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About D.C. LEARNs: The D.C. Literacy Education, Advocacy and Resource Network, Inc. (D.C. LEARNs) is a coalition of literacy providers and stakeholders in the District of Columbia. We are a not-for-profit organization. Our mission is to lead an active coalition of Washington, D.C. literacy programs, learners, and supporters, and work with them to strengthen literacy services and present a strong, unified voice on the importance of literacy as an investment in the community.

The Educational, Literacy, and Sociocultural Needs of Adolescents in Adult ESL Classes

By Sarah Young

This article is adapted from the Center for Adult English Language Acquisition (CAELA) brief "Adolescent Learners in Adult ESL Classes," written by the same author and funded by the Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE) of the Department of Education.

In the K-12 world, adolescent literacy for native English speakers has been a very hot topic addressed in research, professional development, and educational materials. There are alarming statistics about low high school graduation rates, high school graduates who are not literate, and an ever-growing gap in the labor force among workers who have the required skills for meeting the literacy, numeracy, problem-solving, and technology needs of the future. As No Child Left Behind and other federal accountability systems mature beyond the initial focus on elementary school students, adolescent literacy has been brought to the forefront of new educational reforms.

Concerns about the literacy and language levels of English language learner (ELL) adolescents are no less significant. Adolescent ELLs are a growing population in secondary schools and are a steady presence in adult education programs. Adolescents are defined as those between the ages of 13 and 19, although some young adults may exhibit many of the same traits and developmental stages as adolescents. Many adult ESL teachers are faced with the unique characteristics and needs that adolescent ELLs present in the adult ESL classroom. Like their adult counterparts, some of these adolescents may be undocumented or may not have high literacy or education levels in their native languages. They may be trying to juggle work, education, community, and family responsibilities. Others may have been born and raised in the U.S. but failed to succeed in traditional K-12 schooling. As a result, these students are turning to adult education—which can be more flexible, accessible, and accepting—to earn high school diplomas, increase their job skills, and improve their English language proficiency. Despite their varied educational, social, and cultural backgrounds, these adolescents have one thing in common: their developmental stage and related needs may set them apart from the adult students in adult ESL classes.

A Word From the Editor

Welcome to another exciting issue of the *Knowledge Builder*! Spring has finally arrived and the school year is winding down for some, but best practices and current research continue to flourish. The articles included here focus on issues that face both youth and adult learners alike.

Sarah Young who works at the Center for Applied Linguistics, one of D.C. LEARNs newest members, shares her insight on the differences and similarities between adolescent and adult English language learners. She offers practical suggestions for increasing and improving adolescent learners' skills, who may be enrolled in adult classes.

In the final article of her five-part series on learning disabilities, Connie Bumbaugh takes an in-depth look at the effects that environmental factors, such as alcohol use and substance abuse can have on students and their learning. She offers teaching strategies that may help learners who are dealing with such influences.

Finally, Lori Preheim shares a tried and true classroom activity that will engage your ESL learners while at the same time, improving their literacy skills. She has even given us her lesson plan and worksheets for this interactive and engaging activity.

I highly recommend reading this issue in your neighborhood park!



The *Knowledge Builder* is the quarterly journal of D.C. LEARNs, written by and for adult, family, and children's literacy professionals. It highlights best practices, current research, teaching and program management strategies, and lessons from the field. We are dedicated to voicing the experiences and ideas of individuals in the field of literacy.

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Background on Adolescent English Language Learners

In 2003-2004, 3 percent of all enrollees in adult ESL classes in the United States were students aged 16 to 18 (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). This number may continue to grow: 29 percent of newly arrived immigrants are under the age of 18 (Fry, 2005). Many factors contribute to adolescent ELLs' inability or unwillingness to begin or continue a course of study in a traditional secondary school. Some adolescents may have never gone to school in their own countries, or may not have reached a level of native language literacy that would allow them to transfer their academic skills to English. In 2000, immigrants under the age of 18 were only 8 percent of the total youth population, but they made up almost 25 percent of all high school dropouts (Fry, 2005).

