Authentic Activities and Materials for Adult ESL Learners

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Abstract

This article reports on a survey study that investigated the types of authentic materials and activities that ESL teachers of adults utilize and deem successful in their classrooms. Data were gathered through the use of a researcher-developed questionnaire consisting of nine items. Thirty participants provided examples of authentic materials and activities that they have successfully employed in adult ESL classrooms. Five thematic categories emerged from the data. Examples of authentic materials and activities are presented.

Introduction

According to the U.S. Department of Education, 44% of students in federally funded adult education programs in the United States are English as a second language (ESL) learners (IES, 2010). Many of these learners are at the lowest ESL level, beginning literacy. These students often face the dual challenge of developing basic literacy skills as well as proficiency in English (IES, 2010). Adult ESL learners enroll in English language instruction programs for a variety of reasons. Some want to improve their literacy and English proficiency skills in order obtain jobs or acquire better jobs. Others want to be able to communicate with their children's teachers or help their children with school work. Orem (2000) notes that for

adult ESL learners, a lack of language proficiency not only affects their access to housing and employment, but it may also hinder the role that they play in their children's education (p. 441).

Adult ESL learners have specific learning goals that reflect their life goals. It is important that language teachers closely attend to the needs of these learners and engage them in language learning. This article reports on a research study conducted to collect data concerning authentic activities and materials being successfully implemented by teachers of adult ESL students. Specifically, the study was designed to examine the question, "What authentic activities and materials are being successfully utilized in adult ESL classrooms?"

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Literature Review

Contextualized Teaching and Learning

Contextualized Teaching and Learning (CTL) is a "conception of teaching and learning that helps teachers relate subject matter content to real world situations" (Berns & Erickson, 2001, p. 2). CTL helps students make connections between the content they are learning and the real-life contexts where the content can be applied. Students then find meaning in the learning of the content. Instead of teaching skills and knowledge separate from real-life situations and hoping the learners will be able to transfer what they have learned in real life, instructors can help adults learn skills more rapidly through CTL (Dirkx & Prenger, 1997). When students acquire knowledge and skills by integrating content with real-life situations in appropriate contexts, they are likely to apply the content knowledge in real life (Berns & Erickson, 2001).

CTL is rooted in constructivism, which proposes that "students construct their own knowledge by testing ideas based on prior knowledge and experience, applying these ideas to a new situation, and integrating the new knowledge gained with pre-existing intellectual constructs" (Berns & Erickson, 2001, p. 2). CTL is strongly congruent with adult learning theories. One of the most important assumptions of adult learning is that the accumulated experience of adult learners serves as both a rich resource and a stimulus for learning (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). CTL can be found in a variety of adult learning settings, such as adult literacy, workplace education, and family literacy programs. In these settings, academic content and the life experiences of learners are closely integrated (Imel, 2000).

Imel (2000) reviewed two studies that examined the use of contextual learning in adult learning settings and concluded that contextual learning was driven by teachers' and curriculum developers' ideas of how the knowledge would be used and employed within that context (para. 7). This suggests that teachers of adult ESL learners should give a prominent place to the needs and goals of the learners they serve.

CLT and Authenticity

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has been advocated as an accepted paradigm for language teaching. In CLT, "language techniques are designed to engage learners in the pragmatic, authentic, functional use of language for meaningful purposes" (Brown, 2007, p. 241). These techniques may include, but are not limited to, information gap, role play, and games, all using authentic materials. These techniques and materials are presumed to help learners be prepared for "real-world" communication outside the classroom.

However, some cast doubt on the claims of authenticity within CLT. For example, Kumaravadivelu (2006) challenges the claim that CLT practice "actually promotes serious engagement with meaningful negotiation, interpretation, and expression in the language classroom" (p. 62). In other words, communicative curriculum itself cannot guarantee authenticity. In a 1987 study, Nunan observed so-called communicative classrooms and found that they were anything but communicative. Similarly, Kumaravadivelu (1993) analyzed lessons taught by teachers who claimed to use the CLT approach and concluded that even those teachers committed to CLT may not create opportunities for authentic interaction in their classroom (p. 113).

Authenticity, according to Rilling and Dantas-Whitney (2010), "should be framed in broader terms to include learner cognition, engagement, collaboration, problem solving, critical analysis, and the development of language for specific and often localized communication purposes" (p. 1). Authenticity in the classroom entails more than using authentic texts and simulating authentic activities. Instead, we must "address the needs and interests of students, engaging them in authentic, real-life tasks, allowing them ownership of the curriculum" (Felix, 2005, p. 88). When engaging learners in authentic classrooms, it is critical to ask, "Whose texts and whose language standards should be used? Who sets the goals for language learning?…Can we empower students to gain a sense of ownership in the language classroom?" (Rilling & Dantas-Whitney, 2010, p. 1).

