



Adult ESL Education in the US

This article discusses the state of the art in the field of “adult ESL” in the US. It identifies the size, characteristics, and settings of adult education and discusses relevant professional standards, assessment procedures, and teacher preparation. Three approaches to noncredit adult ESL education will be presented (Functional Literacy, Critical Literacy, and New Literacy Studies), each of which has relevance to current status and funding of adult ESL within the Department of Education. A broader view of curriculum design and expansion of technological applications are recommended to address the growing needs of immigrants from Latin America and around the world.

The education of adult English as a second language (ESL) students in the US has come a long way since Leo Rosten’s humorous description of ESL teaching in New York City in *The Education of Hyman Kaplan* (1937). Classes for “Americanization” of immigrants still exist in the form of civics classes, but they are only part of the inspiring array of ESL classes being offered to adults in noncredit adult education programs. Based on a yearlong research project aimed at uncovering and documenting important issues and new developments in adult ESL, this article will paint a portrait of the US adult ESL classroom, foregrounding the Herculean efforts of too few trained ESL instructors teaching a limited few of the potential ESL students in the US.

It will begin by identifying who adult ESL learners are, presenting a description of characteristics of adult learners and categories of immigrants within a variety of current ESL settings in order to highlight the complexity of this student population. Following this description is a discussion of the evolution of adult ESL professional standards, assessments, and teacher-training options, which have not been uniform across the nation. Next, “adult ESL” within the infrastructure of “adult education” will be problematized with its consequent status,

funding, and accountability implications. Then, three competing approaches to organizing ESL curricula will be explored, with a focus on why one of these has superseded the others in recent years. In the next section, the article will discuss relevant new technology applications that may be needed to fill the gap for adult limited-literacy learners in the US. Finally, it will argue for increased visibility, funding, and curricular innovation to responsibly support instruction of these adult ESL learners in a 21st-century global context.

Identification of Adult ESL Learners

At the outset, it must be acknowledged that adult ESL learners in the US attend classes in all types of settings, including colleges and universities or academically oriented Intensive English Programs. However, students in these academic ESL settings will not be the focus of this article. Those in the practice of teaching recognize that “adult ESL” relates to students enrolled in noncredit ESL education in various settings, which will be the focus of this article. To determine how many of these learners exist, only inferential analysis of disparate data can determine the answer. Foreign-born and non-foreign-born adults possessing relatively low levels of literacy amount to about 93 million in the US (National Council of State Directors of Adult Education, 2009). If one uses the 2000 US census as a reference, it appears that about 35 million people are nonnative English speakers and 9 million do not speak well. Only 1 million are enrolled in state-administered and federally funded ESL programs—or about 11% of the nonnative English-speaking population (Burt, Peyton, & Adams, 2003). Thousands are on waiting lists unable to be served (National Council of State Directors of Adult Education, 2009). Others may be enrolled in private, faith-based, or workplace programs or other community-based organizations; however, it is difficult to obtain accurate statistics because they may not be monitored federally or by the state. Nevertheless, this leaves very large numbers, probably in the millions of adults in the US, who do not speak English well, who would like to learn English, but who are not enrolled in any English programs at all.

Results of the National Assessment of Adult Literacy survey conducted by the US Department of Education in 2003 provide a window on what “limited proficiency” means. This survey identified low-level literacy learners by literacy scores on prose, document, and quantitative items. See Appendix A for a description of literacy levels and abilities and tasks associated with each level. Prose literacy shows “the ability to search, comprehend, and use information from continuous texts,” document literacy is “the ability to search, comprehend, and use information from non-continuous texts (e.g., job applications,

payroll forms, and transportation schedules),” and quantitative literacy is “the ability to identify and perform computations using numbers embedded in printed materials (US Department of Education, 2009, p. 3). Based on these results, many individuals were labeled “Below Basic” or “Basic” and may have difficulty with such simple operations as signing a form or reading a TV guide.

Interestingly, the English literacy scores on the prose, document, and quantitative scales varied by a number of background characteristics of respondents. Hispanics, who represented approximately half of the foreign-born adults, had lower average prose, document, and quantitative literacy scores than their foreign-born black, white, and Asian peers. Half of foreign-born adults spoke only Spanish or Spanish and another non-English language before starting school (Warkentien, Clark, & Jacinto, 2009, p. 3). These statistics suggest that Hispanic immigrants who have come to the US with limited education constitute a very large part of the US immigrant population. The latest census data in 2010 confirm the importance of this Hispanic immigrant group, which is now beginning to be considered more seriously in education and public policy decisions (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). In some regions Hispanic immigrants have become the majority minority, and thus Hispanic language and cultural considerations are already having an impact on language of instruction, cultural content of materials, and language pedagogy in adult ESL programs (Rivera & Huerta-Macias, 2008). These curriculum effects will be discussed later within the “Conceptual Paradigms” section of this article.

Learner Characteristics

Because of space limitations, the remainder of this article will focus on adult ESL learners who enroll in noncredit public and private programs for which data are available. This leaves discussion of the millions mentioned above, who need ESL instruction in the US but are not receiving it (potential students), for another paper.

ESL students who appear in ESL classrooms are extremely diverse, which presents many challenges for the adult ESL teacher. Some of the ways in which learners vary include age, religion, cultural or educational background, occupation, educational attainment, learning ability, participation level, literacy level, and motivations for learning.

