

ENGLISH OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM: EQUIPPING LEARNERS FOR REAL-LIFE INTERACTIONS

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Abstract

Many teachers of English language learners in Adult Ed contexts—especially at beginning levels—have observed that their students use English infrequently outside the classroom. Factors contributing to this issue are discussed, namely, affective factors and size of the L1 community to which learners belong. Strategies are presented which teachers can utilize to help students overcome these obstacles and use English more effectively in their daily lives. These include needs assessment and goal setting, formulating an “idea checklist,” creating lessons to prepare students for real life tasks, and providing accountability.

INTRODUCTION

Despite living in communities where English is the dominant language, many adult ELLs struggle to use English beyond the confines of their ESL classroom. Below, the author will highlight two non-linguistic factors that may contribute to this problem and will present four specific strategies which teachers can employ in their classes. These insights are drawn from the author’s experience in noncredit ESL programs in the Midwest teaching adult English language learners at beginning to low intermediate proficiency levels. Although these suggestions may resonate most with teachers in similar contexts, instructors in other settings may also find them applicable (with some adaptation) to their own teaching contexts.

OBSTACLES

Teachers in Adult Ed ESL contexts may assume that their students will have ample opportunity to use English in their daily lives since it is the dominant language in the community where they live and work. However, upon closer scrutiny, teachers may discover that some learners (particularly at beginning levels) use English very little in their daily lives. Although linguistic skill deficiencies may contribute to students' hesitancy to use English outside the classroom (i.e., they haven't yet acquired the necessary grammatical structures and vocabulary to successfully carry out a given task or interaction), there are other important barriers to consider. The following nonlinguistic factors represent two of the obstacles that may inhibit students' use of English in daily life.

Affective factors

Nonlinguistic factors such as willingness to take risks, self-confidence, and language anxiety are commonly referred to as part of the affective domain of language learning. Arnold and Brown (1999) have defined *affect* as "aspects of emotion, feeling, mood, or attitude which condition behavior." Before students can achieve proficiency in a language, they need to develop the communicative confidence to be willing to take risks (Clément, Baker, & MacIntire, 2003). Some of the affective factors which have the potential to hinder learners' success include low self-confidence, an underestimation of their abilities, or fear of failure or ridicule. Rubio-Alcalá (2017) has stated that "probably no other affective factors exert so much influence in the FL classroom as self-esteem and anxiety do" (p. 198). Learners who struggle with affective barriers need targeted strategies to help them identify and manage their fears and anxiety, lower inhibition, and increase self-esteem and willingness to take risks to allow them to experience successful English interactions outside the classroom.

L1 Community

Perhaps the most significant factor influencing how frequently learners will use English outside the classroom is the size of the first language community to which they belong. While students in a small L1 community (perhaps just family members and a few friends) are forced to use English on a daily basis at work and around town, learners who belong to a large L1 community may have less opportunity to practice English outside the classroom. This is due to the fact that their L1 may be predominantly spoken at their workplace, interpreters are readily available to assist them at doctors' offices, and many stores and services in the community are owned and operated by members of the L1 community. The availability of these resources in students' first language drastically reduces the likelihood that they will encounter daily situations in which they are required to speak English. For these students, a creative and intentional approach is needed to encourage English use outside the classroom.

STRATEGIES FOR TEACHERS

The following are four strategies which have been utilized by the author to help students use English confidently and proactively in their daily lives. The teacher's objective in the following activities should be to set the learner up for success outside the classroom. If students identify specific places in the community where they can practice English and learn exactly what to say when they get there, they are much more likely to take the risk to use English in new contexts. Once learners have experienced one successful interaction, they will have the confidence to attempt a slightly more challenging encounter, and each subsequent success will build upon the previous experience, increasing confidence and willingness to take risks in the process.

Needs assessment and goal setting

Needs assessment and goal setting are important tools which can help learners identify how they need and want to be able to use English in daily life contexts. A student questionnaire can be designed as a way for learners to state what functions they can already perform in English (e.g., order meat at the deli counter of the grocery store, make a deposit at the bank) as well as what they are not yet able to do (e.g., talk to their child’s teacher at parent/teacher conferences, set up a medical appointment over the phone). Real life tasks are listed on the questionnaire and students then check either “I can do this” or “I can’t do this yet.” Depending on the focus of the course, teachers can list tasks within a specific language skill area (e.g., speaking) or multiple skill areas. All tasks should be based on contexts and situations students are likely to encounter in their everyday lives.

Table 1

Example Needs Assessment Items*

	I can do this	I can’t do this yet
Ask for help finding something at the store		
Understand a radio program or podcast		
Understand an email from my child’s teacher		
Send a text message to my landlord		

* For lower proficiency levels, the questionnaire should be provided in students’ L1 or be accompanied by a picture or graphic.

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The needs assessment process can transition seamlessly to a goal setting activity as students are asked to prioritize the tasks they most wish to be able to accomplish in English.

They can then reformulate these tasks as goals at the bottom of their questionnaire.

