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Promoting Learner Transitions to Postsecondary Education and Work: Developing Academic Readiness Skills From the Beginning

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Background on Adult Learners

Adult education programs serve both native English speakers and learners whose first, or native, language is not English. Native English speakers attend adult basic education (ABE) classes to learn basic skills needed to improve their literacy levels; they attend adult secondary education (ASE) classes to earn high school equivalency certificates. Both ABE and ASE instruction help learners achieve other goals related to job, family, or further education. English language learners attend English as a second language (ESL), ABE, or workforce preparation classes to improve their oral and literacy skills in English and to achieve goals similar to those of native English speakers.

Audience for This Brief

This brief is written for state adult education staff, program administrators, professional development staff and teacher trainers, teachers, education researchers, and policy makers. It describes a process for adult education staff to use data to plan professional development for practitioners who work with adults learning English.

Background

It has been estimated that of the nearly two million immigrants who enter the United States every year, nearly half have limited access to citizenship, job training, other postsecondary education, and jobs due to low literacy levels, limited formal schooling, and limited English language skills (National Commission on Adult Literacy, 2008). Adult education programs serving this population can play an important role in helping learners develop the skills they need to succeed in postsecondary education and to obtain, retain, and advance in employment. Given the skills needed for the high-demand occupations of the future, it is increasingly important that adult education programs expand the scope of opportunities offered so that adults learning English are prepared with the language, knowledge, and skills they need to be successful, whether their immediate goals include gaining a vocational training certificate, an associate's degree, a bachelor's degree, or a specific job (Bailey & Mingle, 2003; Jones & Kelly, 2007; Lacey & Wright, 2009; Mathews-Aydinli, 2006).

A report from the National Center on Education and the Economy (2009) argues that adult education should be redesigned to promote postsecondary and workplace readiness for all learners. This means that the skills that learners need in order to transition successfully to higher levels of education or employment should be integrated into every level of instruction, including ESL classes that are focused primarily on language instruction. This brief reviews the literature on the skills needed for adult English language learners to transition to academic study and employment and the time it takes to develop those skills. It then focuses on the results of a recent survey completed by the authors, which revealed instructors' perceptions of skills needed by learners in order to be successful in academic programs. Finally, the brief offers examples of activities and strategies that can be used at beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels of ESL instruction to help learners develop these skills.

Skills Needed to Make Transitions

A growing body of literature identifies the skills needed for English language learners to transition successfully to postsecondary education in preparation for work (Alamprese, 2005; Di Tommaso, 2005; Jiang & Grabe, 2007; Johnson & Parrish, in press; Mathews-Aydinli, 2006; National Commission on Adult Literacy, 2008; Rance-Roney, 1995; Rao, 2005). Many of these skills are appropriately taught at advanced and transition levels.

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They include non-academic skills such as time management and the ability to prioritize and organize assignments and responsibilities (Mathews-Aydinli, 2006; National Center for Family Literacy and Center for Applied Linguistics, 2008). They also include academic skills, such as the ability to write college-level papers (Santos, 2004), and academic knowledge of subjects such as history and psychology.

Many other academic readiness skills can be introduced and developed long before students reach advanced-level classes. Examples of such skills include listening and reading for specific information and making and confirming predictions. Although individual student goals may vary—some want better jobs, some want to earn a GED, some want to go to college—these skills are beneficial for most adults in their daily lives. Given the time it takes to master academic readiness skills, the development of complex skills in early levels of instruction may facilitate students' progress throughout their education and as they move toward meaningful employment.

Time Needed to Master Academic Readiness Skills

The time that it takes English language learners to acquire academic readiness skills is highly dependent on their prior experience with formal schooling (Cummins, 2000). Immigrants to the United States who have completed high school or college in their home country probably have experience in a formal classroom setting and most likely have learned academic language and concepts in their own language that they can transfer to learning in English. On the other hand, students who come to adult education with limited or interrupted formal schooling may not have had the chance to develop academic readiness skills and strategies in their own language.