Ages span from teenage (16 to 19) all the way to elder adult. Students can be of different races and are from all parts of the world, but especially they are from developing nations such as Mexico or other countries in Central and South America. Religious affiliations of students can differ greatly from those of the majority of US citizens, who are Christian, as many hail from non-Western parts of the world in

Asia and the Middle East and adhere to Buddhist, Muslim, and Hindu beliefs, among others. Learning styles can also differ depending on students' cultural or educational backgrounds (Christison, 2005; Gardner, 1993). Finally, many students have had no previous education or careers; others have advanced degrees and multiple prior careers, but all are being instructed in the same classroom. Other problems may plague long-term immigrants, many of whom may have dropped out of high school in the US (Orfeld, 2004). According to Payne, DeVol, & Smith (2005):

Formal education is largely about learning the abstract representational systems that are used in the world of work. When an individual drops out of school or doesn't do well in school, often he/she lacks the mental models to do well in the world of work. (p. 132)

Also, 10 to 29.4% of high school dropouts have learning disabilities such as dyslexia, attention deficit disorder, executive function disorder, and so forth (Silver-Pacuilla, 2007). Of the overall population served in adult education, half of the adult students in the US have learning disabilities. Because nearly half of the adult students are English language learners, these students may display some of the learning disabilities as well, which introduces additional educational challenges when learning other languages (National Council of State Directors of Adult Education, 2009).

Comings (2007) has categorized English learners who attend adult classes by their level of attendance and participation. Some learners attend frequently and are called "long-term," while others are called "mandatory" because they are required to attend. Still others are labeled "short-term," because they study for short periods to study for the citizenship exam or prepare for the GED examination and once the goal is accomplished, they stop coming. Finally, "try-out students" come to a few classes and drop out quickly while "stopouts" move in and out of program services throughout their lives as they are juggling many responsibilities, including work and child care.

Another complicating factor in adult ESL classrooms is that students have various literacy levels. Some students may be from countries in which the oral language is not written (preliterate) or from countries that have a written language a student does not know (nonliterate). Others may have lived in the host country a long time but still have only limited reading and writing skills (semiliterate). Students may also be familiar with different types of alphabets. Further complications may relate to the type of alphabet they are familiar

with; for example, literate Chinese learners are nonalphabet literates because they read characters, but literate Russians are non-Roman alphabet literates because they read the Cyrillic alphabet (Birch, 2006).

Adults have various motivations for enrolling in ESL classes. Many students want to learn English for better employment opportunities. Chiswick & Miller (2002) have shown that English-proficient individuals can earn 17% higher wages in the US than those who are not proficient in English, so many take English classes to get better jobs. Others want to improve their skills to better themselves, build friendships, speak to their grandchildren, learn personal finance techniques, or obtain health information (especially with Medicaid and Medicare if they are seniors). With the recent emphasis in the schools on the role parents play in their children's achievement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002), many parents want to learn English in order to help their children with their homework and other school activities. Some want to pass the citizenship or General Education Development (GED) examinations. Finally, some students want to study in Intensive English Programs or prepare to study in college and university degree programs in the US.

Fortunately, adult ESL learners are often quite successful in achieving what they set out to do (Kegan, 1994). Because of their cognitive maturity (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991) and motivation to pursue personal goals (Peirce, 1995), they tend to be quite dedicated students. Inspiring stories abound of adult learners who have limited or no income, limited literacy, learning disabilities, physical handicaps, and experiences as victims of torture or abuse who persist or even excel in adult education programs in the US (Isserlis, 2000; Jackson, 2011; Lowry, 1990; Parrish, 2004).

When they do discontinue their studies, the cause may relate to study habits but can also relate to other peripheral issues. Comings's (2007) study of 150 adults in the US revealed three reasons for ceasing their studies: life demands, relationships, and poor self-determination. Life-demand reasons included transportation problems, family health issues, and insufficient income. Relationship reasons included family or others who were not supportive of schooling for the individual adult. Self-determination reasons included lack of self-confidence, negative thoughts, and laziness preventing students from attending classes. Thus, circumstances in and out of the students' control can explain reduced persistence in school.

Categories of Immigrants

The previous section discussed personal differences among adult ESL students, but immigration status also can play an important role

in determining which educational treatment might be most successful. This section will discuss the various types of immigrants and implications for adult ESL instruction.

The first type of immigrant consists of individuals who have left their native countries for various reasons, which may include to reunite with family members, to find better employment, to conduct business, or in response to natural disaster. They are called “long-term” immigrants if they have lived in the US for a number of years or “short-term” immigrants if they have lived here for only a few years. Long-term immigrants may experience significant challenges learning formal academic English associated with incomplete or interrupted schooling in their native countries or in the US.

Refugees are a special class of immigrants who have left their homes because of religious persecution, violation of human rights, political upheaval, or war. Because of the negative circumstances associated with their departure from their home countries, students may be emotionally fragile and unable to learn in the classroom at times.

Some students may come on temporary F1 visas to improve their English skills in order to matriculate into higher education (e.g., community colleges, universities, private colleges, etc.) and later return to their native countries. These students are less likely to acculturate because of their perceived temporary status in the country.

Some students may be undocumented students who have left their native countries in search of “The American Dream.” They may walk across US borders or arrive transported in trucks or boats to their new home, hoping for benefits and improved lifestyles but often facing disappointment and discrimination, other concerns their ESL teachers will want to be aware of.

Some immigrants are migrant workers who work temporarily in the US in such fields as agriculture, construction, or catering. Many move from state to state before returning to their home countries. In the past, most immigrants prepared for citizenship once they had lived in the US for several years. However, this has changed as some immigrants choose to transmigrate back home or to other countries during their adulthood in search of work or better opportunities. This reduced certainty and permanence also affects teachers as they plan instruction for their nonnative English-speaking learners.

In recent years, destinations for immigrants have changed. A number of states (e.g., California, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, New York, and Texas) have had large populations of adult English language learners for many years and consequently have well-developed adult ESL programs. According to Crandall, Ingersoll, and Lopez (2008), however, this has begun to change with an increase in immigrants

overall but with a difference in the proportion of new immigrants in different states (e.g., Georgia, Nevada, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Utah have seen increased migration and immigration), where services and education may be less well developed. When surveyed, Mexicans indicated that because of the poor economic conditions, crime, drugs, and corruption in Mexico that they would consider moving to the US, even without authorization (Pew Research Center, 2009). One in three said that life in the US is better than life in Mexico, which would explain their interest in moving to various parts of the US to improve their circumstances.

