



LITERACY UPDATE

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Literacy Assistance Center

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The Art of Making Callers Comfortable

> *Jon Steinberg* Director of Communications

They call in the morning, the afternoon, the evening. Weekends too. Albanians call and Vietnamese, along with immigrants from more than a hundred other countries and thousands of native-born Americans. More than 1,400 people a month telephone the LAC hotline; thousands more every year use the Adult Education Locator on the LAC website. The LAC Outreach and Referral program is unique, the only statewide information service covering adult literacy programs, including adult basic education (ABE), English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), family literacy, GED and pre-GED, as well as GED test sites, vocational training, and vocational and educational services for people with

disabilities. Created a quarter-century ago, the hotline is one of the original LAC services to the adult literacy field. The current contract expires on September 30. As of this writing, its future is unresolved.

Some kinds of hotlines can perform their function with little more than a database and polite phone operators. In New York City, where callers include both native-born Americans with a variety of educational needs and desires and immigrants who had schooling in any one of more than a hundred countries, the demands are much greater. To serve its constituency well, the staff of an adult literacy hotline must have a deep knowledge of programs, the ability to communicate in several languages, people skills, and plenty of patience.

“We want immigrants to feel comfortable when they call and try not to ask them questions they can’t answer,” says Marie Severin, the senior hotline referral specialist. “Usually they know the basics—age, borough, what time they want to take a class. If they don’t know what borough means, I say ‘Brooklyn, Queens,’ and then they understand. Then I ask their zip code. If they don’t know what that is, if they live in Brooklyn, I say one-one-two and they understand and give me the other numbers. The Africans who call usually speak French.” If they do, Marie, who was born in Haiti, switches into that. She also speaks French Creole and Spanish fluently. Between English and these languages, she can communicate easily with most of the hotline’s callers.

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Recognition

> Elyse Barbell *Executive Director*

I don't use the phone much any more. Email seems so much more efficient; it helps me get things done a lot faster. Yet, sometimes a phone is still the perfect tool. This week is my favorite "phone week" of the year, the time when I get the pleasure of phoning the eight tremendously dedicated literacy specialists who will receive one of our annual LAC Literacy Recognition Awards, along with a \$1200 book scholarship provided by the Bookbinders' Guild of New York. It is joy to reach the surprised and delighted honorees and tell them that at long last, their dedication, commitment, and years of hard work will be honored.

It couldn't have come at a better time, frankly. Forgive me for being a bit cranky, but in this social and political climate, recognition of our work has been hard to come by. Yet, as our very late spring begins to bloom, small signs of change are emerging. Some of the credit goes to a coalition of literacy practitioners with a collective thousand years of experience in this field. They are making notable progress in explaining the vital contributions of adult literacy to policy makers who hold the purse strings. I'd like to offer my personal thanks to all of you.

Other positive signs are popping up. The health and legal fields are beginning to recognize the importance of communicating clearly with patrons who are challenged by restricted literacy. Some of these service providers are reaching out to collaborate with literacy programs to assure that their message is understood and that their services are used appropriately and to the fullest extent possible. Associations with literacy programs can be extraordinarily valuable to these organizations, and they are beginning to realize it. I would like to take this opportunity to say thank you to service providers who understand the value of what we do and have given us an opportunity us to help make you more effective.

Finally, as our 2006–07 school year comes to a close, I wish you all a happy and restorative summer. Come back not cranky, but ready to do your wonderful work all over again. You can be sure that we know you are changing lives; we tell everyone we meet that you are. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. ●



LITERACY UPDATE

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> Diane Gardner *Center for Literacy Studies, The University of Tennessee*

Work readiness has become a hot topic here in New York and throughout the country. Adult educators exploring the best way to teach it have been looking at a variety of approaches. One that has attracted a lot of attention is Preparing for Work, a new curriculum developed as part of the Equipped for the Future (EFF) project. We asked Diane Gardner of EFF to explain the intellectual framework that underlies EFF and Preparing for Work, and Judy Rye, one of the first teachers to introduce the new curriculum, to describe her experience in our Teacher's Corner on page 10.

The Editors

Back in 1994, the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) set out to improve the quality and results of adult education systems in the U.S. Using the National Education Lifelong Learning Goal, “Every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship,” as a guide, NIFL surveyed adults across the country.

The questions were basic: What skills and knowledge do you need to be effective in your daily life? What do you consider to be your roles as an adult living in the U.S.? The responses, along with input from thousands of teachers, administrators, policymakers, and content experts through field research, advisory councils, and expert panels, became the basis for Equipped for the Future (EFF), a standards-based reform initiative for teaching and assessment.

The EFF framework is based on three Role Maps—worker, family member, and community member. Each of the three describes what adults do to fulfill that role effectively, breaking the process down into a set of key activities. In analyzing each activity to determine the skills needed to perform the task effectively, NIFL came to an unexpected conclusion: Just as flexing your arm requires coordinating the work of many muscles, accomplishing any of the tasks requires applying several of the skills in combination. In addition, even the combination of skills required for the same activity will vary depending on the situation and role. For example, in order to gather, analyze, and use information, an adult might use speaking and listening skills at home, and reading and learning in research skills at work.

