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## Oral Vocabulary Instruction Practices of Teachers of Nonacademic Adult English Language Learners

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### Cover Page Footnote

#### About the Author:

Carol Cochiis a multidisciplinary educator with 30 plus years of experience within the public and private sector in the positions as Adjunct Professor, Program Coordinator, Field Teacher Supervisor, Teacher Trainer, Curriculum and Materials Developer, Researcher and Program Facilitator. Currently holding the position as Program Facilitator of the Adult ESL & HSE Programs at the Bergen County [NJ] Technical Schools, her research interests include Adult Education, Professional Development, and Teacher Education. She holds a BA from Villanova University, an MAT in ESL from Fairleigh Dickinson University, and a PhD from Fordham University. She is a board member of the New Jersey Association for Lifelong Learning. In her spare time, she is writing an online family history cookbook.

# Oral Vocabulary Instruction Practices of Teachers of Nonacademic Adult English Language Learners

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The number of non-academic adults who need English as a second language (ESL) classes is ever increasing, yet little is known about the instructional practices used to teach this population of learners. The focus of this article is to describe an exploratory single case study of the instructional practices used by teachers in a nonacademic adult English as a second language (NAESL) program. Specifically, the study looked at vocabulary instruction teachers employed with beginner-level adult ESL students. The data was collected using questionnaires, classroom observations, and post-observation interviews with the teachers. The findings show that teachers used two categories of activities to teach vocabulary: oral vocabulary activities and written vocabulary activities. It is significant that not only did the participants use twice as many written vocabulary activities as oral vocabulary activities in their NAESL classrooms, but they did not identify written vocabulary activities and oral vocabulary activities as addressing different language skills. Considering the importance of listening and speaking as entry-level language skills, NAESL teachers need to become aware of the importance of the distinction between these two types of instructional activities and the need to focus more instructional time to building and strengthening listening and speaking as these basic, necessary communication skills.

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**Keywords:** instructional practices, language skills, listening, nonacademic adult learners, oral vocabulary, speaking

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Nearly 600,000 adults participated in English literacy, or English as a second language (ESL), classes in 2016 (U.S. Department of Education. Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 2018) when this study was conducted. These adult learners come from varied educational, socio-economic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds; some came to the United States to earn a post-secondary degree while others came to find a better way of life for their families and themselves. Unlike the international students who enter university programs to earn a degree, some adult learners enroll in not-for-credit English as second language programs to gain the language skills they need to get a job and survive in their adopted country (Eyring, 2014). These non-academic adult English language learners (NAELLS), regardless of their work experience or educational background, tend to take low-paying jobs (Forrester & Nowrasteh, 2018; Wrigley et al.,

2003), and they have a higher rate of poverty (Batalova & Zong, 2016; Bernstein, 2017; Fogg & Harrington, 2012; Wrigley et al., 2003).

A key fact in adult education is the increasing number of adult immigrants who try to obtain ESL instruction. The National Council of State Directors of Adult Education (2017) reports that 43% of adults currently enrolled in adult education courses are English language learners, but this number does not include those adults on lists waiting to enter adult education programs. According to Wilson (2014), more than 19 million United States adult immigrants are limited English proficient.

Despite this ongoing rise in the numbers of adult immigrants seeking to learn English, Walizer (2016) says that the United States has experienced a decrease of more than 25% in federal and state adult education funding since 2001, and the National Center for Education Statistics (U.S. Department of Education, 2020) reports a steady decrease in funding for state administered adult education programs—Adult Basic Education, Adult Secondary Education, and English as a Second Language—from 2000 to 2017. Early in the past decade, Foster (2012) voiced concern that decreases in federal and state adult education funding will mean that only a fraction of adults in need of basic skills and English language skills will receive these services.

Given national and global demographic trends, it is imperative that the immigrant workforce in the US receive ESL instruction. Regardless of the country's immigration policy, immigrant populations are necessary to prevent a downturn in the adult workforce population. Kosten (2018) says that immigrants currently make up 17% of the United States workforce, while Passel and Cohn (2017) predict that immigrants will play a key role in the United States future workforce. As U. S. born adults age and retire, and birth rates decline, current and future immigrants—both skilled and unskilled—will take up the slack in the workforce (Passel & Cohn, 2017). Furthermore, new immigrants to the United States are just as likely to settle in more geographically diverse locations such as South Dakota, North Dakota, Kentucky, Delaware, and South Carolina in addition to the traditional states of California, Florida, Texas, New York, and New Jersey (Batalova et al., 2021; Zeigler & Camarola, 2018).

Aside from the demographic reality, another issue is that educators must assure that the language programs offered to this adult student education population are effective. In order to achieve this, more information about the instructional practices used in these programs should be available. Of particular interest is the lack of information about teaching vocabulary to adult ESL students. To address this gap, this article describes an investigation of instructional practices used to teach oral vocabulary to adults in a nonacademic ESL program. I begin by reviewing the scholarly literature on vocabulary instruction in general, and more specifically for adults and adult English language learners (ELLs). The methods of data collection and tools used in the study are then described. In the final section of the manuscript, I connect the analysis of findings to the field of adult education and identify some implications for best instructional practices in programs who serve the increasing number of NAELLS.

## Vocabulary Instruction

Vocabulary is the entryway to learning any language. As such, it plays an important role in language instruction. Although there is much research with a focus on vocabulary instruction, most of the research found focused on K-12 learners or adults in academic, or for-credit, English language classes. I was surprised at the lack of articles that focus on vocabulary instruction with nonacademic adult learners or that focus on the instructional practices used by teachers of these nonacademic adult English language learners (NAELLS). What was found were articles intended for K-12 instructors but used by language teachers in adult education programs as well (Boyd, 2019; Watts-Taffe et al., 2019). Thus, much of the literature that informs vocabulary instruction in NAELLS programs is based on best practices with learners in K-12 schools.