ESL Classroom Settings

Immigrant students in the past enrolled in four main categories of ESL classes: general ESL, family literacy, workplace, and civics education (Parrish, 2004; Wrigley & Guth, 1992).¹ All of these programs still exist in the community; however, because of recent funding requirements, more state- and federally funded programs are beginning to focus on preparation for workplace, career, and college. (See Steinhilber [2012] for a legislative analyst's report about this evolving issue in California.) Most of these programs follow a competency-based syllabus in which students learn functions and structures in order to accomplish practical daily tasks. As previously mentioned, many adult ESL programs use open enrollment (sometimes called open entry, open exit). However, in recent years, "managed enrollment" has been used to register students for shorter terms of several weeks in which regular attendance is required. These programs have helped with "stop-out" rates by encouraging students to complete a program of study and make them aware of the goals they have achieved so that they will either continue or return when they can at a later time. "Flipped classrooms" are also another option in weak budget times in which part of lesson delivery is provided through recorded lecture that learners view at home, reserving actual class time for real student/teacher communication and interaction.

In general ESL programs, instruction is usually centered on a variety of meaningful real-life topics (e.g., housing, shopping, recreation, etc.) while integrating language skills. Pre-employment instruction also sometimes occurs in general ESL programs in order to teach some of the important "soft skills" (social, communication, and self-management behaviors) as well as "hard skills" (technical knowledge for a profession).

Family literacy (or intergenerational literacy) programs improve the oral and literacy skills of parents so that they can assist with their children's literacy development. Even Start has been a popular model

of this type of program in the US, especially for Hispanic families with limited education. Quintero (2008) identifies four components of successful programs:

1. Intergenerational parent and child L1 and L2 literacy activities so that literacy becomes a meaningful part of parent-child relationships and communication;
2. Adult education and adult literacy so that parents obtain more information about becoming economically self-sufficient;
3. Parenting education to help parents support the educational growth of their children in the home and at school; and
4. Age-appropriate education for children to prepare them for success in school and life. (pp. 119-120)

Workplace programs have gained great importance in recent years. Considering that 28% of the US labor force has less than a high school education and is limited English proficient, it is not surprising that workplace programs also supply ESL instruction (Capps, Fix, Passel, Ost, & Perez-Lopez, as cited in Rivera [2008]). Chisman (2009) identifies the following four types of programs:

1. Training programs for particular occupations (e.g., upholsterers, gardeners, etc.);
2. Incumbent worker programs (e.g., programs responding to problems the employer has been noticing or new needs the employer has identified);
3. Postsecondary transition or “bridge” programs (e.g., college-preparation courses); and
4. Career or academic preparation (e.g., courses that may include etiquette, problem solving, or writing instruction necessary for future occupations or schooling).

Finally, civics classes (also called “EL/Civics” because of the English literacy component) most often address the following three goals:

1. Prepare students to take the naturalization exam;
2. Encourage new citizens to vote in elections; and
3. Assist students to participate in civic activities that can improve their communities. (Weinstein, 2001)

Standards and Assessment

As surprising as it may seem, the US has thus far not adopted

any national ESL standards to guide instruction.² The closest approximation to US national standards in recent years occurred with the Equipped for the Future (EFF) project. This standards project was initiated when the National Institute for Literacy was asked by the U.S. Congress to assess progress on National Goal 6, which stated: “By the year 2000, every adult will be literate and possess the knowledge and skills requisite to compete in the global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship” (Equipped for the Future Assessment Resource Collection, http://eff.cls.utk.edu/products_services/esol_instruction.html).

Stein (2000) and her colleagues sought consensus from various segments as they worked on a framework and performance-assessment benchmarks by which adults could achieve this goal. They collected data from 1,500 adults from across the US to describe their roles in the global economy, which included the rights and roles of citizenship (Drago-Severson, 2004). Four main purposes were identified:

1. Access so that individuals can gain information access to perform in their roles;
2. Voice so that ideas can be shared with confidence and be heard;
3. Independent action in order to make decisions without having to depend on others' assistance; and
4. Bridge to the future to keep pace with an evolving world. (Stein, 2000)

Besides the four purposes, EFF includes three Role Maps, the 12 Common Activities, the six Knowledge Domains, and the 16 process-oriented Content Standards, which provide opportunities for learners' input in acquiring knowledge and skills suited to their interests and needs. (See Appendix B or http://eff.cls.utk.edu/fundamentals/16_standards.htm for the wheel of Content Standards.)

Another more recent set of standards is the Framework for the 21st Century, developed in 2009 by a national organization to unite education, business, and government leaders. The 21st Century Framework was first developed for the K-12 system and is being adapted for adult education (http://www.p21.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=254&Itemid=119). The graphic representation of the 21st Century framework is a rainbow (see Appendix C or <http://www.p21.org/our-work/p21-framework>) in which the rainbow represents student outcomes and the accompanying pools at the bottom represent support systems that will help students succeed in the 21st

century. Student outcomes include the core subjects of the 3Rs and 21st Century themes (global awareness; financial, economic, business, and entrepreneurial literacy; civic literacy; health literacy, and environmental literacy) as well as life and career skills, information media and technology skills, and learning and innovation skills (or the 4Cs of critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity).

Besides the standards discussed at the national level, several other ambitious statewide or professional-organization projects that describe instructional and assessment goals for ESL learners have also been produced. These standards, accompanied by benchmarks lists, indicate what students know and are able to do (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2002). See Table 1 for a list of approved adult ESL standards and promising projects for adult ESL. Of special note are the TESOL Standards for Adult Education ESL Programs (TESOL, 2003), which have been proposed for the US. There is also a new movement to incorporate the College and Career Readiness Standards for Adult Education (U.S. Department of Education, 2013) into the curricula of adult ESL education programs in order to match the transition to Common Core Standards in K-12 throughout the nation.

