

ADULT ESL AND LITERACY: ISSUES AND OPTIONS

Heide Spruck Wrigley

Introduction

In this paper, I would like to put forward a number of issues for us to think about and discuss. At the same time, I argue for a better articulated system that more closely matches the needs and goals of various sub-groups of English language learners.

Central Thesis: Adult ESL programs serve diverse immigrant populations with different needs and goals. A One-Size-Fits-All approach limits the effectiveness of services and “cheats” groups at either end of the educational spectrum – those without literacy in their native language at one end and those with higher levels of education in their native country at the other. If we adapt and vary adult ESL services to differentiate instructional programs according to literacy needs and previous schooling experience, we will have a more educationally sound system.

Considering Educational Backgrounds

More than any other factor, educational background influences the rate of progress an adult immigrant is able to make in learning English and developing the literacy skills necessary to succeed and thrive in a print-rich culture. Educational background tends to be more important than culture, age or learning style when it comes to the acquisition of English literacy, although for individual students these other factors may still play a prominent role.

Given the importance of educational background in both the speed and length of acquisition, it makes sense to develop a set of programs that accelerates learning for those who have strong literacy skills and create another set for non-readers or beginning readers in their own language. Programs are likely to be counterproductive when they use the same model of instruction for adults who are already literate as for those who are new to literacy and have not learned to read and write in their home language or in English.

The current dominant model places students by level of English proficiency and puts all students new to English in the same beginning class regardless of whether they know how to read and write. This practice generally puts both the already strongly literate and the weakly literate at a disadvantage. Those who tend to lose out the most are those who need education the most, that is, the students who struggle to make sense of even simple texts, because they never had the chance to develop the foundation skills necessary to gain information from print or express their ideas in written English.

Developing specific educational responses for each group and differentiating the system so it speaks to literacy backgrounds and needs can be the first step in developing instructional services that move different groups toward success more quickly and more effectively.

Meeting the needs of students who have sound schooling in their native country

A more differentiated system will allow us to accelerate learning for those who might be able to transfer knowledge from one language to another, although they will still need support in socio-cultural adjustment and understanding how systems work in the new culture. The need for specialized programs is especially strong in countries such as Canada that admit relatively high numbers of foreign-trained professionals as immigrants and are concerned about upgrading the English abilities of skilled workers.

Students with education are likely to benefit from approaches that:

- Focus on English for specific purposes
- Highlight sub-technical or pre-academic vocabulary
- Provide assistance in recertification and create new professional pathways

Models that Show Promise

Welcome Back Centers

Both Canada and the US recognize the importance of creating pathways for internationally trained doctors and nurses, so they can work again in their chosen professions. Some Welcome Back Centers in the US offer intensive accelerated ESL instruction for foreign-born health care professionals to help them transfer training from their native country. The Welcome Back Center in Rhode Island provides case management and supportive group counseling along with English for special purposes for those professionals.

Meeting the needs of students who have had few years of formal schooling

The system we envision would pay special attention to the educational needs of those who lacked opportunities for formal schooling enjoyed by their more advantaged peers. Those who have only gone to school for a few years – or in some cases not at all – are not likely to have strong literacy skills in their native language and cannot be expected to “pick up” English literacy without a great deal of additional support. A new system can help meet the dual needs of this group: the need for basic literacy skills and the need to fill educational gaps by acquiring the background knowledge generally learned in high school.

Students without much schooling in their native country need basic literacy - both in their native language and in English - before they can be expected to advance in their English studies or have access to the wide range of services and opportunities that all require literacy. Much of the current system assumes that students in adult ESL classes are able to pick up written English as they learn oral English. For example, many teachers/tutors may introduce words and sentences or present ideas orally but then quickly move to writing key phrases on the board and quite often ask students to use worksheets or textbooks to reinforce language. Low-literate students often struggle to make sense of what's written on the board or in the book; for those who have never learned to read and write, the scribbles on a page have no meaning and might as well be decorations. People who don't have phonemic awareness, a sense of sound/symbol

relationships or decoding skills in their native language, are bound to struggle in programs that take these basic literacy skills for granted. Yet students will often see their inability to succeed in formal studies as a personal failure rather than a failure of the system to meet their educational needs.