School districts may be reluctant to allow older immigrant students into schools, due to assessment and accountability pressures and doubts that the students will not be able to learn English fast enough to graduate on time. Recently, the use of high-stakes assessments in grades K-12, which determine student promotion and graduation regardless of English proficiency, has led to increased dropout rates among high school students generally, and adolescent ELLs in particular (Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004; Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000). Research shows that even students with considerable schooling in their own countries still need four to seven years of instruction in the U.S. in order to become academically and socially proficient in English (Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000); however, the earlier that immigrants arrive in the United States, the less likely they are to drop out (Fry, 2005).

Adolescents often do not feel that they have the amount of time to invest in their education when they also need to work to support themselves and their families. One study determined that immigrant Latinos without a high school diploma in their native country or the United States have much lower rates of unemployment and higher annual incomes than those U.S.-born Latinos who without a high school diploma; clearly, many of these immigrant adolescents are more focused on working than on getting an education (Fry, 2003).

Other adolescent ELLs are born and/or raised in the U.S., but for a variety of reasons never manage to gain the academic and literacy skills and content knowledge needed to succeed in high school or to reach English proficiency. Indeed, 56 percent of ELLs in grades 6-12 are second or third generation citizens (i.e., born and raised in the U.S.) (Capps, Fix, Murray, Ost, Passel, & Herwantoro, 2005). Their English oral proficiency is often much higher than their literacy skills (in both their native languages and in English).

Differences between Adolescent and Adult English Language Learners

While adult ESL classrooms are known to include diverse groups of adult learners, adolescents add a new dimension. They usually do not have the wealth of experiences and mature understanding of the world that older learners have (see Senior Service America & Center for Applied Linguistics, 2006 for more information about senior citizen immigrants). Adults often have high motivation to attend classes, whereas adolescents may not perceive the long-term benefits of education (Weber, 2004). Adult learning theory emphasizes adults' need for self-directed, practical learning, using their own experience as a resource and making direct applications to everyday life (Knowles, 1990). These approaches can also be used for adolescents; however, adolescents still have a greater need for structure and guidance in the classroom, particularly if they have limited or interrupted schooling (Mace-Matluck, Alexander-Kasparik, & Queen, 1998).

For example, seventeen-year-old Thérèse was brought to the U.S. from Cameroon by her older brother who had already lived here for many years. In Cameroon, she lived in a small village and only attended school until 5th grade. In this country, she writes laboriously in French, has difficulty expressing herself in written communication, and lacks basic skills in handwriting, mechanics, punctuation, spelling, and comprehensibility. In order for her to not feel overwhelmed, Thérèse needs focused, individualized instruction in literacy skills, study skills, and strategies for setting and meeting goals. She needs to understand why literacy is important in this country, and how she can transfer and apply her fundamental knowledge of French literacy to similar skills in English.

Cognitively, adolescents' brains are still forming in ways that differentiate them from adult learners. In terms of language acquisition, adolescents may not yet have exited the hypothesized "critical period" (Birdsong, 1999). As a result, their brains are still malleable, and they may still be able to learn a second language faster than adults. Some adult ESL teachers have found that adolescents may advance more quickly in certain linguistic areas than adults, or may become bored with the pace set by the other students in the class. One of my students, Marcelo, was a 16-year old from Mexico who was enrolled in an adult high beginning ESL class at night and in the local high school ESL program during the day. His family supported and encouraged his chosen accelerated learning path. He was very motivated to learn English and was a much greater risk taker in class than his adult classmates. His English proficiency grew considerably, and he quickly became bored with the slower pace that the older students required in his adult ESL class. The academic focus that he received in his high school classes was lacking in his adult ESL class, but he didn't want to quit the adult ESL class because of the opportunity for extra practice.