Table 1
Approved US Standards and Promising Projects for Adult ESL

| <i>State</i> | <i>Standards/Projects</i> |
|---------------|--|
| Arizona | English Language Acquisition for Adults (ELAA) Standards (2000) |
| California | English-as-a-Second Language Model Standards (1992) |
| Florida | Curriculum Framework (2005) |
| Maryland | Maryland Content Standards for Adult ESL/ESOL (2003) |
| Massachusetts | Framework for Adult ESOL in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts (1999) |
| New York | Adult Education Resource Guide and Learning Standards (1997) |
| Texas | Texas Adult Education Content Standards and Benchmarks for ABE/ASE and ESL Learners (2008) |
| Washington | The Washington State Adult Learning Standards (2009) |

Table 1 (continued)

| <i>Organization</i> | <i>Standards/Projects</i> |
|--|---|
| Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, DC (formerly the Office of Vocational Adult Education) | College and Career Readiness Standards for Adult Education (2013) |
| The Partnership for 21st Century Skills, Washington, DC | Framework for the 21st Century Learning (2009) |
| TESOL, Arlington, VA | Standards for Adult Education ESL Programs (2003) |
| National Institute for Literacy, Washington, DC | Equipped for the Future (EFF) Content Standards: What Adults Need to Know and Be Able to Do in the 21st Century (2000) |
| Spring Institute for International Studies, Denver, CO | Performance-Based Curricula and Outcomes: The Mainstream English Language Training Project (MELT) Updated for the 1990s and Beyond (1997) |
| U.S. Department of Labor, Washington, DC | Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) Report (1991) |

Standards-based curricula also require placement testing and formative and summative assessments to be administered in a fair and consistent manner. Formative assessments are the regular assessments the teacher uses to check the students' performance against the standards or benchmarks. Summative assessments are the performances or test scores at the end of the program that show the standards have been met. The latter are especially important for accountability purposes for stakeholders, who often also hold the key to continued and/or future funding.

The national association of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) recommends the steps shown in Table 2 for incorporating standards into the instructional and assessment process.

Table 2
Standards-Based Instruction and Assessment Cycle

| <i>Step</i> | <i>Activities</i> |
|--|---|
| Planning | Create a sequence of instructional activities, based on indicators or benchmarks found in the standards, that lead to the final standards-based outcomes. |
| Collecting and recording information | Determine the formative and summative assessment tools to measure outcomes. |
| Analyzing and interpreting information | Comparing current and previous performances to measure progress of individual students and the class as a whole. |
| Reporting and decision | Provide feedback to students on their mastery of the appropriate benchmarks and determine next steps, if more practice is needed. |

Note: From TESOL (2001, p. 7).

Schaetzel and Young (2007) list several questions to consider when planning a lesson or activity with a commercial textbook or a teacher's own materials and relating it to the standards:

1. Does it address the needs of the students?
2. Does it contain the language features (e.g., language functions, grammatical structures, vocabulary) that the standard or benchmark requires?
3. Does it match the oral English and literacy levels of the students?
4. Is it engaging and interesting to the students?
5. Does it require students to practice skills measured in the standard or benchmark? And
6. Can it be tailored or adapted for different student needs? (p. 5)

These questions will assure that the lesson is suited to students' diverse needs, follows the goals of the program, and is communicative and authentic.

Teachers and Teacher Training

Just as the term "adult ESL" refers to certain kinds of students, so "adult ESL teacher" alludes to certain types of teachers. Mr. Parkhill,

the adult ESL teacher in Leo Rosten's *The Education of Hyman Kaplan*, was one kind of ESL teacher but exhibited only some of the qualities of the modern, trained adult ESL teacher. Today adult ESL teachers often play indispensable roles as community resources and/or advocates for their learners (Buttaro, 2004). Teacher qualities that match the adult setting well are an ability to respond, cultural sensitivity, adaptability, warmth, and compassion (Hilles & Sutton, 2001). Although not always possible, bilingual abilities to explain vocabulary or difficult cultural concepts can be an advantage, especially with homogenous classes (Rivera & Huerta-Macias, 2008). Adult ESL teachers are often found multitasking, staying at home with their families or working full time during the day at another job but working part time in the evening for extra family income or for the satisfaction of working with diverse and appreciative learners. Others, who are called "freeway flyers" in large metropolitan areas, piece together several adult ESL jobs at different sites to earn enough money to survive.

The need for qualified adult ESL teachers is great, especially considering the numbers of students and the cultural and logistic complexity of most adult ESL classrooms as described previously. Some states have different expectations for educational preparation. In Alaska, for example, no state requirement for a college degree exists. In California a bachelor's degree is required for a preliminary credential with additional college units needed in a relevant subject area for a professional credential (Crandall, Ingersoll, & Lopez, 2010). For most programs, staff development consists only of voluntary attendance at workshops, conferences, or seminars rather than paid professional development. A professional-development network, ELL-U, developed by the U.S. Department of Education, provides free online ESL teacher training with access 24 hours a day (http://www.ell-u.org/about_us/). The international Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) organization has developed teaching standards titled *Standards for ESL/EFL Teachers of Adults* (2008), which provide standards of planning, instruction, and assessment. However, whether or not states implement these is entirely voluntary, which destines many states to cadres of untrained or undertrained faculty.

Some states with large numbers of ESL learners operate state literacy-resource centers that provide training, information, and technical assistance to ESL teachers. California operates the Outreach and Technical Assistance Network and the California Adult Literacy Professional Development Project. Illinois operates the Adult Learning Resource Center, and Texas offers the Adult Education Professional Development and Curriculum Consortium and the Texas Educational Television Network broadcasts on ESL-related topics. One Texas proj-

ect, Project IDEA, has been successful at working with teachers over an extended period of a year to assist with individual projects at their sites. The goal of the project is to develop “local capacity for reflective, inquiry-based teacher training” (Crandall et al., 2010, p. 3).

