

10 Strategies for Teaching Adult English Language Learners

Adult English language learners come to English as a second language (ESL) classes to master a skill that will help them satisfy other needs, wants, and goals. Therefore, they need to learn about the English language, to practice it, and to use it.

A variety of instructional approaches and techniques support language learning and language use. Teachers need to examine these and decide which are most appropriate for them, their learners, and their settings. Following are 10 strategies to use with adult English language learners:

1. *Get to know your students and their needs.* English language learners' abilities, experiences, and expectations can affect their learning. Get to know your students' backgrounds and goals as well as their proficiency levels and skill needs.
2. *Use visuals to support your instruction.* English language learners need context in their learning process. Using gestures, expressions, pictures, and realia makes words and concepts concrete and connections more obvious and memorable.

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Her NCLE's Worth

In this issue of NCLEnotes, we talk with Peggy Seufert, Adult ESL Specialist for the Maryland State Department of Education.

Miriam Burt: Peggy, how did you get started in the field of English as a second language?

Peggy Seufert: I was a Peace Corps volunteer for environmental sanitation in Paraguay and got roped into teaching a 7:00 a.m. English class in a girls' high school. I realized that with an M.A. in teaching ESL, I could continue to live and travel in other countries.

MB: So you went back to school when you came back to the United States?

PS: Yes, I applied for graduate school while I was still in the Peace Corps. When I got back to the U.S., I enrolled in the MA-TEFL program at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. I taught foreign students in the intensive English program while I was working on my degree. I found, though, that I preferred working in

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nontraditional settings, so I began teaching migrant farm workers twice a week in the evenings as a volunteer.

MB: And that's how you got involved in adult ESL?

PS: Yes. After I got my degree in 1981, I moved to Washington, DC, and began teaching refugees at REEP, the Refugee Education and Employment Program in Arlington, Virginia. I worked as a teacher, testing coordinator, trainer, curriculum developer, and finally as ESL program coordinator.

MB: Where did you go from REEP?

PS: From REEP I went to Argentina and then back to Arlington and then Fairfax County, Virginia.

MB: I know you also worked at the Center for Applied Linguistics.

PS: Yes, in the late '80s. I reviewed computer-assisted workplace materials for native English speakers and did instructional design for an interactive videodisk course.

MB: And then you went overseas again?

PS: Yes. From 1992 to 1997, I worked for the Peace Corps again, as an associate director for education in Poland and Romania.

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National Symposium on Adult ESL

From September 5 – 7, 2001, nearly 100 teachers and administrators participated in the National Symposium on Research and Practice for Adult ESL Practitioners. The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE) sponsored the event, which was held at the Smithsonian Institutions' Ripley Center in Washington, DC. NCLE worked with OVAE to plan and facilitate the symposium.

State directors of education nominated the participants; representatives from all states, the District of Columbia, and the territories attended.

The purpose for the symposium was for practitioners and administrators in the field to share challenges, concerns, and successes in providing English language instruction for adults, and to learn about national initiatives, issues, and opportunities. Participants were encouraged to take information from the symposium back to their state and local programs.

Participants shared ideas, heard from researchers and expert practitioners, and discussed the latest initiatives in adult ESL education. Topics covered included

- current research on adults learning to read in English as a second language,
- challenges of teaching adult ESL and effective practices in instruction,
- project-based learning,
- using museum artifacts for literacy activities,
- assessment,
- distance education,
- ESL learners with special needs,
- civics education,
- National Reporting System for Adult Education (NRS),
- professional development, and
- immigration trends and issues.

Proceedings from the symposium will be available in June 2002 in print version and on NCLE's Web site.



Top to bottom: Symposium participants discuss concerns and successes; NCLE staff member Lynda Terrill talks about project-based learning; participants Wilson Tam (Guam) and Danny Sheffield (Arkansas) network.

Panel Discusses New Millennium

Over 65 participants attended a NCLE-sponsored panel discussion on Adult ESL Practice for the New Millennium in February 2001. Panelists discussed EL/civics grants, learning disabilities and adult English language learners, what works for beginning-level learners, workplace issues, and working conditions for instructors. Proceedings from the discussions are posted on NCLE's Web site and include visual aids and links to organizations and resources on adult ESL.

See you in Salt Lake City

What do Baltimore, Maryland; Ann Arbor, Michigan; Lafayette, Louisiana; Harrisonburg, Virginia; and Degray Lake, Arkansas, have in common? These are some of the diverse cities where NCLE staff have recently given presentations and trainings.

Salt Lake City, Utah, is our next stop. The 2002 Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) annual convention will be held there from April 9 –13. The theme of this year's convention is "Language and the Human Spirit."

NCLE will be giving workshops, attending presentations and meetings, and staffing the Center for Applied Linguistics' exhibit booth.

NCLE workshops will include topics on assessment, civics education, heritage languages, and reading research. Dates, times, and locations will be posted on NCLE's Web site.

TESOL's Web site provides information about the convention and allows you to register and reserve housing online (<http://www.tesol.org/conv/index-conv.html>).

2001 NCLE User Survey

Who reads *NCLEnotes*? What other NCLE resources are used? How are they used? These are just a few of the questions from the NCLE user survey that appeared in the last issue. Over 100 people responded, yielding valuable data, not only on whom you, our readers, are, but also on how NCLE contributes to and can best serve the field of adult ESL instruction.

