over time. We can also become dependent on the resources put forth by other people in a way that hampers our own sense of creativity in curriculum development. (Some would argue that seeing the ideas of others may actually inspire us, but it is all too easy to either get stuck in a group-think rut or simply fall back to all-out laziness in our attitude about this matter.) Finally, many of the great sharable learning supplements freely available to us online, especially at beginning literacy or EAL levels, are designed for young children. The presentation style or type of proposed practice may cause adult learners to feel like babies if we use such resources directly.

SUGGESTIONS FOR SELECTION, USE, AND PRESENTATION

If and when we do decide to use sharable learning supplements as a part of in-class or after-class activities, there are several further considerations to note. Many of the following thoughts and questions have sprung out of my recent work in a community-based ESL tutoring program where we work with adult learners from various language levels as well as a few children. As the months went by, we seemed to be following the same pattern every week, and while routine is beneficial for multiple reasons, I wanted to insert more variety in warm-up activities with the whole group. Yet, due to the demands of my main job, I began to seek out more creative supplemental resources I could print out or otherwise prepare to use for that volunteer-based evening program. I learned, by doing so, to concretize some of the aforementioned advantages and disadvantages.

I have also been developing a kind of mental checklist to quickly assess whether or not I think an online supplement has merit for use with a group of adult learners. Running through this checklist when screening activities has saved me time in both searching for an appropriate supplement and planning the exact way I will use it in the following week's class. I invite you to use these lists of questions (and customize them by adding or changing questions) according to your own setting when choosing new supplements—or if you want, to go back and evaluate supplements you have been using for some time.

Material Selection

We may hear about or stumble upon individual resources or whole collections of supplemental resources. Or we may have a colleague share a resource with us after they developed or discovered it. In either case, how will we know if it is a good, usable resource for

our particular adult learners? And if we have multiple supplemental resources to choose from, how do we choose the best one?

- First and foremost, is this copy write-protected? Does it specifically say on the site that the materials (at least the part I want to use) are legally allowed to be copied/shared?
- Does it cost anything to access or use this resource? If so, am I prepared to pay whatever fee the developer has listed?
- What is the overall age level and style of visual appeal? How might adult learners from different backgrounds perceive the layout and any pictures or illustrations included? Are there any parts of the activity that specifically refer to the learners as kids?
- Is this material or the included activity intuitive enough for learners to understand if they need to continue or complete it independently after class?
- Is the material or the included activity both helping to fulfill at least one learning objective of my lesson while also providing my students with meaningful/useful content?

Material Use

Once we have chosen one or more supplemental resources we might use, what are some best practices for moving toward using those resources? These may also vary, given our individual teaching situations.

- Does this absolutely need to be printed or can I present it another way? If it does need to be printed and copied, do I really need a copy for every student? (If I do, that's fine, but it's always nice to think about making "green" choices and keeping institutional or personal costs down.)
- Will I use the resource exactly as it is? Or will I modify it in any way (language level, graphic design, layout, content, or learning styles addressed) before I present it to my own learners (while still giving credit to the original supplement creators, of course)?
- Whether dealing with the original resource or a modified form for my own learners, when I look at what I plan to present to the class, what type of a first impression do I think this material will leave on my learners?

Material Presentation

Asking that final question about material use will help us to predict what types of things we may need or want to say or do when presenting the materials or activity in the classroom. Of course, this can be tricky when we are first getting to know a group of learners; however, as we look back on previous teaching experiences and learn more about our current learners, we may be able to foresee questions, anxiety sources, or other challenges that can spring up in a learner's mind as we bring in a supplemental piece—especially if it is a type of activity our learners have not done before. Here are a few final questions I ask myself either while polishing a lesson plan or actually presenting the supplemental materials, sometimes adjusting my input or instructions mid-stream based on learner reactions.

- How will I present this to my learners and how will I ask them to use or apply it?
- Will I tell them directly how this will help them and why it is useful? If so, how will I say those things in an understandable way?
- Whether or not I tell them about the direct purpose for using this material, will *they* see it as useful, not just for the moment but connected to content or communication they can use more broadly afterward?
- A final check for me: am I using this material as a cop-out for not planning meaningfully or as busy work to fill a gap of time that could be more effectively used? If so, is there any way I need to further modify the material, activity, or presentation before or during class so that it is more purposeful for my learners?

APPLICATION

Here is an example of the outcome when I applied some of the above questions to the previously-mentioned context. After some searching, I rediscovered a website I had used in other contexts: *Breaking English News* (<https://breakingnewsenglish.com/>). The site adapts

international news stories so that students from a variety of language levels (what they label as 0-6) can read the stories. I skimmed numerous options to make sure the topics would be interesting and useful for our students, the content would not be offensive to them, and the language used was set at an appropriate level. I noticed that our students would need Level 3 adaptations for some stories but could go up to Levels 4 or 5 based on their probable background knowledge on different topics. Then I printed out a series of different articles and created discussion questions, vocabulary discovery exercises, and other activities that could accompany the reading of each article. As tutors worked with students using these articles and follow-up activities, they were able to focus in on key areas of improvement as their assigned students needed. All in all, the articles, especially the stories with a humorous tone, were well-accepted and stimulating.

CONCLUSION

I am certainly continuing to grow as an instructor. Some days, I use sharable learning supplements to support my lessons and everything fits together smoothly and wonderfully. Other days, the selection and use of materials are not really what they should be, or presentation of a supplemental activity flops and students do not engage meaningfully with some aspect of the materials. Still, the above considerations have helped me mature in this area of teaching adults, and I hope the thoughts shared will be useful to you as well.

THE AUTHOR

Kaylene Powell is currently an Assistant Professor and the ESL Program Director at Bellevue University in Bellevue, NE. Previously, she taught EFL to students (of many ages and levels) and mentored NESTs and NNESTs in Mainland China for more than eight years, developed two sets of intensive EFL curricula, and further refined her ESL teaching skills via several teaching positions in the greater Omaha area. She holds a M.A. in TESOL from Wheaton College, and she is MIDTESOL's present Nebraska Member-at-Large. In her spare time, Kaylene is a ESL tutor and tutor mentor, an "angel" with Soldier's Angels, an author, and an artist.