Listserve at schools or with local, regional, or national ESL or literacy organizations can attune instructors to the latest developments in the field and provide them an opportunity to reflect and jointly solve important problems through the web. These types of supports are often appreciated by teachers who do not have sufficient training or time to do face-to-face training while at work.

Despite these efforts, there seems to be a high turnover rate of adult ESL teachers as well as a continual need to train new teachers. To counteract these trends, efforts have been made to build stronger teacher communities. Ziegler and Bingman (2007) found that in-service training that takes place with teachers in their own classrooms is most successful. Paid in-service training can also improve teacher quality and attitude.

ESL and Adult Education

ESL programs are listed as “English Language Acquisition” programs under the Division of Adult Education and Literacy (DAEL) in the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE) within the U.S. Department of Education. Hearing this label “English Language Acquisition,” one would assume that ESL programs play a minor role in the Adult Education and Literacy agenda. Nothing could be further from the truth. According to the National Council of State Directors of Adult Education (2009), the majority of students enrolled in public adult education programs are ESL students or English literacy students (45.6%) with 40.5% as adult basic education (ABE) students and only 13.9% as adult secondary education (ASE) students (see Figure 1). ABE classes may include remedial reading or math review courses. ASE classes are usually individualized and assist learners with passing the GED examination or taking classes toward a high school diploma. ESL classes include all of the types previously discussed in the “ESL Classroom Settings” section of this article.

Experts have rightfully argued that the decision by the U.S. Department of Education to conflate classes for native and nonnative speakers under one umbrella of “Adult Education and Literacy” has tended to mask the real needs and interests of the largest group being served. In truth, the needs of ESL learners acquiring English as a second language often differ quite dramatically from the needs and interests of native English speakers or bidialectal speakers also enrolled in these programs (Murray, 2005). As will be shown later in the

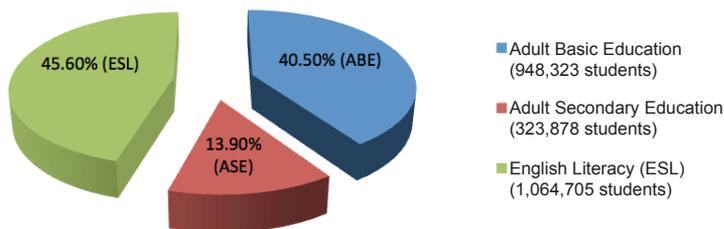


Figure 1. Enrollment in adult education in the US. Source: National Council of State Directors of Adult Education (2009).

article, the number and stature of advocates of adult ESL are partially to blame for this unfortunate situation.

What is known about ESL programs across the US? One of the most comprehensive surveys detailing various aspects of adult program settings, including where ESL students are being served, was the Adult Education Program Study (AEPS) conducted from July 1, 2001, to June 30, 2002. Tamassia, Lemmon, Ymamoto, and Kirsch (2007) published preliminary results that included information about characteristics of adult education programs across the US, instructional and support programs, program staff, the role and uses of assessment, and the use of technology.

The survey sampled 3,100 small, medium, and large programs funded under the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, Title II of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998 (P.L. 105-220), and found that the largest provider of adult ESL in the US was local education agencies (public K-12 schools; 54%) and the next largest was community colleges (17% of adult learners). Other providers included community-based organizations (24%), correctional institutions (2%), and other types of institutions (3%; e.g., private colleges, libraries, departments of human services, etc.).

As far as enrollment and participation, 79% of the programs used open enrollment, in which students could start and stop classes at any time. And 98% of the programs offered classes on weekdays, with only 2% offering services on weekends. Most learners attended their programs for less than 100 hours over 12 months. A little more than one-third completed an educational level by the end of the year based upon state-approved pre- and posttests with 30- to 80-hour intervals between administrations (Tamassia, et al., 2007). The highest rate of participation was with adult ESL learners (124 hours), then with ABE (100 hours) followed by ASE (85 hours), demonstrating higher persis-

tence with ESL learners. Adult ESL learners appear to be not only the largest group in adult education but also the most dedicated.³

The survey also analyzed staffing, technology, and assessment. Part-time staff constituted 40% of the staff in adult education.⁴ Of these, 43% were volunteers, 75% of whom worked as full-time instructors in other jobs. Only 17% were full-time employees. Just 75% of the programs reported having minimal requirements for part-time and full-time work. The most common were a BA/BS degree or K-12 certification. Only 40% of the programs had formal technology plans. Besides programs funded under the AEFLA, classes may be offered by private organizations (such as Literacy Volunteers of America and the Laubach Literacy Action network, which merged in 2002 to form Proliteracy). They can also be offered by churches or other faith-based organizations. Large corporations, such as Disneyland or Wal-Mart, may also offer classes at the workplace.

Funding of Adult ESL

Adult education in the US has often been called the “poor step-sister” of other educational segments because it receives less in funding than elementary, secondary, and college/university programs. Most adult ESL teachers, who are part time, have had insufficient time to devote to advocacy efforts in their field. Also, many ESL students, because of limited knowledge of the US educational system and limited literacy, are not attuned to how they might appeal for change.

