Addressing Potential Impediments to Learning with ESOL Students

Before assuming that an adult ESOL learner has a learning disability, consider phonological processing skills, cultural differences, and more

by Robin Lovrien Schwarz

Adult non-native speakers of English who are not making the progress expected in classes of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) may have learning disabilities (LD). Other issues, however, may be impeding their ability to learn. Bilingual educators have done much work in this area, developing models of assessment for culturally and linguistically different learners who are suspected of having LD or other special learning needs. These models examine every possible reason for learning difficulties (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002; Ortiz, 1990). I have adapted these models of evaluation to adult ESOL, distilling the causes of difficulty into six categories. In this article, I share these categories and provide suggestions on how to address them.

Weaknesses in Phonological Processing Skills

Some adult ESOL learners may struggle because of weaknesses in the phonological processing skills that underlie literacy and support first or additional language acquisition (Ganschow et al., 1998). The first phonological processing skill is phonological awareness, a phonological skill acquired mostly before encountering text. This is the ability to isolate and manipulate consciously the sounds of language, including chunks of sound (words and syllables), rhythm, stress, and intonation, all of which are unique to each language. Phonological awareness is essential to the development of reading and spelling in English (Shaywitz, 2003) and in second language acquisition (Sparks et al., 2006). It continues to develop as literacy develops and learners become more aware of the sound chunks of the language as they are represented in print (Adrian et al., 1995). Phonological awareness can be evaluated and strengthened by using a variety of word game activities. For more on phonological awareness, related subskills, evaluation, and strengthening techniques, see the box on page 22.

Phonological memory is the second phonological processing skill. Phonological memory enables us to perceive and briefly retain never-before-heard speech sounds long enough for the brain to process them either for repetition or for long-term memory (Baddeley et al., 1998). This skill

underlies listening and speaking skills (Dufva & Voeten, 1999; Papagno & Vallar, 1995; Papagno et al., 1991). Phonological memory is needed for acquisition not only of single words but also strings of words such as grammatical constructions and idioms (Ellis, 1996; Williams & Lovatt, 2003). For phonological memory to retain and record language accurately, sounds and words must be heard accurately. But since the adult brain perceives and processes unfamiliar speech sounds less accurately than children's brains do (Kuhl, 2004), the adult learner's phonological memory may not be able to record words and sounds accurately, limiting the development of oral skills. In a pilot study conducted in Texas evaluating the phonological skills of 30 learners from 13 language backgrounds with education ranging from none to post-doctorate, only six could repeat sentences of five or more words completely accurately (Schwarz, 2005). This finding is consistent with the acoustical abilities of adult brains and gives at least a hint of how inaccurate the receptive language of adult ESOL learners can be.

Phonological memory can be evaluated simply by having learners repeat increasingly longer words and then sentences that are totally unfamiliar to them. Have them try to repeat sentences from ESOL materials they are using but have not yet used for oral drills. This way the content and grammar should be within their reach, and it is easy to see how well they are managing the materials. Phonological memory can be strengthened by gradually increasing the length of words and sentences, but other kinds of training in perceiving sounds and words will help even more. This is covered in the next section.

Unmet Needs of Adult Language Learners

Adult language learners need explicit instruction in accurately perceiving the sounds of the target language (Ganshow et al., 1995), especially those that are similar to sounds in their own language and therefore are harder to discriminate.

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Minimal pair training, which involves distinguishing between two different words or syllables that vary in one sound segment only, such as "bat" versus "vat", helps adult learners hear English more accurately. Similarly, practicing hearing individual words in the speech stream helps adult language learners' ability to distinguish sounds. For example, native English speakers say the sentence "He looked at her" as "He look /ta/ /der/." Showing this to learners helps them hear and know how to say the past tense, since it is impossible to say fluently, "He looked at her," by pronouncing each word separately.

Adult learners also need and want to understand something about how language works (Marshall & Snow, 2000). Placing lessons in a linguistic framework, even a very simplistic one, is often appreciated.