Research on children learning English in K–12 settings indicates that it can take from 7 to 15 years to acquire academic language skills even when instruction is focused and continuous (Collier, 1989; Thomas & Collier, 1997; see Garcia, 2000, for a summary of this research). Many adult learners, with the demands of jobs and families, are only able to participate in formal instruction on a part-time basis and have few opportunities to use English outside of class. This adds to the time it can take them to acquire both language and academic skills. Research suggests that adults learning English can benefit from instruction in academic skills while they are still in ESL classes, even at beginning levels, rather than waiting until they are in advanced and transition-level classes (Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, 2005).

Integration of Academic Skills Into Instruction

A recent study of instructional alignment surveyed Minnesota ABE instructors and college and university faculty in the fields of developmental education, health care, and trades and technical education. The purpose of the survey was to identify the skills expected of students in postsecondary academic programs and the types of academic skills taught in ABE classes. Responses revealed that many academic skills that are expected of college students, such as reading and listening, organizing information and taking notes, and thinking critically, are receiving limited attention in adult education programs (Johnson & Parrish, in press; for a summary of the survey findings, see ABE Teaching and Learning Advancement System, 2008). Specific activities that can be used in ABE programs to help students develop these skills are described later in this brief.

Reading and Listening

Reading and listening skills are important in academic and workplace preparation, during which adults may be listening to instructors' lectures or preparing for a workplace credential exam. Specific reading and listening skills should be introduced and practiced long before learners reach advanced levels. In particular, research has shown that skilled readers determine the importance of specific statements, monitor their comprehension, make predictions, and ask questions while reading (Di Tommaso, 2005). Similarly, skilled listeners listen selectively for particular words, phrases, or idea units; monitor their comprehension; and use a variety of clues to infer the meaning of unknown words (Cohen & Dörnyei, 2002; Graham, Santos, & Vanderplank, 2008). Practice of these skills in instruction should be explicit and include introduction to, modeling of, and guided practice with specific reading and listening strategies (Graham & Macaro, 2008) such as these:

- Listening and reading for specific information and to understand the overall message
- Making and confirming predictions
- Inferring intended meaning and attitudes

- Using background knowledge and a variety of clues (linguistic, metalinguistic, and contextual) to infer the meaning of unknown words

Organizing Information and Taking Notes

Whether in a technical skills class or an academic class, learners are expected to organize knowledge and record information, and the ability to do so can have a positive impact on academic performance (Di Tommaso, 2005). Mastery of effective organization and note-taking skills takes time, so explicit techniques should be introduced early and proficiency with them built gradually, to the point where students can use these skills independently by the time they exit from their program (Konrad, Joseph, & Eveleigh, 2009; Makany, Kemp, & Dror, 2009). The use of graphic organizers to analyze text has been shown to increase reading comprehension (Jiang & Grabe, 2007) and to enhance learners' understanding and retention of and ability to use new knowledge (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000).

A system of guided note-taking called Cornell Notes (Pauk, 2001) can be used to help students develop organizing and note-taking skills (Figure 1). In Cornell Notes, students divide their paper into three sections: one for key points, one for notes, and one for a summary. They then use this form to review, reflect on, and study their notes. Other activities that can be used to help students develop organizing and note-taking skills include the following:

- Sorting tasks
- Use of graphic organizers such as Venn Diagrams and flow charts
- Concept mapping and use of matrices

Thinking Critically

Critical thinking is the process of questioning and reflection that allows us to understand, evaluate, and solve problems and take informed action (Kaspar & Weiss, 2005). Critical thinking skills are vital for adults to thrive in their communities, in postsecondary education, and at work. Brookfield (1987) argues that critical thinking is *the* survival skill of adult life. It is a misconception that adults in ESL classes do not know how to think critically or employ higher order thinking skills (Reimer, 2008). Most of these students have made complex decisions for themselves and their families about their lives in the United States, their jobs, and their children's schooling, and many speak two or more languages. At the same time, they may have had limited experience with formal schooling or have come from an educational system that does not focus on critical thinking or development of higher order thinking skills (Chowdhury, 2003).

