

## FROM SURVIVAL TO THRIVING: TOWARD A MORE ARTICULATED SYSTEM FOR ADULT ESL LITERACY

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### 1 *The context*

The United States is a long way from having a coherent system of immigrant education and workforce training. There is no national language policy that offers a vision for immigrant integration that addresses the language and literacy needs of immigrants and refugees as well as their job training and family support needs. There is no one federal office in charge of coordinating the multiple departments that fund services for immigrants. Rather the system consists of a patchwork of departments and services, each with its own regulations and requirements. As a result the system is highly fragmented. Finding ways to offer services for immigrant and refugee families with multiple needs is a complex and often frustrating endeavor. Similarly, effecting change across the many departments whose mission includes serving immigrants becomes a major undertaking. Involved in providing services to immigrants and refugees are the Department of Education (general adult ESL and EL Civics<sup>1</sup> as well as vocational and technical education), the Department of Labor (training and workforce development), the Department of Homeland Security (citizenship), the Department of Health and Human Services (refugee resettlement and temporary assistance to needy families - welfare). Since the federal monies for education and training flow from the national government to the states, most state bureaucracies mirror this patchwork, although a few states (11 or so) have combined adult education (which includes adult ESL) and workforce development.

In an ideal world any immigrant or refugee should be able to walk into a service agency and receive services and information that address multiple needs common to many poor families including the need for job training, English language development, and social support. Most strongly (and negatively) affected by this lack of a coherent and comprehensive system are those who need both training and English as a second language services in order to get jobs that pay a living wage. With a few exceptions, low literate immigrants who are new to English but need work in order to support

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<sup>1</sup> EL Civics stands for English Language and Civics. This strand is a subcategory of adult immigrant education focusing on English language acquisition and civic education with the goal of helping the foreign-born become full participants in civic life. For a discussion of civic education as part of ESL, see also Powrie (2007) *Civic education and adult biliteracy*.

themselves and their families do not have access to services that meet their needs for employment-focused language and literacy services that are linked to jobs.

## 2 *The importance of literacy*

Literacy is important to all aspects of life, from handling personal affairs, to working with others, and participation in a democratic society. It is an essential skill that helps people thrive individually, socially, and economically. It is critical for both individual functioning and for a well functioning society. Literacy gaps and mismatches between the skills of citizens and the need of the economy have serious repercussions.

For immigrant adults, literacy of any kind – literacy in the native language and literacy in the language of the new country – matter a great deal since social and economic benefits are directly related to prior education, literacy and language proficiency (Wrigley, et al., 2009; Batalova & Fix, 2008). As immigration from poorer countries that offer less education for its citizens increases, so does the need to improve the literacy skills of immigrants and refugees. In the U.S., as in other English speaking countries, English proficiency in general and English literacy in particular facilitate integration into the fabric of society and allow for broader participation in the mainstream of civic life and in the economy.

For millions of immigrants, in the U.S. and elsewhere, participation in adult education is the primary tool for acquiring the language of a new country, developing cultural competence, and gaining the knowledge and skills necessary for ongoing education. Gaining access to job training is the goal of many adults with limited language proficiency who see such training as a way to self-sufficiency. Social, political, and economic concerns warrant a system for adult immigrant education and training that promises to move individuals toward language proficiency and civic integration in a time-efficient and cost-effective way. Humanitarian concerns call for a system that moves refugees and immigrants with few resources to a place in society where they do not merely survive but thrive and build a better future for themselves and their children. But, such aims can only be attained if we have a system with services that are focused, well-articulated, and differentiated enough to respond to the specific language and literacy needs of different groups of newcomers. This system must take into account the goals and aspirations that motivate individuals and help them to persist. In the United States the system falls far short of this ideal.

