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Author

McCluskey, Corrie

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Professional Development to Work With Low-Educated Adult ESL Learners: Searching Beyond the Program

After following career interests that included anthropology and the visual arts, the author realized that working with adult immigrants with limited formal education and literacy skills was her path and her passion. Since few programs in the TESOL field focused on these learners, the author sought out instruction in nontraditional spaces to supplement her master's course work with the specific training she desired. She views graduate school as an opportunity to explore fundamental questions about what skill set is essential to effectively teach this population, and in this article she shares her insight, resources, and suggestions for how graduate students can take further agency over their own education and how TESOL teacher training might be more inclusive.

Introduction

Javier (a pseudonym) hid his lack of literacy from teachers and other students well. One evening I asked my students to look at how individual sentences fit together to tell a story. I handwrote the sentences in order on a piece of paper and tore them apart for the sentence scramble activity. Rather than work at the table with his group, Javier, one of my students, took his paper slips to the wall. Standing up, he put them against the wall and started moving them around like puzzle pieces. I later learned he could not read the sentences so instead he looked at their shape to fit the torn sides together. He was a motivated, tenacious student, and I was astounded when he told me he could not read in his first or second language.

This experience impressed upon me the importance of receiving adequate training to be able to recognize and address the needs of low-educated adult English language learners. This population, to varying degrees, simultaneously takes on two demanding tasks: becoming literate and learning a second language. They need to learn basic literacy practices, including decoding and sound/symbol correspondence, skills that take longer when done in tandem with second language acquisition. Because my classrooms often include both literate and nonliterate students (known as the “zero-one split”: see McCurdy & Vinogradov, 2011), I need to create multilevel lesson plans that keep all learn-

ers engaged and moving forward; no one should be left behind, especially the students who need to develop their literacy skills and have the least chance to do so on their own.

Background

Instructors of English language learners (ELLs) “need knowledge about the learners they are working with, about the content they are teaching, and about teaching methodologies and instructional strategies that are appropriate and effective” (Burt, Peyton, & Schaetzel, 2008, p. 3). Much of the research on second language acquisition works with privileged research participants (learners with formal educational backgrounds and literacy in their first language). These studies, therefore, make conclusions about only a small group of ELL learners and misrepresent the field at large. Bigelow and Tarone (2004) simply remind the field that what we study determines what we know. “If accepted findings describe only literate and educated language learners, then theory has limited applicability and little value in guiding teachers who work with illiterate learners” (p. 690). There has been a mass migration of people in recent decades, resulting in 793.1 million illiterate adults worldwide (UNESCO data—presented in Bigelow & Tarone, 2011). In the US, that includes an estimated 1.3 million functionally illiterate immigrants and refugees (Sweet, 1996, p. 1). According to Bigelow & Tarone (2011), many of these immigrants and refugees did not attend school because they grew up in refugee camps, fled their homes because of civil war, or did not have the economic means to pay for education. Because of these conditions, they arrive in urban landscapes and attend school for the first time with very few school or literacy practices. Given this extreme demographic shift, it is increasingly important to provide quality basic language and literacy instruction to immigrants; this population is the future of the US.

Soricone et al. (2011) argue that “untrained teachers are ... likely to vary in their ability to develop effective lesson plans and curriculum to effectively provide reading instruction for low literacy students[, which] can hinder student progress” (p. 40). Facilitators of adult learning need to become familiar with their students’ backgrounds: their home countries and cultures, their reason for migrating, their prior educational background, and their current literacy objectives (what they want to become literate *in*, in order to *do*). In other words, a basic needs and goals assessment should always be the starting point. This background information together with learner input can create real-life curricula. Relevant material supports learner engagement and buy-in and helps build classroom community and trust. Administrators of ESL programs are finding that learning gains and retention rates are higher for learners whose needs are met by relevant, targeted instruction that uses best practices for low-educated learners (Chisman & Crandall, 2007).

