

PREPARING TEACHERS TO HELP LOW-LITERACY ADULT ESOL LEARNERS

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1 Introduction

Across the United States adult immigrants that do not speak English attend ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) classes in publicly-funded adult education programs. These classes are generally free or at very little cost to the learners, and frequently held in the evenings. Each state receives federal funds to provide these educational services and distributes them accordingly to programs within the state that meet their criteria for program standards and requirements for assessment and accountability. The programs vary in size, learner ethnicity and other characteristics, curriculum, structure, entry dates, and not least of all, level of expertise of the teachers.

Many of the teachers that work with the ESOL population in these publicly-funded adult education classes, unfortunately, are untrained in working with the low-literate adult population. In fact, the majority have little training in teaching ESOL to adults in general, before they begin in the classroom. On a frequent basis in-service workshops are held for these teachers so that they can acquire the skills and knowledge to help their students learn English in order to successfully participate in their new communities, at work and at home.

In Virginia these professional development workshops are provided by the Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center (VALRC) at no cost to the programs or teachers. The VALRC is the professional development entity of the Office of Adult Education and Literacy of Virginia's Department of Education. Its vision is that every adult education and literacy practitioner and organization has the tools to help build a better future for its learners. It provides adult education and literacy resources, publications, and training for teachers of adults in Virginia.

As the ESOL Specialist at the VALRC, I am charged with providing support for Virginia's ESOL adult education programs and their staff in the areas of professional development, assessment, curriculum, and instructional resources. I organize trainings around the state, create curricula, disseminate the latest research that reflects best practices and generally respond to programs' needs and demands. The needs of the programs and teachers around the state vary from region to region. In the next sections I first present some demographics about Virginia, and after that I describe how the Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center tries to support teachers in the different regions in doing their jobs.

2 *Demographics*

Table 1 presents some statistics of the population of adult second language learners in Virginia. Virginia has a total population (5 years and over) of almost six million with 4,741,805 over the age of 18 years and 127,015 of these speak English “not well” or “not at all”. Of this last group 44,565 (35%) have less than a 9th grade education while only 5,015 (4%) hold a graduate or professional degree. In the labor market 24,855 (35%) are employed in service positions while only 8,260 (11.5%) work in management or professional jobs. The number of linguistically isolated households is 24,805; in other words, in 65% of English Language Learner (ELL) households no-one speaks English.²²

Table 1: Percentages of ELL population in Virginia related to education and occupations

Demographic	Number	Percentage
Total population (5 years +) of Virginia	4,741,805	100 %
ELL adult population (18 years +) (does not speak English well or at all)	127,015	2.7 %
ELLs with < 9 th grade ed.	44,565	35 %
ELLs with grad. or professional degree	5,015	4 %
ELLs with management + professional jobs	8,260	11.5 %
ELLs with service jobs	24,855	35 %

The ESOL programs are trying to reduce this percentage of homes in which no-one is able to speak English. Each year the number of students enrolled in adult education classes rises. The majority of the students in these classes are at the beginning levels with approximately 48 % at the lowest levels of proficiency. In fact, 19% of them are at the beginning literacy level and the number at this level increases with each year (see Table 2). The levels ‘beginning ESL’ to ‘advanced high ESL’ are more or less comparable to what in the European context is called level A1, A2, B1, B2 and C1 respectively (see Janssen-van Dielen, this volume) .

Table 2: Adult ESOL program enrollment 2004-05 (Annual report, Office of Adult Education and Literacy, Virginia Department of Education, 2004)

Levels	Number of students
Beginning Literacy	2,428
Beginning ESL	3,122
Intermediate Low ESL	2,486
Intermediate High ESL	1,972
Advanced Low ESL	2,103
Advanced High ESL	909
Total	13,020

²² Statistics taken from: U.S. Department of Labor, Employment & Training Administration, Special Tabulation of LEP Information from Census 2000, <http://www.doleta.gov/reports/CensusData/>

If you compare the total number of adults in Virginia that do not speak English well or at all (127,015) with the number of adults enrolled in our adult education programs (13,020), it is obvious that we are only serving 10.3 % of our potential learners. Also to be considered are the large number of immigrants, mostly migrant workers, that are undocumented. Consequently, these workers that live in the shadows go unreported. They are not included in the total official number of potential learners which would swell immensely if they were.