This is extremely unfortunate because limited funding leads to a whole series of negative consequences. When funding is cut, there are more students in each class. As enrollment increases, classes become multilevel and students find them less relevant and stop coming to class. In some schools, because of funding cuts, there are no substitute teachers. When students come to school, they may find a note on the door saying the class has been canceled. As a result, they may go home and never return to school. Because of the major discrepancy between the number of limited English-proficient adults in the US who would like to take classes and the small number of classes being funded, it is evident that for things to change, more effort is needed to generate public funding.⁵

The AEPS Survey (discussed in the previous section) revealed that two-thirds of funding for adult ESL programs across the nation was from state and federal funds. The remainder of funding was from business, social service agencies, libraries, and so forth for various types of assistance or in-kind donations of facilities. Unlike in college programs, the collection of fees from students is not common because the Department of Education does not want fees to be a bar-

rier to participation. The average cost per adult learner per year in the US is about \$626 (Tamassia et al., 2007). According to the AEPS Survey, other funds were distributed as follows: 55% of funding went to instructional staff, 10% to administrative staff, about 5% to instructional materials and equipment, and about 5% to clerical and other staff costs. Smaller percentages were allotted to technology and professional development.

Finally, federal funding for adult education is managed differently across states. In Oregon, it is related to the community college system. In Tennessee it is related to the Department of Labor and Workforce Development, and in Vermont it is related to the Department of Education (Ziegler & Bingman, 2007). Understanding the real costs of educating students and the sources and timetables for funding is an important piece of knowledge for any ESL learner, teacher, school, or organization wishing to seriously advocate for adult ESL education.

Accountability in Adult ESL

The 1990s brought welfare reform and the slashing of the educational budget, reducing adult education, a broader concept, to workforce education, a narrower concept. One-stop career centers, which included adult education that led to job training and then employment were favored by the federal government. The legislature voted in the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), and then the National Reporting System (NRS) was established in 1998 to track progress of such programs at the national level by the Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE).

Just as tighter government budgets have encouraged greater accountability in K-12 education (see Hess & Petrilli [2006] for a discussion of “No Child Left Behind” policies in the US), so have these forces affected adult education. WIA was intended to make adult education programs more efficient, streamlined, and accountable. Continuous Quality Improvement, which had been used in the private sector and K-12 and higher education, was also adopted by the federal government. The National Literacy Act of 1991 required systematic efforts to collect program-quality indicators and the later replacement by the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 added cross-state reporting of outcomes to provide better accountability of funds (Ziegler & Bingman, 2007), all relating to the goal of delivering high-quality adult education and good return on investment.

Today WIA Title I sets policy and funding for workforce development and Title II sets policy and funding for adult education and literacy instruction. According to McHugh, Gelatt, and Fix (2007), about \$250 million to \$300 million a year is provided by the federal

government in the form of grants to states. But the great share for adult ESL (\$700 million) is provided by the states. The Department of Health and Human Services' Head Start and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families programs, Housing and Urban Development's Community Service Block Grants, and the Department of Education's Even Start program and other specific programs in migrant education and vocational education also offer grants that support English language instruction.

Each adult program that receives federal funds reports core outcome measures (educational gain, employment and attainments of secondary diploma or equivalent, or placement in postsecondary training or education) to the NRS on a regular basis. Secondary measures (family and community objectives) are only optionally or voluntarily reported. Approved measures to show educational gain are: CASAS, TABE CLAS-E, and BEST. Programs need to report test gains, levels completed, number who fail to complete a level and leave the program, and the number who remain in the same level. As an example, see Table 3 for a correlation of several test or subtest benchmarks and NRS levels. The latest guidelines appear at <http://www.nrsweb.org>.

This accountability system will change as the new Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) passed in 2014 replaces WIA and new rules for implementation are implemented by July 1, 2016. The Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (formerly the Office of Vocational and Adult Education) website will provide updates, timelines, and resources that will guide implementation of the new requirements that focus on getting more Americans "ready to work with marketable skills" (<http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/AdultEd/wioa-reauthorization.html>).

Table 3
NRS Levels with Several Test or Subtest Score Ranges

| <i>Test Score Range/ NRS Level</i> | <i>CASAS Reading</i> | <i>TABE CLAS-E Reading and Writing</i> | <i>BEST Literacy</i> |
|--|--------------------------|--|--------------------------|
| Beginning ESL literacy | 0-180 | 225-394 | 0-20 |
| Low-beginning ESL | 181-190 | 395-441 | 21-52 |
| High-beginning ESL | 191-200 | 442-482 | 53-63 |
| Low-intermediate ESL | 201-210 | 483-514 | 64-67 |
| High-intermediate ESL | 211-220 | 515-556 | 68-75 |
| Advanced ESL | 221-235 | 557-600 | 76-78 |

Some critics have questioned whether these instruments can actually register small gains or whether they correlate sufficiently to demonstrate comparability (Sticht, 2011). Others have questioned whether the federal government's more complex reporting requirements have discouraged volunteer programs, which presumably serve large numbers of students, from staying in business. On the other hand, others believe that the federal requirements have not gone far enough because programs are required only to report progress an individual makes in a year at one institution versus over multiple years across institutions. They believe this perspective may actually discourage long-term development of learners (Demetrian, 2005). In the end, procedures designed to increase accountability may have inadvertently decreased the total number of programs or created reasons for volunteer programs to fold. The result has been fewer and less varied services for potential learners. English learners who experienced failures in traditional K-12 education in which standardized testing was the norm may also encounter failures in similar adult education environments, where summative commercial test assessments are sometimes driving curricular choices rather than the real needs of learners directing content and approaches to instruction.

Conceptual Paradigms in Adult Literacy Instruction

What is the value of different types of curricular models for different types of adult ESL students mentioned above? Demetrian (2005) describes three paradigms of literacy education in the US that can be applied to the adult ESL classroom. The first paradigm, Functional Literacy, takes inspiration from such publications as *Reach Higher, America: Overcoming Crisis in the U.S. Workforce* (National Commission on Adult Literacy, 2008), in which preparing learners to learn English to get jobs or future careers is a major motivation. Most public adult ESL programs in the US today follow this means-end paradigm, assisting learners to function and contribute economically to US society and the global marketplace.

