

Adult ESL and Kindergarten: An Unlikely Meeting to Improve Literacy Instruction

2013 Harold B. Allen Award Winner

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Enhancing literacy instruction for adult learners with limited literacy can begin by reaching out and learning from our K-2 teaching colleagues.

Reaching out to meet the needs of an overlooked population

In a recent study circle, four adult ESL teachers looked to kindergarten classrooms to learn more about emergent literacy instruction. Walking through hallways of macaroni art and finger paintings, we entered a very foreign space – one full of tiny desks and colorful carpet squares. We are all teachers of LESLLA learners, adult immigrant and refugee students with little or no literacy in their first languages (LESLLA stands for low-educated second language and literacy acquisition; these are adult second language learners who have very little or no literacy in their first languages, www.leslla.org). Now living in the U.S., our learners face a double challenge: acquiring English while learning to read an alphabetic print language for the first time. LESLLA teachers must be reading specialists, language experts, and resettlement workers all rolled into one. This group of adult ESL learners is largely neglected by both researchers and materials developers, and resources are scarce.

However, within our communities, right down the street from many adult ESL programs, early elementary teachers are teaching literacy and language to young new readers every day. Kindergarten, first, and second graders (K-2) are also discovering the alphabetic principle, acquiring the components of reading, and building their identities as readers and writers as they prepare for academic success. While adult ESL and K-2 are strikingly different contexts, there is much overlap.

By asking ourselves, “Who knows more about teaching early reading than we do?” we formed a study circle to research connections between literacy instruction in K-2 and LESLLA. Always keeping in mind that our students are *adult* learners, we observed K-2 instruction, worked individually with young learners, read research together, and engaged in discussions and reflective journaling over several weeks.

Wisdom gleaned from our K-2 colleagues

What did we learn that might be useful for an adult low-literate ESL classroom teacher? Quite a bit! Below is a list of the key take-aways from our collaborate inquiry.

1. *Establish strong routines and common language for regular classroom activities.* Routines might include a morning message and sign in, calendar work, independent reading time, an ‘unfinished work basket,’ a ‘choice box’ when students arrive early, etc. When students know what to expect from their day and know the names of activities, they are better able to participate without frequent teacher-direction.
2. *Offer a regular literacy-work period where learners choose from various literacy activities.* Choices might include small group, partner, or individual tasks such as phonics and phonemic awareness activities, vocabulary matching within your topic, ‘reading the room’

or word wall, re-sequencing a familiar story, reading alone, reading to someone, etc. You can use this independent time to work with students who need extra attention.

3. *Begin a classroom library and make time for independent and peer-to-peer reading.* Make a point to read to students and allow time for students to read to themselves and to peers often. Fill your library with level-appropriate and adult-appropriate materials. Use the public library to supplement your program's texts and to bring in books within your current topic.
4. *Increase students' comprehension and engagement with texts by eliciting and pointing out text connections.* Text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections help learners experience stories more deeply and leads to higher order thinking skills.
5. *Find ways to integrate numeracy instruction into literacy focused time.* Take the time to write out number sentences when calculating attendance or doing calendar work. Create charts and graphs together in response to mingles and surveys. Count by 2s, 5s, 10s when handing out sheets or books. Math is a work skill and an academic skill, and it need not be divorced from literacy instruction.
6. *Get literacy off the page.* Learners who are new to print tire easily with pencil and paper activities, and often such activities do not mirror the language use students need outside of school. Instead, appeal to a wider set of learning preferences and up the energy in your room by using manipulatives, getting learners up at the white board, using iPads and Smart Boards if you have them, and keeping students moving.
7. *Explain WHY you are doing what you are doing in the classroom.* Leave no mysteries in the classroom; regard your learners as partners in the process and let them in on your thinking.
8. *One step at a time.* No need to change too much or too quickly. No doubt much of what you are already doing is working well, but perhaps could be enhanced by some of our findings. Incremental implementation of new practices is ideal for both teaching and learning.
9. *Reach out to colleagues.* LESLLA teaching can be particularly isolating, but finding fellow teachers with whom to share your discoveries and puzzles can be incredibly rewarding. Visit each others' classrooms, reach out to other contexts that might inform your work, and keep communicating about your practice.

Additional Resources

www.leslla.org

Low Educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition (LESLLA) for Adults is an international forum of researchers who share an interest in research on the development of second language skills by adult immigrants with little or no schooling prior to entering the country of entry.

www.esl-literacy.com

An online community of practice that provides resources and information to support the professional development of ESL literacy practitioners

www.multilingualminnesota.org

Multilingual Minnesota supports the many languages spoken in Minnesota families by providing language-related resources for parents and caregivers, teachers, and learners.

www.newamericanhorizons.org

What's a LESLLA class look like? The New American Horizons video project for teachers offers a number of online videos of classrooms. The video entitled *Building Literacy with Adult Emergent Readers* showcases a lesson using the language experience approach with a group of LESLLA learners.

A summary of the dissertation research from which this article is drawn can be found here:

http://www.tirfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/TIRF_DDG_2012_PatsyVinogradov_Final.pdf

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