Cornell Notes

Key Points	Notes
I. Origin of the theory	
II. First born	Characteristics
	• bossy
	Famous people:
III. Middle child	
IV. Last born	Characteristics
	• likes attention, carefree
	• tends to…
	Famous people:
V. Only child	The theory
	Validity of the theory
Summary	

Figure 1. **Sample Cornell Notes.**

The following critical thinking skills should be introduced and encouraged at all levels of adult ESL instruction:

- Identifying assumptions
- Organizing
- Categorizing
- Interpreting
- Inquiring
- Analyzing and evaluating

- Summarizing and synthesizing
- Making decisions

Sample Activities for Integrating Academic Skills Into Instruction

This section describes ways of integrating the development of listening and speaking skills, organizing and note-taking skills, and critical thinking skills into all levels of instruction. The sample activities are guided by the following principles:

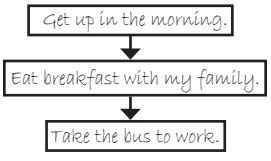
- Strategies instruction is integrated into all reading and listening lessons (DiTommaso, 2005).
- Opportunities are provided for guided and structured practice of new strategies (Graham & Macaro, 2008).
- Learners are taught strategies that help them organize information (Jiang & Grabe, 2007; Konrad, Joseph, & Eveleigh, 2009).
- Learners are taught organizational strategies that help them recognize the structure of texts (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; Jiang & Grabe, 2007).
- Instruction builds gradually to the point where students use skills and strategies independently (Graham & Macaro, 2008).
- Learners are given tasks that promote critical thinking (Van Duzer & Florez, 1999).

Sample activities for beginning, intermediate, and advanced ESL instruction illustrate the ways that existing content and common ESL activities can be used to develop academic readiness skills. These activities demonstrate the multiple ways that information can be

Table 1. **Beginning-Level ESL Activities**

Sample activities (appropriate for NRS low beginning and high beginning—ESL levels 2 & 3)	Higher order skills and strategies introduced	How the lesson addresses one or more principles
Activity 1 In groups of three, students fill in a schedule as they read the story of one family's daily routine. One student in each group reads for information about Rémy and Jonas, another reads for information about Sina, and the third reads for information about Betsy. After reading, the students in each group exchange information to complete the chart for their group: See table below.	• Reading for specific information • Ordering information • Organizing information graphically • Taking notes from a reading using a grid	Reading for information to fill in just one column promotes selective reading strategies. Filling in a time table while reading introduces the concept of chronological organization of text. The grid provides an initial step to organizing information and using note-taking strategies.
Activity 2 Students are given a blank chart to complete for their own family or for themselves. This could include home or work routines.	• Ordering information • Organizing information graphically	Completing the chart provides guided and structured practice with organizing information.
Activity 3 Students transfer the information in their chart to a linear string graphic organizer. See image below.	• Sequencing information • Organizing ideas • Transferring information from one graphic form to another	Putting the information in a new form provides practice with organizing information in a new way. Personalizing the task, with reading as a model, is a precursor to independent use of organizational strategies.

	Rémy and Jonas	Sina	Betsy
In the morning			
6:30		makes breakfast	wakes up
6:45	wake up		
8:00			leaves for work
In the afternoon			
3:00	play soccer		



organized, building from simple to complex note-taking strategies to the integration of reading, listening, and critical thinking skills into all instruction. Each activity lists the associated academic skills and strategies along with the principles that are addressed.

Beginning-Level ESL Activities

Table 1 describes sample activities for a beginning-level ESL lesson on daily routines. The teacher provides a simple story about a family's routines. It could be her own or learners' stories presented orally, using pictures, or in writing; or it could be a story from a beginning-level text. After leading a warm-up activity to develop background information and vocabulary (e.g., showing pictures of daily routines and asking questions and teaching specific words), teachers can have students organize the information provided in a variety of ways. The activities described here could be used for a lesson on job routines as well.

Intermediate-Level ESL Activities

Table 2 describes sample activities for an intermediate-level lesson on holidays, which is a fairly typical theme in ESL classes. These activities demonstrate how academic readiness skills can be integrated into any general or life-skills ESL class. That is, the content does not have to be academic in nature.

