

## Using Oral Language Skills to Build on the Emerging Literacy of Adult English Learners

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### Background on Adult Learners

Adult education programs serve both native English speakers and learners whose first, or native, language is not English. Native English speakers attend adult basic education (ABE) classes to learn basic skills needed to improve their literacy levels; they attend adult secondary education (ASE) classes to earn high school equivalency certificates. Both ABE and ASE instruction help learners achieve other goals related to job, family, or further education. English language learners attend English as a second language (ESL), ABE, or workforce preparation classes to improve their oral and literacy skills in English and to achieve goals similar to those of native English speakers.

### Audience for This Brief

This brief is written for teachers, program administrators, and teacher trainers seeking ways to work effectively with adult and adolescent English language learners with emerging literacy skills.

### Introduction

In addition to learning to read and write for the first time, adult English language learners with limited or emerging literacy skills must acquire oral English. Often, learners with limited print literacy in their first language have oral skills in English that exceed their English literacy skills (Geva & Zadeh, 2006). While this mismatch of oral and written skills can be misleading to teachers, a limited but growing body of research explores the ways in which adults with emerging literacy acquire second language and literacy skills and the ways in which their oral language proficiency affects their literacy learning (e.g., Condelli, Wrigley, & Yoon, 2009; Tarone & Bigelow, 2005, 2007; Tarone, Bigelow, & Hansen, 2009). In this research, learners' oral language proficiency is shown to be a resource that can have a positive impact on literacy development. This brief reviews the research, describes

ways to capitalize on adult learners' oral skills to create successful literacy learning experiences, and suggests areas for further research to bolster the knowledge base in working with adult second language learners who are in the process of becoming literate.

### Learner Demographics and Backgrounds

UNESCO reports that approximately 774 million adults worldwide lack minimum skills in reading, writing, and calculating (Šopova, 2007). This means that approximately one in five adults is not literate, with two thirds of these being women (Tarone et al., 2009, p. 21). With increasing global migration, adults from regions of the world with high levels of illiteracy are moving to the United States and learning to read and write for the first time in English, their second (if not third, fourth, or fifth) language. McHugh, Gelatt, and Fix (2007) estimate that about 750,000 adult immigrants in the United States are not literate in any language.

Many adult immigrants with limited literacy have had limited access to education. This may be due to circumstances of migration, war, civil unrest, nomadic lifestyle, trauma, or poverty (Mace-Matluck, Alexander-Kasparik, & Queen, 1998; Scuglik, Alarcón, Lapeyre, Williams, & Logan, 2007). Many are refugees who have fled situations of extreme violence or have experienced long-term stays in refugee camps. Many come from societies where oral traditions are more prevalent than literate ones or where a script for their native language has been developed and used only recently. Many had to work throughout their childhood to help support their families, leaving no time to attend school. This diverse group of learners is present in adult education programs across the United States.

## First Language Literacy and Second Language Learning

Research on second language acquisition indicates that the stronger one's literacy skills are in the first language, the easier it is to learn an additional language (Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2009; Cummins, 1984; Krashen, 1982; Rivera, 1999; Tarone & Bigelow, 2005). First language reading skills provide a conceptual, cognitive, and linguistic proficiency that can transfer across languages (Birch, 2007; Cummins, 1984). When working with second language learners who have limited literacy skills in any language, educators need to identify and utilize other strengths and resources that these learners bring to the learning situation, including their oral skills in English. Developing instructional activities that draw on their oral skills can help these learners improve their English literacy skills. Seeing all learners as having valuable strengths is a first step to improved instructional practice (Auerbach, 1995).

## Orality and Literacy

Second language researchers have examined the relationship between oral language and literacy and found that they are interdependent. Strong oral language skills pave the way for the development of literacy in a second language (Bernhardt & Kamil, 1995; Carrell, 1991), and literacy skills enhance oral language development. Studies of children learning English that were reviewed by the National Literacy Panel also found a strong relationship between oral proficiency and literacy skills (August & Shanahan, 2006; Grant & Wong, 2004). Likewise, in a study of adult English language learners with limited literacy, Condelli, Wrigley, and Yoon (2009) found that students whose oral English proficiency was higher at the beginning of the study showed greater gains in reading than those who began with lower oral English proficiency.