Context of My Interest in MA TESOL

I came to TESOL later in life with a fully realized career working with health professionals. I am also trained in anthropology and enjoyed a 15-year career in social documentary photography, but I wanted to shift gears in

midlife. My path to TESOL and interest in immigrant literacy began after I attended the Literacy Through Photography Summer Institute at Duke University. Participants were trained to take a collaborative approach to documentary work. This approach connects visual literacy to verbal and written communication as a tool to facilitate community dialogue. After this experience, I was inspired to use my photography skills to become more socially active within my community. Teaching literacy to kids through my medium seemed a good option. Back at home, I joined a mentoring program for at-risk youth sponsored by a nonprofit art gallery and worked to combine academic and life skills with art education. After a semester of mentoring a bilingual teen living in foster care, I read about local volunteer groups teaching literacy/ESL to day laborers (workers who are hired on the spot for temporary work) and vineyard workers. I first took day laborers' portraits, promoting social awareness in the best way I knew, but I soon felt drawn to help adult immigrants in a more practical, concrete, and direct way. I realized that teaching immigrants could be a potent form of social activism that would allow me to more directly participate in my community and help my neighbors—ESL became a calling.

First Steps

The first step on this path was to enroll in a highly regarded intensive TESOL certificate program. The program lasted 2 months and included 130 hours of instruction and 54 hours of observed practice teaching (6 hours of which were solo observed teaching). I would accurately describe it as teacher boot camp. TESOL certificate students learned how to create and execute lesson plans, develop a reflective teaching practice (involving self-observation and self-reflection), and make strong connections between input sessions and the classroom. We worked with immigrant learners, ranging in age from 18 years to older than 60, with some having little formal education in their home countries and others who were working professionals. For half of the program we taught intermediate level and the other half, beginners.

When working with beginning learners, I found it difficult to incorporate standard ESL pedagogy—many of the low-educated immigrant adult learners, especially those with limited literacy skills in their first language, could not keep up and eventually dropped out. Through this experience I understood Wrigley's statement (2008) that "when placed in classes where lack of native language literacy is not taken into account, [learners] often drop out early. Many in this group will not return to school, convinced that they cannot learn" (p. 173). The consequences of our educational systems' inability to meet these adult learners' needs are profound: Beyond the self-blame, these adults will not be able to gain access to better jobs and educational opportunities that require a higher level of literacy, nor will those who are parents be able to fully participate in their children's education (Wrigley, 2008).

The certificate program ended, but my discovery progress had just begun. From this point on, I began to devote time to searching specifically for material on participatory ESL and literacy development. I internalized the meaning of *participatory* as going beyond "learner-centered," as a term that advocates

literacy as a vehicle for personal change and full participation in one's community. I explored the work of Freire, Auerbach, Wrigley, and Weinstein, and I was particularly drawn to *Learners' Lives as Curriculum*—a curriculum that uses text generated from learners and their lives in thematic units, allowing them to discuss relevant themes and “hot topics” while learning and practicing specific language skills (Weinstein, 1999). My self-education had begun.

On-the-Job Training

Soon after, I turned this self-education into a practice. I joined former TESOL certificate graduates in a small ESL project based at a local elementary school in my hometown. In this space, adult English language learners from the neighborhood attended evening classes twice a week for 2 hours. My role on this team was to teach a literacy/low-beginner-level summer class, and, as expected, I ran headlong into the familiar problems of teaching multilevel literacy classes. My student population spanned a wide range of ages, reading abilities, educational backgrounds, learning goals, and preferred learning styles. Without knowing how to plan lessons that simultaneously addressed these different needs and skill levels, I found it difficult to keep all the learners engaged and focused on the lesson. If I wanted to become an effective ESL teacher, I needed to learn how to teach this population. I applied to a MA TESOL program to pursue training that would equip me to teach community-based participatory ESL to immigrants, specifically to a low-educated adult population.

To complement my graduate studies, I signed up to aid and eventually teach in large low-beginner classes at a community-based ESL program. As a novice teacher, I felt underprepared to teach in this setting but starting as an aide allowed me to simultaneously observe and work with a more experienced mentor teacher. I also joined a nonprofit, all-volunteer community organization in my county that provides free ESL tutoring to people 18 years or older in order to get additional training as a one-on-one tutor. The organization matched me with an adult male ESL learner with whom I have now worked for more than 2 years. One-on-one tutoring offers novice teachers the opportunity to connect with an individual, assess his or her evolving skills, tailor a curriculum to meet his or her needs, and work with new materials and activities with a great deal of flexibility. I have gained invaluable skills from this experience and plan to continue tutoring.

