ABSTRACT
        After a brief literature review, this paper examines
the problem of defining literacy. It emphasizes the importance of
using a flexible definition based on learners' needs and goals in
social contexts in determining the goals of literacy instruction. In
order to illustrate the wide variation in not only students' levels
of English-language proficiency but also in their experience with
literacy, different types of learners who may attend adult English
literacy programs are described. An overview is provided of the types
of programs available to immigrants in the United States, as well as
some of the obstacles that may discourage adults from participating
in these programs. Finally, the paper discusses a number of
learner-centered approaches to English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL)
literacy instruction that have been used for helping limited English
proficient adults acquire skills that will empower them socially,
politically, educationally, and economically. It is concluded that
literacy educators must continue to investigate and use approaches
that utilize teacher/learner collaboration. (Contains 30 references.)
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Adult ESL Literacy Education in the United States:

Developing a Learner-Centered Approach

by

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Introduction

Illiteracy complicates the lives of many limited English proficient (LEP) adults when living in highly literate contexts, such as the U.S.. North American society operates on the premise that most of its members can read and write. Many adult immigrants and refugees to the U.S., however, cannot read or write. Immigrants and refugees may be monolingual speakers of their native languages who are literate in the native language, but lack proficiency in English. In other cases, immigrants may be speakers of a language which lacks a written code, and so they may not have needed to know how to read or write until coming to the United States. Others may never have had the opportunity to develop literacy or strong language skills in either the native language or English. Some have never attended school, or have only attained a very minimal level of basic education in their home countries. Some nonnative-speaking adults who have been in the U.S. for some time still lack literacy skills in English due to shortcomings of U.S. public schools, which have concentrated primarily on oral English skills and have neglected to adequately teach reading and writing (Garza & Orum, 1982).

For members of the U.S. immigrant and refugee
population, a lack of literacy skills, in addition to a
limited command of spoken English, can create numerous
difficulties and may limit their participation in many
areas of society. A study done by the U.S. Census
Bureau in 1982 reported the illiteracy rate to be 9%
for adults whose native language is English and 48% for
those whose native language is not English (Haverson,
1986). The survey identified various factors as
potential risks contributing to illiteracy, including
education, immigration status, lack of English
proficiency, race, age, and poverty. This creates a
cycle: while factors such as poverty, and a lack of
English skills and basic education contribute to higher
levels of illiteracy, illiteracy hampers individuals'
ability to escape the marginal existence of many LEP
people in the U.S. and to determine the direction of
their own lives.

Since literacy is a very complicated and
controversial issue, this paper will first examine the
problem of defining literacy and will emphasize the
importance of utilizing a flexible definition of
literacy based on learners' needs and goals in social
contexts in determining the goals of literacy

instruction. The second section of the paper will describe different types of learners who may attend adult English literacy programs so as to illustrate the wide variation in not only students' levels of English-language proficiency but also in their experience with literacy. This section will also provide an overview of the types of programs that are available to immigrants in the U.S. as well as some of the obstacles that may discourage adults from participating in these programs. Finally, a number of learner-centered approaches that have been taken to English as a second language (ESL) literacy instruction as means by which LEP adults may be enabled to acquire skills that may empower them socially, politically, educationally, and economically will be discussed.

Defining Literacy

For a long time, literacy was defined according to the number of grade levels in school that a student had completed (Cook, 1977). More recent definitions have focused on adults' need to function within a specific social context (Cervero, 1985). From this point of view, "literacy is not something that can be measured in an absolute sense, such as body weight, but rather

in a relative sense" (p. 50). UNESCO followed similar
logic in the adoption of its definition of illiteracy
in 1978, which reads: "A person is functionally
illiterate who cannot engage in all those activities in
which literacy is required for effective functioning of
his group and community and also for enabling him to
continue to use reading, writing and calculation for
his own and the community's development" (Lestage,
1982, p. 5).