After considerable research and analysis, NIFL came up with a list of 16 essential adult learning standards:

- > Convey ideas in writing
- > Listen actively
- > Speak so others can understand

- > Read with understanding
- > Use math to solve problems and communicate
- > Solve problems and make decisions
- > Plan
- > Cooperate with others
- > Advocate and influence
- > Resolve conflict and negotiate
- > Guide others
- > Take responsibility for learning
- > Use information and communications technology
- > Learn through research
- > Reflect and evaluate
- > Observe critically

Each of these standards defines an integrated skill process that is transferable across all roles. To “reflect and evaluate,” for example, someone has to “take stock of where one is: assess what one knows already and the relevance of that knowledge”; and “make inferences, predictions or judgments based on one’s reflections.” Not only do these standards provide a framework for instruction, they can be used to align instruction with assessment. Perhaps even more importantly, they provide a common language for everyone—educators, learners, and employers.

Since 2002, EFF has operated under the auspices of the Center for Literacy Studies at the University of Tennessee, where its mission has been to provide adult educators throughout the country with the tools, professional development, and technical assistance they need to implement a standards-based curriculum that meet the needs of adult learners. Over the last few years, EFF has provided professional development and technical assistance to a number of states and agencies, including Washington D.C., Washington State, and New Jersey, and worked with other states, such as Texas and Rhode Island, to develop a set of state standards. In New York, EFF has worked with Educational Opportunity Centers in Buffalo and Brooklyn to help practitioners integrate work-related skills (communication, decision making, interpersonal, and lifelong learning) into their classrooms and courses.

In the past few years, EFF has developed a series of work readiness curricula. *Preparing for Careers in Health*, for example, integrates the EFF standards, the EFF Worker Role Map, and the national skill standards into a curriculum for workers in the health care sector. The most recent, *Preparing for Work*, prepares adults and youth for entry-level positions across industries.

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What Do Adult ESOL Students Need?

> Margo DelliCarpini, Ph.D. *Lehman College, The City University of New York and Eastern Suffolk BOCES*
and Stephanie Engelmann M.S.Ed., SAS, SDA, *Western Suffolk BOCES*

ESOL learners have become the country's fastest growing student population. The 2000 Census identified more than 35 million adult non-native English speakers. During the 2003–04 school year, 44 percent of all participants were English language learners (ELLs), according to the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education (2005). Of this group, most were in the early stages of English acquisition—55 percent participated in either beginning literacy or beginning level ESOL classes (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Although some of these students reached a high level of academic achievement in their native country, most have limited formal education. At least one third arrived with less than a high school level education, according to recent estimates (National Center for ESL Literacy Education, 2003; Wrigley, Richer, Martinson, Kubo & Strawn, 2003). For this group, traditional English classes are not sufficient. Achieving success and gaining a voice in their new country requires educational services that place the development of literacy skills at the forefront of the curriculum.

Mandates for adult education are established by the federal government and the individual states. The Workforce Reinvestment and Adult Education Act of 2003 (which amends the Workforce Investment Act of 1998) sets conditions that determine whether or not a state can receive federal funding to implement adult education programs. States in turn are increasingly focusing on accountability and measurable gains. Their preferred strategy is to align standards for Adult Basic Education (ABE), General Education Diploma (GED) preparation, and English as a Second Language (ESL/ESOL) content and performance with the standards they have established for grades pre-K–12.

As a result of these constraints, two major issues confront adult education for ELLs: Are the current assessment system and prevalent program design in use in many federally funded programs across the country the best approach to meeting the needs of our growing adult ELL population? If not, how could these needs be met more effectively in today's social and educational context?

Native Language Literacy and the Development of English Literacy Skills

The ESOL field may define the term literacy in a variety of ways. In the U.S., level of oral proficiency is frequently associated with and used interchangeably with student literacy level (Solorzano, 1994). This is problematic for several reasons. Adults who lack oral proficiency skills may have a high level of literacy skills in other areas. Conversely, adults who have a relatively high level of oral skills may be unable to read and write in English—and in their native language as well. Either way, programs that make their placements based on oral skills exclusively will find that many learners are in a class that does not match their abilities and the speed at which they are capable of progressing (Gillespie, 1994). At the same time, instructional practices that concentrate mainly on oral/aural (auditory) skill development and de-emphasize other areas, such as reading instruction, may hamper the ability of non-English speakers to improve their English reading and writing skills (Solorzano, 1994).

The Adult Education Content Standards Warehouse (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education) takes a broader approach, stating that ESOL student literacy should encompass reading and writing in addition to listening and speaking skills and abilities. This more expansive definition makes sense intuitively; however, it must be said that little research is available to back it up.

Traditionally, the term “functional” literacy referred to the application of basic skills to one's social, community, and working environment. More recently, researchers such as James Paul Gee and Paulo Freire have won a great deal of support for the perspective that literacy involves more than the acquisition of a discrete set of skills. It requires knowledge of a culturally situated set of social practices. As a culture and society evolve, so does the meaning of literacy. The constant is that literacy provides people with a voice. It gives them access to the society in which they find themselves, whether that society is based on their native culture or the culture of their new home. By this definition, literacy in the U.S. today includes the ability to decode and interpret print.

In a new country that places a great emphasis on the ability to read and write for communication, social interaction, and critical analysis, students who are not functionally literate in their native language need a path to literacy development that draws on their rich schema and gives them access to participation in the community. In other words, they need the skills essential to acquiring information and, perhaps most importantly, to achieving economic self-sufficiency. These include the basic skills necessary to decode text and then progress through the *learning to read* stage and on to *reading to learn*. To provide these skills, the literacy level adult ESOL classroom must consistently offer instruction in reading as well as appropriate support and assessment practices.