Research on monolingual Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking adults who were not print literate and who had had limited schooling or disrupted school experiences has revealed a number of interesting findings about ways in which literacy changes how oral language is processed (Castro-Caldas, Petersson, Reis, Stone-Elander, & Ingvar, 1998; Petersson, Reis, Askelöf, Castro-Caldas, & Ingvar, 2000; Reis & Castro-Caldas, 1997). In a study by Petersson et al. (2000), participants were given tasks that included phoneme manipulation (e.g., adding, delet-

ing, or reversing specific sounds in words, such as *bus* and *sub*), demonstrations of verbal fluency (generating words that relate to a specific category, such as names of animals or objects in a kitchen), and pseudo-word repetition (repeating a list of nonwords after they are said by a researcher). Adults without alphabetic print literacy found it significantly more difficult than those with alphabetic print literacy to manipulate phonemes and to repeat pseudo-words and words beginning with a specific sound. Knowledge of visual representation of words (i.e., grapheme-phoneme association) seemed to help individuals carry out certain tasks involving the perception and manipulation of sounds, a phenomenon that has been discussed by Ong (1982) and Olson (2002, 2006), among others. At the same time, study participants did not differ in verbal fluency as measured by their ability to generate lists of related words, indicating that semantic processing does not depend on one's level of alphabetic literacy.

Studies of second language learners have found similar results. Adults with limited literacy are generally lacking some critical skills, such as sound-symbol association and decoding skills (Gombert, 1994; Kurvers & van de Craats, 2007; Young-Scholten & Strom, 2006). Young-Scholten and Strom found that while all of their study participants “demonstrated solid knowledge of the alphabet in their ability to read letters in different fonts and out of order . . . many demonstrated no phonemic awareness and no decoding ability” (p. 63). Such findings indicate that knowledge of the alphabet alone does not lead to phonological awareness and the ability to decode words. This research points out the importance of explicit instruction to help learners acquire these important literacy skills.

A study of the impact of literacy on the ability of individuals to perceive oral corrections to their speech—for example, if one partner in a conversation corrects an error made by the other partner—found that literacy matters (Tarone et al., 2009). Adolescents and young adults who had some literacy were better able to hear and repeat oral corrections. This conclusion is consistent with the research cited above showing that alphabetic literacy improves conscious processing of linguistic forms. In contrast, research carried out with the same data showed that semantic processing (understanding of entire words) does not depend greatly upon literacy level (Tarone & Bigelow, 2007). One participant

in the study who was not literate in an alphabetic script was able to acquire new vocabulary words in interaction, while it was more challenging for him to notice subtle syntactic corrections. For example, in the following excerpt, Abukar seemed to learn the word *jar*.

- 01 Abukar: OK (pause) what is barrel, what is, what is the thing in it?  
02 What is there? Is it, is there pennies in it?  
03 MB: Yeah. Um, again. Are pennies in the jar?  
04 Abukar: Is, are the penny in the jar?  
05 MB: Yes. And, um,  
06 Abukar: (whispers) jar  
07 MB: you know she's a waitress, so she gets tips,  
08 Abukar: OK  
09 MB: at the diner,  
10 Abukar: mhm  
11 MB: and every day she puts her tips in a jar  
12 Abukar: oh. (pause) (xxx xxx)  
13 MB: Here's the jar.  
14 Abukar: A jar?  
(20 turns later)  
15 Abukar: Oh. Oh. Is this jar have, this jar, is this jar full of money?

(Tarone et al., 2009, pp. 70-71)

It took very little for Abukar to learn the word *jar* before he produced his own original and unprompted sentence using it. Contrastingly, the following excerpt, which is similar to many episodes in the data, suggests that it is more difficult to notice a recast (repetition of an utterance that demonstrates correct usage) focusing on the word order for English questions. Abukar never generates the target question structure throughout the research protocol, despite receiving multiple recasts. There seems to be no evidence of learning through recasts on questions, only repetition of the recast.

- 01 Abukar: What he sit on, what he SIT on, or whatever?  
02 MB: What is he sitting on?  
03 Abukar: Mhm.