While definitions that focus on learners' needs,
and frequently those of the larger community as well,
represent the current view of many teachers and
researchers who are concerned with literacy-related
issues regarding the purpose of literacy instruction,
there are others who would like to settle on a common
definition of literacy. Such a floating, relative
definition of illiteracy as that adopted by UNESCO may
not be specific enough to guide the efforts of those
charged with specifying goals, content and evaluation
guidelines for literacy programs. However, because of
the pluralism of American values, we can't assume that
there exists a set of values that is shared by all
people. People in different contexts have different

values, and so effective functioning in each context
requires different skills. As a result, the definition
of literacy within a given context would have to be
dependent on the values of those who choose to define
it.

While the larger society may consider a person who
cannot read or write as one unable to function
effectively in society, Fingeret (1983) found that
"many illiterate adults see themselves as
interdependent; they contribute a range of skills and
knowledge other than reading and writing to their
networks" (pp. 133-134). Fingeret suggests that we
think of nonreading adults as members of primarily oral
subcultures, rather than as "nonfunctioning members of
the dominant literate culture" (Fingeret, 1989, p. 11).
She states that members of oral subcultures value
spending time with others, sharing information, and
providing mutual assistance. Nonreading adults may,
for example, offer help with child care or assistance
in fixing a car in return for help with reading and
writing tasks. Through this mutually beneficial
exchange, many illiterate adults see themselves as
contributing members of their communities. From this

perspective, the development of literacy skills, even for one learner, can be seen as part of a larger social process.

While certain groups would be served by agreement upon a common definition of literacy, such as federal and state governments, textbook companies, and standardized test producers, a common definition might limit the options available to learners. In the best interest of these learners, it may be best to promote a flexible definition of literacy, the specifics of which should be determined by the learners themselves, together with educators who have elected to assist them in reaching their goals, and according to needs present within their social contexts. Otherwise, it is questionable as to whose interests are being served (Cervero, 1985).

The Learners, The Opportunities, and The Obstacles

The Learners

There are many types of LEP adults enrolled in literacy education programs in the U.S. who choose to acquire literacy for any number of reasons, among them the need to conduct business, to help children with their education, to get a GED certificate, to become a

citizen or a permanent resident, or to acquire a better job. According to Haverson and Haynes (1982), literacy learners can be grouped into four major categories: a) nonliterate; b) preliterate; c) semiliterate; or d) literate in a non-Roman alphabet. According to this categorization, a person who speaks a language that has a written form but cannot read or write it would be classified as nonliterate. A preliterate person is one who speaks a language for which there exists no written form. In other words, those who exist in a context where there are no written words cannot be said to lack literacy. The need of preliterates for literacy arises from a change in their need for literacy, either through an increase in the need for literacy in the environment in which they live or through relocation to a region in which the possession of literacy skills is an expectation for most residents. Semiliterates are learners who frequently have had minimal formal education and may possess limited literacy skills in the native language or additional languages. Finally, those who are literate in a non-Roman alphabet, such as Chinese, Lao, Arabic, etc., can read and write in their own language, but in order to achieve literacy in both

languages must learn a new set of symbols and possibly new sounds as well.

Of course LEP adult learners differ not only with regard to their experience with literacy, but also with regard to the types of classroom settings to which they have been exposed, if any. Also, there exist differences in the functions and uses of oral and written language in the learners' native-language cultures which may act in shaping learners' perceptions about their need for literacy in a second language, and may influence how the learning of second-language literacy is approached. In view of these differences, it becomes clear that addressing the various needs of such a diverse population is a challenging task which requires careful investigation of the cultural backgrounds and native-language abilities of learners as well as the demands that they are likely to encounter in the various types of interactions in which they will take part in U.S. society (Isserlis, 1990; Weinstein, 1984).

Opportunities For Literacy Instruction

For LEP adults living in the U.S., most ESL and literacy instruction takes place through local adult

basic education (ABE) programs, which can be found in settings such as public schools, community colleges, vocational/technical schools, and adult education centers. Other programs, funded primarily through refugee resettlement funds, may be operated by social service agencies, churches, and other community organizations. In addition, since the passage in 1986 of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), which established procedures by which undocumented immigrants who had lived in the U.S. continuously since before January 1, 1982 could become legal residents of the U.S., a number of public and private institutions have been funded under the State Legalization Impact Assistance Grants (SLIAG) program to offer courses to adults seeking to fulfill the educational requirements of the amnesty program. Programs such as those discussed here might include ESL, ABE, General Educational Development (GED) and parenting classes. In addition, consumer-oriented courses, such as tax preparation, are sometimes offered (Terdy & Spener, 1990).