3 *Challenges of Emerging Areas*

In Northern Virginia, close to Washington, D.C., there have been for several decades many immigrants from hundreds of countries. In some of the cities, the number of immigrants can be from one quarter to over one half of the population. The areas of southeast Virginia (the Tidewater area), northwest (Shenandoah Valley) also have large immigrant populations. The educational level of these immigrants is mixed. Many possess graduate degrees from their home countries while others may not have had much formal schooling in their home countries. The level of expertise of the teachers in these areas is generally very high in the publicly-funded programs. Many of these teachers possess graduate degrees in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and even develop and publish curricula, participate in research studies and disseminate their findings.

In other regions, such as the rural southwestern and southern portions of the state, newcomers have been slow to arrive. These new settlers, by and large, are from Central and South America and have low levels of literacy. It is in these regions that programs are beginning to see the influx of non-English speakers into the adult education classes where up until a few years ago the learners had only been native speakers. Programs and teachers are faced with new challenges on a daily basis. Not only do the teachers have less experience, but the learners themselves present added demands since they cannot read in any language and cannot speak English. And at the state level we are faced with the challenge of disseminating the latest results from research that will provide these teachers with models for best practice.

As mentioned, until now the ethnic populations in many regions of the state, except for Northern Virginia, have been in the main homogenous, a mixture of European descendents and Afro-American. These regions are dotted with farms and rural communities. During the last decade emerging populations of immigrants that do not speak English have become visible. This influx of immigrants is a new phenomenon that has economic and social repercussions. New demands are placed on educational, health and social services. Unlike the more cosmopolitan immigrants of Northern Virginia, the newcomers that are settling there tend to be less-educated, agricultural workers. The majority are from Mexico or Central America where they only attended school until the third grade. Although many do learn some oral English, they struggle to read and write in it.

The educators working in adult education do not have experience or training to work with this low-literacy adult immigrant group. In fact, the majority of the practitioners have no preparation or experience in teaching English to speakers of other languages at all.

4 Services and Resources Provided to Promote Professional Development

Until recently the teaching of ESOL, both to children and to adults, has been largely ignored in the United States as a professional field of endeavor. The reasons for this range from a general belief that anyone can teach their own language to the previous paucity of academic foundational studies in linguistics that carry practical implications to the classroom in which life-skills is the focus. Adding to this, as mentioned before, the increasing influx of non-English speaking immigrants who are in urgent need to be served, most programs will hire inexperienced and untrained teachers. Although many universities across the nation have recently initiated certificate and MA programs for TESOL, they focus on the teaching of the structure and forms of the language and/or are geared towards Pre-K-12 (Pre kindergarten through high school) instruction.

For many years the ESOL classroom offered instruction using a traditional model that was teacher-centered and textbook-driven. It focused on grammar lessons, emphasizing accuracy above fluency. Strikingly, it presupposed high literacy and grammatical awareness in L1. The language learning activities were usually repetition or substitution drills, comprehension questions, and fill in the blank worksheets. These were done individually or as a whole class responding to the teacher's modeling or questions. With the growing acceptance of the new research-based methodologies for language teaching and acquisition, however, these teacher and grammar-centered instructional strategies were abandoned for more communicative ones. These, in turn, required that appropriate teacher training in these new methodologies be conducted.

4.1 Practitioner Profile and Needs

Surveys conducted a few years ago plus anecdotal information suggest that the majority of ESOL instructors have one to two years of experience and are part-time. Many teachers come from a K-12 (kindergarten through high school) background, thus do not have experience in working with adults or the knowledge about adult learning theory. Ninety-nine percent have a bachelor's degree. Although some of the teachers have experience teaching native English speakers how to read or to prepare them to pass the test to obtain the (GED) General Educational Development diploma, many have never taught a language. Frequently, the ESOL teachers are retired school teachers or just retirees with a desire to help their community.

Taking in mind the above characteristics of these teachers, at a meeting in late 2004, 24 regional representatives were asked to complete a survey about their possible professional development needs. They were asked some general questions about their regions, e.g. number of ESOL programs, type of population, and other demographics and other questions dealing with staff development needs. The results indicated that the majority of teachers preferred workshops in teaching multi-level classrooms, assessment, and implementation of instructional strategies. When asked what other types of professional development opportunities, aside from workshops, would be useful and of interest, they overwhelmingly responded that they would prefer participating in curriculum design and development and sharing lessons and ideas electronically with colleagues. Their answers provided useful input in the planning of professional activities for the following year.

4.2 Workshops, Blackboard and Other Resources

Faced with these new challenges the local school systems seek help from the state department of education. Because they are distant from the state offices located in the capital, Richmond, the VALRC must reach out to them. The staff at VALRC works to address needs demonstrated and expressed by the practitioners and program managers for all types of adult educators and programs, not only ESOL, by providing staff development and resources. The services that we offer in adult education are: new teacher training for Adult Basic Education teachers and ESOL, professional development either through face-to-face workshops or distance learning, professional newsletters, GED (General educational Development) assistance, technical assistance to programs, a clearinghouse of resources, a web site <http://valrc.org> and publications. These are provided without charge to Virginia Adult Education and Literacy providers.