The US system of adult education serves both native speakers with literacy needs and immigrants and refugees with limited proficiency in English. The latter group is highly diverse, including immigrants who have never gone to school or have only a few years of formal education as well as individuals who have high school diplomas or academic credentials. In spite of this wide range, the system uses a ‘one size fits all’ approach built under the assumption that all foreign-born adult learners, regardless of degree of proficiency or prior education need English to meet the language demands of daily life. While teachers are expected to take the goals of individual learners into account, in reality, more or less the same general life skills curriculum is taught to all of the students in ESL classes. By and large teachers are not trained to meet the special needs of students with minimal schooling and limited literacy in the native language. Nor are they trained to effectively teach students who may have high levels of education from the home country but are still lacking English communication skills.

The US adult education system consists of six levels of instruction starting with 'Beginning Literacy' and ending with 'High Intermediate ESL.' While individual teachers and programs are able to adapt the life skills approach to their classes, for the most part, there is little differentiation in content or approach across levels. As an informal review of the most popular text book series shows, instruction tends to be driven by an emphasis on life skill topics (family, community, health, holidays, work) and personal story telling. Although activities and tasks become somewhat more sophisticated over time, they simply provide variations on a common set of themes. While the language to be taught increases in complexity over time (past perfect instead of present tense), reading passages are longer and more writing is included, there is little acknowledgement that many of the students at the higher levels have strong educational backgrounds and have goals and interests related to academic topics rather than life skills. Nor is there an acknowledgement that many of the beginning level students lack fundamental literacy and have gaps in schooling that need to be addressed if they are to be prepared for job skills training and for work beyond entry level, dead-end jobs.

The US adult education system is built to parallel a public school system where students start in grade 1 and continue through to grade 12. However, this continuum of classes does not match the reality of the learning journey that adult second language learners undertake: Adults stay little more than 100 hours in a program on average; they may leave and never come back; or they may stop out and return for more ESL at a later time. (Since programs do not follow students longitudinally, exact data on who leaves and why and who returns to what effect are not available). Progress tends to be modest: On average, ESL students progress perhaps one or two levels of proficiency before dropping out. In the final analysis we see that those students who start at the beginning levels of ESL instruction don't stay in programs long enough to achieve the proficiency levels necessary to succeed in job training, obtain or advance to jobs that pay a living wage, or transition to vocational or academic classes at a college.

Even for students who enter at the higher levels of the system, there is a mismatch between the design of the system and students' reality and vision. The system assumes a progression from ESL to adult basic education for native speakers and those who are English proficient and then to the GED<sup>2</sup>, a high school equivalency certificate. The system does not take into account that many if not most of the more proficient ESL students come to programs already with a high school education in hand from the home country<sup>3</sup>. Adult basic education classes designed for native speakers (many of whom have learning challenges) don't meet their needs and don't prepare them for the academic English necessary to move to higher education. These literacy classes, primarily for native speakers who were unsuccessful in public school, merely detract better educated ESL students from transitioning to academic studies in a college or university.

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<sup>2</sup> GED stands for General High school Development. It is a test of five subjects that certifies that adults who pass have Canadian or US American high school level academic skills.

<sup>3</sup> The National Reporting System, the primary data collection system for U.S. adult education, does not track the educational backgrounds of ESL students, so no data is available on the years of schooling completed in the home country or elsewhere.

*3 The failure to consider literacy sufficiently*

In the current adult ESL system, educational levels in the home country are not taken into account; nor are literacy levels in the native language officially considered or recorded. The fact that some students cannot read in any language and therefore are likely to face major challenges in acquiring English literacy, while often acknowledged, has not yet translated into programs designed especially for this group. Quite to the contrary: teaching literacy in the native language is a highly controversial topic in spite of evidence that literacy skills in the native language facilitate the development of English literacy.

As things stand, the system operates under the assumption that 'English literacy is the only literacy that counts' (Caro & Wiley, 2008). In placing students in adult ESL classes and in designing educational plans for them, only English proficiency is considered, and teachers are expected to accommodate significant differences among learner groups whose only commonality is lack of English fluency. As a result, we may see a farm worker from Mexico with only an elementary education and needing basic literacy skills studying side by side with a dentist from Russia who is hoping to acquire enough academic English to enter college and practice his profession in the US.

