

Program Standards for Adult Education ESOL Programs



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Adult Learning and SLA

A quality ESOL program for adults is very different from an ESOL program for children or a program teaching English to NSs. The following considerations from research in SLA and adult learning theory underlie many of the program quality indicators.

Research in SLA tells us that adults and children differ to some degree in aspects of second language (L2) development. For example, the speed at which children and adults learn an L2 differs, with adolescents learning the quickest, followed by adults, and then children. Perhaps adult learners have more opportunities to negotiate meaning in the target language or have better developed cognitive abilities (Ellis, 1994). Children, on the other hand, normally acquire nativelike pronunciation of an L2, whereas adults generally do not, although to date there is no conclusive explanation for why this is the case (see Nunan, 1999, for a summary of related research).

Although little SLA research has been conducted on the relationship between literacy in the L1 and acquisition of an L2, research in learning strategies and L2 learning does indicate that, among children and teenagers, transfer of academic literacy skills learned through one language to academic contexts in an L2 is not automatic (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Imagine, then, the considerable challenges facing adult ESOL learners who have received little to no schooling in their native language or who come from a preliterate society.

For adult ELLs, as for all L2 learners, learning is facilitated when instruction integrates the language skills (e.g., speaking, listening, reading, writing) when appropriate, providing a textured, rich experience in which skills reinforce each other in the learning process (Brown, 1994). Research indicates that adults learn best when learning is contextualized, emphasizing communication of meaning and use of English in real situations. Furthermore, by drawing on learners' background knowledge and thus ratifying the value of experiences that adult learners bring into the classroom, adult education ESOL programs can make instruction more relevant to the learners, who have limited time to devote to formal learning.

Factors Affecting the Acquisition of English for Adult ESOL Learners

One of the most commonly asked questions of professionals in the field of adult education ESOL is how long it takes students to learn English. This question comes not only from the learners themselves but from sponsors, employers, school officials, and friends and family members as well. Although there is no single or absolute answer, research and experience indicate that learning an L2 takes a considerable period of time: "It is generally accepted that it takes from 5-7 years to go from not knowing any English at all to being able to accomplish most communication tasks including academic tasks" (NCLE, 1999, n.p.). The Mainstream English Language Project (MELT), conducted in the 1980s, identified 10

student performance levels (SPLs) on a scale of no proficiency to fluency equal to that of a NS. Field testing for that project at various programs in the United States indicated that a range of anywhere from 120–235 hours of study may be needed for an individual learner to move up one SPL (Grognet, 1997). Most adults do not have that kind of time to devote to learning the language, yet they need to acquire a functional use of English as soon as possible. Opportunities to use English outside the classroom constitute one factor that can speed the time it takes for the adult ESOL learner to attain functional skills and even fluency.

The wide range of time estimates for developing English language skills reflects the variety of factors that affect the rate at which an adult will learn English in the United States. These factors include the program characteristics described earlier (see pp. 13–14) and, in particular, the great variety of learner characteristics.

The age of the learner plays a significant role in speed of English language learning. Younger adults often tend to learn English more quickly than older adults. With the wide mix of ages in many classes, the difference in ability to acquire new language skills may be particularly apparent and create additional instructional challenges.

Language background may also affect learning. Learners whose language does not use the Roman alphabet may need more time than those whose language shares an alphabet and vocabulary base with English.

Level of prior education plays a significant role in speed of language acquisition. Learners with higher levels of education commonly progress more quickly than those with more limited education.

The degree of L1 literacy is another important factor affecting acquisition of English, particularly reading and writing skills. Adult ELLs who have limited or no literacy skills in their native language face additional learning challenges as they grapple with initial literacy development along with a new language.

Cultural background also comes into play. For example, some adult ELLs are not accustomed to being taught by a member of the opposite sex and need time to adjust to this situation. Others come from highly formal, teacher-centered classrooms and find the informality of the U.S. classroom and the active participation of students troublesome to the point of interfering with learning.

The culture shock experienced by adult ESOL learners and the varied circumstances that brought such learners to the United States and to the class may affect learning as well. Often, the learners' emotional turmoil about, or even resistance to, being in the United States can block their language acquisition. Other emotional or psychological factors may also interfere. ELLs may be dealing with loneliness, disorienting shifts in family structure, domestic violence, or posttraumatic stress disorder.

For some adult ELLs, learning and access to an educational program is affected by a condition, such as a learning disability, visual or auditory impairment, or other physical impairment, requiring adaptation of equipment, environment, or manner of instruction. These special needs may be more difficult to discern in adult ELLs, and these learners may be less aware of their rights to accommodations under the law than persons who speak English or those who have lived in the United States longer. Ideally, to enhance access and educational opportunities for these special needs learners, program designs should include recruiting materials and methods for serving visually or hearing impaired persons, registration and placement processes that accommodate all kinds of learners, and personnel at all levels who are aware of the special needs of these learners and can adapt instruction to suit those needs.

