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# Best practices for teaching the “whole” adult ESL learner

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*Based on adult second-language acquisition research and whole-language principles, this chapter describes some best practices for teaching adults in ESL classrooms.*

## Best Practices for Teaching the “Whole” Adult ESL Learner

*David Schwarzer*

Justin is a twenty-eight-year-old volunteer ESL instructor at a local nonprofit community program. In “real life,” he is an accountant. As part of the orientation for new instructors, the community program provides the volunteers with twenty hours of training, during which they hand out the curriculum and a series of topics to cover during a four-month period. He will also inherit the former ESL instructor’s grammar textbook. He will have a group of fourteen adult learners of five different nationalities and language backgrounds in his class. Justin will also learn that attendance is an issue at the language program.

This vignette presents a typical scenario for an adult English as a second language instructor working at a nonprofit English language program. What have other ESL teachers done that have worked? What do we know about adult second-language acquisition theory that can help Justin? How can he create a learning community in his classroom with this diverse and shifting learner population? In the following sections, I will illustrate how the ideas of “whole-language learning” can be used to answer these questions.

### **Brief Review of Adult SLA Research**

For a long time in the area of second-language acquisition (SLA), we thought of second-language teaching in terms of four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Speaking and writing were considered active

skills; listening and reading were viewed as passive skills (Celce-Murcia, 2001). This way of thinking has evolved as we look at language usage and communication as negotiation processes. What has come to be known as “communicative language teaching” (CLT) has eclipsed the four-skills approach. “By definition, CLT puts the focus on the learner. Learner communicative needs provide a framework for elaborating program goals in terms of functional competence” (Celce-Murcia, 2001, p. 18). However, focusing on achieving effective communication does not mean that teaching grammar is not important because “while involvement in communicative events is seen as central to language development, this involvement necessarily requires attention to form” (p. 25). It is important to keep a healthy balance between focusing on meaning and focusing on form. Process and product are important, and some class activities could focus just on meaning (for example, writing in a dialogue journal to share with a classmate), and some others could focus on grammar and form (for example, writing an essay and editing for correct language structure). As a matter of fact, several researchers agree that vocabulary development, learner motivation, and meaningful interaction are critical aspects in adult ESL learning (Bello, 2000; De la Fuente, 2002; Ellis, 1999; Gass, 1999; Krashen, 2003).

Research suggests that word knowledge is the first step to becoming a competent communicator in a second language (Coady and Huckin, 1997). However, knowing words is not enough; knowing word families is also an essential part of second-language vocabulary-building activities (Laufer, 1997). Teachers can help learners enhance their vocabulary in several ways. For example, Gass (1999) points out that “incidental vocabulary” learning (the vocabulary we acquire when we are doing something other than formal learning, such as watching TV in the target language) is an effective way of enhancing learners’ vocabulary. Teachers can incorporate television shows into class assignments and initiate discussions of and draw vocabulary from programs that are of high interest in U.S. culture (such as *American Idol* or *Friends*) or programs the language learners themselves suggest.

Another way to help learners enhance their vocabulary is the use of extensive reading (Burt, Peyton, and Adams, 2003; Krashen 2003). Learners’ vocabulary increases dramatically through extended reading and follow-up activities (Wesche and Paribakht, 2000). Reading texts that are interesting and challenging for the learners also has a powerful effect on their vocabulary development (Burt, Peyton, and Adams, 2003). Importantly, vocabulary in the second language (L2) seems to increase over time when learners engage with text in meaningful ways and are encouraged to actively negotiate its meaning with others (De la Fuente, 2002). This means that a part of the teacher’s job is finding reading materials of high interest and relevance to the language learners’ lives and making them a part of the group’s conversation and vocabulary work. Doing this could enhance the adult learner’s motivation to learn.