Although we serve all practitioners and programs of adult education, increasingly more efforts are being concentrated in the area of ESOL. Approximately, 48% of all adults enrolled in adult education classes in Virginia now are ESOL learners. We do not have available a breakdown of how many educators are ESOL teachers, but we do know that their numbers are far less than those that work with native speakers. Obviously due to the emerging demand for ESOL classes, we must do more to create positions for ESOL teachers and to provide them with the necessary instructional knowledge and skills.

Currently, in order to assist these inexperienced teachers and to provide them with the latest in research-based best practices, the VALRC organizes and funds regional and local workshops. Expert trainers are sent out to all regions of the state to facilitate day-long workshops in a variety of topics, including ESOL Basics and training in implementing assessment tools. These are generally well-attended, but they are certainly not enough to prepare the teachers well. Additionally, three times a year we offer an eight week facilitated asynchronous online course, entitled ESOL Basics, which has been extremely popular for new teachers. This is conducted through an online course management system, Blackboard, hosted by the university web server. Any adult ESOL practitioner in Virginia can take this free course. The curriculum content of the ESOL Basics Online explains how to identify characteristics of adult ESOL learners, introduces effective methods of teaching languages, focuses on teaching life-skills, provides strategies for teaching multi-level classes, and addresses how to teach the four language skills and how adults learn another language. Facilitators, available to help you throughout the eight-week course, lead you through the content and technical aspects of the course. Each week's lesson addresses a topic in ESOL instruction. Course activities include readings, assignments, and discussions. The lessons are sequential. Lessons and resources included in the course are the following:

- Characteristics of ESOL Learners
- Methods and Needs Assessments
- Lesson Planning
- Teaching Speaking and Listening
- Teaching Reading and Writing
- The Integrated Lesson
- Professional Development
- Wrapping Up

Completion of the course is designed to require a minimum of 32 hours; approximately four hours for each of the eight topic sessions. In order to receive the certificate for participating in the ESOL Basics training, participants must complete all assignments, respond to the discussion postings of the facilitator, and respond to one of their classmates at least once in each discussion.

Each year during the summer intensive institutes, of two to three days duration, are held at different colleges around the state. The one held in Northern Virginia, which follows a conference format with workshops and presentations, is extremely popular. Smaller, but still popular, are institutes that are organized to explore in depth a central theme, such as teaching in a multilevel classroom, workplace ESOL or starting a new ESOL program.

Also, on our very extensive web site, <http://www.valrc.org>, we have numerous publications and resources for teaching ESOL made available at no cost to Virginia residents. One of these is the *ESOL Starter Kit* which has over 200 pages of background readings and resources for new teachers. Another is the *Virginia Adult Education Health Literacy Toolkit* that includes the links to online curricula available to ESOL teachers for helping their students learn to manage the health care system. Others are: the *Fairfax Family Literacy Curriculum*, the Fairfax EL/Civics Curriculum, and the *1999 REEP Family Literacy Curriculum*.

Except for our website, the online publications, the newsletters, ESOL Basics Online, most of our professional development offerings are face-to-face trainings. These require travel by the participants and/or trainers and can be costly to the state government to fund.

4.3 Graduate Certificate for Teaching Adult ESOL

Since 2004 the offering of a *Graduate Certificate for Teaching Adult ESOL* has been in the works. The goal of the certification process is to prepare Virginia educators to provide adult non-native speakers of English with competency-based, research-driven English language instruction.

There is a need to establish a graduate program for preparing teachers to teach competency-based English for the ever-increasing number of adult immigrants and refugees arriving each year who need to learn English in order to survive and provide for their families. These adult immigrants, for the most part, are not interested in pursuing higher education, but rather need everyday English. The learner-centered curricula and instruction offered in the state funded programs are based on the life-skills these adults must acquire to become active participants in their new communities. The concentration on life-skills distinguishes this type of instruction from that provided for children or for those only interested in learning English for academic or business purposes. It stresses problem-solving and learner interaction around many topics which are needed and requested by learners but not often found in textbooks, such as using credit, accessing community services and finding affordable health care.