Some adult education programs, particularly those located in areas with large language minority

communities (New York City and Los Angeles, for example) offer native language literacy instruction. The goal of most of these programs is bilingualism and biliteracy. Some require students to develop basic literacy skills in their native language before enrolling in ESL classes. In other programs, ESL and native language classes are taken at the same time, the ESL classes focusing on oral/aural proficiency while reading/writing skills are developed in the native language. Another option is to offer bilingual literacy classes, where students develop reading and writing skills simultaneously in their native language and English (Rivera, 1990).

Most adult education for language minority groups in the U.S., however, focuses on ESL, with little or no development of native language skills, though research evidence has indicated that skills and knowledge learned in the first language transfer to English (e.g. Cummins, 1983, 1986), and that when adults are taught to read in the language that they already know, the knowledge and skills they have acquired in the first language may facilitate the learning of reading in the second language (Rivera, 1988). Some programs

are not able to offer native language literacy
instruction for a number of reasons. One such reason
is that classes may be composed of students who speak a
number of native languages, making it economically
difficult to offer literacy classes in each language.
Other problems may include a shortage of native
language teaching and reading materials. Since many
languages lack written forms, print materials for
instruction in those languages are, for the most part,
unavailable. Also, it is frequently difficult or
impossible to find trained teachers who can read,
write, and speak students' native languages.

Dealing With Obstacles to Participation

According to the 1982 English Language Proficiency
Study, of the 17-20 million functionally illiterate
adults in the U.S., an estimated 7 million spoke a
language other than English in the home. However, a
survey of LEP student enrollment estimated that in
1986-87 only about 900,000 of these LEP adults were
enrolled in adult education programs (National
Clearinghouse on Literacy Education, 1991). With the
proliferation of literacy programs in the U.S.,
questions arise as to why the participation of LEP

adults in these programs should be so low. One
explanation is the high attrition rate in all U.S.
adult education programs. LEP adults, like all adult
learners, share a number of difficulties such as
problems related to child care, poverty, health, age,
low self-esteem, work, schedule, and transportation.
LEP students' problems, however, are compounded by
limited knowledge of the language and the culture of
the environment (Brod, 1990).

To encourage students to attend classes, and to
aid retention of students in the programs, programs
need to offer flexible class schedules and fund, or
provide access to, support services such as child-care,
health care, transportation and counseling. In
addition to these external factors, attention should be
given to appropriate placement of students in classes,
so that students will be neither bored nor discouraged
by instruction at too high or too low a level. For
example, the placement of literates and preliterates in
the same class may result in much time being devoted to
the preliterate students while little attention may be
devoted to the needs of the literates. In addition,
proper placement will help ensure that students make

progress towards their goals that is sufficient to
encourage them to continue to participate in classes.
Again, it is imperative that classroom instruction as
well as instructional materials be appropriate to the
needs and interests of the learners. Materials should
neither be too difficult or too simplistic for learners
nor should they lack relevance to learners' lives and
the goals which they seek to attain (Brod, 1990).

Approaches to Literacy Instruction

Literacy instruction in the U.S. has traditionally
been seen as a way of socializing students into a
number of roles in mainstream society (Fingeret, 1989).
While the focus of literacy education has changed
periodically to reflect changes in political and social
conditions in the U.S., the purposes and standards of
literacy, and the contents of the curriculum have been
consistently determined by "experts," students being
perceived as the "objects" of instruction. The norms
of the white, middle-class have provided the framework
upon which the goals of many of these programs have
been built, goals that have included not only the
teaching of literacy skills but the changing of
students' attitudes and cultures as well. Fingeret

states that, during the 1960's and 1970's, educators involved in adult basic education embraced the prevailing social science view that nonreading adults could be seen as "living in a state of psychological and economic poverty; they were seen as lacking the qualities of character as well as the skills necessary for social mobility or economic stability" (p. 7). When competency-based literacy education emerged in the 1970's, it seemed that students might finally be involved in defining the competencies that they wanted to achieve. However, even today, most competency-based programs judge students' skills by pre-determined list of skills which tend to reflect the goals that those in power have deemed appropriate for them. The following approaches to literacy instruction represent alternatives to traditional approaches, which have tended to be more teacher-centered. As a result, the importance of considering participants' reality in establishing goals and selecting materials and of involving learners in the educational planning process has not received adequate recognition. In the following discussion, the terms "teacher," "instructor," "educator," and "facilitator" will be

used interchangeably to refer to persons in the facilitator role.