Marcelo was an excellent student in his adult ESL class, but a tough classmate for the others to have, as he found it difficult not to shout out answers or demonstrate his higher proficiency in inappropriate ways. As a teacher, I found it necessary to create a new role for Marcelo as an "instructional aide" who assisted me and my classroom volunteer in working with some of the older adult students in class. Marcelo did not always function effectively during group work, but when he was paired individually with learners who needed extra attention or when he was demonstrating something at the front of the room, he was completely engaged in the material, developed more patience, and began seeing himself in more of a leadership role.

While adolescents may have more energy and learn more quickly than adults, they may not exhibit the skills of reasoning, organization, communication, and self-control that adults have. Adolescents may put their own capacity for participating effectively in the classroom at risk by engaging in unhealthy behaviors (e.g. drinking alcohol, not sleeping enough, etc.).

Working with Adolescent English Language Learners

Different aspects of adult ESL programs can be adapted to be more welcoming and helpful to adolescent ELLs. These might include, specific policies regarding entry/exit, consultation of educational records, and different types of assessments that reflect their stages of cognitive development and educational goals (CEP, 2005). Partnerships and connections with local community organizations can be created so that adolescents have access to student support groups, tutoring, extracurricular activities, dropout prevention programs, and health and social services. When possible, adult ESL programs should seek and encourage family support for their adolescent students.

While most adult ESL teachers are used to teaching multi-level classes, they may need additional training in teaching multi-generational classes. Adolescent learners often look for personal connections with their teachers and may need more assurances from and interactions with them than their adult counterparts do. Mentoring from teachers and classmates can help adolescents develop the life skills they need to function as adults. Adult classmates can serve as role models for adapting to life in the U.S., pursuing educational and career goals, and dealing with pressures that come from the immigrant experience. In turn, adolescents may find that their different life experiences, exposure to American culture, technological savvy, and [what may often be] a faster rate of language acquisition, can provide them with opportunities for leadership and peer tutoring among their adult counterparts.

Whenever possible, teachers should differentiate adolescents' learning goals from those of adults in their classes and select materials and instructional strategies that meet both groups' real-life needs and goals (Tardaewweather, 2004). Adolescent ELLs with previous experience in the American K-12

education system may expect academic and content-based instruction; however, many adult ESL programs are life skills-based. Students who plan to transition (back) to academic programs will benefit from classroom instruction that creates high expectations and standards for student performance and provides access to information about future educational and career options (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2004).

Literacy Instruction for Adolescent English Language Learners

Research in K-12 educational settings shows that intensive and focused literacy instruction will result in higher graduation rates and academic success (Joftus, 2002). Research also shows that building on any native literacy skills will help students transfer those skills to English. Some ideas for increasing and improving adolescents' English literacy skills include the following:

