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A Conversation with *FOB*...

What Works for Adult ESL Students

Heide Spruck Wrigley was the content specialist on "What Works for Adult ESL Literacy Students," a study funded by the US Department of Education and carried out jointly by the American Institutes for Research and Aguirre International. The two principal researchers on the study were Larry Condelli (AIR) and Heide Wrigley (Aguirre International). Heide discussed the study, its findings, and their implications for curriculum with Focus on Basics.

FOB: Can you briefly describe the study for us?

HEIDE: The study was designed to take a look at what helps literacy students who are new to English develop their English reading skills as well as their oral interaction skills in English. These are students who have fewer than six years of schooling in their home countries and who, by definition, don't have strong literacy skills in their home language nor do they generally have strong skills in English. But we do know that literacy students have strong skills that a curriculum can build on. They negotiate their daily lives in an environment that is both English-speaking and print-rich; they often have developed a score of sight words they rely on; and they use compensation strategies by drawing on their background knowledge and life experience to help them make sense of things. They all speak at least one language fluently and are now in ESOL [English for speakers of other languages] classes in an effort to pick up English and learn the basic skills they missed by not having been able to complete their schooling in their home countries.

The study is particularly pertinent now that immigration from poorer countries is increasing and includes many more individuals who had to leave school early because they had to work or their country was in the midst of civil strife. The largest group of these new immigrants comes from Mexico, where educational opportunities are limited for much of the population (two-thirds of immigrants from Mexico haven't completed high school), but refugees from Southeast Asia (primarily Hmong) and from Africa (Somalia, Sudan, and a number of West African countries) are also among the literacy students. These groups have not been well served in conventional ESOL classes where the class starts with a book and the curriculum assumes that students have a certain level of literacy. These students - with limited literacy - have trouble in these ESOL classes, since students with higher levels of education drive the speed of the class and basic literacy is seldom taught. That was the concern behind the study.

It's an observational study, involving about 500 students who spoke more than 20 languages, with the majority being Spanish speakers. It was grounded in a framework that looked at literacy

and language acquisition as a multidimensional construct. ESOL literacy involves learning how to deal with different kinds of text, and learning how to write for different reasons (for self-expression and functional literacy, for example). ESOL literacy also requires learning English, understanding it and producing it; learning grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and the other subskills. We developed a framework that identified the components of ESOL literacy, starting with print awareness, so that we could observe the classes to see to what extent are teachers are working with these different forms of literacy: narrative, document prose, etc. We looked at literacy development, second language development, and ways of connecting oral and written language.

We also looked at learning opportunities: to what extent did people get to interact with each other and to what extent did students get a chance to talk about their own lives, be involved in spontaneous conversations, or deal with problem solving? We wanted to see to what extent teachers used authentic materials or materials that reflect the literacy demands of the world outside, beyond the classroom. We noted the language (English or the native language) used by the teacher during the ESOL literacy classes. The study used a multivariable statistical model of analysis, looking at intraclass variation, holding various factors constant to see what kind of teaching made a difference. The model allowed us to look at complex relationships among literacy, teaching, and learning. That is what learning literacy while you are trying to learn a second language is: a complex relationship.

FOB: What were the study's key findings?

HEIDE: One of the key findings for reading development was that students learned more, as measured in movement on standardized tests, in classes where the teacher made the connection between life outside the classroom and what was learned in the classroom than in classes that did not. So, for example, if teachers led field trips where students had to use English; or brought in grocery fliers or catalogues to read and discuss; or used as literacy materials cereal boxes or soup cans to figure out calories, all of which are materials and information that reflected the literacy that students deal with in their everyday lives, the impact was stronger. We called this "bringing in the outside." Bringing in the outside made a significant difference in reading gains on standardized tests.