- 04 MB: What is he sitting on? Again. Repeat.  
05 Abukar: What he sitting on?  
06 MB: What IS he sitting on?  
07 Abukar: Oh. What he sitting on?  
08 MB: What IS he sitting on?  
09 Abukar: What IS he sitting on?  
(Tarone et al., 2009, pp. 67-68)

In the end, Abukar is able to repeat the recast, possibly with the assistance of the emphasis placed on the auxiliary verb.

## Language Learning in Adults With Limited Literacy

Little is known about how adults with emergent literacy approach language learning and what learning strategies they actively employ. They may respond differently than adults with well-established literacy skills to daily routines of classroom learning that assume print literacy.

In a microethnographic study, Hvitfeldt (1986) explored learning preferences of low-literate Hmong speakers and found them to fit the description of field-dependent learners—able to participate in social aspects of learning that include peer and teacher support and to engage in and learn from meaningful and interactive learning activities. This finding is consistent with the Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm (MALP) suggested by Marshall and DeCapua (2009), which calls on teachers to change and adapt to learners' needs at the same time that they help learners change and learn. Marshall and DeCapua also argue that learners from oral cultures learn best when they can share responsibility for their learning and when strong connections are made between content, social interaction, and the learners' experiences. They are pragmatic thinkers who look for the immediate relevance to their lives of what they are learning and seek opportunities to practice using their new language. Analytical tasks that isolate specific features of language (e.g., true/false and multiple choice questions) are more challenging for them. Using objects and experiences from their world provides a stronger basis for their literacy learning.

In another study of low-literate Hmong speakers, Reimer (2008) found that these learners were already using a number of learning strategies effectively, including using teachers and peers to help them learn and

“focus[ing]their attention appropriately in the classroom” (p. 11). Reimer implemented explicit learning strategies in instruction, including creating flashcards for new words and phrases, identifying phrases to use in English conversation outside of class, and helping students organize class notes effectively to encourage review of classroom material at home. Reimer concluded that the emergent readers in her study would benefit from an experiential, community-based approach to instruction. What might this approach look like in practice, and what roles do oral language skills play in such instruction? The next section describes meaningful, relevant, contextualized instruction that capitalizes on learners’ oral language abilities.

## Applications of Research to Instruction

The research summarized above suggests that the following principles should guide instruction for adult learners with limited literacy:

- Balance meaning-focused and form-focused instruction
- Connect instruction to learners’ lives

Burt, Peyton, and Schaezel (2008) and Peyton, Moore, and Young (2010) describe research-based instructional approaches that reflect these two principles.

### *Balancing Meaning- and Form-Focused Literacy Instruction*

Experts generally agree that reading is an interactive, meaning-making endeavor that includes both top-down and bottom-up processes (Birch, 2007; Chall, 1967; Pressley, 1998). Both skill-focused, bottom-up tasks and meaning-focused, top-down tasks are integral pieces of adult language and literacy learning, as each approach develops different skills. Therefore, instruction needs to be grounded in interesting, relevant contexts that emphasize meaning while also explicitly teaching patterns of sounds, syllables, and word families (Birch, 2007; Fish, Knell, & Buchanan, 2007; Vinogradov, 2008).

Whole-Part-Whole (WPW) is one balanced literacy method that integrates bottom-up and top-down instruction within meaningful contexts. Teachers begin with a topic or theme that is interesting, important, and familiar to learners, such as jobs in the United States or dreams for the future. Words, phrases, and stories are elicited from students, and teachers provide vocabulary relevant to the topic. When learners are engaged in the

topic and familiar with some of the language and vocabulary involved, the class then focuses on specific language features, such as sound/symbol correspondence. Later, the class or individual students return to the larger story and theme and continue to build oral and written skills through more reading, writing, storytelling, and sharing (Brod, 1999; Trupke-Bastidas & Poulos, 2007; Vinogradov, in press). In WPW, phonics is not presented in a traditionally decontextualized way, with nonsense words and worksheets that are divorced from meaning. Instead, WPW strives to provide a balance between meaningful language; relevant, interesting topics; and the building blocks that combine to create this language.