- Conduct careful needs assessments and language assessments to determine exactly what literacy level your adolescent students are at in both their native language and English and to find out where they want to go.
 - Encourage adolescents to continue developing their native language literacy skills and teach them explicitly how they can use their prior knowledge and skills in developing their English literacy.
 - Make sure adolescents understand that the development of literacy skills in a second or third language will take time, patience, commitment, and certain learning strategies – and that you are there to help guide them through the process.
 - If adolescent ELLs need basic literacy instruction (e.g., letter formation, basic sound-symbol relationships, left-to-right concepts of print, etc.), use instructional materials that were created for adults, not children. These materials should be ideally intended for adult ESL students, not adult native English speakers (see Burt, Peyton, and Van Duzer, 2005 for information about differences in teaching reading in an ABE context vs. an ESL context). Contextualize instruction in basic skills within a more holistic approach to how reading and writing affects their lives.
 - Establish routines and habits of literacy in the classroom, such as copying from the board, writing warm-ups, journal writing (individual and partnered), keeping a class notebook or binder, and referring to vocabulary found on a “word wall.”
 - Engage adolescents in language experience stories, which involve an oral telling of a recent or past experience by a student or a group of students while the teacher writes the story down on the board. The telling and re-telling of the story is followed up with activities to allow the students to manipulate and add on to the text, such as ordering sentence strips or creating a cloze passage.
- Since many adolescent immigrants may come from cultures with strong oral traditions, incorporate students' family histories and traditional stories into their classroom reading and writing experiences, along with pictures, drawings, and other graphic representations. Many adolescents are alone in the United States or live with distant relatives, so their reactions to this type of activity may be positive or negative depending on their situation and level of independence.
 - Use written language found in adolescents' daily lives, such as t-shirts, stickers, CD cases, and magazines. Link TV shows and specials to written content on the same topic.
 - When working with a longer piece of text, such as a language experience story or a nonfiction text, guide adolescents through the process of developing graphic organizers, such as semantic webs, K-W-L charts, or Venn diagrams.
 - Make sure to incorporate nonfiction topics and texts in the classroom that go beyond functional/life skills ESL materials, so that adolescents are able to begin or continue to develop their academic knowledge. This exposure to academic content may help ease their transition to adult secondary education (ASE) or even postsecondary education down the road. Consult resources on Sheltered Instruction for ideas on how to do this.
 - Model everything you want your students to do when asking them to perform literacy-related tasks. Model for your students how to ask questions and to indicate lack of understanding.
 - Use cooperative learning techniques that allow adult ELLs to be role models for adolescents (e.g., modeling turn-taking, organization, effective communication, responsibility, etc.), but that also encourage adolescents to take a role in the task. Reciprocal teaching, literature circles, think/pair/share, jigsaw readings, and project-based activities help both adults and adolescents do this.
 - Foster a sense of community in the classroom; make sure that each student knows what their strengths are and that they can serve as a resource or “expert” for the rest of the class on that particular strength.
 - Give adolescents meaningful, clear homework that they can take pride in accomplishing and receive helpful feedback on.

See also Fisher and Frey (2004) for additional ideas and research on developing literacy skills and strengths for adolescents in academic content areas.

Conclusion

Adolescent ELLs in adult ESL classrooms face challenges in many areas. Traditional high schools are often unprepared to address their unique needs. The consequences of not educating and supporting these students are severe, but the benefits of serving these students with such tremendous potential are many. Adult ESL instructors will benefit from getting training on adolescent development, adolescents' needs, mentoring, and multi-generational instructional techniques. A strong support system is essential to help these students adjust to education in the United States and the various career and life paths that may be open to them.

About the Author

Sarah Young works at the Center for Applied Linguistics/Center for Adult English Language Acquisition to provide technical assistance and professional development to adult ESL programs. She teaches adult ESL part-time in Arlington. After teaching English for the Peace Corps in Cameroon, she earned an MA in TESOL from the Monterey Institute of International Studies in 2002.

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- (See the Alliance for Excellent Education at www.all4ed.org for more information about legislation and educational reform, as well as for an upcoming report containing policy recommendations regarding adolescent literacy for English language learners, set to be released in summer 2006).

The Environment and Learning Disabilities: How Stress, Alcohol, and Drug Abuse Affect Learning

By **Connie Bumbaugh**

What causes learning disabilities? The exact causes of learning disabilities are unknown but the leading theory is that learning disabilities stem from subtle disturbances in brain structures and functions. In many cases the disturbance occurs before birth but environmental factors play a significant role in the effects learning disabilities have on a person's life.

Environmental Influences on Developing Brains

In the early stages of pregnancy, the brain stem forms—this controls the basic life functions like breathing and digestion. It then divides into two halves or hemispheres—the thinking part of the brain. Then, the parts associated with processing sensory information develop and finally, those areas responsible for attention and emotion. As new cells form and networks develop, the brain is vulnerable, and there are many opportunities for errors. If disruptions in proper development occur, learning disabilities are the result.