This does not mean that native language literacy should be ignored. On the contrary, studies have shown a high degree of transfer of basic reading skills between the first language (L1) and the second language (L2), regardless how much their writing systems differ (Carlo & Skilton-Sylvester, 1994; Wagner & Venezky, 1999). Researchers who studied literacy level adult ESOL students reported that participants who had some literacy ability in their first language were able to acquire English reading skills more rapidly than participants who did not have any prior literacy in their native language (Burtoff, 1985; Robson, 1982).

Assessment Instruments and Their Impact

Controversial and confusing ESOL assessment practices have contributed to the dilemma of how to best serve learners. The controversy has arisen over the areas being evaluated on the assessments, and the purposes of evaluating them (Solorzano, 1994). Assessments of adult ESOL learners can be useful for both practical and theoretical reasons. According to Solorzano (1994), they can be used to diagnose weaknesses and strengths in the English language, place learners in an ESOL sequential curriculum, assess English listening and/or speaking proficiency, judge competencies in real life situations, and satisfy funder testing requirements. Solorzano finds them inappropriate when they are used solely to satisfy external requirements.

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22nd ANNUAL LITERACY RECOGNITION CEREMONY

The Board of Directors of the Literacy Assistance Center invites you to join us for the 22nd Annual Literacy Recognition Award Ceremony, which is sponsored by the Bookbinders' Guild of New York and by Scholastic Inc.

THURSDAY, JUNE 7
9:30 AM–12:30 PM

SCHOLASTIC, INC., AUDITORIUM
557 Broadway, 2nd floor
(between Prince and Spring streets)

Registration and breakfast reception at 9:30 am
Award ceremony at 10 am
RSVP is essential! Please call 212.803.3323 to reserve your space.

Recognition Award Recipients

Tilla Alexander *ESOL Instructor*
NYC DOE, Office of Adult and Continuing Education
Mid-Manhattan Adult Learning Center

Susan W. Dalmás *Director*
Queens Borough Public Library
Adult Literacy Programs

Denise Deagan *Director*
Center for Continuing Education and Workforce Development
BMCC/CUNY

Decklan Fox *Literacy Education Specialist*
New York Public Library

Betty Gerstein *Volunteer Tutor*
New York Public Library
Aguilar Language Learning Center

John Lyons *Adult Education Director*
Northern Manhattan Improvement Corporation

Alexis Morales *Teacher/Counselor*
Brooklyn College Adult Literacy Program

Hsiao-Wei Yang *ESOL Instructional
Coordinator/Instructor*
The Door, ESOL Education Program

Jobs in Literacy at the LAC

Director of Professional Development

Lead a professional development team that provides services designed to improve the skills and abilities of literacy program personnel, teachers and school staff, social service workers, health care workers, volunteers, and parents to function as effective adult educators. Responsible for providing educational leadership and guidance through a diverse set of activities aimed at various markets, including adult and alternative education programs, health care institutions, community-based organizations, and social service agencies.

Project Leader Community & Family Programs

Implement programs designed to improve the capability of organizations and institutions to work with families, parents, and children as literacy learners. Train staff, volunteers, and parents in community settings. Work with K–12 schools, libraries, social service agencies, health care providers, immigrant groups, housing associations, museums, and other constituencies in the application of family literacy principles in new and existing programs. Give focus to family-related work within the overall scope of services provided by the LAC.

For more information about these job opportunities at the LAC, please see our website at www.lacnyc.org/about/jobs.htm.

CONFERENCES

June

American Library Association 131st Annual Conference

June 21–27, Washington, DC
www.ala.org/ala/eventsandconferencesb/annual/2007a/home.htm

National Education Computing Conference (NECC) 2007

Learning and Leading with Technology

*The International Society
for Technology in Education*
June 24–27, Atlanta, GA
<http://center.uoregon.edu/ISTE/NECC2007/>

July

National Adult Learner Leadership Institute

*Voice for Adult Literacy United for Education
(VALUE)*

July 5–7, Hartford, CT
<http://www.valueusa.org/>

Workforce Innovations 2007

*The U.S. Department of Labor's Employment
and Training Administration, and
the American Society for Training and Development*
July 17–19, Kansas City, MO
www.workforceinnovations.org/

August

23rd Annual Conference On Distance Teaching and Learning

The University of Wisconsin, Madison
August 8–10, Madison, WI
www.uwex.edu/disted/conference/

May 3

Teaching Math through Problem-Solving in the GED/ABE Classroom Workshop III: Algebra and Geometry Thursday, May 3, 2–5 pm

Facilitators: Charlie Brover, Denise Deagan, and Solange Farina, the New York City Math Exchange Group (MEG)

Recent research on the GED math test shows that adult students have most difficulty with questions that require problem-solving proficiency and flexibility, particularly when these involve unfamiliar mathematical situations. Math educators agree that eliminating this difficulty requires a deeper understanding of the relevant mathematical concepts. As Diana Lambdin says, “No matter how kindly, clearly, patiently, or slowly teachers explain, they cannot *make* students understand. Understanding takes place in the students’ minds as they connect new information with previously developed ideas—understanding occurs as a by-product of solving problems and reflecting on the thinking that went into those problem solutions.” (*Teaching Mathematics Through Problem Solving*, National Council of Teachers of Mathematics: 2003). This four-part series features workshops in Problem Solving, Number Sense, Algebra and Geometry, and Data and Probability. Participants will explore essential elements of a problem-posing, problem-solving classroom and consider recent work from the OVAE-funded GED Mathematics Training Institute. Workshop materials will be classroom-based; teachers who attend the entire series may participate in ongoing teacher research. Participants are not required to attend all four sessions.