While the research surrounding literacy instruction for adult English language learners with limited literacy is growing, it is still limited. However, recent research syntheses can inform instruction. Reviews of research on literacy development of native-English-speaking children (National Reading Panel, 2000), native-English-speaking adults (Kruidenier, 2002), and children learning English as a second language (August & Shanahan, 2006) all support explicit and systematic instruction of basic reading skills. While further research is needed in this area, this evidence points to the high value of such instructional practices (Condelli et al., 2009). (For more information about focusing on language form in the context of meaningful topics, see Rodríguez, 2009.)

### *Connecting Instruction to Learners’ Lives*

Researchers and practitioners have emphasized the importance of meaningful, engaging lessons for adults (Imel, 1998; Knowles, 1973; Weinstein, 1999; Wrigley & Guth, 1992) and argued that learners’ lives must be central to instructional approaches and materials (Auerbach & Burgess, 1985; Lado, 1991; Weinstein, 1999; Williams & Chapman, 2007). As Weinstein argues, “ESL and literacy classrooms can and should be settings where adults find opportunities to develop language and literacy skills while reflecting, as individuals and in collaboration with others, on their changing lives” (p. 6). Learning should be contextualized and relevant, and lessons should draw on the actual experiences and concerns of learners (Auerbach, 1992; Weinstein, 1999).

A longitudinal study of low-literate adult English language learners (Condelli et al., 2009) concludes with suggestions for classroom activities to be used with these learners:

- Connect the curriculum to issues that adults care about in the outside world (e.g., children, work).
- Use students' native language(s) as needed for clarification in instruction (e.g., directions regarding tasks and activities).
- Vary opportunities for use of language in interaction and practice of language forms (e.g., communicative pair activities and short grammar drills).

This study confirms both the value of including relevant out-of-school issues when teaching adults with limited literacy and the relationship between strong oral skills and the development of literacy. Approaching literacy development from a balanced perspective keeps meaning central while also offering focused practice with the building blocks of written language. This is critical for adult emergent readers.

One way to begin with meaning and move to smaller units of analysis (e.g., parts of words) is to use learner-generated texts—developing text orally with students and then putting the oral language on paper. Thus, for students, familiar stories become readings that are both interesting and level-appropriate. The Language Experience Approach (LEA) is one way to develop learner-generated texts. In LEA, students first share a common experience, such as going on a field trip or planting flower seeds. The teacher then guides them in telling the experience aloud individually, in small groups, or as a whole class. Students recall what they did while a teacher or another scribe writes what they say. These words can then be used as a reading text. From there, a number of activities can focus on word analysis and specific sounds and structures. Then, students can return to the text and re-read it, add to it, or write other texts on the same topic or related topics. LEA is an efficient technique for working with adults with limited literacy because it connects oral communication to meaningful print (Crandall & Peyton, 1993).

The following is an excerpt from a learner-generated text developed by adult emergent readers in Minnesota and published as part of the teacher training video series from *New American Horizons* (2010).

On Friday we go to the hardware store. The hardware store is on the corner of Payne Avenue and Maryland Avenue. We ask questions. The cashier helps us. We pay money to the cashier. He gives us a bag and change. We say thank you. We are happy.

The activities used to develop and work with the text connect instruction to learners' lives and provide practice with both meaning and form in English. This text was generated by students following a walk to the local hardware store during a unit on "problems in the house." As the learners described their trip, the teacher wrote what they said, and their story formed the basis for instruction for the entire week. In the next lesson, students worked on understanding the vocabulary in the story, then moved on to sequencing tasks (listing the events in sequence) and sight words. Next they focused on three consonant blends in the story—/th/, /sh/, and /ch/—by sorting words into categories according to the consonant blend each word contained. A series of sorting, matching, and recognition tasks gave students practice with these sounds and their corresponding letters. Such tasks included, for example, forming words from letter tiles and pairing words by similar sounds or letters. Later, students returned to the entire text and practiced reading it aloud with a partner. The lesson closed with a final oral task in which students mingled and asked each other questions about problems in the house that might have led to the need to go to the hardware store (e.g., Is the roof leaking?).