Whereas vocabulary instruction and development were once seen as a side thought in literacy instruction, they are now generally accepted as important and fundamental components of learning and comprehending a language (Beck et al., 2002; Chung, 2012; DeCarrico, 2001; Lightbown & Spada, 2006; Susanto, 2017). It is a basic necessity to speak, understand, read, and write in any language (Ahmad, 2011; Jacobson & Ianiro, 2007; Susanto, 2017); it is important to survive in an adopted country and actively participate in society (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2004); and improving or growing one's vocabulary is required for success in school (Carrasquillo & Rodríguez, 2002; Graves, 2016; Lightbown & Spada, 2006; Richards & Renandya, 2002) and on the job (Parrish, 2014). Even though vocabulary is considered an essential and fundamental skill for English language learners of all ages (Carasquillo & Rodríguez, 2002; DeCarrio, 2001; Richards & Renandya, 2002), as indicated earlier, most research in this field has been conducted with learners in K-12 programs (Lightbown & Spada, 2006; Manyak & Bauer, 2009; Peregoy & Boyle, 2005; Watts-Taffe et al., 2019).

Although it is believed that findings from K-12 research are valid for adult learners (Curtis, 2010), these groups of learners have very different language needs, specifically those in nonacademic programs. Students in K-12 programs are more likely to be introduced to the content-specific language and critical thinking skills (Boyd, 2019; Watts-Taffe et al., 2019) they need to succeed in academic settings. Conversely, nonacademic adult ELLs are more likely to learn conversational English for employment or basic literacy for survival in a new country (Bailey, 2010). While these adult ELLs may benefit from a basic knowledge of academic and technical language allowing them to fully participate in job interviews or other employment opportunities (Bailey, 2010), academic language should not be the main focus of instruction with this group of adult learners. That being said, the shortage of available research with nonacademic adult ELLs makes K-12 studies a readily available resource (Bailey, 2010) and forces the use of pedagogical approaches for teaching vocabulary based on the research conducted with K-12 learners (Brown & Lee, 2015; Celce-Murcia, 2014; Jacobson & Ianiro, 2007).

However, not all instructional approaches are equally effective with all learners. Just as children learn differently than adults (Eyring, 2014; Hilles & Sutton, 2001; Knowles, 1984), adult ELLs learn differently than first-language English adult learners

(Burt et al., 2005). Also, since adult learners come to the classroom with varied personal and professional backgrounds, life experiences, cultures, learning needs and styles, and personal goals, there is not one instructional approach that is best suited to teach every adult learner (Mikulecky et al., 2009). Argued as well is that some instructional approaches are more effective with adult learners while others are more effective with adult ELLs (Burt et al., 2005; Eyring, 2014).

An additional difference between working with adult ELLs and first language English adult learners is the issue of language fluency. The adult ELLs may face language challenges in professional and social settings (Parrish, 2014). For adult ELLs, the ability to express themselves in conversation in a variety of contexts, to understand and make themselves understood, at work and in social interactions is their main concern (Stahl & Nagy, 2006). Adult ELLs may feel especially uncomfortable in social or work-related situations where they possess the knowledge but lack the language to effectively communicate their thoughts and emotions (Hilles & Sutton, 2001).

### ***Best Practices for Adult ESL Vocabulary Instruction***

Vocabulary instruction is an important piece of the language-learning puzzle as it plays a vital role in the lives of adult ELLs. It is the bedrock on which language skills and language proficiency are constructed. Although the above literature shows that there is not one best approach to vocabulary instruction with all audiences of learners, it does reinforce the importance of exposing all learners—K-12, ABE, and adult ESL—to repeated exposure to and practice using vocabulary over time, and in real world contexts and situations to gain a breadth and depth of word knowledge. The literature also talks about the instructional practices that work best with beginner-level adult ELLs, such as word lists; learning a limited number of words, especially high-frequency words, in context; using learner-created sentences and definitions; using bilingual dictionaries and translations to their home language; and multiple exposure to words in various contexts.

Some instructional strategies are more beneficial to adult ELLs than others. All adult ELLs benefit from practicing their English language skills outside of class when reading or otherwise using English. It is also advantageous to use the metacognitive strategies they learn in class in their day-to-day lives. However, first-language English adults and more-proficient adult ELLs are able to use these strategies successfully (Mikulecky et al., 2009) because they have a larger foundational vocabulary. The reading process of searching for context clues, translating words, or guessing at meaning before returning to a reading passage is difficult for some adults and high-level ESL learners, but it is even more difficult for beginner-level adult ELLs. Interestingly, explicit vocabulary instruction (Burt et al., 2005; Mikulecky et al., 2009; Nisbet, 2010) is effective with adult ELLs, especially beginner-level adult ELLs, as the words and definitions are taught before these adult learners use them in the context of a classroom application, e.g., a reading passage.

In addition, all adult ELLs benefit from learning vocabulary in context, and they benefit from learning high-frequency words early on in their vocabulary instruction (Burt et al., 2005). They also benefit from learning words that are pertinent to their daily lives (Finn Miller, 2010), and from being able to make a connection between the

words and information they are currently learning and that which they already possess (Swinney & Velasco, 2011). As a result, teaching words in semantic sets, e.g., *top-bottom*, is a less effective approach for adult ELLs (Nation, 2002) since the words are so closely related and lack context. Nation (2002) suggests teaching words in context and providing adult ELLs with the time, continued practice, and reinforcement they need to learn. After all, vocabulary acquisition is not a one-and-done activity but a skill to be cultivated and refined (Brown & Lee, 2015; Zimmerman, 2014). Adult ELLs tend to learn better with some instructional practices, such as learning a limited number of new vocabulary words before a reading lesson; using learner-generated sentences to reinforce vocabulary meaning, using bilingual dictionaries, translating vocabulary to their home language, learning high-frequency words at the start of the English language instruction, and being exposed to vocabulary on multiple occasions and in a variety of contexts (Brown & Lee, 2015; Burt et al., 2005; Zimmerman, 2014).

Furthermore, since adult ELLs tend to have larger oral or spoken vocabularies than reading, they benefit from hearing words before seeing them in written form (Bromley, 2007; Jacobson & Ianiro, 2007). They are likely to comprehend conversational language better than written (Jacobson & Ianiro, 2007; Lazaraton, 2014). As a result, adult ELLs benefit from hearing a teacher say new words, so they can repeat them before seeing the words in written form. Oral language is indispensable in helping adult ELLs to develop the language and comprehension skills they need to be able to read and write in English (DeCarrico, 2001; Jacobson & Ianiro, 2007), and the most likely starting point for anyone learning a new language (Florez, 1999).