RSVP: LAC Reservation Line at 212.803.3323 or rsvp@lacnyc.org.

May 8

BEST Plus Test Administrator Training Tuesday, May 8, 9:30 am–4:30 pm

Facilitator: Mariann Fedele

Become a certified BEST Plus administrator. Practice administering the print- and computer-based versions of the test and familiarize yourself with the scoring rubric. Participants will receive a test administrator guide and practice CDs.

RSVP: LAC Reservation Line at 212.803.3323 or rsvp@lacnyc.org.

May 10

TABE Test Administrator Training Thursday, May 10, 1–5 pm

Facilitator: Mariann Fedele

This workshop will introduce participants to the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE), Forms 7 & 8 and 9 & 10—the main test used by adult literacy programs funded by the State Education Department to place students in adult basic education (ABE) classes and to measure educational gain. Participants will become familiar with the content and format of the test; learn about effective test administration and how to use the scoring tables; and discuss the relationship between TABE test scores and National Reporting System (NRS) levels.

RSVP: LAC Reservation Line at 212.803.3323 or rsvp@lacnyc.org.

May 17

Teaching Math through Problem-Solving in the GED/ABE Classroom Workshop IV: Data and Probability Thursday, May 17, 2–5 pm

Please see May 3 for an event description. Participants are not required to attend all four sessions.

RSVP: LAC Reservation Line at 212.803.3323 or rsvp@lacnyc.org.

May 18

ESOL Teacher Share Friday, May 18, 2–4:30 pm

Facilitator: Winston Lawrence

Explore and discuss appropriate methods for teaching English language learners (ELLs). Share promising practices from your own classrooms, and receive feedback from your peers. Teachers who attended TESOL 2007 will share their experiences and disseminate the materials that they collected.

RSVP: LAC Reservation Line at 212.803.3323 or rsvp@lacnyc.org.

May 24

ALIES® Data Entry Training Thursday, May 24, 9:30 am–4:30 pm

This training session provides a comprehensive introduction to the ALIES® data entry process. Highlights include navigating ALIES® data entry screens; upgrading ALIES®; backing up data; inputting student, class, and instructor information; and updating outcomes, tests, and contact hours.

RSVP: ALIES® Support at 212.803.3357 or aliessupport@lacnyc.org.

May 25

Teaching Health Literacy: Chronic Disease Management Friday, May 25, 9:30 am–1:30 pm

Facilitators: Estella Natal and Winston Lawrence

Health literacy—the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions—is a vital part of adult literacy education. Participants in this study circle will explore ways to integrate the language and literacy skills needed to manage chronic diseases into their classroom instruction. Participation is limited to those who have already attended a Navigating the Health Care System study circle.

RSVP: LAC Reservation Line at 212.803.3323 or rsvp@lacnyc.org.

June 5

Family Literacy Administrator Training Tuesday, June 5, 9 am–4 pm

Facilitators: Ellen Goldsmith and Ann Marie Tevlin, Educational Consultants

This workshop is designed to provide administrators, staff developers, counselors, program managers, and directors in daycare centers, family literacy programs, and adult literacy programs with the knowledge and skills needed to train other staff members in conducting book workshops for parents. Participants will receive a toolkit and a complete supply of books that can be used in the workshops.

RSVP: LAC Reservation Line at 212.803.3323 or rsvp@lacnyc.org.

**Unless otherwise noted,
all LAC events take place
at 32 Broadway, 10th floor.**

June 12

BEST Plus Test Refresher

Tuesday, June 12, 9:30 am–1 pm

Facilitator: Mariann Fedele

Designed for previously trained BEST Plus test administrators, this workshop offers a comprehensive review of the BEST Plus test. Only previously certified BEST Plus test administrators may attend.

RSVP: LAC Reservation Line at 212.803.3323 or rsvp@lacnyc.org.

June 13

BEST Plus Test Refresher

Wednesday, June 13, 1–4:30 pm

Facilitator: Mariann Fedele

Please see June 12 for an event description.

RSVP: LAC Reservation Line at 212.803.3323 or rsvp@lacnyc.org.

June 14

ALIES® Reports Training

Thursday, June 14, 9:30 am–1:30 pm

Beginning with a general overview of the required tables, fields, and calculations, this training will prepare participants to use ALIES® data check reports to troubleshoot NRS data. The training will pay particular attention to a step-by-step process for determining “Why this student does not show up on my report.”

RSVP: ALIES® Support at 212.803.3357 or aliessupport@lacnyc.org.

June 15

Popular Education Study Circle

Friday, June 15, 2–4:30 pm

Facilitator: Winston Lawrence

This series explores practical approaches for teaching adults to develop an awareness of social justice issues, both in and out of the classroom. Participants will read literature on popular education and discuss how to apply the theoretical concepts presented in the classroom.

RSVP: LAC Reservation Line at 212.803.3323 or rsvp@lacnyc.org.

June 22

Teaching Health Literacy: Disease Prevention and Screening

Friday, June 22, 9:30 am–1:30 pm

Facilitators: Estella Natal and Winston Lawrence

Participants in this study circle will explore ways to integrate the language and literacy skills needed to for disease prevention and screening into their classroom instruction. Participation is limited to those who have already attended a Navigating the Health Care System study circle.