Motivational factors—the reasons for which learners come to an ESOL program—can also affect acquisition of English. Externally imposed requirements, such as recent abrupt changes in welfare legislation, are likely to create emotional turmoil that can interfere with learning. Personal goals, such as the desire to help one's children with schoolwork or improve one's job performance, can stimulate acquisition when the learning is clearly directed toward achieving those goals.

The personal situation of adult learners and the many demands on their lives affect attendance in class and the amount of time they have to devote to learning English. Many issues can interfere with a student's ability to focus on learning:

- work demands, including long hours, split shifts, and changing schedules
- family responsibilities, including child and elder care
- overall health and well-being of the learner
- access to an adult education ESOL program, including availability of transportation

In short, because of their varied backgrounds and experiences, adult ELLs learn in a variety of ways and progress at different rates. This means that there is no single method of language instruction that is appropriate for all adult ELLs and there are no exact time lines identifying how long it may take an adult learner to acquire fluency in English.

Purpose of the Document and the Use of Indicators

The indicators of program quality presented in the next section (see p. 19) are not intended to create prescriptive or rigid requirements for all adult education ESOL programs. They were written with model programs in mind. Due to the extent of variation in programs and learners, as described above, implementation or use of the indicators must take into account issues such as program size, autonomy, funding requirements and restrictions, learner goals and characteristics, program resources, staffing, and many other factors. The impact of this

variation means that, in some cases, a particular indicator or indicators cannot, and should not, be applied to a particular program.

For selected indicators, sample measures and sample levels of performance have been provided. These are intended to suggest possible formats as well as the kinds of issues that can, and should, be measured, and the levels of performance that can, and should, be set. Benchmarks will need to be set based on local conditions and criteria and should be based on multiple measures.

There are many ways in which these indicators can be used. For instance, Maria, the outreach worker at the community center who wants to set up an ESOL program for parents, can identify the important components of an ESOL program by using the indicators, particularly those dealing with curriculum, instruction, and staff qualifications. She can also refer to the indicators in justifying the level of funding she requests.

Diana and DiRonne, the part-time teachers who serve on a program review committee at their community college, can use the indicators as criteria for analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of their program. The indicators supporting equitable compensation, placement testing, and appropriate class size are a few examples of criteria they can use to develop an ESOL program review self-study instrument for accreditation purposes.

Rueben and Sarah, working in their state's department of education, can use the indicators on learner gains and the sample measures and levels of performance as guidelines and models to advise the administrators or program directors who need to write local performance measures as required by their state plan.

Maria, Diane, DiRonne, Rueben, and Sarah represent the thousands of people in the field of adult education ESOL whose main goal is to provide quality ESOL instruction for adult learners. We hope this document serves as a useful tool in that endeavor.

II. Quality Indicators for Adult Education ESOL Programs

1. Program Structure, Administration, and Planning

Program Structure

- A. The program has a mission statement, a clearly articulated philosophy, and goals developed with input from internal and external stakeholders. Internal stakeholders may include administrators, instructional staff, support staff, program volunteers, and learners. External stakeholders may include boards or advisory groups; community and agency leaders; business leaders; employment and training agencies; other educational or service providers; state, federal, and local legislators; and funders.
- B. The program has a system of governance (e.g., a board of directors or advisory group and bylaws) that ensures accountability and effective administration of all program activities. The system of governance will vary according to whether the program is autonomous or affiliated with a larger institution or organization.
- C. The program has an administrative structure with administrative personnel who have experience or awareness of the specific needs of adult ESOL learners in their communities.
- D. The program organizes its instructional offerings to be consistent with the program's mission and goals and with the goals and needs of learners in the community being served.
- E. The program has a curriculum, including learning goals, materials, and resources, for each type of instructional offering.
- F. The program has an accountability plan with a system for record keeping and reporting that is consistent with program policies and legal and funding requirements.
- G. The program has a comprehensive assessment and evaluation policy and procedures that link assessment to instruction as well as learner goals and needs.

