Promoting Learner Engagement When Working With Adult English Language Learners

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Background on Adult Learners

Adult education programs serve both native English speakers and learners whose first, or native, language is not English. Native English speakers attend adult basic education (ABE) classes to learn basic skills needed to improve their literacy levels; they attend adult secondary education (ASE) classes to earn high school equivalency certificates. Both ABE and ASE instruction help learners achieve other goals related to job, family, or further education. English language learners attend English as a second language (ESL), ABE, or workforce preparation classes to improve their oral and literacy skills in English and to achieve goals similar to those of native English speakers.

Audience for This Brief

This brief is written for experienced teachers working with adult English language learners and for program administrators and trainers seeking to help teachers engage learners in instruction.

Teachers of adults learning English often compete with many demands on learners' attention. Concerns about family, jobs, money, and transportation; fatigue; and negative past experiences with education are some of the factors that might inhibit an adult learner's full engagement in class. In a study of learner engagement in adult literacy programs, Beder, Tomkins, Medina, Riccioni, and Deng (2006) noted that engaged learners in K–12 settings have both the will and the ability to participate in and carry out work in class, and Schalge and Soga (2008) suggest that students' persistence in adult ESL classes may be related to their engagement in the class. Unlike students in K–12 programs, the vast majority of adult learners are voluntary participants in their learning, so the "motivation to engage is a cognitive disposition that learners bring with them when they enroll in adult literacy classes" (Beder et al. 2006, p. 119). The National Survey of Student Engagement, conducted annually among college students, described learner engagement in postsecondary settings as "active and collaborative learning, participation in challenging … and enriching educational experiences, and feeling legitimated and supported" by the learning community (Coates, 2007, p. 122; see also Connor, 2009).

This brief gives an overview of theory and research on learner engagement in language-learning settings, describes specific instructional strategies and program structures to promote the engagement of adults learning English, and makes recommendations for further research on learner engagement in this population.

Theories About and Research on Learner Engagement

Numerous educational theories include a focus on learner engagement. In Dewey's (1938) notion of experiential learning, learners are actively involved in the learning process; that is, they learn by doing. Freire (1970) insisted that learners' lives and issues must always be the content of literacy instruction. Vygotsky's (1978) notion of the zone of proximal development posited that when teachers structure learning opportunities at the appropriate level and with the right support, students become engaged in learning. Wenger (1998) described situated learning as an apprenticeship process that takes place within a community. Novice learners (in his case, teachers) learn by observing others, being coached and nurtured by more expert peers, and practicing what they have learned in a supportive environment. Related work by Wenger (2006) describes communities of practice or "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (p. 1). An adult ESL classroom can be viewed as a community of practice, where teachers and students learn from one another and all participants

are engaged (Taylor, Abasi, Pinsent-Johnson, & Evans, 2007; Warriner, 2010).

Recently, educators and researchers have focused on the importance of connecting instruction to learners' experiences and needs in order to promote engagement and learning. Condelli, Wrigley, and Yoon (2009) and Schwarzer (2009) express the need for teachers to engage learners by bringing the outside into the classroom. Adult learners use English when they watch TV; listen to music; participate in conversations with their children; and read signs, menus, memos, mail, email, recipes, newspapers, and magazines at home, work, and in the community. These materials can be used to facilitate learning in the classroom. Purcell-Gates, Degener, Jacobson, and Soler (2002) also found that adults were more likely to engage in literacy activities outside the classroom, such as reading the newspaper, using a bus schedule, and writing a letter to someone, when authentic texts were included in class. (See Jacobson, Degener, & Purcell-Gates, 2003, for practical teaching ideas on using a wide variety of authentic materials in instruction.) Weinstein (2002) recommended using teachers' and learners' stories as texts for classroom instruction, including for language-specific focus on grammatical structures and vocabulary.

Finally, researchers have studied the relationship between collaboration among learners and learning. A study of Japanese students in a noncredit ESL program in Canada found that students involved in collaborative peer–peer work received higher test scores than those working in pairs in which one partner dominated and the other did not participate equally (Watanabe & Swain, 2007). Smith, Harris, and Reder's (2005) study of pair work at the Portland Lab School found that when students collaborated in pairs on specific tasks, they tended to adapt the activities to the areas they wanted and needed to learn, so that one pair might focus on vocabulary and another on pronunciation (Harris, 2005). In addition, the researchers found that even students with minimal English skills were collaborating with one another in pairs as they negotiated language and turn taking to complete the tasks; however, when the instructor approached the pairs to check on progress, the learner-to-learner collaboration stopped as the students either asked the teacher questions about the task or an unrelated subject or performed for the teacher.