RSVP: LAC Reservation Line at 212.803.3323 or rsvp@lacnyc.org.

July 20

Troubleshooting NRS Reports

Friday, July 20, 9:30 am–1:30 pm

Beginning with a general overview of the tables, fields, and calculations, this training will help prepare programs for troubleshooting NRS Reports. Participants will learn how to apply the ALIES® data check reports. A step-by-step process for determining “Why this student does not show up on my report” will be highlighted.

RSVP: ALIES® Support at 212.803.3357 or aliessupport@lacnyc.org.

Aug 9

Troubleshooting NRS Reports

Thursday, August 9, 9:30 am–1:30 pm

Please see July 20 for a series description.

RSVP: ALIES® Support at 212.803.3357 or aliessupport@lacnyc.org.

LAC Professional Development Center Open Hours

Every Monday, 1–5 pm

Computer Learning Center

Visit our 16-station Internet-connected computer lab to explore ways to use computers to enhance instruction. Browse the web for sites that lend themselves to your lessons, or build a project that uses common office software to enhance communication skills. For information, contact Mariann Fedele, 212.803.3325 or mariannf@lacnyc.org.

Dan Rabideau Clearinghouse

Explore the city’s largest collection of materials for adult literacy education. The collection of books, journals, and audiovisual materials encompasses professional development materials as well as curriculum and reading materials for ESOL, ABE, and GED learners. For information, contact Dr. Winston Lawrence, 212.803.3326 or winstonl@lacnyc.org.

What Do Adult ESOL Students Need? *continued*

When externally imposed assessment results are used to determine funding, their formulation can play a powerful role in shaping what is taught and how. Based on case studies and their own observations of classroom practices, scholars such as Gillespie and Solorzano have concluded that oral proficiency is the predominant focus of ESOL instruction in the U.S. Funding requirements at both the federal level (National Center of Applied Linguistics and National Reporting System requirements) and the state level (as demonstrated by the Employment Preparation Education/EPE aid guidelines) support that conclusion. Many programs respond by under-emphasizing (written) English literacy (Solorzano, 1994). The Center for Applied Linguistics has called for using different assessment tools that reliably measure English literacy for adult ESOL students (CAL, 2003). Many experts are also encouraging the states to go beyond what is considered “basic compliance” with National Reporting System (NRS) guidelines in their assessment procedures. This could include incorporation of meaningful English literacy assessments. Over time, this would presumably broaden the range of skills developed in the adult ESOL classroom.

In New York State and many others, all of the major public funding sources that finance ESOL programs, including the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), EL/CIVICS funding, Adult Literacy Education (ALE) funding, Welfare Education Program (WEP) funding, federal Even Start, and Employment Preparation Aid (EPE), require that every participating program use the Center of Applied Linguistics (CAL)-endorsed BEST Plus assessment instrument as part of its application and documentation process. The BEST Plus oral proficiency test and the BEST Plus literacy test are the only compulsory assessment tools. Gains are expected at each level after 100 hours of instruction. The New York State Education Department defines six ESOL levels. The expected percentages of ESOL adult learners at each level are:

- > Beginning Literacy—39%
- > Beginning Basic Education—45%
- > Intermediate Low—51%
- > Intermediate High—52%
- > Low Advanced—45%
- > High Advanced—19%

New York is not an exceptional case. Of the four other states with the largest population of adult ELLs enrolled in state administered adult education programs, Florida, Illinois, and Texas have approved use of the BEST Plus. California mandates use of the CASAS Adult Life Skills-Listening Test, an assessment of English listening comprehension in common, authentic situations (Solorzano, 1994). Florida allows programs to use CASAS. Illinois has also approved the Combined English Language Skills Assessment (CELSA).

Regardless of any usefulness it might have in measuring the generic success of programs, no assessment tool is able to account for all of the specific learning variables present in this heterogeneous student population. As Crabbe notes, “the extent to which an institution can be held to be responsible for the outcomes achieved by a cohort of students is limited by such factors as initial competence, general motivation, attitude and ability” (2003, p. 13). The testing instruments may also provide inaccurate results due to a lack of sensitivity to cultural

implications of questions or an assumption of background knowledge that many learners do not possess. These cultural insensitivities may be content-based or stem from an assumption that adult ESOL learners have had similar testing experiences in their native country, which is often not the case (Solorzano, 1993).

Some scholars go further, contending that language proficiency is such a complex concept that no fixed definition is possible (Cummins, 1984; Oller & Damico, 1991), and it is unrealistic to think a single assessment tool can measure it. Educators and administrators should use assessments with care and avoid making important decisions on the basis of a single instrument (Del Vecchio & Guerrero, 1995).

In New York State, all publicly funded ESOL programs are required to use oral proficiency testing, but virtually no assessment tools that measure writing or reading comprehension skills are mandated. As a result, students may find themselves in a class where speaking and listening skills are fairly homogeneous, but literacy abilities vary considerably. Within such a class, authentic reading instruction becomes a major challenge. Teachers who want to reach all students at the same time find that it is more practical and efficient to focus on oral/aural language skills, since this is the common feature among participants. The pressure to emphasize oral literacy is intensified when an oral assessment is the only tool used to assess program success. Instructors under pressure to show the yearly progress required to meet funding guidelines may consciously or unconsciously teach to the test.

Due to all of these factors, the current practice of basing assessment exclusively on oral/aural proficiency narrows the focus of adult ESOL instruction wherever it is implemented.