Certain precautions can be taken during pregnancy to foster healthy development and to prevent certain types of learning disabilities. Smoking during pregnancy may cause newborns to be of low birth weight which puts them at risk for various learning disorders. Drugs such as cocaine seem to affect the development of sensory receptors which may cause delays in speech and hearing. Some researchers believe that ADHD may also be related to faulty receptors.

Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) is one of the leading causes of learning disabilities in children and is the direct result of maternal alcohol consumption during pregnancy, particularly during the first eight weeks of development and if the mother drinks heavily over the course of the pregnancy. FAS leads to varying degrees of learning disabilities, developmental delays, behavioral problems such as hyperactivity and short attention spans, and lifelong difficulties with appropriate social skills.

According to the Mayor's 2003 Interagency Task Force on Substance Abuse Prevention, Treatment and Control study, nearly 15 percent of new mothers in the District reported hav-

ing used illicit drugs during pregnancy. Although alcohol consumption is prohibited for individuals under the age of 21, one in three adolescents reported having tried it and 17 percent stated they had used alcohol within the past month. Among 18 to 24 year olds, 77 percent admitted using alcohol within the past month. Because student populations with learning disabilities are particularly vulnerable to alcohol and drug use, these numbers may be even higher.

Prevention Strategies

Effective education programs can significantly reduce the risk of environmentally influenced learning disabilities, can alert parents and educators to the risk factors that lead individuals with learning disabilities to use drugs and alcohol, and can hopefully prevent many cases of substance abuse. There are a number of very effective local instructional programs available that teach prevention strategies. Programs that teach prenatal care and parenting skills are available through hospitals and social service agencies like Mary's Center, the Shiloh Family Life Center, the DC Dept. of Health—Maternal & Family Health Administration, and other health care clinics. Many offer free services—check www.dcreources.gov for a list of programs in the area. If learners are interested in researching information on their own, websites such as the March of Dimes (www.marchofdimes.com) might be helpful.

For teaching the risks of drug use, published curricula such as "How Drugs Affect the Brain: A Tool Kit for Literacy Programs" is available through the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Directorate for Education and Human Resources Programs. It is available for purchase at 1-800-351-7542. Another curriculum designed to prevent illegal drug use is called, "Project Prevention," and was developed specifically for use with students with disabilities. Both elementary and secondary level curricula are available to download at www.eric.ed.gov (Eric#: ED401702).

Environmental Influences on Learning

Stress is the perception of being unable to cope with the demands that individuals place upon themselves or the pressures they feel are being placed upon them. These demands can come from many internal and external sources: families, employers, church and community commitments, and school to name just a few.

Despite all the negative publicity it receives, stress is not necessarily a bad thing. Excitement and fear are perceived by the body in much the same way—both emotions produce stress, which in turn give the body an extra boost of energy. However, the problem exists when individuals are unable to distinguish the difference between "good" and "bad" stress. This is especially difficult for students with learning difficulties whose coping strategies and social skills may not be as strong

as their peers. Keep in mind that common characteristics of individuals with learning disabilities often include: below average academic achievement in one or more skill areas; poor organization and time management skills; difficulty with directionality and motor skills; a lack of emotional maturity or social skills; trouble maintaining attention or concentration; and poor memory.

Unfortunately, returning to school as an adult can be a significantly stressful activity in itself and when paired with the ordinary stressors of being an adult, it becomes much more difficult. The ability to successfully deal with stress and stressful situations involves a variety of coping strategies. The best way to help students through the stress of returning to school is to teach them stress management techniques. Positive methods may include learning how to prioritize and manage time effectively, setting realistic goals, maintaining good physical health (eating well and sleeping), taking study breaks, going for walks, and making time for hobbies or recreational activities.