Advanced-Level ESL Activities

Table 3 describes advanced-level activities on a theme—birth order theory—that could be of general interest to a group of adult learners and that moves toward content that is more academic in nature.

Conclusion

Most adult learners need to employ the skills and strategies outlined in this brief in order to participate fully in education and work. The activities presented here are but a few of the possibilities available to teachers to help their students acquire these skills. Teachers who are intentional about developing activities that lead to deeper understanding of content, increased critical thinking, and greater independence will provide learners with the tools they need to succeed in postsecondary education and the workplace.

Table 2. **Intermediate-Level ESL Activities**

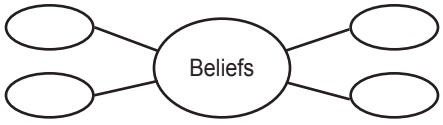
Sample activities (appropriate for NRS low intermediate and high intermediate—ESL levels 4 & 5)	Higher order skills and strategies introduced	How the lesson addresses one or more principles
Activity 1 In a lesson on holidays, the teacher shares a series of *mind maps* (illustrated below) with supporting visuals, including information about how her family celebrates a favorite holiday. *Activities: bake and cook with family, sing songs, take walks, watch movies on TV* *Foods: turkey, mashed potatoes, green beans, beet salad, pecan pie* *Beliefs: time to give thanks, time to reconnect with family*  Students guess what the holiday is.	• Organizing information using a mind map • Making predictions	Mind maps give opportunities to organize information.
Activity 2 Students are given a set of three mind maps, one for each category: activities, foods, and beliefs. Using words or pictures, they complete their own mind maps.	• Organizing personal information using mind maps • Categorizing	Using these mind maps can be a precursor to using mind maps for note-taking purposes. Mind maps give opportunities to categorize information in new ways.

Table 2. Intermediate-Level ESL Activities *(continued)*

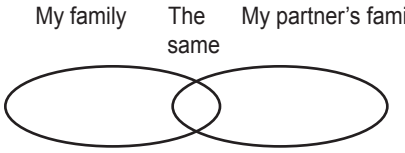
Sample activities (appropriate for NRS low intermediate and high intermediate—ESL levels 4 & 5)	Higher order skills and strategies introduced	How the lesson addresses one or more principles
Activity 3 Pairs join together to create a Venn diagram comparing their holidays. *Talk to a partner in the class and find some ways that you celebrate in your families that are the same and some that are different.*  *Find out from your partner* • *The history and meaning of the holiday* • *The reasons your partner chose to talk about this holiday*	• Comparing and contrasting • Inquiring and questioning • Analyzing and evaluating	The Venn diagram helps learners visually recognize the concept of comparing and contrasting information. Venn diagrams can be used to practice organizing information in a new way. Follow-up questions move students beyond talking about surface aspects of culture (e.g., food, clothing) to thinking critically about their choices.
Activity 4 Before listening to a short interview with someone about Chinese New Year, students share what they know about the beliefs associated with this holiday and make predictions about what the person interviewed will say.	• Making predictions	Making predictions involves using a listening strategy that allows learners to compare existing knowledge to new knowledge.
Activity 5 Students listen to the interview and fill in a mind map. Afterward, students compare class predictions to information from the interview.	• Listening for specific information • Listening to confirm predictions • Taking notes using a mind map	Taking notes using a mind map develops the strategies of selective listening and listening to confirm predictions. Using a mind map is an early form of guided note-taking.
Activity 6 Students listen to the interview again and fill in a cause-effect chart. They write the beliefs or rules in the left column and what happens when the rules are broken in the right column. **Belief** | **When you break that rule** Don't sweep floor → Don't wash hair → Wear red → Give money in red envelopes → Students then discuss these questions: • *How are these similar to or different from beliefs in your culture?* • *What are the origins of the beliefs in your own culture?* • *Why do you believe people feel a need to live by special beliefs and customs?*	• Listening for detail • Recognizing cause and effect • Taking notes • Analyzing and evaluating	Listening for cause and effect promotes a critical understanding of the text. Completing the cause-effect chart promotes listening for specific information. Completing the cause-effect chart provides practice with complex, guided note-taking. Follow-up questioning promotes critical thinking. Discussing origins of beliefs promotes higher order thinking about traditions.