Two popular approaches to teaching vocabulary are explicit (direct) instruction and implicit (indirect) instruction. Although the literature is mixed as to the best instructional practices to use to teach literacy skills as all have their strengths and drawbacks (McQuillan, 2019; Mikulecky et al., 2009; Wright & Cervetti, 2017), Mikulecky et al. (2009) recognize the usefulness of explicit instruction as it is easier to measure the impact of direct learning. This makes it a useful and influential tool with students, decision-makers, policy-makers, and others and in determining program efficacy for curriculum or funding. This is especially true for both ABE and adult ESL programs where funding is tied to student performance on standardized assessments.

Explicit or direct vocabulary instruction is used to formally and systematically introduce a word and its usage in context, in both ABE and adult ESL classrooms. In this approach, the teacher introduces the vocabulary learners need to comprehend for the lesson-focused reading passage, writing, or listening activity. Explicit instruction activities include vocabulary lists, definitions, using known words to teach new words or new forms of words (e.g., using *tall* to teach *taller*), word families, envisioning words with their meanings, using vocabulary in different contexts, learners sharing personal connections to vocabulary, and helping learners develop metacognitive skills they can use both in and out of class (Beck et al., 2002; Blachowicz & Fisher, 2004; Brown & Lee, 2015; Schwarzer, 2009). Whereas explicit learning is teacher-led and occurs within the classroom setting, implicit learning is less structured.

Although implicit or incidental learning can occur within the ABE or adult ESL classroom, this type of learning is more likely to occur outside of the formal classroom

setting. Implicit learning takes place when a learner comes across an unfamiliar or unknown word in context in an everyday situation (DeCarrico, 2001), such as reading the morning news or engaging in conversation. Then, using the metacognitive strategies learned in class, the learner searches for the meaning of the word from the context of the conversation or the reading passage. Other strategies for implicit learning include saying the word out loud, guessing meaning from context, vocabulary journaling (DeCarrico, 2001), and using keywords to decipher new words. Regardless of the strategy used, a prerequisite for using these deciphering strategies is exposure through a variety of activities to increase a learner's knowledge of incidental vocabulary (Hunt & Beglar, 2002).

Implicit learning is a multi-step process the learner engages to search for clues in a reading (Nation, 2002), hope the presumed definition is correct, and then retrace steps to complete the reading passage. Therefore, adult ESL learners with a rudimentary vocabulary will have difficulty using these strategies successfully. For this implicit learning to be successful, context clues must be present, and the learner must have good comprehension of most of the reading passage. In addition, the learner must have at least 2,000 to 3,000 words in his/her vocabulary (DeCarrico, 2001) or understand "98% of the words in a passage" (Jacobson & Ianiro, 2007, pp. 1-2) to learn the word from context. First-language English adult learners are more likely to have a larger base vocabulary necessary for success with implicit instruction. In addition, first language English adult learners are more likely to be successful with vocabulary taught in semantic sets, using student-created definitions, using context clues to learn incidental vocabulary, and multiple-choice assessments. The same cannot be said for adult ELLs.

Additionally, Beck et al.'s (2002) Robust Vocabulary Instruction (RVI) is a comprehensive approach to vocabulary teaching (Boyd, 2019; Brown & Lee, 2015; Manyak & Bauer, 2009; Susanto, 2017; Watts-Taffe et al, 2019; Zimmerman, 2014). It is designed to introduce ESL students, of all ages, to the breadth and depth of the vocabulary they learn. Developed for K-12 students, it has been well received as an effective instructional method to use with adult ELLs. This three-tiered approach to vocabulary instruction begins on tier-one and commonly used everyday words, progresses to academic words in tier-two, and ends on tier-three words with content area specific language.

The popularity of this approach is based on the varied fun and provocative activities employed to reinforce the definition and usage of words in various contexts and meaning, semantic forms, and uses. For example, students are encouraged to connect new vocabulary with words they already know, create their own definitions, incorporate the new vocabulary into their everyday interactions, and personalize learning by spending out-of-class time learning more about new words. The focus of this approach on well-rounded and well-developed understanding of a word and its many applications through continuous exposure and practice make this a good foundation for teaching vocabulary (August et al., 2005; Jacobson & Ianiro, 2007; Nisbet, 2010; Watts-Taffe et al., 2019; Zimmerman, 2014) across age levels. Brown (2007) cautions that although beginner-level adult ELLs may possess a limited vocabulary and may lack the grammar and syntax of native speakers of English, they



still possess the ability to make themselves understood by using basic language and simple constructions in everyday interactions.

### **Teaching Listening and Speaking Vocabulary to Adult ELLs**

Much of the research on vocabulary instruction with adult ELLs, and vocabulary instruction in general, has focused on vocabulary as a precursor to reading and writing activities (Armbruster et al., 2001; Carrasquillo & Rodríguez, 2002; Hunt & Beglar, 2002; Jacobson & Ianiro, 2007; Nagy, 1988; Ovando et al., 2003; Peregoy & Boyle, 2005; Zimmerman, 2014). In this section I discuss some of what has been learned from research on oral vocabulary instruction, specifically vocabulary for speaking and listening without any links to reading or writing activities.

The literature identifies activities and best practices adult ESL teachers can use to teach listening (Goh, 2014) and speaking (Lazaraton, 2014) skills. Goh (2014) suggests that teachers can help students to develop their listening skills through frequent practice in different contexts and by using metacognitive strategies students can use before, during, and after communications, such as listening diaries and self-report checklists. She clarifies that listening is not simply an activity for comprehension but it is more comprehensive in scope. Listening requires participants to play an active role in the process of making meaning from what they hear; it is not simply detecting sounds but decoding and extracting meaning from these sounds. As a skill, listening is “goal-directed and purposeful” (p. 73) for the listener who needs to comprehend what is heard in order to act on or respond to the message, or to simply understand a situation, for example, listening to a radio broadcast.