In one class, for example, the teacher helped a group of displaced workers learn how to order food in English at a local fast food restaurant. This seems like a small task but was hugely important to the group since their children always had to order for them. Ordering themselves helped restore the parental role to what the students considered a more natural balance. The group spent a great deal of time discussing the menu, predicting questions, and practicing what to say: "Would you like that supersized?" "No, thank you." They then went to the fast food restaurant and, for the first time, ordered their food by themselves.

We also did a literacy practices inventory to see what kind of things people were reading and writing in their native languages and English. We didn't see a really close relationship between what they were reading and how much they were reading and gains on standardized tests; there are just too many variables involved. Of course, people who had higher scores to start with tended to read more because it was easier for them.

FOB: *Did you happen to look at whether, if a teacher "brought in the outside" to class, students increased their use of literacy skills outside of class? That's something that Victoria Purcell-Gates studied in her research (click [here](#) for a description of her findings).*

HEIDE: I can't say that there was no relationship between teaching approach and use of literacy, because we didn't analyze for that. We were looking primarily at the relationship between the kind of ESOL and literacy emphasized in the classroom and the way it was taught, and learner outcomes (as measured by standardized tests). There were other findings as well, related to growth in oral proficiency, for example, and we had some interesting findings in terms of attendance.

FOB: *Were there any findings you did not expect?*

HEIDE: Yes. Judicious use of the native language made a difference in both reading and oral language skill acquisition as shown by results on standardized tests. We didn't have any native language literacy classes, and we didn't have any classes in which teachers did a great deal of translating for the students. But students had higher gains when the students in the class shared a language - (in our case, Spanish) - and the teacher was bilingual and used Spanish here and there, to give instructions, or to clarify, or to offer a quick translation of a difficult term. In classes with other language groups, the group either spoke multiple languages, as was the case in Seattle and New York, or the teacher was not bilingual, as was the case with Somali and Hmong classes.

The classes where the teacher used the native language here and there had higher gains. This makes sense, particularly for literacy students who had little English, because their brains are busy trying to speak, to figure out print, to understand what the teacher wants, all while dealing with a new language and a new culture. Many of the students had not been in a classroom since they were small children, so school tasks were new to them as well. In these cases, where you are cognitively taxed to your fullest extent, if someone comes in and explains it to you, it really frees up mental space to focus on the task itself. In ESOL classes that are all in English, so much of students' time and energy is spent trying to figure out what it is the teacher wants them to do. Once the instructions are clear, the task becomes manageable.

Something else new, although not totally unexpected, was that students need practice and they need variety. I think in our emphasis on communicative competence we sometimes forget how much practice is needed before literacy and English take hold and become internalized or "automatized." On the other hand, if language input and language tasks become repetitive and boring, the brain shuts down and learning slows way down. Students who experienced mainly skill and drill in their classes didn't do as well as other groups who had more varied experiences. By the same token, if everything was new all the time, and lots of different activities came at the students without a clear focus on what they needed to learn, they didn't do as well either.

The students who got both sufficient time on task with a particular component and a chance to encounter that component in various ways (reading, writing, hands-on activities, talking about they were reading) showed higher gains than the rest. Students need a chance to interact with print, to practice, and to "get it down." At the same time, they benefit from different kinds of experiences that reinforce language and literacy skills. This kind of balance between routine and variety made a difference in their scores on standardized testing.

FOB: The two findings seem like they may be related: judicious use of native language, to introduce procedures and to clarify complex points, for example, and the need for routine. Both indicate that time should be spent on the content - on the learning - rather than on the procedures.

HEIDE: I think a certain amount of routine is good, particularly for adults who have little experience with schooling and who often doubt their own ability to learn. School-based learning is important to them and they want to get the basic skills that they have missed. But they often really come alive when they get a chance to work with important concepts, such as figuring out what all the charges on a phone bill are for or whether buying vegetables at a farmer's market or in a supermarket is a better deal. The finding also points to the importance of giving instructions that are simple and clear, and of demonstrating and modeling so that frustration and anxiety are reduced and students can focus on "meaning-making." And that can be done in English as well as in the native language.