Skills Necessary for Second Language Literacy Development

A 2003 report from the Center for Applied Linguistics (Burt, Peyton, & Adams, 2003) delineates four types of language learners: preliterate, non-literate, semiliterate, and non-Roman alphabet literate. Birch (2002) has added two more categories: non-alphabet literate and Roman alphabet literate. These six categories of literacy are already influential in determining placement and instructional program design. Instructional strategies to meet the language and literacy needs of learners who have no literacy skills vary greatly from the methods used with learners who have high levels of literacy in their native language. In fact, Cynthia Ingersoll (2001) cites studies, including several completed in New York, that support the theoretical assumption that low level ESOL students who first receive instruction in their native language may be more successful at learning English.

Gillespie (1994) took a different approach, examining three native language instructional models for adult learners: (1) the sequential model, in which learners are instructed in their native language until they reach a high enough literacy level to move into an ESOL class; (2) the bilingual model, which relies on simultaneous native language and English instruction; and (3) the coordinate model, in which learners participate in one class for their native language and another for learning English. In all three models, she found a correlation between proficiency in the native language and progress in learning English (Gillespie, 1994).

Research on the acquisition of language reading skills indicates that adults must attain some degree of mastery in four language domains: phonological awareness, recognition of vocabulary, syntactic processing,

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The Art of Making Callers Comfortable *continued*

Marie has been at the LAC for 13 years, longer than anyone else on the entire LAC staff. Before that, she worked as a group teacher in a nursery school for low income families. At the time she came to the LAC, the city government offered a number of free workshops on how to talk to people on the phone and Marie took three. Since then, she has steadily increased her expertise on the job. Dispensing information is only part of what she does every day. A skilled hotline specialist spends an average of five minutes on the phone with each caller, acting as a counselor, social worker, and motivational speaker, particularly when talking to adults who were born in the U.S. but never finished high school.

“A lot of the people who call are angry at themselves,” explains Marie. “I try to make them feel comfortable. [*Comfortable* is one of the words Marie uses most frequently when discussing her hotline work.] Today I got a call from a woman who went for a job and the employer asked to see her GED. Four years ago she had failed some parts of the test and had not gone back to class. After listening to her describe all that she was able to do in her work, I told her, ‘You’re a smart woman. If you put in the extra effort to learn the things you still need to know, you will pass.’ I gave her information about classes. A few programs have math classes for women only, since they often have trouble with math. Men sometimes have math and science problems, but programs generally insist they take classes that cover all GED subjects. If they are lucky, they can show their GED scores to a teacher who will give them separate work in the subjects they didn’t pass. When we were done the woman said ‘Thank you. You made me so happy.’ ”

The hotline staff has to update information on 600-plus programs in New York City and more than 100 Upstate on a regular basis. Even with this data, matching adults who speak English as their first language with the right program isn’t always a straightforward process. The hotline screening process only begins with the standard questions: the caller’s education, work and home location, and work schedule. “We tell them, ‘You left school in the 6th grade, you need a 9th grade education,’” says Marie. That said, determining what it would take for a particular caller to reach that level requires a lot more information. Many callers start out by saying that they want to take a GED class, since they have been told they need a GED before they can be considered for a job they were interested in. Often, however, what they really need is an adult basic education class. “The literacy level often depends on age,” Marie explains. “If they haven’t been reading, people get rusty. On the other hand, some people left school early but read a lot.” If they have, and their math skills are strong, they may be almost ready for the GED test.

That doesn’t mean they can take it right away, however. As Marie will tell callers, the wait can be six months to a year, particularly for applicants over 21 years old. Whatever the barriers, she counsels callers to persevere. “I try to explain times have changed,” she says. “Now, if you don’t have a GED, you can lose your job. If companies want to downsize, they use that as an excuse. In the last three years, more and more employers have been asking people to bring in their high school diploma or GED before they’re hired. They can’t say they have lost their GED. The state has an automated system so anybody can pay \$10 and get an official document.”

Marie and Jaynell Walls, the hotline referral specialists, and Marsha, Jose, and Tresha, the current volunteers who assist them, spend much of their time urging young callers to stay in school. “A lot of the calls I get are from 16-year-olds who want to drop out and their parents,” says Jaynell, the other full-time specialist. “We always try to persuade them to stay in, to speak to the school counselor. Sometimes they say the counselor was no help. Then we say call the district office. We tell them they have to wait until they’re 16 before adult literacy programs will admit them. If they’re almost 17, I give them the phone number for the Department of Education’s Offsite Education Service, which provides programs for 17 to 21 year olds.”

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Jaynell can talk to these callers about the challenges and benefits of sticking with school from personal experience. She had her first child at age 16 and had to go work. Even so, she graduated from Brandeis High School on time. “I went to work in the after school program at Children’s Aid Society,” says Jaynell. “I did everything there—was a reading coach, a basketball coach, did choir with the mentally challenged. After graduating, I was at University Settlement as a VISTA Corps worker for five years. I taught ESOL there, gave the TABE test, worked on the after school switchboard, did outreach to other programs, and traveled to Albany when we fought for welfare and workforce programs. At the LAC, I started as an administrative assistant, worked on the hotline database, and gradually started picking up calls when the hotline staff was having lunch. I learned on the job. The time I spent in the classrooms at University Settlement gives me a better understanding of programs I’m talking about on the phone.”