Even though we may think of listening as a skill to be used in the give-and-take of conversation, listening can also be a “one-way (nonparticipatory)” activity (Goh, 2014, p. 73). Although one-way listening still requires active participation on the part of the listener, there is no opportunity for the interchange of ideas and information that comes with conversational participation. As a result, when adult ELLs engage in one-way listening by watching television or listening to a radio broadcast, they still need to comprehend and make sense of what they have heard. However, as explained by this researcher, they are not able to ask questions for clarification or get more information so they must rely on their knowledge and experience for comprehension. Having a variety of activities to use to teach listening across ESL proficiency levels is beneficial in developing students’ listening skills (Brown & Lee, 2015).

Just as the above research addresses best practices to teach listening skills, Lazaraton (2014) talks about the components of teaching speaking as a complex language skill. As a skill, speaking is a complicated yet necessary component of learning a language, it is reciprocal with the give-and-take between speaker and a partner in conversation or other communication, and includes basic pronunciation, accuracy, and fluency (Brown, 2007; Brown & Lee, 2015; Florez, 1999; Lazaraton, 2014). Speaking is an intricate process for adult ELLs to navigate and requires them to simultaneously process information they hear, or prompt they see, while harmonizing pronunciation, grammar, context, vocabulary, fluency, accuracy of sound production and the social customs associated with conversation (Bohlke, 2014; Florez, 1999; Lazaraton, 2014). The variety of categories within the skills of speaking—monologue, dialogue, planned,

impromptu, social, business (Brown & Lee, 2015) —add to the importance of providing adult ELLs with the practice and support they need to successfully navigate a simple conversation or class presentation. Therefore, it falls to the ESL teacher to provide, planned or impromptu, activities and instances for adult ELLs to engage in role-play scenarios, class presentations, and other speaking activities, to build and practice speaking skills for real-world social and professional settings in the safety and support of their ESL classroom.

When teaching beginner level ELLs, Brown (2007) advises ESL teachers to promote fluency over accuracy as these students may be more self-conscious if their accuracy is constantly corrected in class. Brown also suggests that teachers of beginner-level ELLs aim to strike a balance between students feeling comfortable enough in class to practice speaking English and correcting phonological and grammatical errors so students can communicate clearly outside of class. Whereas Brown (2007), and Brown and Lee (2015), promote fluency over accuracy, Lazaraton (2014) takes a more pragmatic approach. She suggests that while ESL students who have more exposure to interactions in English on a day-to-day basis would benefit from more accuracy focused classroom time, English-as-a-foreign-language students who have limited exposure to everyday interactions in English would benefit from more fluency focused classroom time.

Lazaraton (2014) argues that although fluency and accuracy are important elements of speech, it is also important for ELLs to be aware of, and familiar with, the social and cultural customs of communicating in English, such as introducing oneself or greeting others, and social distance or personal space. In addition, related to authenticity in speaking, this researcher suggest that especially ELLs currently in a workplace setting, learn better from actual real-world materials rather than fabricated textbook materials meant to imitate the workplace. Classroom activities should promote the development of speaking skills including fluency, accuracy, appropriateness, and using authentic language, such as discussions, group work, presentations, role plays, conversations, and dialogue journals.

Another component of listening and speaking is pronunciation. According to Goh (2014), pronunciation and listening work together as language skills constructing a sort of bridge for listening and speaking. As a skill, pronunciation is an important element of listening as comprehension depends on a listener's ability to understand or recognize each word in the conversation. Therefore, correcting students' pronunciation is one technique an adult ESL teacher can use in promoting and improving their students' listening skills. As a speaking skill, pronunciation includes not only how we produce sounds but also prosody (Goodwin, 2014); the intonation, pitch, word stress, and sentence stress that accompany pronunciation are all part of teaching speaking skills to adult ELLs.

One related concern of ELLs, especially adult ELLs, is their accent and making themselves understood outside of their ESL classroom (Goodwin, 2014). Here, repetition is seen as a successful tool for helping adult ELLs to accurately pronounce words thus improving their day-to-day communication (Ghazi-Saidi & Ansaldo, 2017) outside of ESL class. Repeating a word to improve pronunciation may be helpful to

adult ELLs to sound more native-like (Zimmerman, 2014). However, some adult ELLs may be hesitant to communicate in English for fear of being unable to clearly express themselves or of being judged as not intelligent (Wang et al., 2017).

Lazaraton (2014), as well as researchers such as Ahmadi (2018), McClanahan (2014), and Rose (2015), discuss the benefits of using technology as a learning tool as it provides students the opportunity to communicate in real-time in class as well as on their own time and at their own pace; she includes video conferencing, podcasts, and voice-based tools which allow ELLs to practice listening and speaking skills. Computers provide ESL students with complementary activities to reinforce content and skills learned in the classroom (Moore, 2009), opportunities for adult ELLs to collaborate on learning and classroom projects (Ahmadi, 2018; Moore, 2009), and a learner-centric atmosphere for learning (Ahmadi, 2018). Computer activities give autonomy to the adult ELL thus making the students responsible for their own learning (Ahmadi, 2018; Rose, 2015).

The review of the scholarly literature discussed in this section underscores the significant role of vocabulary in developing language for adult NAELLS. It signaled how obtaining listening and speaking vocabulary fluency, different from literacy in English, is critical for effective workplace performance. The few scholarly studies found, highlighted strategies and approaches effective for instruction in NAESL's classrooms. Importantly, the review also suggested a lack of clarity if and how these practices are employed by teachers of NAESLs. The case study discussed below focuses on addressing this need.

### **Case Study on Adult ESL Vocabulary Instruction**

I conducted this case study to learn about the instructional activities that teachers of nonacademic adult ELLs use to teach oral vocabulary to their students. My curiosity stems from a combination of the importance of vocabulary for speaking and listening—oral vocabulary—and the lack of available research on this topic. My guiding question was: How do teachers in nonacademic adult ESL programs conceptualize teaching oral vocabulary to adults? To further develop the study, I created the sub-question: What instructional practices do teachers implement in teaching oral vocabulary in NAESL classrooms? This sub-question presented me the opportunity to observe these NAESL teachers' practices rather than rely solely on participant-reported responses.