In failing to consider educational backgrounds and degrees of literacy in the native language, the current system limits the effectiveness of services and 'cheats' groups at either end of the educational spectrum. Most affected and most in need are those with few years of schooling and low levels of literacy in the native language who have the most need and the fewest options for developing literacy on their own. When placed in classes where lack of native language literacy is not taken into account, they often drop out early. Many in this group will not return to school, convinced that they cannot learn. The failure of the system to meet the needs of the non-literate students is far reaching: individuals may internalize their lack of success as a personal shortcoming rather than seeing it as a failure of the system; they will be shut out from work, training, and other opportunities that require literacy; and they will be inhibited in their ability to help children with their homework and support their academic success.

Despite growing evidence of the importance and efficacy of offering literacy in the native language (Lukes, 2009); the system is slow to consider, discuss, and fund the various options that show promise: Basic Education in the Native Language (BENL); bilingual vocational training, or English language instruction with bilingual support (Condelli & Wrigley, 2008).

Research indicates that people need to learn literacy but once - and that the skills then transfer to other languages. For learners with limited or no literacy in their native language, effective approaches fall into three main categories: basic education in the native language (BENL), bilingual instruction (often with literacy development in the native language and an emphasis on development of oral skills in English), and ESL instruction with native language supports (Lukes, 2009; Condelli & Wrigley, 2003).

But failing to take into account educational backgrounds of immigrants is only part of the problem. The current system also fails to take into account the varying goals that motivate adults to learn English and persist and in this effort for months and years. While the system acknowledges that learners come with different goals related to work, civics, parenting, or academics, it is a rare program that is able to accommodate these goals in meaningful ways. As it is right now, individual teachers are asked to document learner goals and report when goals have been achieved as part of the National

Reporting System. Yet the system only counts short term goals (e.g., get a job) and not longer term goals where adult ESL could act as a transition point (e.g., get into a training program that could lead to a job with a family sustaining wage).

#### 4 *Matching educational responses to learner goals*

Just as adult immigrants and refugees differ in their educational backgrounds, they differ in their goals. Clearly, adults whose primary concern is to learn English to get a job, keep a job, or get a better job have different learning needs than those who come to classes for social reasons or for personal enrichment. Similarly, an individual who needs academic or professional English skills in order to transition to college requires a different educational pathway than someone whose goal for learning English is to help her children with their homework and use English to get things done in the community.

While ESL students do come to classes with a variety of purposes and goals, both short term (learn English) and long term (make significant changes in their social or economic circumstances), when primary and secondary goals are analyzed, goals related to employment predominate. Yet, currently, there is little guidance from the federal government or from the states on how to work collaboratively to create pathways for adult learners who want and need to work and come to classes to increase their economic opportunities.

While the US system does collect information on student goals as part of its National Reporting System, there are few organized efforts to create educational interventions designed to move students who share specific reasons for coming to classes (employment, stay or transition to higher education) toward those goals. On the contrary, most ESL programs try to be all things to all students, and ‘turf issues’<sup>4</sup> keep communities from developing plans that delineate who offers what kind of educational service for what kind of student (Wrigley, 2007). Currently, no such articulation exists in spite of research that suggests that students who can see progress toward their goals tend to persist longer than those who don’t see a clear connection between their purposes for attending classes and the curriculum being offered to them (Comings, 2007).

By overreaching and underperforming in particular areas, programs end up not serving any one group particularly well (with the possible exception of those who come to programs for social reasons). In teaching a curriculum that is designed to appeal to everyone regardless of reason or purpose for learning, programs run the danger of losing the very students who come to programs motivated to work hard to reach specific goals.

To remedy this situation, we need a system that links students whose goals are clear and specific with programs that are purposefully designed to meet these goals. Such a system will require community-wide planning as well as collaboratively outreach and referral strategies. It might also need state incentives so that programs which serve

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<sup>4</sup> Programs are partially paid by the number of students attending classes and programs try to fill all open slots even if another program in the community might be more appropriate. Exceptions exist in areas where there are long waiting lists. In these cases, programs might refer a student for whom there is no slot to a ‘competitor’.

fewer students but move them toward their goals in an accelerated fashion, will not be penalized.

