Adults Learning English as the Second Language

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INTRODUCTION

The upswing of immigration in North America over the past two decades has impacted every element of the educable population, both old and young. The 1990 census revealed that approximately 6.3 million children between the ages of 5 and 17 spoke a language other than English in their home, and that 41 million elementary and secondary students in the United States alone had limited English proficiency (Dunn, 1993). In the realm of older learners, immigrants constitute an increasingly significant segment of society, with over 22 million foreign-born U.S. residents in 1994, representing 8.5 percent of the United States population (Gray, Vernez and Rolph, 1996). During the 1980's, approximately 10 million immigrants came to the United States, more than at any other time in the history of the country (Zimmerman, 1994). In the United States, three quarters of all immigrants settled in just six states : California, Texas, Florida, New Jersey, New York, and Illinois (Zimmerman, 1994). In Texas alone, reductions in student outcomes have been linked to large immigrant populations in urban areas and reductions of language proficiency (Silbert, Carnine, and Alvarez, 1994).

Language assimilation is a primary concern for the variety of non-English speaking learners within these programs, and their directive toward the mainstreaming of non-English speaking students demonstrates the importance of an integrated learning system that addresses both cultural and language elements in creating a context for language learning (Faber, 1993). Faber (1993) maintains the necessary for these types or programs not only to create a means of individual language development, but also as a way to introduce early language skills to families of non-English speakers, including non-English speaking parents.

Though English language proficiency is perceived as a basis necessity in the adult population in the United States, a large segment of the adult immigrant population has not achieved literacy or basic verbal communication skills. The development of ESL programming for adult populations has been defined by recognition of two specific issues : first, that primary language development has already been completed in most adult populations ; and problematic language patterns in adapted English often prevents the effective application of educational models. In other words, adult learners already have a complete language at the base of their system of knowledge, and they may have

adapted problematic English language elements, including colloquialisms, that work against them in the learning process.

One of the major problems for educators of speakers of other languages (SOL) is that the processing of language develops in different ways, and the focus on distinguishable teaching techniques has varied outcomes for learners from different cultures. Researchers are just beginning to recognize the impact of evaluation learner errors and the content of words utilized in order to determine the process of language acquisition (Tao, Healy, and Bourne, 1997). It has also been recognized that the learning process is different when addressing learners who are children when compared to language instruction for adults (Fitch, 1995), and the need to determine the impacts of learning focus, teaching techniques and learner directives is linked to the progression of ESL and TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) programming.

The Necessity for Language Proficiency in Adult Populations

Social scientists have argued that language proficiency is one of the most significant issues in determining economic mobility, and that English dominance in North America suggests that underlying assimilation into the culture of the region are linked to language (Espinosa and Massey, 1997). English proficiency has clearly been linked to increasing socioeconomic status in the United States, as demonstrated in a number of studies of Hispanic men, especially those with limited language assimilation, often experience lower socioeconomic status than their English speaking counterparts. Because of the link between language and socioeconomic status, and because the likelihood of using public social services increases as socioeconomic status falls, the necessity for addressing language proficiency among immigrant populations clearly has economic implications for the government (Espinosa and Massey, 1997).

Some theorists have suggested that the push for ESL programming in recent years is linked to the perception of the connection between limited English proficiency and dependency on social services (Espinosa and Massey, 1997). The costliness of increasing use of social services has led to the desire to reduce expenditures by reducing dependency, and from both a political and a social perspective, The belief that ESL programming can improve socioeconomic status has underscored the emerging prevalence of these programs.

ESL and TESOL

The profession of ESL teaching has developed from two distinct roots, a linguistic heritage that is based in American structuralism, and a pedagogical heritage reflected in intensive language institutes patterned after the initial English Language Institute founder by Charles Fries of the University of Michigan in 1941 (Vandrick, Messerschmitt and Hafernik, 1996). In the 1960's the development of the Peace Corps and the large demand for teachers of the English language provided greater visibility for the emerging field of ESL/EFL, and the progression of ESL and TESOL premises, techniques and

curriculum design (Vandrick, Messerschmitt and Hafernik, 1996). Theorists have contended that English language instruction within the scope of ESL/EFL and TESOL programming are based on three distinct influences, including: 1. political reality; 2. a boarding of the curriculum within the field based on political influences; and 3. the realization of the interdisciplinary nature of the field itself (Vandrick, Messerschmitt and Hafenik, 1996). While the focus on its application has been the recognized element of its promotion, ESL has also been determined to be a true and viable academic discipline with its very own professional and scholarly concerns (Vandrick, Messerschmitt and Hafernik), 1996.