The Language Experience/Whole Language Approaches

The language experience approach (LEA) to the teaching of reading is hardly a recent innovation. Forms of LEA have been considered basic recommended reading methodology and have been used in the U.S. for many years in mainstream educational settings (Stauffer, 1980). While LEA is not the name of a specific methodology and is practiced in many forms, LEA lessons usually proceed according to the following steps. The first step in the process involves a stimulus, an experience. The experience can be something created by the teacher and learners together or students' remembered experience. The teacher and students discuss the experience, thus generating vocabulary and ideas to be included in the written version. Students then dictate the story to the teacher, who records what is said, thus constructing the basic reading text. Students read the story many times until it is familiar. Since the story was generated by the learners, motivation to read it is high, and comprehension is almost guaranteed. Through

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the frequent discussion and reading of self-generated
texts, learners acquire oral language and learn to
recognize their words in print. In most cases,
individual story words are later reinforced through
other activities designed by the teacher. When
students have gained confidence and skill in the
reading of their own dictations, they then move on to
reading texts written by other authors, such as texts
produced by their classmates as well as commercially
published materials (Dixon & Nessel, 1983).

More recently, the term "whole language" has been
used to refer to holistic practices in the teaching of
reading and writing. Like LEA, the term "whole
language" doesn't name a specific methodology but a
paradigm that can be used in the development and
evaluation of teaching methods. A basic tenet of both
LEA and whole language is that literacy instruction
should involve the integration of reading and writing
activities centered on language and experiential
backgrounds of learners, and that facility in language
is acquired and refined through use (Altwerger,
Edelsky, & Flores, 1987; Goodman, 1986; Newman, 1985).

Holistic approaches, such as LEA and whole
language, offer a number of advantages for ESL
learners. One advantage is that reading, writing,
listening, and speaking skills are integrated.
Learning to read and write becomes an extension of the
language learning process. Also, because the topics
for discussion and the generation of texts are taken
from learners' experiences, both oral language skills
and literacy skills may be learned in a more meaningful
context, which may motivate students and reinforce
self-esteem. Finally, since LEA and whole language are
extremely flexible approaches, both can be modified in
a number of ways to accommodate learners' individual
needs.

While the use of LEA or whole language approaches
in the teaching of ESL literacy may be extremely
rewarding, they are also very time-consuming. Since
the use of these approaches requires an incredible
amount of individualized planning and instruction, they
place a great deal of responsibility on the teacher for
the management of the program. Also, approaches such
as LEA and whole language have been criticized for
their lack of vocabulary control or graded skill

development (Thonis, 1970). Nevertheless, even when
using a holistic approach, efforts can be taken to
structure lessons in such a way as to reinforce
vocabulary and reading skills. While many whole-
language teachers admit that they find the approach
more taxing on their creativity and time, they also
stress that the use of whole language rewards their
sense of professionalism in that "whole language
requires teachers to make decisions" (O'Neil, 1989, p.
7).

Participatory Literacy Education

Another interesting approach to literacy, which
has been referred to as a variant of whole language
(Spener, 1990), involves a curriculum development
process that is "participatory and is based on a
collaborative investigation of critical issues in
family or community life" (Auerbach, 1989, p. 177).
Brazilian educator Paolo Freire, who is credited with
the development of the participatory approach to adult
literacy education, sees literacy education as a
vehicle for social change. According to Freire, since
unjust social conditions are the cause of illiteracy,
basic education is necessary for learners to free

themselves from the conditions that oppress them
(Spener, 1990).