For students who struggle with basic literacy in any language, introducing literacy in a language that students understand, rather than in a language they are still trying to learn makes a great deal of sense. Given the idiosyncrasies of English spelling and pronunciation, particularly in the case of every day high-frequency words (head/heat; daughter/laughter; rough/cough), introducing literacy through words and examples that students are familiar with can provide a measure of success early on and help students persist. Expecting students to deal with the dual challenges of learning the meaning of new words and phrases at the same time as trying to understand the relationship between the sounds of a new language and the symbols on the page can be too much of a challenge even for those highly motivated. Introducing literacy in their native language can facilitate this challenge. Of course, this approach is most easily implemented in classes where students and the teacher all speak the same language, but community workers who share the language of the students can be trained to work with small groups and help non-literate students develop basic literacy. In some cases, literacy materials from their native country can be adapted.

Students from languages where the writing system differs from English, either because a non-Roman alphabet is used (Russian, Korean or Greek) or because the language uses a logo-graphic system such as Chinese or Japanese often face challenges learning to read English as well. Yet, if these students have strong literacy skills in their own language, they tend to transfer underlying concepts of how print works fairly easily, and reading skills in English often develop quite rapidly after an initial learning period, although spelling problems may remain. The evidence that many students with education from their native country are able to make good progress further supports the precept that “you only need to learn to read one time” – that is, once students have grasped the concept that oral language can be represented in print, and that text on a page represents ideas, reading development tends to advance along a regular path. However, if learners have not yet developed the skills related to processing print (alphabets, phonological processing, fluency and comprehension) or learned to “break the code” that allows them to decipher print, recognize words, and gain meaning from written texts, they are likely to face ongoing reading difficulties even if their conversational skills as their general level of English improves. A more responsive system would offer instruction geared specifically to the needs of those learners who are non-literate or low-literate in the native tongue.

Although I advocate for classes or small group instruction that focus on literacy foundation skills for adults, I do not support a rigid model of literacy development such as the one that underlies so many textbooks. Many of these models start with learning the alphabet, move toward practice in building phonemic awareness, then focus on sound and letter correspondences (short vowels, long vowels) and emphasize decoding skills long before introducing high-frequency or high-interest words that are phonologically irregular. In such a model, several weeks may pass before students are encouraged to spend time trying to make meaning even from simple texts, such as familiar signs and announcements (grocery flyers, for example), family names, or short sentences that speak to the experiences of immigrant adults (My name is Awa. I am from Somalia.). I support models that, from the beginning, use high frequency words that are part of the students’ lives (names, signs, and labels) and then draw the students’

attention to regular patterns common to these words. Showing students how to break words into smaller parts may also be worthwhile (Ca-na-da; A-me-ri-ca). Through this approach students become familiar with sight words as well as with the rules that drive phonologically regular words.

Models that Show Promise

New York City has an extensive network of BENL (Basic Education in the Native Language) classes that are also designed to foster the acquisition of English literacy skills.

A number of cities across the US also offer the GED in Spanish since many employers want to see a GED as proof of educational attainment and check for the requisite English skills during an employment interview. The Mexican Council (part of the Consular Services of Mexico) makes free Spanish literacy materials for adults available to programs that want to set up classes.

Some programs in Seattle use bilingual community workers to support the different language groups in the classroom and to build literacy skills on an as needed basis. Students work in pairs or small groups with others who speak the same language using the bilingual staff person as a resource. The ESL teachers may not use any of the languages of the students but they have learned to move back and forth between teaching in basic English and setting up small group work in which the native language is used for literacy development.

Youth LINC (Bow Valley College, Calgary, AB)

This is a program for immigrant youth with 3 to 10 years of education in their first country. Students aged 18-24 work on all four strands (listening, speaking, listening, reading and writing) as well as numeracy skills and come to the program with a minimum of a Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB)² in listening and speaking, and CLB Phase II Developing or higher in reading and writing.

Implications for Assessment

(see also <http://www.centreforliteracy.qc.ca/whatsnew/sli2008/Assessment.ppt>)

- Assess literacy in the native language as well as literacy in L2
- Separate assessment of oral proficiency in English from assessment of reading and writing skills in English
- Assess for both functional literacy and environmental print that can be understood using experience and background knowledge

Matching Educational Responses to Learner Goals

Just as adult immigrants and refugees differ in their educational backgrounds, they differ in their goals. This must be taken into account if we expect students to persist in their studies and if, as a society, we want them to be able to fulfill their potential, thrive and participate fully in both civic and academic life. Differentiating the system by learner goals allows us to streamline the system by focusing on what adults need to know and be able to do to reach a particular milestone that moves them in that direction.