#### 5 *Responding to the needs of literacy learners*

If we were to imagine a more responsive and therefore more effective and efficient system of literacy education and employment training, what might it look like?

Such a system must first of all recognize that literacy, the ability to read and write in any language, is a crucial factor in second language acquisition. An individual, who has no or little understanding of print, faces enormous challenges in trying to interpret and use literacy in a yet unfamiliar system.

As part of an overall system of immigrant education, there must be programs specifically designed to address the needs of those who have never learned to write or who have only basic literacy skills in the native language. Such programs must not only teach literacy but most also seek to teach the cognitive academic skills associated with schooling. It must provide the kind of background knowledge normally acquired in school, particularly knowledge in civics, math, and science that is necessary for success in training and in academic work and is often required to help children with their homework (even in elementary school). Merely teaching English literacy, functional life skills, and English conversational skills may not be enough to help lift undereducated immigrants who are new to English out of poverty and into the economic mainstream.

In areas where immigrant learners share a common language (and where trained teachers speak the language of the students), a model that combines basic literacy and content-based instruction of relevance to adults can provide a sound educational basis for those who have not had the opportunity to go to school in the home country. Content-based literacy of this kind provides a basis upon which English language education can build, reinforces family literacy, and acts as the first step toward success in adult education, academics, and training. It can also provide the subject matter knowledge necessary to pass the history and government components by the US citizenship test.

In cases where the sending country has an adult literacy program, partnerships can be developed that allow adult immigrants to close the educational gaps they have experienced and achieve school completion certificates (Mexico has such a program), while learning the language of the new country. Increased cognitive-academic skills, more education, and higher literacy skills in any language are likely to yield benefits not only for individuals but for families and communities as well. It will also facilitate English acquisition (the more you know in one language, the easier it is to learn in another) and facilitate transition to job skills training and academic or vocational education.

#### 6 *Foundation classes in adult ESL*

Currently, the US system offers free English language instruction to anyone who has no or limited proficiency in English. It makes sense to maintain a system designed to teach ESL as a foundation so that students can either continue learning on their own or transition to a special focus program that meets their need. Three levels of general ESL however, seems sufficient to lay a foundation before students get the opportunity to

select an ESL strand that promises to move them toward their special goal for learning English more quickly.

Program quality is uneven and teachers are often not trained in effective ways to foster second language acquisition at beginning levels. Other shortcomings need be addressed as well.

- Greater emphasis should be placed on connecting classrooms to community so that the English learned in class is used in real situations outside of the classroom so that English learning can be accelerated.
- The amount students at beginning levels spend in class is not enough to gain proficiency in English. More time must be spent on 'learning how to learn' beyond the classroom and on taking advantage of self-access opportunity for language learning.
- Hybrid classes must be established that combine teacher led classes with computer mediated instruction so that students can continue practicing English on their own. Students should be shown how to use technology for communication (e-mail, chats, texting) and to engage in high interest activities that promote language acquisition and use (on-line news from the home country, pod casts, quizzes).
- Differentiated instruction needs to be instituted so that more educated students with low English skills can be challenged by ideas that build on their background knowledge while the teacher works with students who need additional support.
- The standard life skills curriculum will need to be supplemented with content knowledge (geography, history) and strategies for negotiating systems (health, money, work) for less educated students. Even at beginning levels of ESL, adults should have the opportunity to engage in meaningful language interactions that require problem solving of various kinds using approaches such as task-based instruction, project-based learning, and scenarios for problem posing and problem solving.

### 7 *English for special purposes (English Plus)*

Once basic functional literacy and English conversational skills have been acquired, the system can be expected to take the different goals for learning English into consideration and offer special focus classes. While there may be a great many individual goals, broader aims for learning the language of a new country can be clustered into a few broad categories: English for work and training, life skills English, community ESL and citizenship, and English for transition to higher education.