When instruction is planned with learners' needs and goals in mind, actively involves students in learning from one another, taps into their life experiences, and is challenging at learners' varying levels, learner engagement is likely to be strong, and learning is more apt to occur. Instructional approaches that can facilitate learner engagement include task-based learning, problem-based learning, project-based learning, literature circles, and classroom-based assessment. The next section describes each approach, gives examples of what each might look like in practice, and provides resources that practitioners can consult for further guidance.

Engaging Instructional Approaches

Task-Based Learning

Task has been defined in various ways in the language learning literature (Ellis, 2003), yet there is agreement among researchers that tasks that promote language learning (Ellis, 2000)

- Involve a real-world problem;
- Are authentic; that is, "designed to instigate the same kind of interactional processes, such as the negotiation of meaning, scaffolding, inferencing, and monitoring, that arise in naturally occurring language use" (Ellis, 2009, p. 227; see also Bachman, 1990);
- Are cognitively complex; that is, "are context-free (in the sense that the task does not provide context and support for communication) and involve considerable detail" (Ellis, 2000, p. 8)
- Require a two-way exchange of information, rather than a one-way exchange (i.e., both participants in the task seek, give, and receive information);
- Require interactive communication rather than simple description; and
- Lead to a specific outcome (e.g., a paper origami bird is made by one student following the instructions of another).

Tasks can be structured for an entire class, small groups, or pairs and can focus on listening, speaking, reading, writing, or an integration of skills. Ellis (2009) explained that tasks can be either focused or unfocused. In a focused task, learners use specific language (e.g., prepositions of place by giving directions to a partner, who draws items in a picture; "The vase is on the coffee

table"). In an unfocused task, learners use language for general communication (e.g., interview one another to get acquainted and report back to the class).

Example 1 shows how the task-based approach can be implemented through information gap activities (in which one partner has information that the other one doesn't have).

Resources: Larsen-Freeman (2003) and McKay and Tom (1999) provide examples of task-based activities.

Problem-Based Learning

Problem-based learning focuses on learning through solving real, open-ended problems to which there are no fixed solutions (Ertmer, Lehman, Park, Cramer, & Grove, 2003). Problems can be taken from real-life news stories, generated by students themselves, and developed from realia, such as brochures about emergency preparedness, flyers advertising housing opportunities, and reports from community meetings. Students work in pairs or groups to understand the problem and then to find possible solutions to it.

Recent research reviews indicate that problem-based learning can lead to long-term learning outcomes, whereas traditional instruction leads to slightly better performance on short-term learning as measured on standardized tests (Strobel & van Barneveld, 2009; Walker & Leary, 2009). Hmelo-Silver, Duncan, and Chinn (2007) cite evidence that problem-based learning is particularly effective in increasing engagement and reducing the achievement gap among marginalized groups in K–12 settings, including English language learners. Kirschner, Sweller, and Clark (2006) caution, however, that learners new to this instructional approach require more guidance (direct instruction) than do more experienced

learners. This caution should also be applied to learners with limited English language and literacy.

While there is no research on problem-based learning in adult ESL contexts, the evidence in K–12 and post-secondary education provides support for its use with adults learning English. (For additional information, see Abdullah, 1998, and Alan & Stoller, 2005.)

Problem-based learning is characterized by the following elements:

- The focus is on real-world problems that require critical thinking skills, collaboration with others, reflection, and application of solutions if possible (Savery, 2006).
- Students are responsible for their own involvement and learning.
- Teachers serve as facilitators of learning rather than knowledge providers.

The steps in carrying out a problem-solving activity include identifying the problem, exploring what is known and what is not known about it, generating possible solutions, considering the consequences of the different solutions, and selecting the most viable one (Mathews-Aydlini, 2006). Example 2 gives a specific exercise in which learners go through this process.

Resources: Teachers can use published instructional materials to identify and create problems for learners to work on. Cameron et al. (2002) and Educational Testing Service (2006) are helpful TOEFL and GED prepara-

tion materials for teachers seeking examples of problem-based activities for upper-level students. For instruction of beginning- and intermediate-level students, see Van Duzer and Burt (1999) and Senior Service America and Center for Applied Linguistics (2006).