Purcell-Gates, Degener, Jacobson, and Soler (2002) conducted a nationwide U.S. study of adult learners and examined changes in the literacy practices of these adults as a result of attending adult literacy programs. They found that using real-life materials and authentic activities in adult literacy classes impacts the literacy practices of these learners. Specifically, they found that adults who attended programs or classes with more authentic literacy activities reported (a) reading and writing more often outside of the classroom and (b) reading and writing more complex texts.

Condelli, Wrigley, Yoon, Cronen, and Seburn (2003) conducted a nationwide study in the U.S. to explore the question of what strategies or techniques work for low-level literacy students in developing their English reading skills and oral skills. Participants were new immigrants with less than 6 years of schooling in their home countries. They did not possess strong literacy skills in either their native language(s) or English. One of the key findings for reading development was that their reading improved more, as measured by standardized tests, if they were in classes where the teacher implemented more real-life activities.

Method

Participants

Participants in this study were a volunteer pool of 30 teachers of adult ESL in programs located throughout the United States. All participants are members of regional or national professional associations in the field of adult education.

The overall experience level of this group of teachers was relatively high. They had taught students of all proficiency levels, ranging from low beginners to advanced learners. Fifty-seven percent of the participants (n=17) had at least 4 years of experience teaching adult ESL learners; and 20% (n=6) had taught adult ESL for more than 10 years. Only 17% of the participants (n=5) had teaching experience of less than 1 year.

The participants were also relatively well-trained: 33% (n=10) had master's degrees or higher in TESOL, and 27% (n=8) had a TESOL certificate; 33% (n=10)

have taken TESOL training courses offered by various agencies. Only two participants indicated having no formal TESOL training.

Procedures

We contacted selected associations and commissions that have adult ESL teachers as members and requested their help in distributing the survey. The Kentucky Association for Adult and Continuing Education, the Commission on Adult Basic Education, and the Virginia Association for Adult and Continuing Education agreed to send the survey to their members who teach in adult ESL/ESOL programs. Two weeks later, a follow-up e-mail was sent to the targeted associations and commissions. We also dispatched the link to personal contacts who are currently teaching adult ESL in various states and are members of one or more professional associations. A total of 30 completed surveys were returned.

Instrumentation

The study incorporated a researcher-developed questionnaire consisting of nine items (five open-ended questions and four multiple-choice questions). The survey begins with a short introduction, which includes a statement regarding the purpose of the study and the types of information that were to be collected. The four multiple choice questions were designed to collect demographic data from the respondents, including (a) how long they had been teaching adult ESL, (b) what type of training they received, (c) the levels of learners they were teaching, and (d) the regions of the world where their learners are from. The five open-ended questions ask teachers to provide examples of authentic materials, activities, and assignments that they deem effective.

Analysis

The analysis of data was limited to questionnaire responses. Established qualitative analysis techniques were employed. A content analysis was performed on the data. After using items on the questionnaire to

develop initial coding categories, the data were analyzed for emerging categories. Next, utilizing both sets of categories, data were reduced and charted on a data display. Finally, all coded and charted data were analyzed again to discover major patterns across the coded and charted data. The analysis was iterative in order to ensure that possible differences in the interpretation of responses were explored. To check the reliability of the analysis, a peer review was conducted to obtain second and third opinions on the findings. An audit trail was maintained throughout the analysis.

Results

The following question guided the study: "What authentic activities and materials are being used in adult ESL classrooms?" All participants reported employing a wide variety of types of authentic materials and activities. An analysis of this data revealed five emerging categories related to the *what* and *how* of authentic curriculum and instruction in adult ESL classrooms. These thematic categories are as follows:

(a) Employment, (b) Technology, (c) Consumer-Related Goods, (d) Consumer-Related Services, and (e) Citizenship/Civic Participation. Results and analysis are reported in relation to each of these categories.

Employment

Participants' activities related to the first thematic category, Employment, are provided in Table 1. Topics such as conducting a job search, filling out applications, writing resumes, and mock interviews are included in this section.

Many adult ESL learners take language classes to further their careers or pursue job opportunities. Giving them hands on experience with the job seeking process is beneficial to them both in enhancing their employment opportunities and developing their language skills. In this category, the job seeking process includes identifying the types of jobs students are seeking, finding these jobs in the newspaper and online job sites, filling out application forms and writing resumes, and preparing for job interviews.

Table 1. Employment Activities

Materials or Media	Activities
1. Employment-related materials (including those for finding job openings, applying, and interviewing)	a. Give a needs assessment to determine the types of jobs that students may be interested in. b. Scan newspapers and do online searches for job openings. c. Supply job applications from various businesses and have students practice completing them. d. Give students the employer's perspective and talk about appropriate dress for an interview. e. Watch and discuss videos of job interviews. f. Have mock interviews. g. Write resumes.