As instructors, it is important for us to recognize when our students are having difficulty managing stress. Some of the signals may include (Berkowitz, 2003):

- A sudden dramatic increase or decrease in academic efforts
- Major changes in attitude or temperament (irritability, lack of enthusiasm, carelessness)
- Withdrawal or outbursts
- Overactive or distracting behaviors (fidgeting, nervousness, difficulty concentrating)
- Complaints of fatigue, problems sleeping
- Headaches or stomachaches, vague illness
- Increase in allergic or asthmatic attacks
- Avoidance of school or testing situations
- Loss of appetite or excessive eating
- Drug and/or alcohol use or abuse

If these warning signs occur, it might be a good idea to refer the student to an appropriate social service provider for additional support. The District Department of Mental Health has a help line (1-888-7WE-HELP) and a comprehensive social services directory for the District can be found at <http://www.dcreources.org/>.

An interesting new treatment, created by Dr. Francine Shapiro, called Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), is being used to treat extreme cases of stress and trauma. Dr. Shapiro believed the best way to treat her clients was to integrate multiple psychological approaches

to therapy (cognitive, behavioral, social, psychotherapy) and that eye movements have a desensitizing effect on stress and anxiety. Dr. Shapiro developed her EMDR therapy and has won a number of awards, published many articles and books, and now serves as the Executive Director of the EMDR Institute in California. This method has been successful with individuals suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), victims of sexual abuse, domestic violence, violent crime, and natural disaster, as well as those suffering from other conditions such as depression, addictions, phobias and self-esteem issues. More information and clinician referrals can be found at Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing, www.emdr.com.

What is the Problem Locally?

Unfortunately, drug and/or alcohol use and abuse is one of the more common side effects of stress and it is a particularly large problem in Washington, DC. According to the Mayor's 2003 Task Force study, more than 60,000—or one in ten residents of Washington, DC are addicted to illegal drugs or alcohol. For illegal drugs alone, the rate of addiction in DC is nearly 40% higher than the national average. For youth, the numbers are just as disturbing—one out of six adolescents (aged 12 to 17) reported having consumed alcohol in the previous month, 21 percent reported using an illicit drug in the past year, and 7 percent reported using an illicit drug in the past month. More than 20 percent of individuals in the 18 to 24 year old age group reported using illicit drugs in the past month.

Also from the 2003 study, rates of drug use were found to be two and half times higher for males than females and varied according to employment status. Nearly one in four (24 percent) unemployed DC residents used an illicit substance in the past month compared to 8 percent employed full-time. Substance abuse is also highly correlated with homelessness in the District. The Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness estimates that 2,600 chronic substance abusers are homeless—or 35 percent of the homeless population. Many of the individuals served by recovery, treatment, homeless and other social service agencies are also being referred to and served by adult education programs. This becomes a significant problem for programs when these social problems co-exist with a learning disability.

Frequently Co-Existing Problems: Learning Disabilities and Substance Abuse

Drug and/or alcohol use or abuse is commonly found among individuals with learning disabilities. While research has not yet determined a causal link between the two, there is substantial evidence that a correlation exists between learning disabilities and substance abuse. Studies show that as many as half of those individuals with Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity

Disorder (ADHD) self-medicate with drugs and alcohol and that between 40 and 60 percent of individuals in substance abuse treatment programs have learning disabilities (National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, 2000).

People in general tend to use drugs for one of two reasons: novelty or more likely, to alleviate the pain and stress of a difficult life situation. In many cases, individuals with learning disabilities, beginning as young teenagers, use drugs to deal with the stigma associated with being labeled a “slow learner.” Academic failure is one of the primary contributors to peer rejection among teens and consequently, a leading cause of low self-esteem. Adolescents may turn to illicit drugs and alcohol as a method of coping with the stress or as a way to “fit in” with their peers. Adults on the other hand may turn to drugs and alcohol as a way to cope with job stress or loss, family pressures, or other social factors—real or perceived. Remember that individuals with learning disabilities often lack the emotional maturity and social skills to make appropriate decisions regarding the use of illegal substances.

Teaching Strategies

Drug and alcohol use and abuse over time have a detrimental effect on the brain and its ability to function properly. Alcohol for example, is a depressant—it passes through the cell membranes and changes the way they respond to chemicals in the brain. The nerve cells become less excited and less active and eventually stop firing. This leads to confusion, loss of memory, loss of muscle control, and eventually, when alcohol reaches the midbrain, it begins to shut down body functions.