ESL has been developed as a classroom approach to teaching non-English speaking individuals, or individuals with limited English language ability that focuses on grasping basic language concepts and incorporating reading and writing into conversational language. Instructors face a number of challenges in providing ESL instruction. For the most part, many instructors have to address the teaching of adults of varying language abilities who also speak many different languages. Except for ESL instructors who teach ESL in a foreign country, ESL instructors in the United States often have no way of predicting the range of languages or abilities present in their student population.

The approach to ESL instruction, must reflect the varying abilities of the population. It is necessary that instructors recognize that ESL students often not only have varying primary language bases, but it is also possible that an ESL instructor could be faced with the challenges of teaching an individual language process from the beginning, requiring the teaching of the alphabet as well as total language skills. In other words, it is conceivable that adult students within the scope of ESL programs may have had no exposure to English nor exposure to the English writing system, and that this itself may be problematic to instruction. At the same time, what can be even more problematic to instruction. At the same time, what can be even more problematic is when individuals have adapted faulty language skills that must be addressed in the development of programming.

Polotocal elements have clearly impacted the progression of ESL programming and its implementation in the United States, especially in comparison to bilingual educational programming. Movements in the United Stated to make English the official language, has been argued by many to be the primary element that has assisted in the elevating of ESL programming in recent years (Vandrick, Messerschmitt and Hafernik, 1996).

Effective Instruction

It has been argued that it is essential to the assimilation of non-English speaking countries that the process of instruction maintain native language and culture in order to reduce the likelihood that inter-ethnic conflicts will arise (Vandrick, Messerschmitt and Hafernik, 1996). Vandrick, Messerschmitt and Hafernik (1996), suggest that this is one of the most problematic elements of English language learning, but also demonstrates the political, social and ethical issues that make ESL and bilingual instruction problematic within existing communities.

In order to reduce the chance for these kinds of tensions, the TESOL organization mission statement suggests that ESL and TESOL professionals "support measures that protect the right of all individuals to preserve and foster their linguistic and cultural origins" and "oppose all measures declaring English the official language of the United States of America or of any legally constituted part thereof..." (TESOL, 1995, page 3). It is also an essential directive of the TESOL mission statement that TESOL professionals pursue curriculum development, educational programming, and linguistic processes that do not underscore existing language process. In other words, the need to address the cultural and native language needs of speakers while also promoting the use of the dominant language has come into focus as an element of English-language instruction (TESOL, 1995).

Perotta (1994) suggest that the most commonly applied means of promoting language acquisition in ESL classes is by presenting materials in a linear manner, by first teaching listening, then speaking, then reading, and finally, writing. Educators generally evaluate TESOL on the following criteria:

1. Existing language skills, both native and non-native, especially in regards to the ability to hear and evaluate language, speak a language, and read and write
2. Linguistic differences between native language and English
3. Learner motivation
4. Parental language skills
5. Cultural elements
6. Socialization

But Perotta argues that these four essential processes are interrelated and interdependent and as a result, ESL teachers must focus on writing development as well as speech development in order to create a basis for language application and the continued pursuit of acquisition skills (Perotta, 1994).

Conclusion

In many ESL programs around the world, but especially in the United States, language learning has focused more completely on the application of literature and a variety of creative systems for learning. Many of these programs focus on the integration of poetry, short stories, and dialogues, many of which are also accompanied by pictorial art (Heath, 1996, page 776). These techniques have offered educators a means by which to extend appropriate language learning outside of the classroom, by allowing adult students to approach the learning of English from a contextual format (Zimmerman, 1997). In correlation with this view, it has been recognized that the best approaches to adult learning is through the development of contextualized systems of learning that promote a kind of varied approach and integrate demonstrative language, making English applicable and creating a context for adapting new language forms.

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