Motivation is “why people decide to do something, how long they are willing to sustain the activity, [and] how hard they are going to pursue it” (Dornyei, 2002, p. 8). In this respect, it is also important to remember that adult ESL students in community programs are a shifting population; they move and change jobs often, and their motivation to learn ESL also transforms and evolves with the changes they face in their lives outside the classroom. As stated by Dornyei and Kormos (2000), motivation is not static; it may change from day to day, from task to task, and from learning community to learning community. For example, “integrative motivation” (willingness to learn a new language in order to become part of a particular speaking community) and “instrumental motivation” (willingness to learn a new language to accomplish immediate goals and needs) are both important aspects of why adults try to learn languages (Gardner, 1985; Oxford and Shearin, 1994). Depending on the circumstances under which the adult learner migrated to the United States, the ESL instructor may find different responses to the new culture among learners that influence their approach to the new language. Some may not want to adapt to the new culture or are experiencing culture shock. Others may be adapting very well to the new living environment, culture, and community. Some adult learners are very motivated to learn ESL because they need it to communicate with their colleagues at work or to obtain a promotion, accomplish educational goals, help their children with school assignments, or just feel confident speaking the language of the community in which they live.

Teachers need to discover what motivates the learners to come to their classes and take on the very challenging task of learning another language. They can tap in to their learners’ motivation to both improve language learning and enliven the class by identifying high-interest popular media in the form of television programs, films, newspapers, magazines, and even signs, billboards, and posters that the learners encounter in their day-to-day lives. They can also use scenarios relevant to the learners’ lives, such as renting an apartment, trying to get a job promotion, or going to the emergency room. When adult learners see their English class as connected and helpful to their real lives, they are more likely to invest the effort it takes to attend class and to approach their out-of-class lives as a language-learning laboratory. Teachers can support this by identifying individual, pair, or group projects (Florez and Burt, 2001) of importance to their adult learners, particularly projects that identify and build knowledge about community resources and how specific institutional systems work, such as the school system, banks and mortgage companies, and the medical establishment.

The ultimate goal of learning a language is to be able to communicate and interact with the people that speak it. Interaction is what happens when two or more people exchange ideas and negotiate meaning in order to prevent “breakdowns” (Ellis, 1999). This does not mean that we should focus only on listening and speaking skills; teaching grammar, vocabulary,

and pronunciation to adult ESL learners is equally important in preventing communication breakdowns (Finn-Miller, 2004). However, interaction is crucial, as it makes learners aware of the gaps between what they want to say and what their listener understands (Schmidt and Frota, 1986).

Building a community in the ESL classroom helps provide a safe environment where learners can interact and try out using the new language. When they interact in class, they receive comprehensible input and feedback from each other (Gass, 1997). As language instructors, we can build a setting in which adult learners can learn and practice communication strategies and tools such as paraphrasing in order to describe, questioning for clarification, drawing on linguistic and world knowledge in order to build meaning, and using sentence fillers (*well, I mean, you know*, and so on) in order to become successful language users. Having different group activities in the ESL classroom provides opportunities for them to learn and practice these strategies and use these tools with others. One way to help them is to have them work in groups and pairs. Research has shown that students produce more and longer sentences when they work in groups and pairs (Doughty and Pica, 1986), and we know that language is best learned when social interaction is occurring and learners use the new language for social communication (Lantolf, 2006).

## Whole Language for Adult ESL Classrooms

Whole language implies that we look at adult learners as whole persons rather than just ESL learners. It asks us to see the learners in our classes as parents, spouses, employees or business owners, neighbors, churchgoers, and members of various communities. In other words, when we approach learners in our classes as whole persons, we view them as adults with accomplishments, responsibilities, relationships, personal histories, and hopes. Moreover, whole language encourages the teacher and the learner to look at language not in segments but as a whole. In whole language, all language skills are integrated, class participants learn about the cultures of their peers and their communities, social rules are openly discussed, and class activities incorporate the students' knowledge and talents. Seven basic principles support the whole-person approach to second-language learning and teaching (Schwarzer and Luke, 2001): a holistic perspective; authentic learning; curriculum negotiation; inquiry-based lessons; language learning, a developmental process; alternative assessment; and community of learners.