Callers who feel nervous about their ability to complete an adult education program would be inspired to learn what Jaynell has accomplished since coming to the LAC. Ten years after graduating from high school, she enrolled in college, earned a degree in Computer Information Systems, and then went on to get Culinary Certification and a New York State license to be a chef—all while raising three children. Like Marie, Jaynell finds being on the hotline challenging but rewarding. “I like helping students find classes,” she says. “I have a heart. I let them know they can always start again.” ●

LAC Literacy Referral Hotline

New York City: 212.803.3333

Upstate and Long Island: 888.683.7323

Online: www.lacnyc.org/hotline

“I Wish School Had Been Like This”

> Judy Rye *Martha O'Bryan Center, Nashville TN*

“You want me to *what?* Teach a work readiness curriculum with 229 pages of student handouts starting in January? Are you crazy? How am I supposed to teach this AND prepare students for the GED, AND teach adult basic education skills?”

I spoke those words aloud, but to myself, last December. I was in my office with the door closed and my hands on either side of my head, poring over the student and teacher manuals for *Preparing for Work: An EFF Work Readiness Curriculum*, trying to make sense of the modules, standards, and lessons. I was, obviously, not prepared for this.

I was the instructor, facilitator, encourager, and cajoler for a class of 35 adults, ages 17–52, a one-room school house with grade levels 2–12 that meets four hours a day, five mornings a week. The class was 75 percent African American; 85 percent female. All of the students were low income; 75 percent were on some form of government assistance. They were MY class. I had worked for 18 months to establish routines and rhythms, an atmosphere of openness, support, high standards, hard work, and good communication. I didn't want to sacrifice all that hard work and all those “good things” by devoting an hour a day to a Work Readiness Curriculum (WRC) I had never seen before.

Within a week, all my concerns were put to rest. I saw that the WRC was a gold mine of benefits for the teacher as well as the students, and began to freely adapt lessons to fit my style and the students' levels. This wasn't difficult. WRC lessons consistently make connections to the skills required for both general adult education and for GED preparation. They put all of my students on the same page, literally and figuratively. This united the class, and at the same time provided an easy entry point for new students.

On Arnell's first day in class, the WRC topic was Conflict Resolution. Asked what he would do if he were an employee on the telephone with a customer and an in-store customer came to the counter, he shared his solution with the class and joined the ensuing discussion. After class, Arnell, age 18, came up to ask me a question just when a student who had been in my class for some time approached me. When I asked Arnell to wait while I helped the other student, he responded, “Miss Judy, you've got some problem solving to do.” I nodded and suggested he watch me carefully to make sure I had solved the problem.

“How did I do?” I asked him after answering all the questions from both students. He thought for a moment and then told me I had solved the problem successfully. I couldn't have been more pleased. A student's first day in class had included problem-solving, public speaking, discussion, asking questions, and evaluating his teacher's problem solving ability. Throughout the lesson, he had experienced success upon success. This was not an isolated incident. “I wish school had been like this,”

17-year-old Alisha commented after her first day in class. I could offer many other examples of how this term has been so rewarding, involving students who have been in the class for some time as well as newcomers.

Sometimes, the class as a whole developed a “lesson.” On a recent field trip, a public altercation involving two students and inappropriate comments by a group of students stimulated a class discussion based on the WRC lessons on Conflict Styles and Resolving Conflict. The students went over the situations and student reactions in a non-threatening, non-judgmental, positive context, and came up with creative possible solutions.

WRC makes it easy to find direct applications of the lessons. Classroom activities and lessons provide a common vocabulary and concrete examples based on the skills and standards of Equipped for the Future and Work Readiness. (For more information, see page 3.) The active and reflective lessons make it possible for students to demonstrate that they know more than any written test can reveal. “I like finding out what I'm good at,” Jean, a 52-year-old woman, told me recently.

This term my students have had opportunities to identify their strengths and weaknesses, share personal experiences, build relationships, and become teachers and leaders, all the while building the skills needed for the TABE, GED, and job market. “The work readiness will be good for anyone going out looking for work,” Robert, age 52, noted.

Like Robert, the other students in the class have gained confidence in their ability to think and communicate, which motivates them not just to study, but to become pro-active, forward thinkers, looking to their future beyond the classroom. “Of all the exercises,” Cathy, age 37, recently wrote, “the most valuable for me have been: working with others with integrity, self respect, team roles and responsibilities, listening actively, and how to solve problems and make decisions.”

My first term using the curriculum is almost over. To my surprise and delight I find nothing has been sacrificed; much has been gained by the students, the class, and the teacher. The WRC has freed me to create and to teach in a context that makes it easier to connect success in the classroom to success at work, in the family, and in the community.

For more information on Preparing for Work, visit the Equipped for the Future website at <http://eff.cls.utk.edu/>. ●

A Skills Approach to Work Readiness *continued*

John Tyler, a professor at Brown University, highlighted the need for this more general curriculum in his article, *Skills Matter in the Types of Jobs Young Dropout Will First Hold* (Volume 7, Issue A, June 2004 of Focus on Basics). Based on his research, he concludes that the acquisition of basic cognitive skills is vitally important for young dropouts with low levels of education and little to no work experience, and plays a major role in determining their economic future. As a result, programs that sacrifice skill formation to concentrate on test-taking skills that prepare students for an assessment, such as the GED, do not equip them to enter the labor market. The *Preparing for Work* curriculum addresses this issue by integrating academic skills with the “soft” skills that businesses have identified as needed by today’s workers.