Project-Based Learning

Project-based learning focuses on real-world problems, issues, and contexts (Alan & Stoller, 2005); promotes use of all four language modalities (listening, speaking, reading, and writing); and may include explicit focus on form. It is similar to problem-based learning in that it engages learners in authentic communication with team members and is learner-centered and teacher-facilitated. Completion of projects typically requires learners to use language in a variety of ways to collaborate on a plan, negotiate tasks, contribute ideas and constructive criticism, assess progress, and achieve consensus on various issues that are important to the learners' lives. Unlike problem-based learning, which focuses on discussing and solving a problem, project-based learning focuses on developing a product, such as a group presentation, class newspaper, or cookbook of recipes from each student's native culture (Starr, 2005). Other projects to use with adults learning English might include creating oral histories; designing books for children in the family; writing short plays, skits, or poetry; surveying students in the program (or the community) about an issue of interest or concern, analyzing the survey, displaying the data and using it for next steps; listing tips on how to apply to a local college or training program; or producing mock TV news broadcasts or talk shows, complete with commercials, focused on issues of personal significance or of significance in the community. When a project is designed for students to produce and practice English in ways they need to outside the classroom (e.g., participating on a team, repairing communication breakdowns), it provides a bridge to real-world communication (Bas, 2008). Example 3 shows two project-based activities that can be used with adults learning English.

Resources: Fried-Booth (1997) and Wrigley (1998) are helpful resources for planning project-based instruction in the classroom. For information about using digital stories with English language learners, see Rance-Roney (2008) and (2010). Also see her website at http://digitaljumpstarts.ning.com, where she outlines how to create digital stories using free software such as Photo Story 3.

Example 3. Project-Based Activities

Exploring U.S. Immigration Law

An adult ESL classroom project about U.S. immigration law might involve students interviewing each other about immigration experiences, writing about personal experiences, talking with experts on immigration, using the library and conducting research on the Internet, culminating in a classroom presentation on immigration law and the experiences of class members.

Creating Digital Stories

Digital storytelling (DS) involves using computer-based tools to tell stories (University of Houston, 2010) on a broad range of topics. As Iannotti (2005) noted, learners can work individually, with partners, or in small groups. In the process of creating their stories, learners have the opportunity to collaborate with one another and work on a topic of interest, perhaps drawing from personal experiences, while they hone their speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills in English and their technology skills.

Using DS in the adult ESL classroom requires teachers to have an in-depth understanding of the process by first creating their own digital stories. The teacher's story can then serve as a model for students. Digital stories are usually short, lasting 2–5 minutes, and include the following steps: (1) developing a storyboard to ensure the story flows well and has a beginning, middle, and end; (2) writing and recording the voice-over script to accompany the story, a step that is especially useful for learners' language development because students want their English to be comprehensible to a wide audience; and (3) searching for photos or background music to include in the story.

Integrating technology into instruction can be motivating and engaging for learners who desire to keep up with a fast changing world. Many of them, including those with minimal English skills, may have more technological skills than their teachers. These learners can help support others as they write their digital stories and thereby enhance collaboration in the classroom community of learning.

Literature Circles

Literature circles provide a venue for students to engage with one another while also interacting with texts of interest and importance to their lives. Originally developed by Harvey Daniels (1994), literature circles are similar to a book club, where readers can engage in lively discussions about what they have read.

A recent experimental design study showed that literature circles can have an impact on English language learners' reading comprehension as measured on standardized tests (McElvain, 2010). While this study was conducted with children, it seems likely that literature circles can be adapted for high-intermediate and advanced adults learning English. In McElvain's version of literature circles, groups of four to six students were formed based on the level of text they were reading. Students read silently in class for 15 minutes and spent the next 15 minutes responding to the text in a reading response log. During the final 15 minutes, students either participated in student-led book clubs by sharing from their reading response logs, or they worked on a collaborative book project. McElvain suggests that the most important aspect of literature circles is the "collaborative talk" about the reading that takes place among students throughout the activity as well as with the teacher, creating a "classroom literacy community" (p. 182; see also Mesa & Chang, in press). An additional finding from this study was that both teachers and learners reported increased engagement in reading and improved confidence to participate in class discussions.

Resources: For information about using literature circles in the classroom, see Geraci (2003) and Mizokawa and Hansen-Krening (2000).