Texts can be created in other ways as well. For example, a teacher and students can first talk and then write about a photograph or a drawing, write together in a dialogue journal (Peyton, 2000), or work together to transcribe a story that a student tells. Many cultures without widespread print literacy have rich oral traditions that include storytelling, poetry, proverbs, and jokes that can serve as the basis for literacy development in English (Johnson, 2006). Perry (2008) and Bigelow (2010) have found that the use of oral language among refugees (Sudanese and Somali respectively) can be used to promote literacy. Folktales, poems, proverbs, and personal stories initially told orally in the home language can be used in activities that promote literacy in the home language and English. Participants in the studies learned a range of literacy skills by writing their stories in English. In Bigelow's study (2010), one adolescent girl spent vast amounts of time putting her traditional oral Somali folktales into English and editing them carefully so that her readers could see how interesting the stories were. (See Croydan, 2005, for additional examples of the use of learner-generated texts.)

Croydan (2005) and Liden, Poulos, and Vinogradov (2008) suggest the following ways that learner-generated

ated texts can be used to help learners move from oral language to print:

- Writing about shared experiences
- Transcribing conversations or student stories
- Sharing learner-generated texts in newsletters
- Writing about a photograph or other visual
- Writing in a journal or dialogue journal
- Providing texts for wordless picture books
- Creating photo books with captions
- Creating class posters

These instructional activities demonstrate ways that teachers can put research findings on oral language proficiency and literacy development into practice by bringing the content from the lives of the students into the classroom, capitalizing on oral language skills, and creating balanced literacy lessons that draw on the interests and abilities of adults with emerging literacy while also focusing on the components of language. These opportunities can result in texts that are comprehensible, meaningful, and interesting to learners and that allow focus on language structures and forms. Because learners created the texts, they have ownership over the words and story. Teachers can then focus on particular sounds, word families, or other reading skills within content that the students have created.

## Areas for Further Research

Because little research focuses on adult English language learners with limited literacy and formal schooling, researchers need to deepen and clarify what is known about the language and cognitive processing of and instruction for this population to inform education policy and teacher professional development.

In terms of language processing, Tarone et al. (2009) have listed a number of questions that are relevant to the fields of second language acquisition and education and have the potential to inform instruction in education programs that serve adults with emerging literacy. The following are examples of questions they have identified as needing empirical research:

- Do all grammatical forms (such as final *s* on third person singular present tense verbs or subject–verb inversion in questions) have to be noticed by learners who lack alphabetic literacy before they acquire them, or just some? Which ones?

- Do second language learners who are not alphabetically literate organize working memory in terms of vocabulary and semantic classes instead of by linguistic units?
- How long does it take an adolescent or adult who has low alphabetic literacy to reach a threshold of phonemic awareness that supports the ability to notice corrective feedback?

Issues of social and global context, including policies that help and hinder educational opportunities, also must be explored with this unique population of learners. Tarone et al. (2009) list the following examples of questions in these areas that need to be explored:

- How do skills learned in Quranic (or religious) schooling bridge to English literacy learning in formal classroom settings?
- What is the range of oral genres (e.g., stories, songs, speeches) used by different groups, and which can be leveraged for the purpose of learning English print literacy?
- How do connections to communities that share the languages and cultures of learners (digitally or otherwise) maintain or build home language literacy as well as English literacy?
- How does experience in refugee camps influence literacy? Which oral or written texts were valued and protected? Which texts were used and for what purposes?
- How do language learners with limited print literacy learn academic or workplace content in classroom settings?

The field has many promising practices for instruction with this population, but not enough classroom-based research explores what teaching practices are well suited to individuals becoming literate for the first time. This topic is in great need of exploration for practitioners and teacher educators focusing on developing print literacy among adults learning English.

## Conclusion

Adult English language learners with limited literacy or limited formal schooling have particular characteristics that distinguish them from native English speakers who are becoming literate and from adult English language learners who are literate in their native language. There-

fore, they require different types of instruction. They should have access to instruction that values and builds on their experiences and that systematically teaches them basic literacy skills.

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### Additional Resource

During the week of February 22-26, 2010, the authors of this brief moderated a discussion on the LINCS adult English language acquisition list during which participants shared their successes and challenges in working with adult English language learners who are emerging readers. The transcript and summary of this discussion can be downloaded at [http://www.nifl.gov/lincs/discussions/englishlanguage/10teach\\_summary](http://www.nifl.gov/lincs/discussions/englishlanguage/10teach_summary).