An exploratory case study facilitated the use of a natural setting of a NAESL classroom to learn firsthand about the instructional practices used by three teachers of beginner-level students. Teachers of beginner-level NAESL students were chosen as participants for this study as they were the most likely to teach oral vocabulary to develop their students' speaking and listening skills. The study took place in a county technical school in a suburb of New York City. The diverse student population of the NAESL classes was reflective of the diverse population demographic of this metropolitan area.

At the time of data collection, all of the three participants were state certified K-12 teachers; however, only one had an ESL teaching certificate and one had a master's degree in adult education with a focus on consumer economics. It is important to note

that none of the participants had formal training to work with adult ELLs. They were all part-time employees of the county technical school at the time of data collection, and two of the three taught full-time in other school districts: one taught in a middle school and the second taught at a community college. Overall, the three participants had an average of 17 years of general experience teaching and 13 years of experience teaching adult ESL. This suggests that much of their knowledge of teaching adult ELLs came from classroom experience. Although they all belonged to various professional organizations, they said that their on-the-job experiences teaching adult ELLs was the best and most helpful training for them as teachers. For two of the three participants, teaching adult ESL was a career change.

To get an extensive understanding of the oral vocabulary instruction used by the NAESL teachers, I used a variety of tools to collect data (Merriam 1998; Yin, 2014) including two questionnaires, completed classroom observations, and conducted post-observation interviews. The Background of Teachers' Questionnaire (Appendix A) was used to gather contact information, class schedules, and the professional background of the participants. Their responses provided me insight into the experience and training they brought to their NAESL classrooms. The Initial Description of Teachers' Instruction Questionnaire (Appendix B) asked participants to identify the instructional practices they used. The open-ended, short answer questions encouraged participants to freely provide details of their own instructional practices rather than choose from a drop-down menu (Dornyei, 2003). The responses participants gave to these tools were my guide for what to look for during my classroom observations and the questions to ask during the interviews.

The instructional observations allowed me to take a fly-on-the-wall perspective of the actual vocabulary lessons being taught and the instructional practices the participants used in the natural setting of the NAESL classroom (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2005; Yin, 2014). I created an Observation Protocol (Appendix C) to take descriptive field notes of my observations (Johnson & Christensen, 2000) and used a small digital recorder which allowed me to review the observed lessons at a later time. Conversational post-observation interviews were a third form of data collection that took place after each classroom observation, thus giving me the opportunity to learn about the participants' thoughts and perspectives (Yin, 2014), and an opportunity for participants to give their own voice to their instructional practices (Seidman, 2006). So as to facilitate analysis, I used an inductive approach to review the data and identify the embedded patterns and relationships (Creswell, 2005, 2007; Johnson & Christensen, 2000; Stake, 1995) across the three participants. Tables and charts were created to show frequency of usage of their instructional activities and to identify words these participants used (Yin, 2014). The use of three different methods of data collection allowed me to triangulate the data for an in-depth analysis. In the next section, I discuss my findings, their importance to the field of NAESL, and implications for classroom instruction.

## **Discussion of the Findings**

In this section, I introduce and discuss the overall findings from my classroom observations and interviews with this study's participants. I specifically identified the

oral vocabulary activities participants used and discussed any patterns and common practices that emerged. Although the participants had their individual styles of classroom management and instruction, they all believed that a relaxed, and fun, classroom atmosphere was most conducive to learning at the adult classroom level. These beliefs were evident in my observations; confirming that much learning took place in a comfortable learning environment. In addition, the participants also believed in the importance of teaching pronunciation, intonation, stress, prosody, definitions, spelling, and practice through repetition. Throughout the 15 classroom observations, the participants used a total of 247 individual activities to teach English to their adult ESL students. This means that the relaxed and fun classroom atmosphere did not take away from the task at hand, namely, engaging students in learning English.

Looking at the data collected using observations and interviews across the three participants, I discovered they used two categories of activities to teach vocabulary: oral vocabulary activities and written vocabulary activities. The oral vocabulary activities were those activities that did not transition to a reading, writing, or grammar lesson but focused on the vocabulary, or words taught, for listening and for speaking (Armbruster et al., 2001). The written vocabulary activities were those activities that served as a transition to a reading, writing, or grammar lesson where the vocabulary, or words taught, served as a precursor to a literacy or grammar lesson.

It is significant that the participants used more than twice as many written vocabulary activities as oral vocabulary activities in their NAESL classrooms. Of the 247 instructional activities I observed across the three participant teachers, only 77 (31%) were oral vocabulary activities as defined above and 170 (69%) were written vocabulary activities. This means that although the participants were actively engaging their students in English instruction, more than two-thirds of their activities were vocabulary instruction as an introduction to teaching reading, grammar, and writing and not focusing on vocabulary instruction solely for listening and speaking. The importance of establishing a strong, solid foundation in speaking and listening skills in adult ELLs, especially beginner-level adult ELLs, cannot be overemphasized as they are much more likely to use listening and speaking skills outside of the classroom than reading or writing (Brown & Lee, 2015; Florez, 1999).

These basic communication skills are crucial to adult ELLs (Bailey, 2010), especially beginner-level adult ELLs, for success on the job and in social and professional situations. Consequently, adult ESL instructors must see the value of building and strengthening speaking and listening skills in their NAESL classrooms. This is not to diminish the value of vocabulary for reading and writing activities in NAESL classrooms, but a call to encourage these instructors to actively engage their students in authentic, real-world conversations and activities (Florez, 1999; Goh, 2014; Lazaraton, 2014), and to encourage their students to converse with other speakers of English, outside of class, in professional and social settings (Florez, 1999).

Another key finding emerged from the analysis of the activities used to teach oral vocabulary. Although the teachers used a total of 77 specific oral vocabulary activities (Appendix D), these activities were not used across the board. Only some of

the activities were used by all three participants, while some were used by two of the participants and others were used by single participants. The number is significant as it represents a shortfall in the amount of instruction time and the number of instructional activities participants employ to promote the listening and speaking skills which are needed the most by beginner-level adult ELLs. As language skills to be honed, speaking and listening come with their own skill sets to be nurtured and developed (Florez, 1999; Goh, 2014; Lazaraton, 2014). For adult ELLs who must be able to express themselves in everyday interactions at work and in social settings (Stahl & Nagy, 2006), it is their adult ESL teacher who is tasked with the responsibility of providing the instructional activities to practice and strengthen language skills necessary for listening and speaking.