At the heart of participatory literacy education
is the notion that education is a highly political act,
and that it has traditionally been designed to meet the
needs of those in power. Literacy programs have been
used as means of transmitting or reproducing the
dominant culture and of providing workers whose skills
may serve the needs of the dominant culture (Auerbach,
1989; Freire, 1985; Handel and Goldsmith, 1989). The
positions of students in dominant and subordinant
classes have been reinforced, thus maintaining a
"culture of silence" (Freire, 1985, p. 50) among those
in subordinate classes. While traditionally educators
have been viewed as possessors of knowledge who "fill"
the heads of their learners with their words, Freire
takes the view that all individuals can be seen as
intellectuals since we have all participated in the
conception of history, of the world. Literacy, from
this point of view, is a way in which both learners and
teachers develop their way of thinking about reality.

Freire's approach provides guiding principles
which those involved in participatory literacy can use

to guide and evaluate their efforts. He emphasizes the importance of investigating the cultural contexts of the learners in order to collect "generative words" (Freire, 1985, p. 12). The collecting of generative words involves the identification of vocabulary which reflect meaningful themes in learners' lives. The generative words are should then be used as the basis for texts which will reflect the sociocultural point of view of the learners. Another use of the generative words is in the preparation of "discovery cards" (Spener, 1990, p. 2) in which each generative word is separated into component syllables. Learners use the cards to form other words by recombining the syllables. Freire also stresses the importance of using the generative words in realistic problem situations, such that learners are challenged to analyze and find answers for problematic situations that they encounter in their own lives. The issues that learners choose to focus on become the basis for their own content-based literacy curriculum.

Practitioners of participatory literacy in ESL contexts in the U.S. have questioned Freire's syllabary method in teaching work-attack skills. Since English

is much less phonetically and orthographically regular
than Spanish or Portuguese, the languages of
instruction in Freire's Latin American programs, there
has been a shift in ESL participatory literacy programs
towards the use of whole-word and text-focused methods.
Other programs have discontinued the use of generative
words altogether, preferring to use language experience
and whole language techniques developed for use with
English. Participatory ESL literacy programs in the
U.S. have, however, retained the two most distinctive
features of the Freirean approach, that of the
generation of texts through authentic dialogue between
equally knowing learners and educators, and the posing
of problems related to issues in participants' lives
(Spener, 1990).

Family and Intergenerational Literacy Programs

Family and intergenerational literacy approaches
to literacy share many of the same characteristics as
the approaches previously discussed. Both "Family
literacy" and "intergenerational literacy" are terms
used to refer to approaches which stress the importance
of cross-generational interaction between learners.

In the following discussion, only the term "family literacy" will be used.

Family literacy program models vary according to their goals. One goal of family literacy is to promote intergenerational transfer of literacy skills. Another goal of is for parents and children to become learners together in such a way that ideas and values of home and school can become integrated (Murphy, Viola, Love, & Martin, 1989). Some programs, unfortunately, take a kind of behavior modification approach to teach parents to imitate such behaviors that occur in the homes of "successful" readers. Several programs established with Even Start funding have been developed according to rather prescriptive goals such as "to 'give' parents of three and four year old children the knowledge, motivation, skill, and resources necessary to help their children" (Isserlis, 1990, p. 5). More innovative programs have attempted to design activities and curricula based on the specific needs of their participants. It has been noted that, whatever the approach, the most successful programs are those which make acknowledgement and exploration of both American

and native cultural values and practices an integral
part of the curriculum (Weinstein-Shr, 1990).

For most of these programs, "family" is loosely
defined. Not only parents are encouraged to
participate, but also grandparents or primary
caregivers. Most family literacy programs, like many
adult education programs, provide literacy and
parenting education for adults; however, programming
for adults is generally coordinated with programming
for children in order to provide parents with
opportunities for systematic parent/child interaction
involving literacy activities. A number of family
literacy programs have been established and include a
wide range of program models, many of which are
supported by federal funding through Title VII and
money allocated as a reusult of the passage of the Even
Start legislation and the Family Support Act of 1988.
The Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy,
private corporations, and others are additionally
responsible for funding family literacy programs
(Isserlis, 1990).