**Holistic Perspective.** Taking a holistic perspective means looking at language as a whole rather than approaching it in pieces, such as studying adverbs in isolated sentences or practicing verb conjugation out of context merely to memorize the endings. It means studying the language in context so that the learners experience it in a realistic way. It prescribes integrating reading, writing, listening, speaking, and cultural activities; reading a chapter of a book or an article from the newspaper instead of isolated paragraphs,

sentences, or words; and listening to an entire segment of a news or reality program before breaking it down into short interactions, sentences, or vocabulary. It helps the learners develop an understanding of the whole and then allows them to examine the pieces after that. Think about the context within which the piece was written or produced. Who was the audience? Why did the author write it or the producers produce it? What does it say about life, society, or politics in the author’s or producer’s society or culture?

**Authentic Learning.** Authentic learning means to incorporate learning materials and learning experiences from the learners’ daily lives. Use classroom activities that learners could use tomorrow or the next day in real life. Use your learners as authentic audiences to practice on before they venture beyond the class. Make sure that in-class learning activities represent both the cultural context of the learners and the cultural context outside the classroom. For example, if they come from Latin America, ask them to explain about their culture, holidays, and what they miss from their country and at the same time to request information about the American culture and holidays to an English-only speaker. Not only are they learning the culture of the United States, but they are at the same time bringing their own language and culture to people who have lived in the United States all their lives.

**Curriculum Negotiation.** Curriculum negotiation involves asking learners to participate in the decision-making process related to the curriculum they will study. You cover the “mandated” curriculum but also make room to address learners’ learning needs and wants. Integrate, if you can, what is mandated with things the learners are interested in their daily lives. Providing options is a good way to start the negotiation. Creating a chart with learners’ needs and wants for the class may be another way to recognize and subsequently incorporate what is important to them into the class.

**Inquiry-Based Lessons.** Inquiry-based lessons promote the development of inquiry skills in the classroom. Encourage learners to ask questions and pursue answers to them. For example, the instructor can elicit questions from the students about a text they have read together. The students can formulate possible questions they would like the author of the text to answer in an interview, or they can formulate questions to help them understand the text more fully and pose them to their classmates. When learners ask their own questions, learning becomes more meaningful to them, and they invest more in their learning.

**Language Learning: A Developmental Process.** Language learning is a process, and learners will inevitably make mistakes when they are actively learning. The goal is to make “better” and more sophisticated mistakes as the learners progress in their learning. Therefore, taking risks and making mistakes should be embraced. Also, remember that what learners can produce in English does not necessarily reflect what they know about the language. Part of your job is to provide contexts and tasks that will help them use what they know and identify and fill in what they don’t know.

**Alternative Assessment.** Alternative assessment requires that learning be measured by means of various evaluation methods, not just standardized testing. Such alternative assessments as portfolios, anecdotal records, and videotapes of learner presentations are effective tools to assess learners' progress over time, and these techniques also provide learners with useful and actionable information about their own progress. It is important to look not only at the product but also at the learners' processes of language learning.

**Community of Learners.** It is important that adults in the ESL classroom feel welcome and accepted for who they are. Developing a sense of belonging to the adult ESL class is crucial. The instructor and the learners act in both roles—as learners and as experts—in such a community. Adult learners are more willing to invest in their learning and continue attending the ESL class when they feel welcome and part of a caring learning community.

### Teaching the Whole Adult ESL Learner: A Few Practical Ideas

The following section suggests ways in which the principles of the whole-language approach can be applied in adult ESL settings.

**Building the Classroom Together.** Like a new house, the ESL classroom is empty before the instructor and the learners meet for their first class. The first step when you move into a new place is to take ownership of the place and make it comfortable and welcoming for you. This is also true of the classroom. When you meet for the first time, invite your learners to “build the classroom” with you. Invite them to bring or make their own furniture such as shelves to store and display material or students' work, picture frames, and learning materials for their new class. Provide opportunities for them to make the classroom feel more like home. Let them bring food. Often adult learners arrive to class after a full day's work and are tired and hungry. Share your family and culture, and encourage your learners to share theirs. This helps learners take ownership of the learning environment, and that feeling may spill over into their other learning responsibilities in the class. And by integrating the learners into your classroom, you are focusing on their strengths and acknowledging that they bring valuable resources to the learning environment.