Instead of the traditional way of teaching, the life-skills based ESOL methodology is learner-centered responding to the learner's immediate survival needs. The learners' needs, which are assessed by the teacher at the beginning of the instructional period, drive the course content. They generally work cooperatively in pairs or small groups since there is an emphasis on mastering fluency with the new language (i.e. ability to communicate). The learning tasks prepare the learner for communicating in everyday

situations. Lessons on grammar may be included to provide support but always relate to a skill being mastered. The materials represent real-life contexts (housing, health, community) and there are extra supports for low-literacy learners in the form of pictures, easier worksheets, working with the alphabet, and cloze exercises.

As mentioned earlier, few ESOL teachers for adults in Virginia are prepared to facilitate classes using the appropriate research-based curricula supporting competency-based instruction required by their programs. In response to this need, the Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center has proposed the creation of a certificate program in the teaching of adult ESOL which would satisfy the requirements for an add-on endorsement in Adult ESOL to the K-12 Virginia teaching license, provide courses that lead towards a masters in education, and constitute the program of study for a certificate in teaching ESOL to adults.

Since one of the major obstacles to professional development, especially for those that reside in the emerging areas of ESOL and with the greatest needs, has been their isolation and distance from the capital, we decided that the certificate program should incorporate distance learning. The suggested modality for the program is a blended one that would include one or two face-to-face sessions for each module while the rest of the course material will be facilitated online through Blackboard, a course management software. The face-to-face sessions would be held on the weekends in a central location. This choice of modality would enable teachers from distant regions of the state to participate.

The program will last from one and a half to two years. The variance will depend on length of each module and breaks between these. The modules may be seven to ten weeks in length. The courses to be part of the program are:

- Orientation (especially in the use of online technology)
- Second Language Acquisition
- English Linguistics for Adult ESOL Instructors
- Cross-cultural Education
- Methodology in Adult ESOL
- Adult Second Language Instruction
- Teaching Reading/Literacy to Adult English Language Learners
- Practicum along with three formal observations and six peer observations

When the teachers are not attending the face-to-face sessions, they will be required to participate in the online component of the course administered through Blackboard. They will need to complete the course readings (some of them available online), submit assignments, post questions and answers, and take part in any discussions. They can communicate with the instructor, the whole class or only certain classmates. Study groups can be formed in which only members of these groups can electronically communicate with each other within the system. Within each course syllabus there are one or more components that link theory to everyday practice. For example, in Methodology in Adult ESOL, by the completion of the course, participants should be able to:

- Apply current theories and approaches related to the practice of teaching adult English as a Second Language.
- Design language-learning activities that correspond to life-skills functions and contexts encountered by adult ESOL learners.

- Use a variety of research-based methods and techniques for teaching reading, writing, listening, and speaking to adults.
- Tailor instructional activities and techniques for students with limited formal education.
- Understand the special learning needs of refugees, senior citizens, and individuals with learning disabilities and employ appropriate teaching strategies.
- Use different forms of technology in the classroom and assist students with computer usage.
- Identify "best practices" in ESOL instruction, staff development, and materials for learners.
- There is still much work and preparation for establishing this certificate program.

Hopefully, by the fall of 2007, we will be able to initiate it.

5 Research to Practice

In conclusion, what teachers need is to be able to access to scientifically-based research on second language acquisition in adults, especially in adults with little L1 literacy. Since the majority of our adult ESOL students are at the Literacy or Beginning levels, teachers need to have the relevant research articulated to their practice. Where should teachers begin? Are the sequences for learning to read the same for adults as for children? What are the differences in learning to read for a native speaker and a non-native speaker of English? How does oral literacy influence learning to read? What exactly are "best-practices"?

The teachers need to obtain this information, reflect on its applicability to their own practice, and implement the research-based instructional strategies in their classrooms. To begin with they need recourse to relevant research, research conducted on populations that are similar to the students that they work with. As the specialist for ESOL staff development it is my responsibility to get this pertinent information out to the teachers across the state. Until recently, there has been little research done in this area so there has been little to disseminate to them. Dr. Larry Condelli, Managing Director at the American Institutes for Research in Washington, D.C., and colleagues (2003) however, conducted a seminal work, *Effective Instruction for Adult ESL Literacy Students: Findings from the What Works Study*, that gives critical insight into providing instruction based on research. Currently, he is conducting another project, *Explicit Literacy Impact Study*, which will also be central to guide emerging methodologies for this population. Special curricula for low-literate learners have been developed by the VALRC, but before these can be widely disseminated it behooves us to evaluate them against the current research that is being done.

References

- Condelli, L., Wrigley, H.S., Yoon, K., Cronen, S., & Seburn, M. (2003). *What Works Study for Adult ESL Literacy Students: Final Report*. Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research.