On the other hand, the Critical Literacy paradigm, inspired by such works as *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970), focuses more closely on helping learners identify and solve their own problems in their own neighborhoods, educating them to use English to liberate themselves from discrimination or other types of societal oppression. Learners are taught to critically think about their own social situations and initiate change by posing solutions that are fair and socially just. Many participatory community-based programs follow this model.

Finally, the New Literacy Studies (NLS) paradigm, inspired by such works as Shirley Brice Heath's (1983) classic tome *Ways With*

Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms and the more recent work of the New London Group in New London, New Hampshire (New London Group, 1996), advocates a “constructivist model.” With this approach, the instructor scaffolds instruction to address students’ real English learning needs while being sensitive to intercultural differences and sociocultural settings. Instruction may span from helping learners find a well-paying job or find information on the Internet to helping parents read books to their children.

Each paradigm, whether based in behaviorist, emancipatory, or constructivist philosophies, suggests different methodologies and materials in the classroom and suits different kinds of students. For example, the more “culturally conservative” models may incorporate functionally- and competency-based syllabi, skills-based activities, textbook materials, and commercial tests. However, the more “culturally liberal” models may embrace task- or project-based syllabi, Language Experience Approach stories, problem-posing materials, and portfolios (Auerbach, 1992; Papen, 2005; Weinstein, 1999). As was shown earlier in this article, federal accountability measures have leaned toward the more traditional model and thus predisposed certain textbook companies to produce more functionally-based textbooks to assure viable sales agendas. However, community-based programs receiving private funding may still prefer more liberal approaches and materials for certain kinds of student populations (Rivera & Huerta-Macias, 2008). Also, “home-grown” publications from community-based organizations or literacy networks, such as *Litstart: Strategies for Adult Literacy and ESL Tutors* (Frey, 1999), work well in ESL tutoring settings.

Technology Applications

In preparing students for the 21st century and potentially reaching greater numbers of learners, there are many ways that technology can tap into learner needs and assist with literacy instruction no matter the educational paradigm. New applications of technology are especially helpful in teaching reading and writing. Even low-level students can benefit from computer-assisted language learning in the classroom (Kucia, 2007). Modern software and the Internet are able to assist ESL students in ways similar to live teachers. For example, text readers, such as Microsoft Reader (<http://www.microsoft.com>), which are now free on the Internet, voice-recognition software, and word-prediction software can provide transcriptions of students’ stories (much like the Language Experience Approach) or oral reading of simple texts for low-literacy learners. Software and the Internet can also provide definitions through word glosses and electronic dic-

tionaries, generate personalized glossaries, and lead students through drafting processes. Although there can be no replacement for the instructor who is able to facilitate and individualize instruction, the software allows students who are able to use it to become more autonomous, productive self-study learners (Silver-Pacuilla, 2007) as well as to overcome the sociocultural “digital divide” of technology (Warschauer, Knobel, & Stone, 2004).

McCain (2009) describes tools of technology from across the nation that are especially valuable to adult ESL learners who want more self-access and distance learning options or ways to reinforce what they have been learning. For example, Indiana PBS stations broadcast half-hour GED programs that correspond with a workbook. *Crossroads Café* DVDs provide intermediate ESL practice at <http://www.in telecom.org/>. *English for All* can be viewed online at any time at <http://www.myefa.org>. Email and Google Groups and Yahoo Groups allow learners to interact in real time. Blogs, wikis, and social networks such as Facebook can provide ways to obtain user-generated content for learning. USA Learns is a free web portal that provides lessons and videos for three different levels of English learners at <http://www.usalearns.org>. Sed de Saber (Thirst for Knowledge) is a portable kit that has an interactive interface to teach English to Hispanic learners. Workplace Essential Skills uses videos, print, and the Internet to help students improve reading, writing, and math skills that could assist learners with finding a job or passing the GED test. Tamassia et al. (2007) state, “As the digital transformation continues, it is likely that the development of skills and knowledge associated with technology use will affect us in much the same way that print literacy affects the development of cognitive skills” (p. 45). All of this suggests the potential transformational influence of technology on adult ESL/ literacy programs in the future for wider access to reach underserved learners and new ways to instruct students in weak budgetary times.⁶

Conclusion

Great strides have been made in developing adult ESL education in the US since Leo Rosten wrote his classic book. Mr. Parkhill would be pleased. State and organizational standards have strengthened instruction and assessment for thousands of adult ESL learners. Theories of adult literacy instruction have been developed with accompanying ESL curriculum models and technology applications.

However, this article has shown that all adult learners in ESL classes are not “adult ESL” learners and few “adult ESL learners” even make it to adult ESL classrooms. Those who do enter these classrooms represent a less diverse population than might be expected, consisting

of mainly limited-literacy Hispanic learners. Vague naming of these educational programs for adults by the Department of Education (using “English acquisition” vs. “ESL”) obscures the size and importance of these learners in discussions of funding and curriculum. Minimal advocacy efforts by mostly part-time and often untrained instructors, as well as the weak voice of undereducated and impoverished immigrants themselves, assures continued neglect of this problem.

More political work needs to be done to raise the status of adult ESL and improve its funding base. Increased state, federal, and private funding would assure that appropriate models of instruction reach the millions of underserved learners in the US, whose future success depends on it. Higher standards of teacher training and professional development should be achieved, new delivery systems using technology should be explored, and more research of best practices should be implemented to increase teaching effectiveness and learner achievement in noncredit adult ESL programs across the nation.

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Notes

¹ESL students may also enroll in a variety of adult enrichment courses, such as folk-dancing or jewelry-making courses, which also provide opportunities for interaction with the native English-speaking adult community as well as other speakers. These courses are not funded by the US government but are fee supported by participants.