Classroom-Based Assessment

Students who are learning are engaged in monitoring their learning progress, as are their teachers. Formative assessment, also called *assessment for learning* (Dainton, 2010), is an ongoing process that provides teachers and learners with details about what students have and have not yet learned from instruction. Involving learners in setting personal goals for learning and monitoring their progress are essential components in formative assessment (Looney, 2007). Evidence from research in K–12 settings indicates significant learning outcomes when students were engaged in tracking their own progress (Marzano, 2009). Formative assessment can show students that teachers want to understand what and how

they think rather than whether they know the correct answers. As a result, students may become empowered to think for themselves and take control of their own learning (Brookhart, Moss, & Long, 2008). Example 4 describes one use of classroom-based assessment.

Whereas formative assessment is an ongoing process that engages learners, is part of instruction, and lets learners monitor their progress, summative assessment reports on the outcomes of learning. Summative assessments often take the form of standardized tests that are used for accountability purposes. According to

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Example 4. Classroom-Based Assessment

As part of a class session, the teacher asks a series of questions that students are likely to encounter in their daily lives. Some of the questions might be drawn from the current theme of instruction (e.g., preparing for a job interview): What is your name? Where are you from? How long have you been in the United States? What languages do you speak? What is your experience with this type of job? Beginning-level students write short answers, and more advanced students write answers in complete sentences. The teacher collects the papers and then shows the students the questions soliciting answers from the class, allowing students to assess whether and to what extent their responses addressed the questions asked.

The written responses show the teacher how the students handled the questions and responses. At the beginning of the next class, the teacher uses the students' errors for a "correct the sentences" exercise on the board, and volunteers are invited to make the corrections. The teacher then uses some of the same questions, as well as some new ones, for a partner interview activity in which students practice asking and answering the questions with three or four different partners. Later in the class, the teacher repeats the activity, recycling some of the same questions that were used in the partner interviews. Since the teacher will have returned the corrected papers from the previous class, students can refer to the corrections if they need to. By revisiting and recycling these everyday English questions and answers in a variety of engaging ways, students have the opportunity to monitor their progress with asking and answering the questions.

research in K–12 settings, when formative assessments are aligned with standards, teachers structure the assessments effectively, and students clearly understand the evaluation criteria and are engaged in monitoring their own progress, learners can perform well on summative assessments as well (Leahy & Wiliam, 2009).

Resources: Resources on using formative assessment with adults learning English include Center for Applied Linguistics (2007) and National Center for Family Literacy and Center for Applied Linguistics (2008).

Program Structures That Support Learner Engagement

Teachers involved in promoting learner engagement need support from program administrators and professional development that engages and informs them.

Administrative Support

Administrators can support teachers in providing instruction that engages adult learners by affirming the value of creating a community of practice within the classroom in which learners can learn from one another. The process begins with conversations with learners about their goals for learning English during program intake and orientation, discussions that administrators should expect teachers to have with entering students.

A specific area that might be explored further by program administrators is formative assessment (Campbell & Tovar, 2006). Looney (2007) has noted that use of formative assessment in instruction has not been made explicit in policy; as long as it remains implicit, it is not likely to be practiced widely. Since research has shown that use of formative assessment in instruction can yield positive results, administrators should seek out information on formative assessment for themselves and provide support for teachers to deepen their understanding of how it can be used to engage learners and shape instructional decisions.

Professional Development for Teachers

Engagement in learning is likely as relevant to practitioners as it is to adults learning English. Professional development should be structured to engage teachers in identifying issues they care about in their practice and allow them to learn from one another. Novice teachers need extra support to learn what it means to provide engaging instruction. In their first year, new teachers should be mentored by more experienced colleagues. Experienced teachers might be challenged to take their instruction to the next level by joining or facilitating a study circle on a special topic or by conducting a teacher inquiry project in an area of interest. Teachers in a program might take up a problem- or project-based approach to professional development by working together on a project. If the technology is available, an entire staff might participate in creating digital stories, with the goal of introducing creation of digital stories to learners. (For more ideas on approaches to professional development that will engage teachers, see Rodríguez & McKay, 2010.)

Areas for Further Research

Most of the instructional practices discussed in this brief were tested in K–12 or postsecondary settings and often with students who were not English language learners. It would benefit the field if research on problem-, project-, and task-based learning, as well as digital storytelling, literature circles, and classroom-based assessment were conducted in adult ESL contexts and their benefits for students in terms of both engagement and learning were determined.

Conclusion

In addition to considering the research on the instructional strategies described here and on the impact of learner engagement on student learning, practitioners should reflect on the types of learning activities that engage them personally. Most would acknowledge that they are engaged in and learn from professional development that addresses their needs and is applicable to their practice. By the same token, adults learning English need to be active participants in their learning, and what they learn needs to have relevance to their daily lives.

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