Discovery of LESLLA

In my process of self-education, I found scant research done specifically on low-educated immigrant adults. These literacy learners (also called “emergent readers” or “LESLLA learners”) are generally defined as having 6 or fewer years of formal education in their native countries and as needing more focused instruction than other learners when learning to read and write a second language. New teachers commonly begin their practice only to discover that they do not know how to teach these adult students. The international forum of LESLLA (Low Educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition) has aimed to fill this gap with new research in the last decade. LESLLA researchers

and practitioners provide and share study findings and approaches to improve teaching practice and inform educational policy for immigrant and refugee second language learners.

The lack of adequate training for LESLLA instructors is both real and severe. Inadequate training brings clear and negative consequences for our LESLLA learners and a level of frustration to LESLLA teachers, teachers who are trying everything in their toolboxes but are still struggling to find classroom practices that are effective. (Vinogradov & Liden, 2008, p. 133)

The LESLLA website (www.leslla.org) includes research, materials, and introduces key LESLLA professionals. It has raised my awareness of the different kinds of literacy learners and of the need to first focus on oral proficiency—the key to helping them develop their print literacy. In addition to a strong theoretical base, I also looked for evidence-based instructional strategies to draw on in my practice. Theory informs teaching philosophies, values, and beliefs, but new teachers also need practical strategies and activities to use immediately in their classrooms. I have found this piece missing in my formal TESOL training but have gained a number of practical teaching strategies by consulting the professional-development resources discussed in this article.

Other Professional-Development Resources

Graduate students can use professional-development resources to develop both a theoretical and pedagogical base. I would encourage graduate students to self-educate and search out professional development beyond their MA programs. Graduate students can find the cutting edge of our field online, at conferences, and in new evidence-based research. In addition to attending CATESOL and TESOL conferences, consider lesser-known conferences where the focus is adult basic education, including ESL and literacy, such as the CCAE (California Council for Adult Education) and COABE (Commission on Adult Basic Education).

A wealth of online resources are available to support adult ESL teachers. The Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center (VALRC) at Virginia Commonwealth University (www.valrc.org) provides ESOL beginning-literacy and ESOL multilevel online courses. Both are 6-week courses that provide a number of useful classroom activities and lesson-planning strategies. Hamline University in Minnesota (www.hamline.edu) also offers an online Certificate for Teachers of Adult ESL that is designed specifically for adult ESL practitioners. This course work consists of four core courses in literacy development, developing oral skills, course design, and assessment of the adult ELL. There are also online and DVD video resources. Wrigley's website (www.literacywork.com) offers several video segments that illustrate specific teaching strategies for low-literacy ELLs. It includes a resource section with "Scenarios for Civics" that I have used in both classroom and one-on-one tutoring. An exciting new training series, *Classroom Approaches in Action* (Florez & Parrish, 2010)

from New American Horizons Foundation, is also available to view free online (www.newamericanhorizons.org).

Other web resources include Multilingual Minnesota (www.multilingualminnesota.org), with a section for teachers of low-literate adult ESL (best practices, learner-generated texts, reading resources, materials for classroom use). Similarly, Bow Valley College's literacy network for practitioners provides ESL literacy curriculum, including readers, videos, and professional-development resources (www.esl-literacy.com). Finally, ELL-U (www.ell-u.org), a new national adult English language professional-development network, offers online courses, training events, and study circles.¹

Taking Graduate Training Into the Real World

I am driven to provide instruction for those who “have the most need and the fewest options for developing literacy on their own” (Wrigley, 2008, p. 173). For that reason, I have chosen a path to teach emergent readers and low-educated adult learners who have had little or no formal education in their home countries. My plan for postgraduate work is to open a small adult ESL learning center in the heart of my immigrant neighborhood. It will ideally be centrally located, open during convenient hours, and offer child and toddler care. Instruction will focus on “soft skills,” forms of literacy practices that low-educated adult learners need to navigate systems and institutions within the community, as well as literacy “hard skills,” the basic working components and practical aspects of English reading and writing. This plan is my culminating community service-learning project for a Certificate in Immigrant Literacies that I am concurrently obtaining with my master's degree. While honing my teaching skills, I also participate in community building through membership in a local organizing project. This project enables me to build stronger ties in my community, learn about issues that most affect my immigrant neighbors, and create a strong network of colleagues and supporters who could help me carry out my plan. I look forward to the challenge with an open heart.