English for Work or occupation-specific English classes need to integrate language and literacy skills with job training or offer work-related communication and employability skills for those individual whose interests are focused on work but who have not yet selected a specific job to train for. These classes can be targeted for youth and adults preparing for work or for incumbent workers. Classes can be taught as part of the adult ESL system or can be jointly funded by the Department of Education and the Department of Labor. Free classes should be informed by the job prospects in

particular industries and reflect the knowledge, skills, and strategies required for demand occupations such as health care, construction, transportation, high tech manufacturing, and 'green jobs.' Close relationships with employers need to be sought and pro-active job development and placement need to be instituted if adults who are not yet proficient in English are to compete with others who have stronger language and literacy skills. The emphasis should be on developing integrated programs that offer certificates recognized by industry to help ensure that the jobs the system is training offer wages that can sustain a family.

**Case in point**

In the US, the State of Washington, as part of its I-BEST model offers pre-employment training that combines English language and literacy development with job skills training in the trades and in health care. In each course, an ESL teacher and a vocational skills instructor work side by side to ensure that students understand lectures and gain essential technical skill. All training leads to a real certificate recognized by local employers in a demand field that pays a living wage (Prince and Jenkins, 2005). In Australia and the UK, similar approaches are being implemented under the rubric 'embedded learning' (Casey, 2006). Other programs in the U.S., such as the Center for Employment Training in San Jose, California, and the MET Program in El Paso Texas (Motivation, Education and Training) combine family support services with language and literacy development and hands-on training so that lack of literacy skills does not become a barrier to acquiring the vocational skills associated with better jobs (Wrigley et al., 2003).

**8 Incumbent worker training**

A system of quality education and responsive training for immigrants should also support classes for incumbent workers who need to upgrade their skills. These classes can be funded through collaborations between adult education providers and employers or unions. A focus on communication skills and problem solving strategies can help workers in dead-end jobs develop the competencies necessary to find more fulfilling or better paying work. These classes can be offered on-site with companies providing at least partial release time or as an intensive class meeting weekends or evenings or other times convenient to working adults. While solely employer funded classes often focus on the skills workers need to be productive at their current jobs, courses funded with public monies should focus in part on the job skills that workers not yet fully competent in English might need to change employment.

**Case in point**

McDonald's Corporation has put into place a bilingual worker training program that teaches basic job knowledge in both Spanish and English. The company currently offers a national ESL program designed for assistant managers who plan to move into management. The program serves immigrants (mostly women) with limited education (close to half lack a high school education). The program uses a hybrid model of

instruction that combines distance learning with on-site practice and individually based e-learning to reinforce skills. Workers participate in pairs (buddies) and take part in synchronous (real time) interactive lessons delivered on the computer and via telephone conferencing. Workers from different regions of the US meet once a month at a local community college to get to know the instructors as well as other participating workers and to build community as a class. During these meetings, workers also gain hands-on practice with the technology they will use to participate in the lessons. The program was developed through collaboration between the corporation, ESL experts, local instructors, and owner-operators of local McDonald restaurants. The national office funded the development of the program and brought together experts in second language acquisition, teaching English as a Second Language and technology-mediated instruction, and then hired an ESL professor and others to create the curriculum, teach the pilot, and train subsequent. Participating community colleges use state and federal funds to provide teachers and local franchise operators pay additional program costs as well as release time for their workers. The program has had impressive results reporting learning gains much higher than those made by the average ESL student attending a conventional ESL class, focused on general life skills (for more information, see <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2009/05/27/esl>).

### 9 *Entrepreneurship training*

One opportunity for incumbent workers or others wishing to work independently is entrepreneurship training. Such training can support the dream of many immigrants to own a small business that can help support a family. In the United States, both documented and undocumented workers can apply for business licenses, although the paper work required tends to be daunting. While workshops showing would-be entrepreneurs how to develop business plans and access loans are available for free in the U.S., for the most part the language used in lectures and in print require fairly high levels of English proficiency. Needed are courses for non-native English speakers that address the linguistic, financial, and cultural issues that often act as barriers to establishing micro-enterprises.