Technology

Participants in the study reported designing and implementing a variety of activities involving student interaction with technology. As displayed in Table 2, activities in the Technology area incorporated student use of e-mail, the internet, videos, podcasts, audio recordings, CDs, television, and cell phones.

The Technology activities fall into two categories, using personal technology devises such as e-mail and one's phone and using more generic and non-personal channels like television and the internet. It is important to note that teachers took advantage of the interactive aspects of technology to help the students practice their language skills. For example, students used cell phones to call the teacher and other students, and a PenPal Project was implemented via email.

Technology was also used to enable students to function effectively in life. For example, students learned to use search engines to access goods and services and use the MapQuest to access directions. Finally, technology was used to provide visual and audio support for language acquisition. For example, students recorded their own reading for pronunciation critique and watched the weather channel to learn vocabulary and expressions.

Table 2. Technology Activities

Materials or Media	Activities
1. E-mail	a. Implement a Pen Pal Project to foster vocabulary acquisition and writing skills. b. Notify an employer or teacher via email regarding an absence (to encourage composition of e-mails).
2. Internet	a. Use search engines to access goods and services (e.g., free health clinics) to increase vocabulary. b. Use Map Quest to access directions to students' homes to increase vocabulary.
3. Videos/Podcasts	a. Interact with videos and podcasts to foster vocabulary, including idioms. b. As a class, film student-narrated videos advertising ESL classes at the university to increase vocabulary and build fluency. c. Have students watch and discuss video-taped news. Focus on cultural matters and key vocabulary.
4. Audio recordings/ CDs	a. Have students record their reading to critique pronunciation. b. Have students listen to music from different countries on CDs during journal writing.
5. Television	a. Watch the weather channel to teach vocabulary and expressions. Have students make reports regarding weather predictions.
6. Cell Phones	a. In small groups, students learn functions of cell phones. Then each student calls the teacher. Students also call members of the class to obtain designated information. The information is reported in class. b. Take pictures of people, places, interests, or special concerns with cell phones to spark discussions and writing assignments.

Consumer Goods

Participants' activities related to the third thematic category, Consumer Goods, are provided in Table 3. Examples of topics addressed in this thematic grouping pertain to shopping, ordering food at a restaurant, and reading labels to compare products.

The area of Consumer Goods shows that the need for reading and writing skills is everywhere. Diverse activities include getting food outside of the home, getting money out of a bank account, or completing an application of some type. The advertising materials and labels provide information that can be as different

as what is important to one's health to information that helps the buyer make determinations on the quality of a product. The ubiquitous availability of diverse materials in the Consumer Goods area makes them an excellent source of authentic instructional materials.

Table 3. Consumer Goods Activities

Materials or Media	Activities
1. Menus	a. Match words with pictures on menus. b. Read menus from favorite restaurants. c. Role play calling a restaurant and ordering a meal from a take-out menu. d. Visit a restaurant as a class and practice reading menus, ordering food, using table manners, and paying the bill.
2. Advertisements	a. Role play shopping for various items in a sales flyer. b. Teach words and phrases like clearance, final sale, and buy one and get one free, c. Identify food and beverages and compare prices from a number of ads. d. Read ads and make a grocery list. e. Use ads to learn about buying clothes. Teacher brings a bag of clothes for students to model, identify, and describe.
3. Checks/ Applications	a. Write a check to purchase designated items. b. Fill out an application for a store bonus card and apply for a card.
4. Labels	a. Read labels on various consumer goods. Compare goods to items in the countries represented.

Consumer-Related Services

Participants' activities related to the fourth thematic category, Consumer-Related Services, are provided in Table 4. Examples of topics addressed in this thematic grouping include health and safety, banking, postal services, transportation, and news.

In order for adult ESL learners to communicate effectively, they should be able to perform various basic communication functions. Many of Consumer-Related Services activities were used to teach these basic communication functions such as providing personal information, providing directions using public transportation schedules or city maps, making requests, reporting accidents and/or emergencies, and carrying out various transactions at banks and post offices. Role playing was a main strategy used to teach these various functions.

Table 4. Consumer-Related Services Activities

Materials or Media	Activities
1. Medical paperwork and information	a. Provide information on free health clinics, free screenings, and reduced doctor fees; teach students to fill out the required paperwork for medical services. b. Role play visiting a doctor's office and filling out the paperwork. c. Practice reading the print on prescription drugs as well as over-the-counter medications.
2. Emergency Services information	a. Teach students when and how to call 911. b. Visit a fire station with students and their families where they can learn about fire safety and see the inside of an ambulance. c. Learn about power outages and practice calling to report an outage.
3. Transportation-related materials (e.g., schedules and maps)	a. Provide public transportation schedules. Emphasize the days of the week, times (e.g., a.m. vs. p.m.), and names of streets. b. Provide city maps for students to read and give each other directions to designated places. (Also use Map Quest to obtain directions).
4. Driving-related publications/ materials	a. Go over driving rules. b. Draw and label road signs. c. Have a police officer visit the class. Role play situations involving reporting information as a witness to a traffic accident.
5. News-related materials (e.g., articles, cartoons, and special reports)	a. Provide newspaper articles for reading, discussion, and dictation in dyads. b. Provide political cartoons, special news reports, and graphics to verbally summarize and analyze and then express in writing. c. Provide articles for students to read about community and current events. d. Provide special ESL paper, "News for You", for discussion e. Summarize for students local, state, national, and international daily headlines. Have them listen for details.
6. Postal and banking materials	a. Students role play going to the bank and post office to carry out various transactions.