Administration

- H. The program fosters and maintains linkages and clear communication with internal and external stakeholders. Linkages vary according to the constraints of program guidelines, size, resources, and autonomy.
- I. The program uses facilities and resources appropriate for adult learners. If a program is part of a larger institution, facilities meet standards equivalent to those of other programs.
- J. The program provides trained support personnel and equipment for day-to-day operations and for efficient record keeping.
- K. The program maintains a student-teacher ratio conducive to meeting learning needs and goals within the constraints of program guidelines.
- L. The program provides courses of sufficient intensity and duration with flexible schedules to meet varied learner and community needs in convenient locations within the constraints of program resources.
- M. The program has a procedure for ensuring confidentiality in communication with internal and external stakeholders.
- N. The program supports employment conditions, compensation, and benefits commensurate with those of other instructional or professional staff with comparable qualifications (e.g., the program employs full-time instructional staff and provides part-time instructors with prorated benefits).
- O. The program provides the instructional staff with access to materials, resources, and services (e.g., books, scissors, workbooks, duplication services, computers) to support classroom instruction.
- P. The program has sound financial management procedures to collect and maintain fiscal information, guide program budgeting, ensure continuity of funding, and meet reporting requirements.
- Q. The program demonstrates respect for the cultures of learners, staff, and other stakeholders.

Planning

R. The program has a planning process that is ongoing and participatory, guided by evaluation, and based on a written plan that considers targeted community demographics; retention patterns; needs; resources; and economic, educational, and technological trends.

S. The program has a technology plan. The plan addresses the use, acquisition, and maintenance of technological resources and training of personnel. It is aligned with program goals and learner needs.

T. The program has a plan for outreach, marketing, and public relations activities to foster awareness and understanding of the program.

2. Curriculum

A. The program has a process for developing curriculum that includes participation and input from learners, instructors, program administrators, experts on topics such as special needs learning and cross-cultural communication, and other stakeholders in the community.

B. The curriculum reflects the mission and philosophy of the program and is compatible with principles of SLA for adult learners.

C. The curriculum includes goals, objectives, outcomes, approaches, methods, activities, materials, technological resources, and evaluation measures that are appropriate for meeting learners' needs and goals, as identified by needs assessment activities. The curriculum reflects learners' goals while considering their roles as individuals, family members, community participants, workers, and lifelong learners.

D. The curriculum specifies learning objectives for each instructional offering for learners, stated in terms of progress within the class or program and measurable performance outcomes. Where necessary, the curriculum is appropriate for learners in multilevel classes.

E. Curriculum and instructional materials are easily accessible, up to date, appropriate for adult learners, culturally sensitive, and oriented to the language and literacy needs of the learners.

F. Curriculum materials and suggested activities address a variety of learning styles and strategies and incorporate learners' different experiences, prior knowledge, and special learning needs.

G. The program has an ongoing process for curriculum revision in response to the changing needs of the learners, community, and policies.

3. Instruction

A. Instructional activities adhere to principles of adult learning and language acquisition. These principles include the following:

- Adult learners bring a variety of experiences, skills, and knowledge to the classroom that need to be acknowledged and included in lessons.
- Language acquisition is facilitated through providing a nonthreatening environment in which learners feel comfortable and self-confident and are encouraged to take risks to use the target language.
- Adult learners progress more rapidly when the content is relevant to their lives. Language learning is cyclical, not linear, so learning objectives need to be recycled in a variety of contexts.

B. Instructional approaches are varied to meet the needs of adult learners with diverse educational and cultural backgrounds. Examples of these approaches include, but are not limited to, the following:

- grammar-based (focus on the basic structure of language, such as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation)
- competency-based or functional context (focus on application of specific basic language skills in areas needed to function in everyday life or at work)
- whole language (integrated approach using listening, speaking, reading, and writing in thematic contexts often introduced through learner-generated content)
- participatory (focus on developing language and literacy skills to facilitate personal empowerment, community involvement, and social change)
- content-based (focus on developing language to support learner success in specific content areas, such as citizenship or vocational training)

C. Instructional activities engage learners in taking an active role in the learning process.

D. Instructional activities focus on the acquisition of communication skills necessary for students to function as individuals, family members, community participants, workers, and lifelong learners. Content is determined by what students need or want to accomplish with the language outside the classroom or in other educational programs (e.g., ABE, GED)

preparation, postsecondary education, and vocational training programs).

E. Instructional activities integrate the four language skills (e.g., listening, speaking, reading, and writing), focusing on receptive and productive skills appropriate to learners' needs.

F. Instructional activities are varied to address the different learning styles (e.g., aural, oral, visual, kinesthetic) of the learners.

G. Instructional activities incorporate grouping strategies and interactive tasks that facilitate the development of authentic communication skills. Techniques that facilitate these tasks include cooperative learning, information gap, role-play, simulations, problem solving, and problem posing.

H. Instructional activities take into account the needs of multilevel groups of learners, particularly those with minimal literacy skills in their native language and English.

I. Instructional activities focus on the development of language and culturally appropriate behaviors needed for critical thinking, problem solving, team participation, and study skills.

J. Instructional activities offer students opportunities to use authentic resources (e.g., newspapers, telephone books, school notices, library resources, community agencies, work sites, television, and the Internet), both inside and outside the classroom.