Long-term alcohol use may adversely affect one’s ability to learn but will not prevent learning altogether. A multi-sensory approach will work well with students who have learning disabilities that co-exist with substance abuse problems. Instructors should emphasize teaching memory strategies such as visual organizers to help learners overcome those problems that are typically found with long-term substance abuse. For example:

Time Management:	Teach calendar skills.
	Teach time concepts through math & word problems.
Organization:	Help the learner to color-code notebooks (one color for each subject).
	Use advance organizers & outlines at each class to help the learner keep their place and connect new information to previously learned material.

Stress Reduction:	Don’t expect perfection. Teach the learner that it’s OK to make mistakes. Other techniques include stretching, going for walks, drinking plenty of water, deep breathing, and visualizing success.
Memory Strategies:	Teach the learner how memory works.
	Use strategies like mnemonics, acronyms, verbal elaboration, and music.
Attention:	Allow the learner to take frequent breaks but make sure s/he comes back on time and is on task during scheduled work times.
	Maintain frequent eye contact, check-in regularly, and give feedback.
Other needs:	Ensure that the learner is ready to be in class and that his their other needs have been met. If not, refer him or her to an appropriate service provider.

Can learning disabilities be outgrown or cured? The answer is no. However, people do learn to adapt and overcome enormous challenges. They live full and rich lives—not by being cured, but by learning about their individual situations, developing their strengths and enjoying their talents. The brain is most flexible during childhood so early intervention is critical, but adults have the advantages of life experience upon which to build new learning and the determination to expand their knowledge. Even though learning disabilities are lifelong, given the right educational experiences and supports, people can and do learn.

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About the Author

Connie Bumbaugh is the Executive Director of Literacy Volunteers of the National Capital Area (LVA-NCA) and is an advocate for adults with special learning needs. She provides LD screenings for adult learners and conducts training for educators on how to effectively support these learners in the classroom. Connie received her Master's degree in Adult Learning from Virginia Tech.

Improving Literacy Gains through Fun, Educational Games

By Lori Preheim

According to Malcolm Knowles, we learn 20 percent of what we hear, 40 percent of what we see, and 80 percent of what we do. Doing something different, dynamic, and interactive in the classroom will not only improve student motivation, participation, and retention rates, but also increase learning gains.

The 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy reports that ninety-three million American adults (45 percent of the adult population) have limited reading, writing, and math skills. Many adult education programs have learners who struggled in or dropped out of school. Others, who serve the immigrant populations, are not only dealing with low literacy rates, but second language acquisition at the same time. Retaining and motivating these learners is essential for increasing learning outcomes. For many, what has been done in the traditional school system has not worked. New and innovative ideas are needed to better meet the educational needs of these learners.

At the D.C. LEARNs ESL Special Interest Group mini-conference held in December 2005, my colleague, Karen Hertzler and I from the Even Start Multicultural Family Literacy Program presented a workshop designed for ESL Learners, entitled, "Improving Learning Gains Through Fun, Educational Games." The objective of the workshop was to show how studying traffic signs, job descriptions, prescription labels and other topics can be fun, interactive, and educational. The following is an example of one activity presented in the workshop which focused on job descriptions.

