

Building Skills and Expertise for Working with Struggling Adult English Language Learners

An Action Research Project Summary Report

Overview

While most English language learners make expected progress, there are some for whom second language and literacy acquisition is extremely difficult. *Building Skills and Expertise for Working with Struggling Adult English Language Learners* builds on the Calgary Immigrant Women's Association's work to support adult English language learners experiencing learning difficulties, whatever the reason. Even within an ESL Literacy class where all learners are developing literacy skills as adults, learners acquire language and literacy acquisition at different rates. The question this project sought to answer was, "What will help struggling ESL Literacy learners succeed in their learning journeys?"

Research Design

Over two years, a LINC teacher and a community-based ESL Literacy teacher collaborated with learning support services to find ways to address unmet literacy needs with learners making limited gains over time. Teacher-researchers selected reading and writing outcomes found in *Learning for Life: An ESL Literacy Curriculum Framework* (Bow Valley College, 2011) and drew on adult ESL Literacy, early childhood literacy, and learning disabilities research for strategies that would support identified struggling learners make gains on these outcomes.

Teacher researchers kept track of their teaching experiences by journaling, making note of teaching strategies used and how learners they identified as having the most difficulty responded to this targeted instruction. Learners included in the research had 0-7 years of formal schooling in the first language. Additionally, they were making limited gains compared with their peers. All learners attended part-time classes: 12 hours a week for LINC classes and six hours a week for those in ESL Literacy classes.

By the end of the project, teacher researchers identified strategies they found to be the most critical in their work with adult ESL Literacy learners, particularly those experiencing the most difficulty developing literacy skills.

Lessons Learned

Key lessons

The teacher-researchers in this project increased their knowledge of best practices in literacy instruction and language acquisition, deepened their understanding of emergent reading, and developed a repertoire of effective strategies to help struggling learners in the classroom.

Outcomes-focus guides strategic instruction and increases learning.

- Focusing on specific outcomes from the ESL Literacy Framework, regardless of the theme taught in the classroom, resulted in more targeted instruction and greater learner success on those outcomes. For example, the reading outcome *Interpreting Lists and Tables* was taught and reviewed every day through calendars, then recycled through themes such as back to school (reading school supply prices from a chart) and used in classroom applications such as attendance charts. The chosen outcomes guided lesson planning across themes. This resulted in learners revisiting the outcomes in various contexts and solidifying their skills.

Some outcomes were more easily taught than others.

- Teacher-researchers saw greater exit scores for all learners in certain chosen outcomes than for others. *Filling out Forms* proved to be an outcome in which all learners improved significantly for several reasons. First, the learners were anxious to learn their personal information, being aware of their need to use this skill in their daily lives in the context of medical appointments, their children's schools and looking for work. Second, even learners with no print literacy skills could practice their personal information orally. Finally, this outcome lent itself very well to repetition in many different contexts. Each theme provided opportunity to fill in forms linked to real life situations such as visiting a doctor's office, applying for a job, registering for children's programs, etc.

- In contrast, learner exit benchmarks were lower for *Following Instructions*. This was a difficult outcome to teach effectively to low-literacy learners, possibly because they often did not see this as applicable in their daily lives. Oral learners appeared to be much more comfortable learning by listening to the teacher's directions and then working through the steps than they were following print-text instructions. Finding real-life written instructions that were level appropriate was difficult. From an instructional point of view, teaching the vocabulary needed for *Following Instructions* with print-text was difficult as the outcome is abstract or conceptual, as opposed to learning vocabulary that learners can connect to a specific object or image.

Oral language supports literacy acquisition.

- Learners' oral language skills correlated with their decoding and reading skills. While a detailed analysis of learners' oral skills was beyond the scope of this project, teacher-researchers observed that learners who improved their oral language vocabulary were more successful in improving their reading ability. Research in the fields of adult literacy and reading instruction suggests that oral skills are essential for both literacy development (Vinogradov & Bigelow, 2010) and for emergent reading (Young-Scholten & Strom, 2006). Learners acquired new vocabulary more successfully when the language was introduced and practiced orally using realia and realistic images. Once learners were familiar with the vocabulary, instruction could move on to phonemic awareness skills such as identifying first and last sounds, as well as decoding skills.

Reflective practice supports teaching.

- Regular reflection on classroom experiences can increase teacher satisfaction and improve teaching practice. By committing time for regular reflection on challenges and successes in the class, teacher-researchers found they were more motivated to seek answers to their challenges and to put research discoveries into practice in the classroom.

Useful teaching strategies

Teacher researchers recommend these strategies to support all ESL Literacy learners, including those making limited progress:

Repetition – Spiralling – Scaffolding: Revisit the same language and theme in many different ways such as flashcards, games, word rings. As mastery increases, you can extend the activities to add challenge.

Kinesthetic Learning: A variety of movement-based activities will help learners who learn best kinaesthetically, but will also provide new and unique ways to work with the material for all learners to reinforce their learning. Examples: air writing, Simon Says, flashcards, varied medium, games, Total Physical Response

Stress Reduction for Learners: Stress affects focus, ability to learn new tasks and retention. Stress reduction improves learning and creates a positive classroom atmosphere. Examples include breathing exercises, simple exercises in class, providing information and access to support services.

Use of realia: Real objects are much more effective and recognizable than representations. Learners connect the items to their everyday lives and are motivated to understand the language on the items. Examples: medicine bottles, receipts, labels, signs, play money, grocery items.

Real-world tasks: Working on actual tasks that learners need to complete in their lives increases motivation and builds competency. Examples: writing and sending letters, reading signs on field trips, and calling Calgary Transit to find out bus times.

Oral language first: Learners can focus on meaning in connection to the real objects or to the photos. All learners can participate regardless of reading ability. Oral mastery leads into phonemic awareness, phonics activities, and reading skills.

Realistic colour images: Reduces the cognitive load for learners and allows learners to focus on learning the vocabulary and literacy skills in the classroom. Consistent use of the same photos in a variety of activities is essential.

Connect learning to life: Tie learning to real, everyday experience to make learning meaningful and concrete. Building upon needs expressed by the learners is motivating. Examples: Language Experience stories, filling out forms for doctor's appointments, field trips where learners use vocabulary and learned skills.

Differentiate instruction: Students with different abilities and learning needs can work at their level and pace. The use picture flashcards, blank picture books, and teacher-made texts at varied levels of difficulty can facilitate this.

Recommendation and Implications

While all learners involved in this project made observable gains, work on the project raises further questions about supporting ESL Literacy learners, particularly those who experience the most difficulty. Questions include: How do we measure incremental literacy development for ESL Literacy learners? How do we ensure our instruction starts at the right place for all ESL Literacy learners, *especially for those with learning differences*? How do attendance, years of prior schooling, program design and responsiveness and programming type correlate to learners' language and literacy skills development?

Conclusion

Growing ESL Literacy research, reading difficulties and learning disabilities research, as well as emergent literacy research proved to be invaluable to researchers looking for ways to target instruction to the needs of individual adult ESL Literacy learners. After working with the research and the ESL Literacy Curriculum Framework, teachers are better able to identify and address learning needs. Teacher-researchers presented two related sessions at TESL Canada and have presented in-house presentations and workshops within the language training department.

Works Cited

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- Vinogradov, P., & Bigelow, M. (2010, August). *Using Oral Language Skills to Build on the Emerging Literacy of Adult English Language Learners*. Retrieved from CAELA Network Briefs: <http://www.cal.org/caelanetwork/resources/using-oral-language-skills.html>
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