Again, it does not seem rational for students to persist in a system that places adults who come to programs for social reasons or personal enrichment in the same programs as those who are highly motivated to learn the English they need to find employment, advance at work or get a better job. Similarly, those who need English to enter a training program that will provide them with the skills they need to get a job that pays a living wage are not likely to be well-served in classes that focus on life skills such as shopping and holidays. While newcomers or beginning English language learners (whether they are L1 literate or not) may still need basic English and can benefit from insights into the day-to-day culture of the new country, those who have at least high beginning levels of English are better served in programs that take their employment and training goals into account and respond directly to their need for employment-related English and literacy.

Work-based Classes

Work-based classes can be offered in regular ESL programs as well as at work sites and can be funded by public dollars, employers, unions or collaborations between those entities. Of particular promise are programs (few and far between unfortunately) that combine job skills training with English language and literacy education since they provide an accelerated route to work and better pay. They stand in contrast to the currently prevalent models that expect adults who need work-based English to complete a series of ESL courses before they are considered ready for occupational skills training. Experience has shown that immigrants who start as beginning ESL students seldom have the resources to persist between one or two additional levels of ESL and often leave programs far below the proficiency levels that training providers demand as a prerequisite for access to job skills training.

A new system, that integrates ESL services with occupational training designed to help immigrants acquire the skills they need for jobs that can help support a family, is likely to benefit individuals, their families and society as well. In doing so, we prevent less skilled immigrants from slipping into a permanent underclass. We also take advantage of “human capital” through the professional experience that more educated immigrants bring to the table if they are matched with the right training program. Foreign-born professionals might not be the only group to benefit. Programs that combine language and literacy education with job skills training can be designed for both of the groups we have been discussing – those with little education and little English and those with stronger academic backgrounds but still struggling with the new language. Examples of existing programs include models that offer hands-on training or bilingual vocational training for workers preparing for jobs in trades such as licensed vocational nursing, construction, welding and high tech manufacturing as well as those that offer training,

re-certification and counseling for foreign-born professionals who want to acquire new credentials or to set out on different pathways to new professional careers.

Models that Show Promise

Center for Employment Training

The Center for Employment and Training in San Jose, CA, assists hard to serve clients, including those with minimal English skills. Their success is based on hands-on training where tasks and job functions are demonstrated and practiced. Trainers work in teams and help others understand difficult theoretical concepts that need to be mastered for certification. The CET offers a continuous and variable time frame that allows students to study and train until they have achieved the requisite competencies to meet certification requirements. More advanced students move through the program faster; others can take the time needed to acquire them. This approach reduces the sense of failure that students in fixed-time models face in Community College when they do not pass a class and need to retake an entire course.

Bilingual Vocational Programs for the Hmong, Wisconsin

Wisconsin provides re-settlement services to refugees, including the Hmong, a pre-literate tribe from the mountains of Laos. The state supports high quality and culturally cohesive services, which include bilingual vocational training, bilingual job development and post-placement follow-ups. Mutual Assistance Associates provide new employment and training services and other services to youth, victims of violence and those with mental health problems. The assistance agencies through their bilingual staff also work with the Hmong leadership and within the traditional family structures.

Motivation, Education and Training in El Paso, Texas

The main objective of the Motivation, Education, and Training (MET) Construction Program is to prepare former farm workers for jobs with a promising future economically. The MET Program is designed to help the farm workers acquire job skills, as well as math, literacy and vocational English skills necessary for their workplace. Instruction also includes important technological skills such as document reading to help in interpreting blue prints. Adults training in the program build an actual (though temporary) house in the parking lot of the community college. The on-the-job supervisors are generally mono-lingual English speakers while the farm workers are all Spanish speakers, so students get experience hearing and speaking English as they complete tasks and solve problems.