Using the EFF Worker Map as a foundation, the curriculum is constructed of six modules, each of which focuses on specific tasks defined as entry-level by the Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS). Classroom activities provide a direct link between instruction and achievement of real-world outcomes. Each is designed to address the skills and knowledge needed for entry-level

work and at the same time to equip learners to advance beyond entry-level jobs by providing hands-on experience in how the new skills they are applying in one situation or context can be utilized in another.

The EFF goal is ensure that participants who successfully complete the activities of the curriculum should be well prepared to:

- > Transfer work readiness skills beyond preparation for entry level jobs
- > Learn new skills and to take responsibility for their own learning on the job
- > Apply skills in a variety of contexts, including work, home, and community

EFF’s *Preparing for Work* was officially launched in December 2006 and introduced at a nationally advertised training program. The response was so enthusiastic that EFF offered a second round in March. Working with state and local agencies, it will replicate the training program in Chicago and New Jersey this spring.

For more information on EFF, call 865.974.8426 or go to <http://eff.cls.utk.edu/>. ●

What Do Adult ESOL Students Need? *continued*

and schema activation (Burt, Peyton, & Adams, 2003). To be effective, curriculum and instruction must include all four.

Phonological awareness—that is, “awareness of and the ability to manipulate the phonological segments in words” (Blachman, 1991)—begins with an understanding that words are comprised of sequences of phonemes and the ability to detect the individual phonemes of a given word. It also includes the ability to manipulate the phonemes of a word, real or invented, by blending, segmenting, deleting, adding, substituting, and rhyming. Adult ESOL students who are pre-readers may need explicit instruction in phonological awareness before they can master the decoding stage of reading. This is not necessary for those who have mastered decoding.

Vocabulary knowledge is particularly important for second language learners. Unlike someone reading in his or her own language, a second language learner cannot rely heavily on contextual information to ascertain the meaning of an unknown word. Vocabulary in any language is best learned through creating rich networks of meaning—that is, when words are encountered or used in meaningful, authentic contexts.

Syntactic processing is a reader’s use of grammar and morphology (word formation rules, inflectional endings, affixes, etc.) to comprehend the meaning of phrases, paragraphs, or sentences (Burt, Peyton, & Adams, 2003). Teachers find that integrating word order, grammar, and sentence structure into the instructional framework develops skills in this domain much more effectively than drills and rote memorization of grammatical rules.

Schema activation occurs when a reader is able to use prior knowledge to discern the meaning of a sentence or paragraph. This ability to “read between the lines” (Burt, Peyton, & Adams, 2003) is directly related to a learner’s cultural background and life experiences. As every teacher knows, when students are familiar with a topic or are able to connect the topic to events or situations in their own life, their comprehension

and motivation go up. The best way to engage older ELLs is to allow them to construct the essential questions and identify the “big ideas” to be discussed. When they do, learning can take place within the context of their own experience. Similarly, by integrating authentic materials that build on the strengths of learners and activate their schema into classroom activities, an instructor can encourage students to make connections with the texts and derive meaning from them in a collaborative, constructivist inquiry that involves their peers as well as the teacher.

Even though considerable research supports the common sense conclusion that all four of these skills are essential to second language reading acquisition, by placing so much emphasis on oral/aural language development, our current assessment and accountability system creates strong pressures to devote little time to them. Some programs are forced to omit them from the curriculum entirely.

Conclusions

Determining best practices in any form of instruction is a challenge. Validating them becomes even more complex when the learners are ESOL students with diverse ethnic and cultural identities, as well as a wide range of literacy skill levels.

We do not deny the importance of oral/aural language proficiency. Our concern is that by privileging a single assessment tool focusing on this area exclusively, public ESOL funding sources exert heavy pressure on programs to narrow their curricula. If programs respond by paying little or no attention to other important skills, we will not be able to meet the literacy development needs of our older ESOL students.

For a complete list of references, please see the online version of this article, which is available on the LAC’s website at www.lacnyc.org/resources/publications/update. ●

Bad Times Teach More Lessons

> Shaima Otmarkhel *Steinway Adult Learning Center,
Queens Library*

I always have been a go-getter and have had a strong desire to succeed in my education. So when I came here, I decided to learn English. I just put my best foot forward and searched out and took advantage of getting free English classes at the library. I was so excited to meet my teacher and my classmates for the first time. But I was also a little nervous.

So I met them. I was happy to see that everyone was very nice. It was also interesting for me to learn from my classmates about their different cultures. My teachers were wonderful people and I was so glad to be their student. They explained things very clearly and they gave me a lot of practice in English, for example reading, writing, listening and speaking. My teacher, Andy, even helped me to get a job in the Adult Learning Center.

The first day of my job was my birthday. I was very happy but also a little nervous like everybody is the first day of their job. I knew that it would not be an easy experience but that day it was harder than I thought. Someone yelled at me when they couldn't understand my accent. I felt so bad. I wanted to give up and I didn't want to come to the library anymore. But I thought to myself I shouldn't concentrate on the negative opinion and I decided to try once again. I know there are hard times in life, but it's important to find the solutions and solve your problems. The good times in our life teach us much, but the bad times teach us so many more lessons. Since I started working in the library, I have learned many new things. But now I have knowledge gained from my experiences. The library is my favorite place. I enjoy working in the library. I think this is a very helpful program for adults. I'm proud of the steps I'm taking to learn English. Now I feel more confident. I know that every year my English improves a little more.

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