The literature highlights the importance of teaching listening and speaking skills to adult ELLs as these are the skills most likely to be used by adult learners outside the classroom (Florez, 1999; Stahl & Nagy, 2006), are foundational for introductory language instruction (Florez, 1999), and are necessary for basic communication in a language (Lazaraton, 2014). However, these findings suggest that NAESL teachers who participated in the study are not concentrating the bulk of their classroom instructional time on these essential skills. Still, this is not a complete surprise as most of the literature on oral vocabulary research, as reflected in the review of the literature above, focused on vocabulary instruction, both oral and general, as introductory to a reading or writing activity. In the next section, I discuss specifically the oral vocabulary activities used by the three participants of the study.

### **Oral Vocabulary Activities**

The data gathered from classroom observations reveal that within the category of oral vocabulary activities, three sub-categories became evident: Listening Activities, Speaking Activities, and Listening & Speaking Activities (Appendix D). Listening Activities were those where students focused on hearing words for comprehension with no written or spoken response to follow, or where students were expected to physically act out or respond to the aural prompt. Speaking Activities were those where students were focused on speaking aloud whether as individuals or as part of a group. Listening & Speaking Activities were those that required students to comprehend what they heard and follow up with a spoken response, such as responding aloud to a teacher or classmate-led question or repeating after listening to a CD prompt.

Thirty-five (45%) of the 77 oral vocabulary activities the participants used were devoted to Listening Activities (Appendix D) where students listened to the teacher and responded with some type of action. These 35 activities represent the largest percent of oral vocabulary activities compared with the 22 (29%) Speaking Activities and 20 (26%) Listening & Speaking Activities used by the participants (Appendix D). However, when compared with the total number of 247 activities used to teach English in these adult ESL classrooms, the 35 Listening Activities now represent a mere 14% of the total classroom time spent on vocabulary instruction-both oral and written vocabulary activities. Just as important to note is the 22 Speaking Activities and 20 Listening & Speaking Activities, compared with the number of total classroom activities, now

represent a meager 9% (Speaking Activities) and 8% (Listening & Speaking Activities) of total classroom time devoted to developing and reinforcing these essential oral language skills.

Of the 77 oral vocabulary activities used by the *three participants*, only two (3%) oral vocabulary activities were used by all three of the participants, and 11 (14%) were used by two of the participants. This means that of the 77 total oral vocabulary activities used by the participants 64 (83%) were used by individual participants and not implemented by two or all three participants. In other words, despite the limited number of general oral vocabulary activities used in class, on the whole, a large variety of activities were used to teach oral vocabulary. However, it also shows a lack of consistency in practice across the participants.

Of the two activities (3%) used by all three participants, one was a Listening Activity where the teacher corrected students' pronunciation of vocabulary. The scholarly literature, discussed above, supports the importance of pronunciation as an element of listening and comprehension in conversation (Brown & Lee, 2015; Goh, 2014). The second activity used by all three participants was a Listening & Speaking Activity when the teachers took their students to the computer lab for Listening and Speaking Activities. As suggested by Ahmadi (2018) technology-based activities can be effective tools for learning in the ESL classroom.

Of the 11 (14%) oral vocabulary activities used by two participants, five were Listening Activities and there were three each of Speaking Activities and Listening & Speaking Activities (Appendix D). The five Listening Activities used by two participants all centered on the definition and usage for the vocabulary taught including definitions, synonyms, and rules for using a vocabulary word. Zimmerman (2014) discusses the challenges that come with vocabulary instruction as a word can have different meanings and pronunciations, take different grammatical forms, and have various uses and cultural implications. Also, as the research of Beck et al. (2002) suggested, adult ELLs, and ELLs in general, benefit from multiple exposures to a word in context for meaning, usage, and cultural relevance. For example, [www.merriam-webster.com](http://www.merriam-webster.com) lists 13 definitions for the word *big* (8 adjectives, 3 adverbs, and 2 nouns) as well as pronunciation, examples of usage, synonyms, word forms (*big*, *bigger*), and word origin. However, it does not explain the cultural implications associated between telling a 3-year-old child and a 30-year-old adult: *How big you've gotten since I last saw you*. It falls to the ESL teacher to explain that although the 3-year-old child would be delighted at this statement, the 30-year old adult would be insulted.

Of the three Speaking Activities used by two participants, one was the students reading word pairs for pronunciation practice and the other two focused on word meanings. The teachers focused on word meaning by either asking their students questions about meaning of words or by providing a translation of the target word. Here, repetition is seen as a successful tool for helping adult ELLs to accurately pronounce words thus improving their day-to-day communication (Ghazi-Saidi & Ansaldo, 2017) outside of ESL class. Whereas repeating a word to improve pronunciation may be helpful to adult ELLs to sound more native-like, it is not as

helpful for comprehension or retention of vocabulary (Zimmerman, 2014). Nonetheless, translation supports word understanding and retention. Cook (2010) sees translation as beneficial to the ESL student as it facilitates learning and helps learners to better assimilate knowledge they have with what they are learning. However, Brown and Lee (2015) caution ESL teachers not to overuse students' home languages and to limit their usage to instances when it is helpful to the learners.

There were three activities used by two participants in the category of Listening & Speaking Activities (Appendix D). Two of these activities were vocabulary focused: the first activity was an incidental conversation between the teacher and a student, and the second was students repeating vocabulary words after the teacher said them. The third activity in this category was students repeating after listening to a CD. Zimmerman (2014) discusses some of the benefits of incidental conversations for learning. As mentioned above, repetition of vocabulary instruction can be beneficial if done in context and over time.

Of the 64 *single participant* activities used to teach oral vocabulary, 29 (45%) were Listening Activities, 19 (29%) were Speaking Activities, and 16 (26%) were Listening & Speaking Activities (Appendix D). As discussed in the best practices section of the literature review section, various activities have been documented as important to use in instruction of vocabulary. Since adult ELLs come from diverse backgrounds and life experiences, have different motivations for learning English, and different literacy levels and learning styles, it is important for the adult ESL teacher to have a variety of techniques and activities available to use in teaching adult ELLs (Eyring, 2014). The single participant listening activities were divided into three categories: (a) definitions or word meanings; (b) examples for word pronunciation, spelling or usage; and (c) teacher's questions to check vocabulary comprehension or using pictures to check comprehension. On the whole, the literature supports these activities as best practices as they reinforce new words in context, over time, and allow ELLs to use the words in real-world interactions (Beck et al., 2002; Brown & Lee, 2015).