#### **Case in point**

CEO Women (Creating Economic Opportunities for Women), an Oakland, California-based non-governmental agency offers training, intensive mentoring, and coaching and helps immigrant women access the capital needed to start a small business. Currently, the agency is producing a video series that follows four women entrepreneurs. The series documents the challenges the women face and the successes they experience as they strike out on their own. The video series is designed to teach entrepreneurship skills and create a pathway to independence for women. Women who sign up for the series also receive workbooks and invitations to meet with like-minded individuals to share ideas in regional workshops.

### 10 Education and recertification of foreign-born professionals

A high quality system for immigrant education and workforce training needs to take into account the populations at either end of the educational continuum. At the low end, as mentioned above, are the educational needs of those with less than a high school education (the LESLLA population) and at the higher end of the spectrum are the needs of the more highly educated immigrants whose English still needs development. Both in Canada and in the United States, a significant percentage of foreign-born professionals are underemployed, working as dishwashers, security guards, or taxi drivers. In 2005, more than 1.3 million college-educated immigrants (or one out of every five) in the United States were unemployed or significantly underemployed. Almost half (44 percent) of recent Latin American immigrants with a college degree or higher worked in unskilled jobs in the US (Batalova & Fix, 2008). Foreign-born professionals often face significant barriers in trying to pursue the occupations for which they have been trained in the home country. For example, the majorities of immigrant professionals who have worked in the health care field are now working outside their professions but would like to find career paths that use their skills. Highly skilled immigrants need specialized services that allow them to bridge the gap between the abilities they have and the competencies sought in the new country so that their talents can be tapped and their potential realized.

**Case in point**

The United States now has several centers, called Welcome Back Centers, designed to help foreign-born health care providers (particularly physicians and nurses) achieve the recertification needed to work in the US. Participants receive advice on how to navigate systems and have foreign credentials recognized, are made aware of available resources, and are offered classes focused on English for the medical profession and the development of cross-cultural competence. The San Francisco Welcome Back Center, for example, offers case management, career counseling, and resource coordination along with a curriculum for English for Special Purposes to help create viable career paths for internationally trained health care professionals.

### 11 Community ESL and civic participation

While a great many immigrants have specific goals for wanting to learn English, some have more general reasons. These include wanting to improve one's English to communicate better, gain meaning from newspapers or enjoy novels, or simply to become more educated, a purpose expressed by many who have limited opportunities to participate in formal schooling. Students at the intermediate level can benefit from classes that explore how communities work in terms of the services they provide and the opportunities for civic participation they present.

Community ESL classes are well served by approaches that are less structured than those used in courses designed for students who need to move quickly toward specific goals. Project-based learning allows students to research issues in their communities

and explore remedies through action learning. Writing projects allow students to find their voice and contribute to our knowledge of the immigrant experience.

These courses are well situated to allow students to grapple with issues of social justice and examine their role as community members and citizens in a democratic society. They can teach immigrants not only how to participate in the system as is, but also educate newcomers as to the opportunities that exist to challenge and change the system, through examples of civic participation (and civic disobedience) explained from both a historical perspective (the Civil Rights Movement) and through examples of personal and community involvement (participating in food drives; women working together to get a Stop Sign<sup>5</sup> installed in a neighborhood).

Community ESL can also easily encompass a focus on family literacy. Such classes for parents of pre-school and school age children not in the workforce can provide English language skills in the context of communicating with the school system and can help parents develop the skills needed to access information (print or electronic) and develop strategies for advocating for their children (Wrigley, 2004). For parents who have less than a high school education, family literacy programs can play an important role in providing the kind of background knowledge that children are acquiring in school – knowledge important if parents are to help with home work or discuss topics beyond the here and now with their children. Such knowledge, offered as part of content-based ESL, also helps to create an intellectual curiosity that is an important factor in lifelong learning and facilitates transition to higher levels of education for parents as well as their children (Office of English Language Learning and Migrant Education, no date).