Citizenship and Civic Participation

Participants' activities related to the fifth thematic category, Citizenship and Civic Participation, are provided in Table 5. Examples of topics addressed in this thematic grouping include citizen-ship, voting, and participation in community events.

Citizenship and Civic Participation activities are further divided into two categories: materials and information related to citizenship and materials and information related to civic participation. These activities demonstrate that language skills development and civics content can be easily integrated into the adult ESL classroom. One reason is the special interest for citizenship test preparation among these adult ESL learners. Another reason is the readily

available resources related to US history, government, and civic participation.

Table 5. Citizenship and Civic Participation Activities

Materials or Media	Activities
1. Materials and information related to citizenship	a. Teach citizenship concepts and vocabulary such as the meaning of the American flag, the Pledge of Allegiance, and classroom expectations for their children. b. Teach students to sing the national anthem (using a written script). c. Students draw and color the flag of their native country and the American flag. Students learn the meaning of the stars and stripes. d. Students visit a citizenship office for a tour and presentation. e. Students practice asking and answering questions for citizenship classes.
2. Materials and information related to civic participation	a. Guest speakers encourage students to vote. b. Identify election results and voter percentages and preferences. c. Students write an article for a civics paper such as Our Voices d. Visit a library and help students complete forms for a library card, learn where easy-to-read books in English are located, learn how to check out books, and become familiar with all the services of the library. e. Have students participate in a community clean-up day. f. Have students write a letter to America and post at a literacy fair.

Discussion

Participants in the current study reported utilizing a wide range of authentic, meaningful activities which maximize student engagement and foster connections to real-world contexts and situations. These activities span a broad spectrum of work and life situations as revealed by the five thematic categories of Employment, Technology, Consumer Goods, Consumer Services, and Citizenship/Civic Participation. In other words, these activities are inextricably linked to students' needs, everyday lives, and experiences. They provide students with opportunities not only to interact with authentic materials but also to meaningfully connect their language learning to the outside world in genuine communication.

Notably, the recommended activities of the participants also necessitate that students use the English language in a holistic, integrated fashion. Within the set of activities presented in Tables 1 through 5 are opportunities for students to learn and practice vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, pragmatic and semantic elements, and more. Speaking, listening, reading, and writing are interwoven in a natural fashion as students engage in true communication involving the negotiation of meaning.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the types of authentic, contextualized activities presented in this study provide opportunities for students to take ownership of their language use and express their own *voice.* They provide a venue for teachers to encourage and empower students to pursue their own goals, both inside and outside of the language learning classroom.

Limitations and Recommendations

The current study was designed as an exploratory inquiry into the types of authentic activities and materials that are being successfully integrated into adult ESL instruction. Participants responded to a researcher-developed questionnaire in which they were asked to provide examples of materials and activities that they have successfully implemented in their teaching. Because the study involved voluntary completion of a survey, the 30 participants were self-selected. Thus, the results of this inquiry are not meant to be representative of what is taking place in all settings or programs; rather, they are presented as a pool of ideas and practices that have met with success among the teachers who participated in this study.

The ideas presented within this article can serve as both a resource for practitioners and an impetus for further research. ESL teachers are encouraged to identify the needs and goals of their own students and build upon the pool of activities presented herein. Further research is needed to examine the impact of authentic, contextualized instruction on adult learners of English in a variety of settings both in the U.S. and internationally. Such research could be structured to contain measures of student achievement in specific areas of language (e.g., literacy) over time. Finally, additional research is warranted on the use and impact of authentic assessment in adult ESL and English as a Foreign Language settings.

Conclusion

Although Communicative Language Teaching has been accepted as a dominant language teaching approach and is used as a framework in most textbooks, merely using texts that have an authentic appeal does not necessarily result in appropriate, meaningful, and successful instruction of adult ESL learners. Participants in this study provided examples of authentic materials and activities currently yielding success for adult students inside and outside of the classroom.

When materials and teaching activities are closely aligned with the learner's needs and goals, learner motivation and success naturally follow. The authentic materials and activities reported within this study can serve as both a resource for teachers and a springboard for generating new ideas.

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