²ESL standards are an important feature of the educational systems of several other English-dominant countries. In 1978 Australia developed the Australian Second Language Proficiency Ratings (ASLPR)

scale associated with the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP). In 2001 the United Kingdom added the Adult ESOL Core Curriculum to the national standards for adult literacy. In 2002, the Canadian government published the Canadian Language Benchmarks, which are reading, writing, listening, and speaking standards at 12 proficiency levels (<http://www.language.ca>).

³The percentage of students in ESL programs advancing one or more educational levels as measured by the National Reporting Service (NRS)-approved tests increased from 41% to 44% between 2008 and 2011. Those in adult-based and secondary education programs advanced only from 40% to 42% during the same period, demonstrating again the greater persistence of ESL learners (U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

⁴In some states with large populations of immigrants, such as California, the proportion of part-time teachers is much higher.

⁵Some advocates believe that adult education should not be a responsibility of the government, but that private charities and organizations should take care of literacy instruction. However, the numbers reported earlier in the article suggest that this is a big enough program that both private and public sources will be needed to address this great need. Moreover, funding for language instruction of new immigrants in the US is much less than funding for immigrants in other developed countries, including, Germany, Norway, Australia, and the United Kingdom (McHugh, Gelatt, & Fix, 2007).

⁶McCain (2009) has proposed that the nation develop a new national web portal in which all learners (as well as program professionals) can easily access information and materials for English language learning.

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Appendix A

Overview of the Literacy Levels

| Level and definition | Key abilities associated with level | Sample tasks typical of level |
|--|---|---|
| <p>Below Basic indicates no more than the most simple and concrete literacy skills.</p> <p>Score ranges for <i>Below Basic</i>:</p> <p>Prose: 0–209 Document: 0–204 Quantitative: 0–234</p> | <p>Adults at the <i>Below Basic</i> level range from being nonliterate in English to having the abilities listed below:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • locating easily identifiable information in short, commonplace prose texts • locating easily identifiable information and following written instructions in simple documents (e.g., charts or forms) • locating numbers and using them to perform simple quantitative operations (primarily addition) when the mathematical information is very concrete and familiar | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • searching a short, simple text to find out what a patient is allowed to drink before a medical test • signing a form • adding the amounts on a bank deposit slip |
| <p>Basic indicates skills necessary to perform simple and everyday literacy activities.</p> <p>Score ranges for <i>Basic</i>:</p> <p>Prose: 210–264 Document: 205–249 Quantitative: 235–289</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reading and understanding information in short, commonplace prose texts • reading and understanding information in simple documents • locating easily identifiable quantitative information and using it to solve simple, one-step problems when the arithmetic operation is specified or easily inferred | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • finding in a pamphlet for prospective jurors an explanation of how people were selected for the jury pool • using a television guide to find out what programs are on at a specific time • comparing the ticket prices for two events |
| <p>Intermediate indicates skills necessary to perform moderately challenging literacy activities.</p> <p>Score ranges for <i>Intermediate</i>:</p> <p>Prose: 265–339 Document: 250–334 Quantitative: 290–349</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reading and understanding moderately dense, less commonplace prose texts as well as summarizing, making simple inferences, determining cause and effect, and recognizing the author's purpose • locating information in dense, complex documents and making simple inferences about the information • locating less familiar quantitative information and using it to solve problems when the arithmetic operation is not specified or easily inferred | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • consulting reference materials to determine which foods contain a particular vitamin • identifying a specific location on a map • calculating the total cost of ordering specific office supplies from a catalog |
| <p>Proficient indicates skills necessary to perform more complex and challenging literacy activities.</p> <p>Score ranges for <i>Proficient</i>:</p> <p>Prose: 340–500 Document: 335–500 Quantitative: 350–500</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reading lengthy, complex, abstract prose texts as well as synthesizing information and making complex inferences • integrating, synthesizing, and analyzing multiple pieces of information located in complex documents • locating more abstract quantitative information and using it to solve multistep problems when the arithmetic operations are not easily inferred and the problems are more complex | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • comparing viewpoints in two editorials • interpreting a table about blood pressure, age, and physical activity • computing and comparing the cost per ounce of food items |
| <p>NOTE: Although the literacy levels share common names with the NAEP levels, they do not correspond to the NAEP levels.</p> <p>SOURCE: Hauser, R.M., Edley, C.F. Jr., Koenig, J.A., and Elliott, S.W. (Eds.). (2005). <i>Measuring Literacy: Performance Levels for Adults</i>. Interim Report. Washington, DC: National Academies Press; White, S. and Dillow, S. (2005). <i>Key Concepts and Features of the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy</i> (NCES 2006-471). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.</p> | | |

(Source: From U.S. Department of Education, 2003)

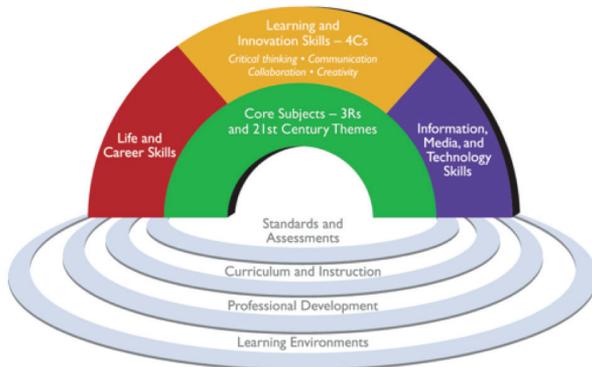
Appendix B Equipped for the Future Skills Wheel



(Source: National Institute for Literacy. EFF 16 process-oriented content standards. Knoxville, TN: Center for Literacy, Education & Employment. Retrieved from http://eff.els.utk.edu/fundamentals16_standards.htm)

Appendix C Framework for the 21st Century Rainbow

21st Century Student Outcomes
and Support Systems



(Source: *The Partnerships for 21st Century Skills*. (2011). 21st century student outcomes and support systems. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.p21.org/our-work/p21-framework>)