Texas Industry Specific Cluster Curriculum

In response to the high interest in work-related ESL for high beginning and intermediate level classes and recognizing the demand for trained workers, the Texas state legislature has funded the development of a set of industry specific curricula for health care, manufacturing, and sales and service. The program is meant to be integrated into adult ESL programs that serve high beginning-to-intermediate level students interested in specific careers. The target population is students who have less than a high school education from their native country and still have difficulties with English. The model includes a set of scenario-based modules that ask students to engage with and respond to critical incidents that might occur in work situations. These discussions allow teachers to gain insight into what students believe and help them make connections between what students think is important and the expectation of the US workplace.

George Brown College (Toronto, ON) Career and Work Counselor program for internationally educated professionals

This program is specifically designed to prepare internationally trained individuals to bridge into their field, capitalizing on their previous education, experience and language capacities. It includes four months of specialized English language instruction designed for ESL students in this program; job placement that allows students to gain Canadian experience; and integration into the college's regular Career and Work Counselor program, so students graduate with the same education, diploma and professional certifications.

George Brown College also has programs for college teachers, computer programmers, construction managers and early childhood educators.

Corporate Readiness Training Program, Bow Valley College, Calgary AB

This program prepares foreign-trained professionals such as engineers, accountants, and geologists to enter the corporate workplace. The curriculum has evolved from its roots in ESL language training to more of an Essential Skills/literacy focus. Despite their credentials, some of the learners score at the lower levels on the TOWES (Test of Workplace Essential Skills). Nevertheless, their level of prior education and the workplace focus of the Essential Skills and the assessment have helped learners better understand the demands of the office environment and make rapid progress. Over 90% are working in their fields six months after the end of the training.

Community ESL

Certainly, not all immigrants and refugees have employment as their goal, and a focus on work and employment should not drive the entire system. We need to establish and maintain programs for parents who need the kind of English that will help them support the education of their children and teach them how to advocate for their children in school systems that are not always responsive to immigrant families. Similarly, there should be educational opportunities for those who want and need English to talk with their neighbors, get involved in community affairs or take on the powers that be to make a better life for themselves and their communities. Programs for the elderly and the home-bound can help support those who are often left out, and classes for those who simply love learning and are fascinated by a new language and culture should be considered as well.

Models that Show Promise

Bridge - Bow Valley College, Calgary, AB

This is a program offered to ESL literacy learners 18 to 25 years old and usually recruited from high school ESL classes. These learners are refugees or new immigrants whose formal schooling interrupted in their homeland. In the program, students learn reading, writing, computer and numeracy skills, and are also taught life skills, in a course called BELLS, Building Essential Life and Literacy Skills. Students are encouraged to take responsibility for and reflect on their learning by setting academic goals and monitoring their progress using a portfolio. This program prepares students for Basic Education and High School upgrading. Bridge has an in-program Student Advisor and Multicultural Support Worker who offer personalized support to students.

Abbotsford Community Services, Abbotsford, BC

This community centre offers settlement services including local provision of the free province-wide English Language Service for Adults (ESLA) program. In addition to providing language classes it also provides support services for Abbotsford's immigrant community, including employment mentoring, legal advocacy, and a 'host' program that matches up newcomers to volunteer hosts.

Transition from ESL to Academic Programs

As “good jobs” increasingly demand college degrees, special consideration needs to be given to those with slightly higher levels of proficiency who are ready to transition to adult basic education or GED programs and whose goal is to enter and succeed in academic programs in community colleges and universities. There is a need to create bridge programs and transitional services as well as counseling (and in some cases financial) support to help students move across systems particularly to make it possible for low income adults to access and succeed in higher education, including vocational programs. Such models may require collaboration between educational communities who receive incentives for working with diverse groups of students along with the common goal of helping immigrant youth and adults succeed academically.

Models that Show Promise

I-BEST

One of the most recognized programs in the US focused on helping immigrants transition from ESL to training and/or academic work is the I-BEST model in Washington State. Students who participate in I-BEST attend courses that are team taught by an ESL instructor and an occupational skills instructor. The skills instructor teaches subject matter knowledge (e.g. nursing, construction) and the ESL instructor provides support by rephrasing and highlighting key vocabulary, presenting ideas in the form of a graphic organizer or simply checking for understanding. The model is being implemented throughout the state and focuses on in-demand occupations determined through a needs assessment with employers. It includes ongoing rigorous data collection to document program strengths and weaknesses, so appropriate changes can be made in a timely way. The program is supported by state and federal funds.