A third language acquisition factor to consider is the normal gap between conversational language, which develops in just a couple of years, and academic or non-contextualized language proficiency, which develops very slowly. Cummins (1984) noted

that this gap explained the lower reading achievement of otherwise orally proficient K-12 readers, and Collier (1992) has shown repeatedly that younger and adolescent English language learners require up to 10 years to master academic or non-contextualized language at a level that permits them to manage text meant for native English speakers. Misunderstanding the implications of this gap is considered by some to be the chief contributor to disproportionate referral of English language learners to special education in K-12 (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002). The problems this gap causes for adults can be seen when learners succeed in oral proficiency tests, advance into pre-GED classes, and then flounder as they encounter texts meant for native English speakers.

Learners' reading skills can be measured with reading tests designed for native speakers. The score will show the level of native-language materials these learners might be expected to manage. To help these learners raise their reading skills, instruction in higher level reading skills as well as heavy vocabulary study may be useful.

Unacknowledged Educational Backgrounds

Learners' educational backgrounds can play a role in learning in a variety of ways. Though most programs inquire about how many years of school learners have completed, the answers can be misleading. Learners may exaggerate or misreport actual education so as not to look uneducated or because they cannot accurately calculate time spent in educational endeavors in refugee camps (Eggers, 2006). Also, educational systems in other countries differ in length of day

Phonological Awareness

Adult ESOL learners may have weak phonological awareness for several reasons. Basic phonological awareness skills generally transfer readily (Durgunoglu, 2002; Lopez & Greenfield, 2004) so a person literate in one language will transfer much phonological awareness to the learning of a new language. However, transfer happens only to the level that phonological awareness has been developed in the first language (Cummins, 1984; Geva, 2000; Artiles & Ortiz, 2002). Learners with limited literacy in another language will likely have only partially developed phonological awareness. Those with no education at all can be expected to have phonological awareness at the preliterate level (Dellatolas et al., 2003). One study of preliterate adult learners (those whose language has a literacy, but they are not yet literate) who were given explicit training in phonological awareness found that they were able to become literate more easily than those who were not trained (Royer et al., 2004). This finding is similar to many studies of children where similar training improved reading outcomes.

Another factor may be problems with **phonemic awareness**, a sub-skill of phonological awareness that involves recognizing that there are single units of sound within words in alphabetic languages. Critical to reading and spelling in English and other alphabetic languages, it grows as learners learn how to read and write, but is dependent on having fundamental phonological awareness strongly in place. In orthographically regular languages such as Italian or Spanish, children's phonological awareness can be fully developed by about second grade, which is when full literacy is achieved in these languages; however, since English is orthographically and phonologically complex, phonological awareness continues to develop as education continues. The implication is that ESOL learners, even literate ones, require more explicit phonological awareness training in English than just what is needed to decode.

Many adult ESOL learners do not yet have phonemic awareness because they are not literate or because they speak languages such as Japanese or Chinese, which do not use individual phonemes.[1] Asking learners to **identify initial phonemes** is a good way to start to find out where these skills are. (Before asking learners to assign letters to phonemes, they must have mastery of the letters of the alphabet and the sounds the letters make. Learners can be asked if sounds are similar or different, however, without having to name letters.) Asking about final sounds—be sure sounds are clear consonants and not blends or vowels—and then medial consonant sounds will give more information about how well learners understand and hear phonemes. A higher level skill is **phoneme counting** ("How many sounds are there in 'rent'?"), which is critical for English reading and writing. This can be done if the learner understands the concept of phonemes. Learners who have difficulty with phoneme counting should practice this skill with manipulatives and other tactile-kinesthetic activities until it is mastered. The final skill in phonemic awareness is **deletion**. The learner listens to and repeats a word, then is asked to say the word with a piece or sound missing. For example, ask the learner to say "football" and then to say "football" without "foot." The learner should respond: "ball". Ask the learner to say "cold," then to say "cold" without /c/. The learner should respond: "old". This is high-level phoneme manipulation, a skill highly correlated with good reading in English.