Implications for Adult ELL Immigrant Learners and Their Families

If more TESOL practitioners were adequately prepared to teach immigrant learners of all levels, these students would have a more promising future. There is a direct correlation between literacy, prior education level, knowledge of English, and earning capacity (Wrigley, 2008). Petsod (2008) presents evidence from a national study of adult ESL instruction that showed 32% of adult ELLs are not literate in their first language. TESOL practitioners need to focus instruction to increase basic literacy and numeracy skills and on developing more than just basic English skills. If not, the students' efforts will not lead to better-paying jobs. Additionally, Burt, Peyton, and Adams (2003) point out that immigrant parents' literacy affects their children's ultimate literacy attainment—the primary reason to support family literacy programs, such as CBET.² ELL immigrant parents' involvement in their children's education may be hampered by lack of English literacy, and the child's literacy development may in turn be

affected by lack of interaction with print at home (Purcell-Gates, Degener, & Jacobson, 1998). Furthermore, children with limited English skills may do poorly at school, translating to lower-paying jobs for them as well (McHugh, Gelatt, & Fix, 2007, p. 12). Finally, it is noteworthy to point out that health outcomes are also directly related to income and educational levels.

Recommendations for TESOL Graduate Programs and Students

It is easy to imagine the immediate benefit of an intensive graduate-level course or series of workshops that offers a theoretical base and pedagogical skills for teachers-in-training who wish to work with the LESLLA population. This intensive training would include teacher round tables, access to mentors and master teachers, and specific courses on how to teach reading and writing to nonliterate adults. Opportunities to observe teaching methodologies such as stations (tables or learning areas focusing on a specific learning task), LEA (language experience approach), and the Whole-Part-Whole (WPW or W-P-W) instructional method (to enhance particular components of reading) would be useful. Additionally, courses or workshops focused on how to motivate learners who associate formal education with a number of negative past experiences would be useful. TESOL graduate programs and graduate students themselves could also coordinate a “mentor material share,” in which novice and experienced TESOL instructors created and shared literacy-level learning materials. Graduate students and TESOL teachers-in-training need more hands-on instruction in providing community-based participatory ESL specifically for low-educated adults; I’ve listed some avenues for graduate students to seek out this training in the professional-development resource sections above.

Graduate students should self-educate, digging deep to supplement program course work with outside readings. Graduate students can organize study circles with peers or colleagues interested in the same issues. They can explore the LESLLA website to learn about the important core of practitioners and researchers now driving this field, in addition to other professional-development resources. When reading the latest research, graduate students can look at conclusions and opportunities for further research and delve deeper into these issues.

Conclusion

As a new teacher of adult LESLLA learners, I need to be able to have access to evidence-based practices and research that will inform my practice. In the current economic climate, many graduate TESOL programs may need to focus on keeping their programs afloat and therefore have limited funds to incorporate resources that focus on this population of adult learners. Therefore, those of us who are dedicated to working with this population must seek out the necessary training and resources in nontraditional spaces to learn about and implement teaching methods and strategies that work in the LESLLA classroom. I hope in the future to participate in a reflective teaching practice with like-minded colleagues to better serve my community and neighborhood.

Author

Corrie McCluskey is in San Francisco State University's MA TESOL and Certificate in Immigrant Literacies Programs and has a BA in Anthropology (University of California, Berkeley) and TESOL Certificate (SIT). She volunteer teaches ESL at Canal Alliance and is an ESL tutor, mentor, and trainer with the Adult Literacy League of Sonoma County.

Notes

¹Study circles are excellent professional-learning activities that allow teachers to focus on a particular issue, discuss recent research findings, and consider best practices they can adopt in their own classrooms. For LESLLA teachers I recommend Vinogradov's (2011) *Study Circle Guide For Teachers of Low-literacy Adult ESL Students* that is available for download (www.atlasabe.org/_literature_91283/Study_Circle_Guide).

²<http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/el/cb>

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