Table 2

Goal Setting Activity

It is important to keep in mind that goal setting may be an unfamiliar concept for some learners. Many students will benefit from this simplified process starting with a list of options to choose from. To follow up this activity, learners (with guidance from the teacher) may choose an appropriate timeframe for achieving their goals such as “by the end of this year” or “by the end of this class.”

Not only are needs assessment and goal setting helpful exercises for students, but these activities also provide valuable information to the teacher about students’ perceived communicative needs and relevant target contexts, and by extension, which topics merit class instruction time.

English outside class idea checklist

An idea checklist is another tool that teachers can create to provide suggestions for real life tasks appropriate to learners’ proficiency level. It is important to consider what opportunities

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are available in students' communities (e.g., bank, doctor's office, grocery store, library, etc.) as well as the tasks students selected during their goal setting activity. Some examples could include:

- Make a deposit or withdrawal at the bank
- Email your child's teacher
- Talk to an English-speaking coworker on your lunch break
- Buy stamps at the post office
- Ask a librarian to help you find a book, magazine, or video at the library

Creating specific, achievable tasks will decrease the likelihood of students becoming overwhelmed. A variety of difficulty levels should be included on the checklist so students can begin with something that feels easy and gradually work their way up to more challenging tasks.

The idea checklist provides learners with a gentle nudge to move outside their normal routine and comfort zone to use English beyond the classroom, while providing specific ideas for how they can do this. The author has used this activity in several adult ESL classes with considerable success, and many students enjoy the challenge of checking one of the items off their list each week and reporting back to the teacher and the class about what they did.

Real world lessons

Designing lessons focused on the vocabulary and grammatical structures needed to accomplish a specific task will help learners feel prepared to take on the challenge of an unfamiliar situation. By selecting tasks that have been identified as relevant and useful during the needs assessment and goal setting phase, there is a greater likelihood that student motivation will be high.

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For beginning levels, it is important to distill vocabulary and grammar down to a very few vocabulary items and a couple versatile language chunks rather than overwhelming students with a long list of options. For example, when preparing learners to ask for help at the grocery store, the teacher might provide five vocabulary items she expects will be both new and useful for students (e.g., paper towels, canned vegetables, baking aisle), and one phrase they can plug the words into such as, *Excuse me, I'm looking for the ___*. The goal in these lessons is not to prepare students for every possible way they might need to use English in a given situation, but rather to set them up for success with one very specific, simple interaction.

A picture dictionary such as the *Word by Word Picture Dictionary* (Molinsky & Bliss, 2007) can be a helpful tool for identifying relevant vocabulary. For example, students can choose five new, useful vocabulary items from the *grocery store* section and write them on an index card with the corresponding word in their L1 on the flip side of the card for study at home.

Lessons focused on real-life tasks can be incorporated into the existing syllabus, and in some cases will only require a short segment of class time. Whenever possible, students should be given the opportunity to practice the interaction in class using a dialogue or roleplay activity. For example, students can be divided into pairs where one is designated the store employee and the other plays the customer. The “customer” will use the phrase that has just been taught (*Excuse me, I'm looking for the ___*) and the “employee” will provide a response which can be more or less scripted, depending on the student’s level of proficiency (*It's in aisle ___*). Lessons should always be followed up with an assignment to carry out the task in real life, as will be discussed in the next section.

Accountability

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Especially if students are not accustomed to using English frequently in their daily lives, accountability will be needed to ensure that they follow through with task assignments.

Accountability can either take the form of assigning a point value to tasks and/or requiring students to report back on their experience (e.g., in a class/small group discussion, dialogue journal, activity report form, etc.). It is important to choose a very simple task for the first assignment (perhaps even one that seems too easy) to increase the likelihood of a positive experience. If students feel that the first interaction was successful, they will be motivated to share about it with their teacher and/or classmates and more willing to attempt a more challenging task. If one or more students do not feel that the experience was successful, this provides an opportunity for classmates to encourage each other with related personal anecdotes and helpful suggestions. The teacher can then provide additional practice with vocabulary and forms in class along with roleplay activities and subsequently assign another related task.

Teachers should provide either oral or written feedback to students following the completion of each assignment to validate their effort. Since these assignments may take learners outside their natural comfort zone, it is important for feedback to be primarily positive in nature and point out specific ways the student is progressing in confidence and willingness to take risks as well as linguistically.

CONCLUSION

By identifying the challenges that prevent learners from using English outside the classroom and implementing effective strategies to prepare them for real life tasks, teachers can equip their students to seek out opportunities to use English in daily life interactions. By using these strategies, teachers will set learners up for success outside the classroom and will help students build confidence in the process.

THE AUTHOR

Bethany Anderson has been teaching English to adults in Iowa and Illinois for over twelve years in various community college, nonprofit, and workplace settings. She recently received her MA in TESOL from Azusa Pacific University and is currently designing private English courses which will be offered online. She and her family live in West Liberty, Iowa.

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