Perception of rhyme is another important phonological awareness skill. Asking learners to decide whether pairs of words they hear rhyme or not provides good information about this skill. Having learners pair pictures of words that rhyme (be sure they know words for the pictures) is a useful way to practice this skill. However, many ESOL learners' first languages do not have or use rhyme in the way English does, and the concept of rhyme is very difficult to convey. Addressing rhyme concepts that are weak can help learners hear and understand similarities in words, a skill that helps with reading and spelling.

For activities to build phonological processing skills, see:
www.bdainternationalconference.org/2001/presentations/thu_p1_b_2.htm

For minimal pair activities, see:
iteslj.org/Lessons/Fryer-MinimalPairs.html

For other ideas, see:

Nilsen, D. & Nilsen, A. (2002) *Pronunciation Contrasts in English*. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.

Edelen-Smith, P. (1997). "How now brown cow: Phoneme awareness activities for collaborative classrooms." *Intervention in School and Clinic* 33(2): 103-111.

Tolman, C. (2005). "Working smarter, not harder: What teachers of reading need to know and be able to teach." *Perspectives* 31(4): 15-23.

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[1]Chinese learners who have been taught Pinyin, a phonemic version of Chinese, are the exception to this.

and school year, emphasis on content, teaching methods, and expectations of students. Learners may have information gaps due to differences in education systems, interrupted learning, or lack of access to books. When assumptions are made about what learners know or can do, materials and tasks may be beyond them. Yet, because of cultural respect for teachers, adult learners may say nothing about their discomfort or confusion.

Another way prior education affects learning relates to what not having had access to formal education really means. For example, interpreting photos and drawings is a learned skill, as is holding pencils and books correctly. Concepts such as homework may be new to learners who did not attend school prior to coming to the United States. Little information is currently available about how much time non-literate adults typically need to gain literacy in a language that is not their first or how best to teach them. What is known, however, is that it will generally take much longer for such persons to read or write than for a literate learner to learn to read and write in English: the non-literate must first acquire all the pre-literacy skills needed to move into literacy.

Many ESOL learners, on the other hand, are highly educated. Balancing their needs with those of learners with limited education is a challenge. Sandra Fradd, who has written much about avoiding labeling ESOL learners in K-12 as LD, recommends that schools find out exactly what learners know and start instruction there (1994). Asking a few more questions at intake, learning more about the education systems of the countries learners come from, having a range of

tests available to estimate learner knowledge, and best, permitting adult learners to make more decisions about

> "*Screening all learners for vision, hearing, and visual stress issues can identify those who have uncorrected problems.*"

what and how they will learn can go a long way towards preventing learners from being overwhelmed or under-challenged by ESOL classes.

Cultural Differences

The cultural aspect of learning and teaching (Irving, 1984) should not be ignored. The mismatch between learner and teacher expectations is often a major barrier to learner engagement and contributes to decisions to drop out. Everything we do as teachers and learners is colored by our own cultures (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003). As mentioned earlier, many adult ESOL learners come from school cultures that are quite formal and require rote memorization. Teachers in the United States tend to be fairly informal and use an analytical, applied-learning approach. Behaviors such as lateness, reluctance to join in multi-sensory activities or to ask or answer questions, ignoring writing structures, not doing homework,

"helping" each other on tests, and even text comprehension difficulties may occur for cultural reasons. When learners' expectations of teachers, classes, materials, and teaching methods are continually in conflict with the reality of the classroom, some will eventually drop out from discouragement.

While it is not possible to know all the ins and outs of each learner's culture, it is possible to recognize that issues in the classroom may have a cultural basis. Teachers can read up on or ask their students about the practices in the schools they attended in their home countries. Teachers can also explain constantly how their own practices and approaches are culturally rooted and consider that culture may be at the root of puzzling learner behaviors or performance.

Health, Physical Functioning, and Mental Health Issues

Adult learners may have reduced vision and hearing, but because of cultural barriers, they may not identify themselves as having some condition that requires accommodation. They may not recognize the impact that their medication, illness, vision problems, or hearing is having on their efforts to learn. (See "Taking a closer look at struggling ESOL learners" at www.ncsall.net/index.php?id=994 for more on this topic.)