**Capitalizing on Learners' Expertise.** Adult learners bring a lifetime of knowledge and experience to the ESL class. They bring specialized knowledge from their professions and occupations. It is not unusual for ESL learners to have practiced as well-educated professionals (doctors or teachers) or skilled tradespersons in their countries of origin. Capitalize on their strengths; you can help your learners become “expert of the week” and take turns making class presentations on their topics. These presentations will enhance their vocabulary skills in their areas of expertise while integrating all language skills in an authentic and meaningful setting. Other students

in class as well as the instructor benefit from learning the new information provided by their classmates on health, nutrition, cooking, beauty, construction, and carpentry depending on their occupations and professions.

**Creating Independent Learners.** Adult learners should depend as little as possible on their instructor for learning. The instructor should be one of many resources available to them. One way to start building independence in the learners is to have class routines. When there are clear and relevant class routines, learners are more focused on learning, and learning anxiety diminishes. Even if the instructor is absent, they know what should happen in the different segments of the class. Having class routines does not mean having a boring class. It means having direction and a clear set of procedures and expectations for the learners. Part of the routines you may consider are setting learning goals, having hands-on learning activities, and implementing self-assessment. These routines need to be consistent. When adult learners set their own learning goals and monitor their own progress, they feel more independent. Independent learners are more motivated to learn and are therefore more likely to keep attending class. They are also developing the skills to continue learning the language when they are not in your classroom.

**Extending the Classroom to the World.** Field trips are a great way to connect the learning that happens in the classroom with the life that goes on outside of it. Adult ESL learners need to learn about the new culture in real-life situations, and it is important to remember that what ESL teachers may consider commonplace is all new for someone from another country. Visiting places such as the supermarket, the hospital, and the public library offers an array of learning opportunities for the adult ESL learner. With the help of the learners, you can make a list of places to visit and plan for tasks to be accomplished during those visits. Learners can also go by themselves as an assignment and report on the experience. To support language learning from these activities, the instructor can design short lessons as follow-up activities in order to integrate the language skills from the field trip experience. You can take advantage of the printed messages in the environments visited and explore those messages with the learners in class. Field trips are just one more way to connect the classroom to the community outside.

**Acquiring New Literacy Habits.** When adult learners are exposed to a variety of hands-on activities, they develop new literacy habits. Literate adults read for pleasure, search the Internet, read newspapers, and know how to access services offered in their community. Also, learners who are exposed to libraries, museums, and the Internet may develop a taste for books, music, and art. When the instructor encourages learners to acquire these new literacy habits, they are able to apply them in their daily literacy needs as adults.

**Empowering Justin.** As an “emergent” adult ESL instructor, Justin has a lot to learn; however, he also has a lot to offer to the field of adult ESL. He should be encouraged to attend conferences and professional development



geared toward improving adult ESL teaching and learning. Justin (and other adult ESL instructors like him) needs to document the practical knowledge he acquires through teaching adult ESL learners and sharing what he learns with other instructors. This practice will help him gradually develop his professional voice as an adult ESL instructor. By taking the risk to try new methodologies that look at the adult learner as a whole as well as by presenting them to his peers, he will develop and empower himself and other instructors. By turning his language classroom into a site of human interaction, by viewing language, learning, and teaching as holistic processes, and by inviting learners to bring their lives into the classroom while he brings his in as well, Justin forges a community that is not only good for language learning but also for the well-being of Justin himself, the learners, and the larger world.

## Conclusion

Justin and other emergent ESL instructors teaching adult ESL learners should be praised for their commitment. They have stepped forward as members of their communities to share their language and thereby help those who have arrived more recently to find their place within the diverse richness of the many smaller communities that make up the whole of the nation.

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