#### **Case in point**

A community ESL and Family Literacy Program in Socorro, Texas on the US-Mexico border has for many years instituted Project-Based Learning as a means to connect adult learners to the community (see also Guo (2007); Wrigley, 1998; 2004b). The ESL program serves parents and others as well as displaced workers from Mexico - most of whom have only limited formal schooling and are new to English. As part of these classes, students work collaboratively to investigate topics of their choice and create presentations that are presented to the larger community as part of a showcase. Students have developed bilingual presentations on diabetes (a significant health concern in the local community), investigated what it takes to get lights for a park where children play soccer at night, and created “how to videos” designed to show others how to change the oil in a car, prepare a spaghetti dinner for a special day, or roast your own coffee. Students learn to use PowerPoint to present their findings and take videos to document both the process and the end result of their work.

In one instance, a class decided to spruce up and repair a small school in the Mexico side of the border because it had fallen into disrepair after most of the residents

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<sup>5</sup> Stop Signs are traffic signs used in Canada and the US that are similar to flashing red lights in other countries. A Stop Sign requires that a vehicle come to a full stop at an intersection and only proceed when cross-traffic is clear. Stop Signs are sometimes installed after petitions from members of a community that make a case that unregulated traffic flow puts other drivers and pedestrians, especially children, at risk.

in the village had left for the U.S. Students went across the border to take pictures of the debilitated building and they created storyboards that showed what needed to be done and how they might do it (repair wiring, paint walls, tear down and replace the backboard on the basketball court). In class students learned the language they needed to explain the various problems they saw at the school, to explain the tools they needed to fix things, and describe the end results. The students went to the local Do-It-Yourself store, to explain the project and ask for donations of paint and building materials (they used their own tools), then drove across the border and went to work. One group prepared a BBQ lunch (they had also spent time mapping out supplies and learned the English needed to explain the process). The group had notified the local mayor who came to thank them and hold a speech, and the local press covered the event. The students created a video and presented the project to a group of students, teachers and district staff.

It is easy to see how this type of civic project results in multiple outcomes: Students choose a task close to their hearts, develop the language and literacy necessary to describe their work, and make a significant contribution to the community. In the process, they acquire the technology skills that allow even beginning level learners to present information in a way that impresses 'real people,' not just ESL literacy teachers who are easily impressed. PowerPoints and videos allow students to tell the story visually with minimal language support. They can prepare their presentation ahead of time and get the chance to think about language, use resources such as graphics and dictionaries to help them, do a 'dry run' with a friendly audience and revise their work. (See also Wrigley, 2004b.)

## 12 Conclusion

More than any other factor, educational background influences the rate of progress an adult immigrant is able to make in learning English and developing the literacy skills necessary to succeed and thrive in a print-rich culture. Educational background tends to be more important than culture, age, or learning style when it comes to acquisition of English literacy, although for individual students these factors may still play a prominent role.

Given the important role that educational background plays in both speed and length of acquisition, it makes sense to develop one set of programs that accelerate learning for those who come to us with strong literacy skills and create another set of programmatic responses for those who are non-readers or beginning readers in their own language. Programs are likely to be counterproductive when they use the same model of instruction for adults who are already literate and for those who are new to literacy and have yet to learn how to read and write.

The current model used in the United States that places students by level of English proficiency and puts all students new to English in the same beginning class regardless of whether they know how to read and write has not been effective. This practice tends to disadvantage one group or the other. In most cases the students who lose are those who need education the most (those who struggle to make sense of even

simple texts) because they never had the chance to develop the foundation skills necessary to gain information from print or express their ideas in written English.

Developing different kinds of educational responses for each group and differentiating the system so it speaks to literacy backgrounds and needs can be the first step in developing instructional services that move different groups toward success more quickly and more effectively.

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