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Lesson Plan

Title: "What Am I?"
Topic: Job Descriptions
Materials: Tape, index cards, "What Am I?" question sheet, "What Am I?" follow-up activities sheet.
Objectives: Learners will be able to recognize and read job descriptions, and understand and ask questions about job descriptions. They will be able to correctly use numbers to talk about salaries and periods of time. They will have increased vocabulary related to jobs and job descriptions.
Skills practiced: Asking closed questions. Practicing numbers and time periods (Activity may be adapted for more advanced students)
Pre-lesson: Review selected vocabulary. Discuss the purpose of job descriptions. Review structures for asking questions. Review using numbers for talking about money/salaries and for time. Review the use of AM/PM and telling time.
Activity Description: Divide the learners into groups of six, but no less than three. Give each student a job description index card with the title of a job, salary, and work hours written on it clearly. Be sure that the students do not allow the other members of their group see the cards. Instruct each student to tape their card to the back of another student in their group. Learners walk around within their groups, asking each other questions to determine what job they have, what their salary is, and what their work hours are, based on the information on the job description card on their back. (i.e. Do I work with children? Do I work at night? Do I make a lot of money?) For lower level classes, students can use the list of "What Am I?" questions" or create their own lists in class beforehand. Students continue asking questions until they guess what job they have on their backs.
Post-lesson follow-up: The teacher leads the students in the "What Am I? Follow-up Activities & Questions" sheet. For more advanced learners, teachers can have students write about their dream job or write a 'help wanted' ad.

"What Am I?" Activity Questions

Student directions: Ask any of the following questions to find out what you are:

1. Do I work with people?
 - 7:00 AM - 6:00 PM
2. Do I work with children?
 - 7:30 AM - 3:30 PM
3. Do I work in an office, school, store, shop or hospital?
 - On call 24 hours a day, work nights or evening shifts
4. Do I use a computer?
 - Full-time, irregular hours, overtime work as needed
5. Do I work with machines?
6. What kind of machines do I use?
7. Do I use tools?
8. What kind of tools do I use?
9. What are my work hours?

Your work hours are _____.

 - 9:00 AM - 5:00 PM
 - 1:00 PM - 9:00 PM
10. What is my salary?

Your salary range is _____.

 - \$1,000 TO \$1,700 per month
 - \$900 TO \$1,200 per month
 - \$1,400 TO \$2,200 per month
 - \$400 TO \$600 per week
 - \$300 TO \$500 per week
 - \$500 TO \$700 per week

“What Am I?” Follow-up Activities

A. Students stand in order from lowest to highest paying jobs.

- CASHIER - \$900 TO \$1,200 per month
- SECRETARY - \$1,000 TO \$1,700 per month
- TEACHER - \$1,200 TO \$2,000 per month
- NURSE - \$1,400 TO \$2,200 per month
- MECHANIC – \$1,600 TO \$2,400 per month
- COMPUTER TECHNICIAN - \$2,000 TO \$2,800 per month

B. Students stand in order from best to worst work schedule. Discuss why they put them in that order.

- SECRETARY - 9:00-5:00
- CASHIER - 1:00-9:00
- TEACHER - 7:30-3:30
- NURSE - On call 24 hours a day, work nights or evening shifts
- MECHANIC – 7:00-6:00
- COMPUTER TECHNICIAN – Full-time, irregular hours, overtime work as needed

C. Large group questions:

1. Which job/s has regular daytime hours?
2. Which job/s works 40 hours per week?
3. Which job/s works more than 40 hours per week?
4. Which job/s may work weekends?
5. Which job/s works irregular hours?
6. Which job/s needs a degree?

D. Discuss with a partner:

Which job would you like to do? Why?

Which job would you least like to do? Why not?

What is your ‘dream’ job’?

About the Author

Lorie Preheim is Adult Education & Training Coordinator with the Even Start Program at Mary’s Center. She has been working in family literacy for more than 8 years. Presently, Ms. Preheim teaches Intermediate English as a Second Language. During her 13 years of experience, she has taught all levels of ESL and GED. Previously, Ms. Preheim worked internationally for the Mennonite Central Committee in Bolivia, was Assistant Director for Charitable Choices in Washington, DC, and Shaw Director/GED Teacher for Academy of Hope, an adult basic education program. Ms. Preheim earned her Master’s in Adult Education at George Mason University in Fairfax, VA and has a B.A. in Education, Art, and International Development from Bethel College. She was named Toyota Teacher of the Year (2004) by Toyota and the National Center for Family Literacy.

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