Nineteen of the single participant oral vocabulary activities were Speaking Activities (Appendix D). Ten of these activities centered on defining vocabulary including the teacher giving examples, acting out a definition, drawing and showing pictures to define a word, and the teacher or a classmate translating to a student's L1. Other single participant activities include students spelling the vocabulary words aloud, reading and defining the words aloud (some using a written prompt), the teacher asking questions about the vocabulary, playing Pictionary to elicit vocabulary for classroom objects, and students showing family photos on their smartphones to talk about their families. This family photo Speaking Activity, used by one participant, presented students an opportunity to use the vocabulary they learned to interact with classmates on a more personal level. Students clearly enjoyed this activity and sharing their family photos and stories with classmates. Although this activity began as a speaking only activity, it quickly developed into an impromptu speaking and listening activity. Students were especially curious to hear from a newlywed classmate who shared photos of her recent wedding, talked about the event, and answered her classmates' questions. This unrehearsed activity gave these adult ELLs the opportunity



to engage in authentic speech to express their own opinions, and use the vocabulary and language skills they learned in class in a real-world setting that had meaning to them (Finn Miller, 2010; Lazaraton, 2014; ThiTuyetAnh, 2015).

Sixteen of the single participant oral vocabulary activities were Listening & Speaking Activities (Appendix D). Of these, nine were teacher and student engagement activities, including: students repeating vocabulary words for pronunciation, repeating vocabulary in sentences, singing, responding to the teacher's questions, and practicing listening and speaking skills through dialog. The remaining seven activities engaged students by working in pairs to practice dialogs, introduce themselves to classmates, repeating after and completing web activities, and asking and answering questions. These participatory activities have been found beneficial by previous researchers (Brown & Lee, 2015; Lazaraton, 2014).

The teacher and student interactive activities were valuable as adult ELLs benefit from listening to and repeating new words after their teacher (Lazaraton, 2014) to gain fluency. Whether practicing conversation skills with the teacher or a classmate, adult ELLs also benefit from the real-world-pertinent practice of speaking and listening as dialog (Finn Miller, 2010). In a Listening & Speaking Activity, used by one participant, students introduced themselves to classmates in a simulated social setting of meeting people and engaging in small talk at a party; this activity included the social practice of shaking hands at introduction and ending a conversation politely. The diverse ethnic and cultural make-up of this class meant the activity allowed students to practice their listening and speaking skills while they learned the culture associated with social interactions in the United States. The small talk activity was successful because the students felt safe and comfortable enough in their learning environment to practice their language skills (ThiTuyetAnh, 2015), and it was a situation they find themselves facing in real life. This activity added to the adult ELLs' ability to interact in social settings and gave them an awareness of proper social etiquette (Lazaraton, 2014). In the next section, I discuss the oral vocabulary activities used by the study's participants, and their beliefs, by categories.

## **Conclusions and Implications**

Since little is currently known about the instructional practices used to teach oral vocabulary to non-academic adult ELLs, this study contributes to the relevant literature and to the field of adult ESL. Overall, this study revealed that although NAESL instructors used two categories of activities to teach oral vocabulary to their students, they were much more likely to use written vocabulary activities than oral vocabulary activities. I cannot emphasize enough the importance of building oral vocabulary and listening and speaking skills in adult ELLs. These basic skills enable beginner-level adult ELLs to interact and communicate in professional and social settings.

Although it is not surprising that the study uncovered two categories of instructional activities teachers in NAESL programs used to teach vocabulary, namely, oral vocabulary and written vocabulary activities, the rate these activities were used came as a surprise. Overall, the classroom time devoted to written vocabulary activities far outweighed that spent on oral vocabulary activities despite the importance placed

on listening and speaking skills for beginner-level ELLs. When I presented my findings to the study's participants, they seemed unconcerned as they did not see a difference between the oral vocabulary and written vocabulary activities they used. They believed that any vocabulary instruction was beneficial to their students regardless of how it was delivered or used in the classroom. This is not a complete surprise as my review of the literature shows a partiality to vocabulary instruction for reading and writing. Nevertheless, vocabulary is an essential first step in learning any language, yet it is the listening and speaking skills that beginner-level adult ELLs are more likely to use in their everyday work and social interactions. Taking into consideration the importance placed on speaking and listening as entry-level language skills, and the actual real-time spent in the classroom building and reinforcing these skills, more classroom instructional time should be devoted to speaking and listening as language skills.

Although reading and writing are important language skills for adult ELLs to expand and strengthen, as this case study suggests, speaking and listening play a much more prominent role in NAELLS everyday interactions regardless of where they take place. Therefore, spending more classroom instructional time on oral vocabulary activities would provide adult ELLs with the practice they need to become more fluent in English but under teacher supervised conditions, which from this perspective are crucial. Adult learners see their teachers as the go-to person for questions of language and culture in the United States. As such, by overseeing NAELLS as they practice speaking and listening skills in classroom-staged social and work settings, the teacher can provide group and individualized feedback on pronunciation, prosody, intonation, and usage. These real-world and real-time skills are necessary for comprehension in a variety of everyday situations, such as on-the-job or in a job interview, storm warnings, in a doctor's office, and interacting with their child's teacher.

Importantly, as the number of adults in need of ESL instruction increases and expands to non-traditional points of entry across the country, the need for qualified instructors will also increase. Through ongoing professional development instructors of NAESL learners should be made more aware of the different types with vocabulary activities available, and they should be familiarized with, and encouraged to use, oral vocabulary activities in their classrooms.

Instructors of NAESL learners should be made more aware of the different types of vocabulary activities available, and they should be familiarized with, and encouraged to use, oral vocabulary activities in their classrooms. My review of the literature above confirms the need for more research in the field of adult ESL. Specifically, I suggest follow-up research to explore vocabulary instruction with beginner NAELLS compared with intermediate or advanced fluency level NAELLS. Furthermore, given the growing role immigrants play in the US workforce (Passel & Cohn, 2017), future research should investigate vocabulary instruction and skills for employment with NAELLS whether beginner, intermediate, or advanced levels of fluency.