FOB: Any other findings to share?

HEIDE: The basic attendance finding was that it didn't matter how many hours for class that students came but the percentage of class time they came. Rate of attendance matters more than the hours per se. For example, a student who comes to class almost every day and then drops out after three and a half months ends up doing better than a student who only attends sporadically but stays for the full six months of the course. This is true even when the total number of class hours attended are the same.

FOB: What are the implications of the findings of your study for curriculum?

HEIDE: We found that building on what students are interested in outside of the classroom results in success. This supports the idea that you want to have a curriculum that connects literacy development with oral language development and connects it back to students' lives. You can't read in English if you don't know English. We didn't see that a narrow approach that focused solely on narrow notions of reading was successful, although spending time on some of the subskills related to fluency and decoding certainly is necessary for students who don't have these skills. As we keep hearing, these subskills are necessary but not sufficient and I think our study shows that.

The findings speak for building a rich curriculum that makes a connection between the language and literacy used inside and outside of the classroom and lets these students see that they are gaining skills that reflect what's needed in daily life. Use of objects (real foods, household items), environmental print (flyers, labels, signs), mail (including notes from schools), and trips to neighborhood spots where literacy is needed are not the only materials that are useful. Language experience stories, personal writings, and stories and songs build engagement and can become the starting point for discussions and further language use. These materials also form the basis for building fluency, discovering patterns, developing vocabulary, and practicing various subskills. Their use ties back in with the finding about practice and variety.

"Varied interaction and practice" is important. We do need to draw students' attention to what it is we want them to learn. There needs to be focus, engagement, and practice if language and literacy learning is to take place. A lot of times in ESOL teaching we're doing way too many things that don't connect to each other. Tightening the connections, doing fewer things, focusing

on what students need to get in order to move forward is important.

In terms of the native language, we do need to rethink that "English only" idea, and that fear that any minute spent in native language takes away from English learning. That is actually not true. We need to really think about how to provide opportunities for students to have enough time on task really to become fluent in English. This calls for multiple opportunities to use English while facilitating learning by using the native language here or there or, if that is not possible, taking time out to demonstrate or model the tasks or use visual information to get our point across.

I mentioned before that language learners need enough energy in terms of cognitive resource to focus on language learning. If tasks are constantly changing or if instructions contain new words and phrases, learning is really inhibited. So I like to encourage teachers to keep a certain amount of classroom interaction routine when they are introducing new concepts. That lets people focus on the learning rather than on the procedures. But overall, in terms of curriculum, the findings suggest a rich language and literacy learning curriculum that provides opportunities for students to use English outside of the classroom, both through interactions with English speakers and through engagement with various forms of print. But the study also points toward the need to provide a sufficient focus on structure and practice. We can't just assume that literacy students will pick up reading and writing skills on their own, through mere exposure and continued acquisition of English. This may be true for students who have a sound foundation in literacy in the native language, but it's not true for students who lack these skills. Through our curriculum, we will need to give ESOL literacy students practice in acquiring basic reading and writing skills within the context of their lives without making these skills the primary focus of the curriculum.

FOB: Thanks for sharing all this with us. Where can readers go for your full report?

HEIDE: The report is still under review by the Department of Education. It's difficult to tell when it will be released. As soon as the study is released, it will be available on the web. We will announce its availability in various newsletters and list serves, including the *Focus on Basics* electronic discussion list (to subscribe, click [here](#)).

Resources

Wrigley, H. (1993). "One size does not fit all: Educational perspectives and program practices in the U.S." *TESOL Quarterly*, 27, (3).

Wrigley, H. (2004). "We are the world: Serving language minority adults in family literacy programs." In B.H Wasik (ed.) *Handbook on Family Literacy: Research and Services*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Spruck, H., & Guth, G. (1992). *Bringing Literacy to Life: Issues and Options in Adult ESL Literacy*. San Mateo, CA: Aguirre International.