The Navajo Parent Child Reading Program (NPCR),
initiated in 1985 at Chinle Primary School on the

Navajo reservation, is an example of an innovative
family literacy program. The designers of NCPR began
with specific objectives, whizh were to "empower Navajo
parents by involving them in their children's literacy
development and, within the context of pleasurable
reading experiences at school and at home" (Murphy,
Viola, Love, & Martin, 1989, p. 2). To reinforce
Navajo culture as well as build home and school links
parents, grandparents, teachers and children work
together to generate and share texts based on
traditional Navajo stories. Since emphasis is placed
on the comprehension of story ideas, and not the actual
decoding of print, parents and children can enjoy the
stories together, regardless of the language used for
the sharing or whether either the parent or the child
can actually read the print on the pages.

Whereas most family literacy programs target both
adults and children both as direct beneficiaries of
instruction, some programs are more adult-oriented and
focus on building instruction around community and
family issues. The University of Massachusetts Family
Literacy Project (UMass Project) has utilized a
participatory approach to literacy which has involved

learners in investigating issues of immediate concern
to their lives, such as daycare, housing problems, and
AIDS. Students participating in the UMass Project have
utilized their developing reading and writing skills to
take an active role in addressing what they perceive as
problems for themselves and their families. This
activism has involved writing letters to the editor,
writing and presenting testimony for state funding
hearings, and writing articles and letters addressing
concerns about their children's schooling (Auerbach,
1989).

Conclusion

The approaches to adult ESL literacy instruction
that have been described here present alternatives that
are available to those challenged with helping LEP
adults achieve their literacy goals. Language
experience, whole language, participatory literacy, and
family/intergenerational literacy approaches offer
advantages over traditional approaches in that not only
are learners' experiences and values incorporated as
part of literacy instruction but also that learners are
more actively involved in determining the direction of
their instruction according to their own goals.

There is considerable overlap among these
approaches to literacy education, and for each approach
to be effective, a key element is the identification of
learner needs. Adult ESL/literacy learners have little
time to waste; therefore, teachers/facilitators must be
adept at helping learners to quickly identify their
learning objectives (Anderson, 1988). Participants may
have difficulty articulating what they need or want to
learn. Because of low self-esteem, a lack of self-
confidence, or as a result of having occupied a
marginalized position in society, learners may enter
the learning activity with preconceived ideas regarding
classroom roles of teachers and students. In addition,
because of the tendency to act on culturally-based
assumptions that differ from the learners' reality,
learning facilitators may have difficulty understanding
what learners really want. Since any of these factors
may create problems in the design or implementation of
a learner-based literacy program, it is vital that
literacy facilitators take steps to familiarize
themselves with the contexts of the participants' lives
outside the literacy classroom, both through dialogue
with participants themselves and by spending time

actually visiting and analyzing those contexts. By
gaining an awareness of participants' social, economic,
political, and cultural environment, facilitators may
be better able to hear what is often difficult for
learners to articulate and may more effectively help
learners meet the expectations that they have for their
learning.

All individuals living in the U.S. need to have
access to literacy instruction. An inability to
interact with print sources limits individuals' ability
to determine the direction of their own lives and that
of the society in which they live and participate.
Obviously this opportunity needs to be made available
to all, regardless of language background. For those
involved in the work of promoting literacy, it is
important to remember that literacy, like spoken
language, is used in specific social contexts. Any
definition of literacy must, therefore, take into
account the social setting in which the literacy is to
be used. Literacy educators must also be reminded that
the LEP adults who enroll in ESL literacy programs are
a heterogenous groups of persons with a range of
personality characteristics, skills, knowledge, and

aspirations that must be investigated and considered
when designing instructional programs for their use.
Furthermore, programs that provide literacy instruction
must work to deal with the numerous obstacles to
participation that stand in the way of many LEP adult
learners. Finally, and perhaps most importantly,
literacy educators must continue to investigate,
utilize, and promote approaches that utilize
yteacher/learner collaboration in order to achieve
individual and common goals. Through this sharing of
power, mutual learning may be facilitated through
cross-cultural communication and the value of both
teachers and learners as knowledgeable individuals,
equally worthy of respect, is acknowledged.

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