Given that most of the instructional activities were used by one participant, it is important to look at ways teachers of this student population can be trained and certified to provide more consistency in the implementation of best practices. Unlike

K - 12 that has uniform licensure requirements, adult ESL has no uniformity in certification or training for its teachers. As a result, teachers of NAELs would benefit from participating in on-going professional development opportunities to address the unique needs of NAELs as learners and to inform teachers of best practices to use with NAELs that they can apply to their own practices.

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## Appendix A

### BACKGROUND OF TEACHERS' QUESTIONNAIRE

January 27, 2014

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1. How many years have you been an **adult education** teacher at the County Technical School?  
  
(a) \_\_\_ 0-2    (b) \_\_\_ 3-5    (c) \_\_\_ 6-10    (d) \_ 11- more
  
2. In what area(s) is your NJ state teaching certificate?
  
3. If not ESL certified, what is your preparation to teach ESL?
  
4. In what year did you receive your NJ state teaching certificate?
  
5. How many sections of beginner adult ESL do you teach?
  
6. How many students do you teach in each section?
  
7. What is your teaching schedule this semester for beginner adult ESL classes?





**Appendix C**  
Observation Protocol

Descriptive Notes	Reflective Notes
Teacher:	
Location:	
Date:	
Time (begin/end):	
Number of students:	
Lesson Observed:	
Lesson Objective:	
Classroom environment, physical setting, layout, desks:	
General Observations:	

## Appendix D

### *Oral Vocabulary Activities Across Participants*

ACTIVITY	PARTICIPANT			
	1	2	3	
<b>Listening</b>				
Teacher corrected student's pronunciation of vocabulary	X	X	X	
Teacher wrote definition on board following an oral definition	X	X		
Teacher gave synonym	X	X		
Teacher gave example using target vocabulary	X	X		
Teacher asked questions to elicit information using target vocabulary		X	X	
Teacher asked for definition of vocabulary		X	X	
Teacher asked questions to elicit vocabulary	X			
Teacher asked questions to elicit definition	X			
Teacher asked questions to review vocabulary	X			
Teacher asked questions to survey students using vocabulary	X			
Teacher gave definition	X			
Teacher gave example sentences with vocabulary	X			
Teacher read aloud to model pronunciation	X			
Teacher modeled how to spell aloud: D as in David	X			
Teacher gave clues for pronouncing words	X			
Teacher asked if any "new" words on vocabulary list		X		
Teacher asked questions to check comprehension of vocabulary		X		
Teacher asked questions about vocabulary picture		X		
Teacher gave antonym		X		
Teacher gave other meanings for words		X		
Teacher gave example for word usage related to vocabulary		X		
Teacher read vocabulary		X		
Teacher said vocabulary words aloud		X		
Teacher spelled word aloud		X		
Teacher gave definition aloud for pronunciation		X		
Teacher checked students' speaking: pronunciation, intonation of vocabulary		X		
Teacher repeated students' sentences		X		
Students pointed to picture for each vocabulary word		X		
Students listened to CD		X		
Teacher wrote students' vocabulary words on board			X	
Teacher asked if students know vocabulary words			X	
Teacher reviewed vocabulary usage			X	
Teacher gave example of vocabulary in context			X	
Teacher asked student to spell her name aloud			X	
Teacher wrote word pairs on board-for vocabulary pronunciation			X	
<b>TOTAL LISTENING ACTIVITIES:</b>	<b>35/77 (45%)</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>9</b>

<b>Speaking</b>				
Students read word pairs from board-pronunciation using a written prompt	X	X		
Teacher answered student's question about specific vocabulary/words		X	X	
Students translated vocabulary to L1	X		X	
Students spelled vocabulary and teacher wrote on board	X			
Students gave example for definition	X			
Teacher used visual to elicit vocabulary	X			
Students spelled their names aloud and teacher wrote letters on board-letter pronunciation	X			
Teacher asked student to translate words and vocabulary to L1		X		
Teacher used picture to introduce vocabulary		X		
Students showed family photo and identified family		X		
CD Activity/Smartboard for class activity-questions from teacher		X		
Teacher drew picture to show definition		X		
Teacher wrote IPA of vocabulary word on board		X		
Students read vocabulary from the board				X
Students read date from board-pronunciation using a prompt				X
Students played Pictionary with vocabulary				X
Teacher used L1 for definition/translated vocabulary				X
Teacher used visual/showed item to elicit responses using vocabulary				X
Teacher used picture to elicit conversation				X
Students circled words they know on "word list"				X
Teacher acted out definition of vocabulary				X
Teacher used visual/item for definition of vocabulary				X
<b>TOTAL SPEAKING ACTIVITIES:</b>	<b>22/77 (29%)</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Listening &amp; Speaking</b>				
Computer Lab-some were listening and speaking activities	X	X	X	
Students listened to CD and repeated		X	X	
Teacher and student incidental conversation about vocabulary	X		X	
Teacher said vocabulary and students repeated	X		X	
Teacher pronounced vocabulary and students repeated	X			
Teacher sang and students repeated	X			
Students asked and answered questions following a written prompt	X			
Teacher read sentences aloud using vocabulary and students repeated		X		
Teacher read vocabulary aloud and students repeated		X		
Teacher said list of vocabulary and students repeated		X		

Students and teacher practice vocabulary by reading dialog in turns			X	
Students Pair work reading dialog to practice using vocabulary			X	
Teacher modeled listening activity with a repetition task			X	
Teacher asked questions about a listening activity			X	
Students responded to questions to elicit oral vocabulary			X	
Students practiced introductions with classmates				X
Teacher and students practiced introductions				X
Students practiced asking and answering questions using vocabulary				X
Students listened and repeated web activity				X
Students listened and completed web activities				X
<b>TOTAL LISTENING &amp; SPEAKING ACTIVITIES:</b>	<b>20/77 (26%)</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>TOTAL ORAL VOCABULARY ACTIVITIES:</b>				
	<b>77 (100%)</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>29</b>