K. Instructional activities give learners the opportunity to develop an awareness of and competency in the use of appropriate technologies to meet lesson objectives. Examples of these technologies include telephones, computers, fax machines, and audio and video equipment.

L. Instructional activities are culturally sensitive to the learners and integrate language and culture.

M. Instructional activities prepare students for formal and informal assessment situations, such as test taking, job interviews, and keeping personal learning records.

4. Recruitment, Intake, and Orientation

A. A quality ESOL program has effective procedures for identifying and recruiting adult ESOL learners. The procedures include strategies for collecting data on community demographics that identify the populations that need to be served, particularly those at the lowest level of literacy.

- B. The program uses a variety of recruitment strategies (e.g., personal contacts, peer student referrals, print and broadcast media, outreach to community groups, networking with various institutions, advertising through and participation in community events, and use of technological sources, such as Web sites and electronic discussion lists).
- C. The program takes steps to ensure that culturally and linguistically appropriate recruitment and program information materials and activities reach the targeted populations in multiple languages as needed. Recruitment materials suitable for persons with special needs should be available (e.g., larger print, audiotapes).
- D. The program evaluates the effectiveness of its recruitment efforts and makes changes as needed.
- E. The program has an intake process that provides appropriate assessment of the learner's needs, goals, and language proficiency level; an orientation process that provides the learner with information about the program; and, if needed, referral to support services within the program or through other agencies.
- F. The adult education ESOL program has a procedure for accommodating learners waiting to enter the program.

5. Retention and Transition

- A. The program supports retention through enrollment and attendance procedures that reflect program goals, requirements of program funders, and demands on the adult learner (e.g., flexible enrollment options, flexible transfer, and short-term courses).
- B. The program encourages learners to participate consistently and long enough to reach their identified goals. This may be accomplished by adjusting the scheduling and location of classes and by providing appropriate support services.
- C. The program addresses retention issues by accommodating the special needs of learners as fully as possible (e.g., case management, counseling, native language support, and learning accommodations).
- D. The program improves retention by contacting learners with irregular attendance patterns and acknowledging learners who attend regularly.
- E. The program improves retention by providing learners with appropriate support for transition to other programs (e.g., ABE, GED preparation, job training or postsecondary education) or to the workplace.

6. Assessment and Learner Gains

Assessment Policy

- A. A quality ESOL program has a comprehensive assessment policy that reflects the mission and goals of the program, legal requirements, and needs of the learners and other stakeholders, and is linked to instructional objectives and activities. Procedures are developed with input from internal and external stakeholders.
- B. The assessment policy is based on principles of adult learning, SLA, language learning pedagogy, and literacy development for adults.
- C. The program has a process for assessing students' skills and goals for placement into the program, documentation of progress within the program, and exit from the program. This includes appropriate assessment of learners with special learning needs.
- D. Assessment activities are ongoing and appropriately scheduled, providing information about educational gains, student outcomes, and recommendations for further assessment (e.g., special needs, literacy considerations).
- E. The program has procedures for collecting and reporting data on educational gains and outcomes. Data are reported in clear and precise language to all stakeholders without violating standards of confidentiality.
- F. The program provides appropriate facilities, equipment, and conditions for assessment activities (e.g., appropriate space for intake and initial assessment, sufficient audiovisual equipment).

Types of Assessment

- G. The program identifies learners' needs and goals as individuals, family members, community participants, workers, and lifelong learners.
- H. The program assesses the language proficiency level of learners in the areas of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The assessments may also identify the learners' literacy skills in their primary language and any learning disabilities.
- I. The program uses a variety of appropriate assessments, including authentic, performance-based assessments; standardized tests; learner self-assessment; and assessment of nonlinguistic outcomes (e.g., perceived improvement in self-esteem, participation in teamwork activities).

J. If standardized assessment instruments are used, those instruments are reliable and valid, based on studies with the targeted adult-level population.

Uses of Assessment

K. The information obtained through needs assessment is used to aid administrators, instructors, and tutors in developing curricula, materials, skills assessments, and teaching approaches that are relevant to learners' lives.

L. Assessment results are clearly explained and shared with learners, to the extent permitted by assessment guidelines, in order to help learners progress.

M. Assessment activities document learners' progress within the ESOL program toward advancement to other training programs, employment, postsecondary education, and attainment of other learner goals.

Learner Gains

N. Learners identify their short-term and long-term goals.

O. Learners demonstrate skill-level improvements in listening, speaking, reading, and writing through a variety of assessments.

P. Learners demonstrate progress toward attainment of their short- and long-term goals.

Q. Learners demonstrate progress in nonlinguistic areas identified as important toward meeting their goals.

R. Learners attain their personal goals, short- or long-term, within time frames compatible with learner and program expectations.