An Ethiopian man who had been trying for more than five years to learn to read could not remember the alphabet letters from one lesson to the next. When asked about what he saw when he looked at the paper, he moved his hands back and forth indicating that everything on the page was moving, a symptom not of dyslexia, as his tutors had concluded, but of visual stress syndrome. Visual stress syndrome involves problems with bright light and black print on white pages that cause words to move or disappear and readers to have headaches and other physical symptoms (see www.irlen.com for more information). With a goldenrod-colored overlay on his book, the letters no longer moved. He read them all correctly and continued to make steady progress in reading thereafter.

Screening all learners for vision, hearing, and visual stress issues can identify those who have uncorrected problems. Learners can then be referred to specialists if necessary or accommodated for milder problems immediately.

All adult immigrants and refugees can be assumed to be suffering from culture shock (Irivng, 1984; Yost & Lucas, 2002), and many have experienced trauma in their countries or the camps (Eggers, 2006). Dealing with the emotional issues these experiences have engendered can be challenging. Some learners may want to work through their trauma as they learn English; others will prefer to avoid the topic. Insofar as possible, following learners' leads on when and how much they want to deal with mental health issues in the education setting seems respectful of them and their histories.

Offering help or attempting to intervene in ways that are culturally insensitive can also be a problem. In some cultures, talk therapy is unknown and talking about the past is unconstructive. Just as with other cultural issues, learning more about

how mental health issues are regarded by the cultures of your learners is one way to address this difficult issue (Butler, 1994).

Inappropriate Pedagogy

Generally speaking, the primary cause of pedagogically-induced learning problems is ignoring the issues already discussed in this article. However, other factors contribute to learner frustration and slow progress. If learners are not able to master concepts and content, they then lack a foundation on which to build. This is a complex issue: part of a learner's failure to master material may be due to educational gaps, cultural differences, or normal comprehension lags. But, learners may just need more time with materials. Therefore, teach to mastery. Learners need and appreciate review. Over-learning is essential for automaticity in skill-based learning. Using a wide variety of methods and material for review prevents boredom for you and learners.

Have specific, easy-to-understand, attainable, quantifiable goals that are meaningful for each learner. Adult learners can set their own goals. Teachers can help them break those goals into smaller steps and plain language, and record progress towards those goals. Seeing progress is a powerful motivator, and learners can see for themselves whether they have mastered something or not.

Have high expectations of learners and keep learning relevant and challenging, but not overwhelming. Let learners indicate what they need and want to learn, then help them design ways to learn it.

Provide multiple ways of learning. Move from whole group to small group to individual learning, giving learners many opportunities to listen, talk, and be involved. This allows for a wide variety of learning styles, skill levels, and interests.

In Conclusion

Before attributing ESOL learners' failure to progress to learning disabilities, review the issues discussed here. Assess and strengthen learners' phonological skills. Learn about, acknowledge, and address their educational, cultural, and health situations as they relate to learning. Provide well-sequenced instruction with plenty of review so learners master the material. LD may still play a role with some learners, but for many learners, the impediments to learning will have been removed.

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WORLD EDUCATION

Resources

For more information on teaching beginning-level ESOL or on ESOL learners who are progressing slowly, a good place to start is:
Learning Disabilities and Adult English Language Learners: Resource Collection
www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/collections/ld.html

Within that collection, make sure to review these resources:

ESL Instruction and Adults with Learning Disabilities
www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/digests/LD2.html

Trauma and the Adult English Language Learner
www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/digests/trauma2.html

How Should Adult ESL Reading Instruction Differ from ABE Reading Instruction? www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/briefs/readingdif.html

Teaching Low Level Adult ESL Learners
www.cal.org/cae la/esl_resources/digests/HOLT.html

What Non Readers or Beginning Readers Need to Know
www.springinstitute.org/Files/whatnonreaders2.pdf

For activities to build phonological processing skills, see:
www.bdainternationalconference.org/2001/presentations/thu_p1_b_2.htm

For minimal pair activities, see:
iteslj.org/Lessons/Fryer-MinimalPairs.html❖