Table 3. **Advanced-Level ESL Activities**

Sample activities (appropriate for NRS advanced—ESL level 6 and beyond)	Higher order skills and strategies introduced	Principles addressed in the lesson
Activity 1 Students mingle and create groups according to their birth order: first born, middle child, last born, only child. Once in birth-order groups, they brainstorm the benefits and drawbacks of their birth order and record their ideas on a *T-chart.* **Our Birth Order: _____** **Benefits** | **Drawbacks**	• Organizing and categorizing information • Comparing and contrasting • Analyzing and evaluating	The T-chart helps learners organize information. Comparing their experiences and synthesizing that information promotes critical thinking.
Activity 2 *Jigsaw reading* Each birth-order group is given the section of a reading on birth-order theory for their own birth order and completes one branch of a tree diagram (see Figure 2). Groups mingle and interview others in class to complete the other branches of the tree.	• Reading for specific information • Discerning specific details from main ideas • Organizing information • Categorizing information	Completing a tree diagram helps learners organize information. Completing a tree diagram provides a model for developing independent note-taking skills.
Activity 3 *Vocabulary development* Each student gets one vocabulary word from the readings, for example, *energetic, aggressive, compliant, easy-going, caring, risk-taker.* Students place their word on a continuum that reflects contrasting values, such as • Positive or negative • Promotes success or does not promote success • Is valued in their culture or is not valued in their culture	• Recognizing connotations of words • Questioning cultural connotations • Comparing and contrasting connotations across cultures • Analyzing and evaluating beliefs and values • Identifying assumptions • Questioning beliefs and values • Solving problems and making decisions	Placing items on a continuum promotes multiple critical thinking skills, including interpreting, analyzing, evaluating, and decision-making.
Activity 4 In small groups students do the following: • Prepare a questionnaire to conduct their own birth-order theory study. • Interview 10 people outside of class and bring results back to class. • Compare the results of their interviews among themselves and to the reading. • Determine whether their findings support the theory	• Summarizing information from the entire text • Inquiring beyond the text • Interpreting data • Analyzing and evaluating • Questioning beliefs • Making decisions	Negotiating and prioritizing questions as a group promotes critical thinking skills.
Activity 5 Students listen to a short lecture (online or teacher-created) on birth-order theory. Students fill in partially completed Cornell Notes (Figure 1). Students then write a final summary.	• Listening for main ideas • Listening for details • Discriminating between main ideas and details • Taking notes • Summarizing and synthesizing	Completing Cornell Notes provides practicing in note-taking. The use of Cornell Notes promotes the use of effective listening strategies. Using Cornell Notes provides guided practice in a note-taking strategy that students can use independently. Writing a final summary requires students to think critically about what they have listened to in the lecture.

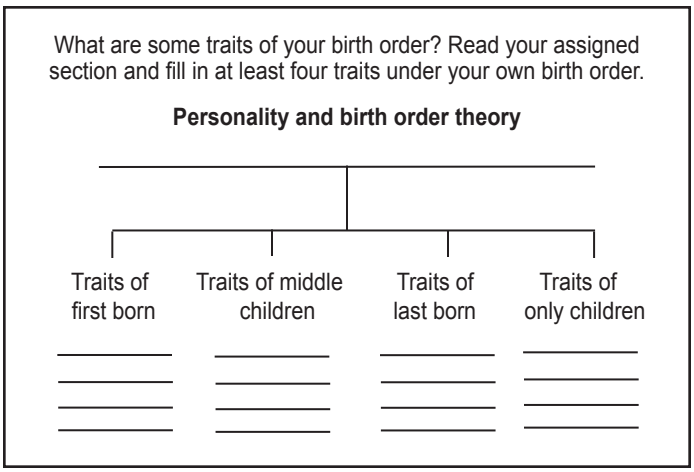


Figure 2. **Tree Diagram.**

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