ESL and Basic Education - Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology

This program provides eligible immigrants with LINC (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada) instruction. At the end of that instruction an exit interview is conducted to ascertain what pathway would be best for the student: academic study, further language training, or employment. The program also follows up with students to check on their progress. For those who need further language training to get into an academic program, SIAST has the English for Post-Secondary Success program, using Canadian Language Benchmarks testing to assess the student’s language level.

Conclusion

Efforts to change the system and create separate pathways for different groups of immigrants will not happen without investment and planning on all levels - program, state or province and federal - and without focused attention to the specific needs and goals of each subgroup.

Creating a better articulated and more focused system will require more resources, but much time and effort is currently wasted in an undifferentiated system that purports to be all things to all people, yet does not serve any given group as well as it could.

Bibliography

Burt, M. (2004). *Issues with Outcomes in Workplace ESL Programs*. Washington, DC: National Center for ESL Literacy Education.

Condelli, L. and Wrigley, Heide Spruck (In press) What Works Study: Instruction, Literacy and language learning for Adult ESL Literacy Students. In S. Reder and J. Bynner (Eds.). *Tracking Adult Literacy and Numeracy Skills: Findings from Longitudinal Research*. London & New York: Routledge.

Condelli, L. and Wrigley, Heide Spruck (2007) Instruction, language and Literacy: What Works Study for Adult ESL Literacy Students. In I. van de Craats, Jeanne Kurvers & Martha Young Scholten (Eds.). *Low Educated Adult Second Language and Literacy Acquisition: Proceedings of the Inaugural Symposium - Tilburg 05*. Utrecht, Netherlands: LOT

Duncan, David, Poisson, Yves, and Wong, Winnie. (2008, Jan.) *Improving Bridging Programs*. Ottawa, ON: Public Policy Forum.

Duke, A-E., Martinson, K. & Strawn, J. (2006, April). *Wising Up: How Government Can Partner with Business to Increase Skills and Advance Low-Wage Workers*. Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy.

Gillespie, Marilyn K. (1995). *Native Language Literacy Instruction for Adults: Patterns, Issues and Promises*. Philadelphia, PA: National Center on Adult Literacy.

Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees. (2003). *Newcomers in the American Workplace: Improving Employment Outcomes for Low-Wage Immigrants and Refugees*. Sebastopol, CA: Author.

Huerta-Macias, A. G. (2003). Meeting the Challenge of Adult Education: A Bilingual Approach to Literacy and Career Development. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 47, 3:2-18-226.

Jurmo, P. (2004, November). Workplace Literacy Education: Definitions, Purposes, and Approaches, *Focus on Basics*, 7: 1-9. <http://www.nesall.net/index.php?id=629>

Moore, R. (1999). Empowering the ESL Worker within the New Work Order, *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 43,(2): 142-151.

Workforce Strategy Center. (2003, January). *Building Bridges to College and Careers: Contextualized Basic Skills Programs at Community Colleges*. NY: Author.

Wrigley, Heide Spruck (2008). Capturing What Counts: Language and Literacy Assessment for Bilingual Adults. *Adult Biliteracy: Sociocultural and Programmatic Responses*. (Klaudia M. Rivera and Ana Huerta-Macias eds). New York, NY, Lawrence: Erlbaum Associates.

Wrigley, Heide Spruck (2007). Beyond the Life Boat: Improving Language, Citizenship and Training Services for Immigrants and Refugees. *Toward Defining and Improving Quality in Adult Basic Education: Issues and Challenges* (Alisa Belzer ed). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum Publishing.

Wrigley, Heide Spruck (2004). We are the World: Serving Language Minority Adults in Family Literacy Programs, *Handbook on Family Literacy* (B. Wasik ed.) New York, N.Y: Erlbaum Publishing.

Wrigley, H. S., Richer, E., Martinson, K., Kubo, H., & Strawn, J.(2003, August). *The Language of Opportunity: Expanding Employment Prospects for Adults with Limited English Skills*. Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy.

Wrigley, Heide Spruck (2000). *Assessing Ongoing Progress: Are We Progressing?* In D. Holt and C. Van Duzer (Eds.), *Assessing Success in Family Literacy and Adult ESL* (pp. 63-95). Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.

Wrigley, Heide Spruck, and Guth, Gloria (1993). *Bringing Literacy to Life. A Handbook for Practitioners in Adult ESL Literacy*; San Mateo, CA: Aguirre International.