Forty-seven percent of the respondents identify themselves as adult ESL literacy teachers, 30% as adult ESL program administrators, 20% as volunteer tutors or teachers, 4% as library or resource center staff, and 26% as other educational or government professionals—many shouldering more than one responsibility. Thirty-six percent have more than 10 years experience in adult ESL and 39% have less than 5 years. This last statistic is up from 22% in the 1998 survey, perhaps reflecting the growth in the number of adult English language learners in our nation and the increase in personnel to serve them.

The most useful NCLE resources—whether ordered through the mail (by 52% of the respondents) or accessed via the NCLE web site (by 42%)—are the digests and Q&As. Web users also rank the FAQs, notices of books and publications, *NCLEnotes* online, and the resource compilations

as very useful. Fifty-five percent have contacted NCLE staff for technical assistance—17% via the Web, 13% by phone, 11% by email, and 15% in person through NCLE workshops. We are pleased to say that not one reported dissatisfaction with the response!

How do respondents use these resources? Seventy percent say they use NCLE resources for personal and professional development and 30% use them in training others. Nearly half of our readers say that they pass *NCLEnotes* on to others to read—some to as many as 20 other readers. One respondent characterized NCLE as a “unique and valuable pipeline to resources and information that are not available anywhere else.”

What topics would respondents like to see addressed in NCLE publications in the upcoming months? Assessment and testing; working with beginning level learners, particularly those who have limited literacy skills in the native language; cultural issues; health; and citizenship all received multiple mention. All comments were read, recorded, and will receive our consideration as we plan our upcoming publications.

A special thanks to each of you who took the time to answer the survey so we could know who you are and how we are serving you. Special kudos to Faith Fernalld of Edmonton, Canada, who noticed a typo in Question 11, “How often do you visit NCLE’s Web site?” The first choice was “at least once a month,” and the second was “monthly.” The first should have been “at least once a *week*.” Thanks, Faith!

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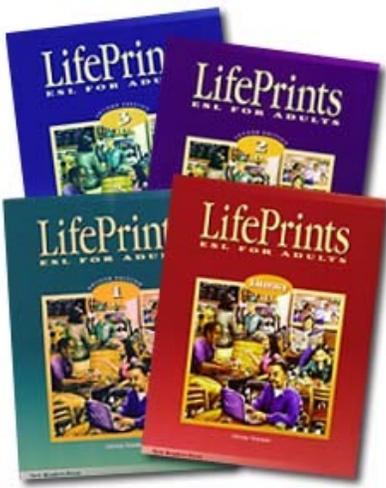
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ERIC Digests
about adult ESL
are now available in full text
on NCLE’s Web site at
www.cal.org/ncle

Resource Updates



New Readers Press has added a literacy-level text to their **LifePrints** series of adult ESL materials. A student text, workbook, teacher's edition, cassette, and CD-ROM are now available for

learners who are developing reading and writing skills as they are learning English. NCLE staff member MaryAnn Cunningham Florez is the author. Visit New Readers Press' Web site (<http://www.newreaderspress.com>) for more information on the *LifePrints* series.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) recently released a report entitled **English Literacy and Language Minorities in the United States**. Using data from a 1992 National Adult Literacy survey, the report provides an in-depth look at adult U.S. residents who are nonnative English speakers. It reviews English language and literacy skills of this population as well as native language and literacy skills, education, and employment patterns and earnings. The full-text report is online at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2001/2001464.pdf>.

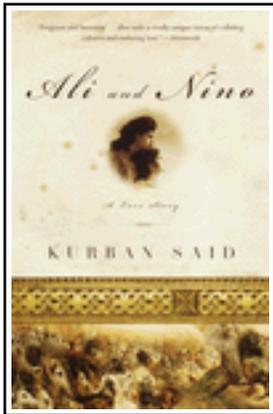
ESL for Literacy Learners is part of Canada's national standards effort, the Canadian Language Benchmarks. This resource describes the reading, writing, and numeracy skills ESL literacy-level learners should be able to demonstrate at various stages of their development. (Literacy-level learners are defined in this text as learners who are learning English and who are not functionally literate in their native language.) The publication is available from the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 200 Elgin Street, Suite 803, Ottawa, Ontario K2P 1L5, Canada; Tel: 613-230-7729; Fax: 613-230-9305; Email: info@language.ca; Web: www.language.ca.

Tennessee and North Carolina recently published curricula for adult English language learners.

The **Tennessee Adult ESOL Curriculum Resource Book**, a collaborative project of the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development and the University of Tennessee's Center for Literacy Studies, defines the language, EL/Civics, and workplace competencies for the six ESOL levels recognized by the state (corresponding to the six levels of the National Reporting System for Adult Education, NRS). It also provides descriptions of student learning plans that incorporate the various competencies. Appendices on materials and resources, samples of student portfolio sheets, and information for new teachers are included. For more information, contact the Center for Literacy Studies, University of Tennessee/Knoxville, 600 Henley Street, Suite 312, Knoxville, TN 37996-4109; Tel: 865-974-4109; Fax: 865-974-3857.

Building Together: The Inquiry Writings. NC Adult ESOL Curriculum Framework Inquiry Project was developed by Literacy South and a group of North Carolina adult ESL teachers, using an inquiry approach. *Building Together* explains the unique perspective that guided the development process, the curriculum, 13 lesson plans, and an assessment toolbox. It is available from Peppercorn Books and Press, PO Box 693, Snow Camp, NC 27349; Tel: 336-574-1634; Fax:

Cyberstep, a project funded by the Office of Vocational and Adult Education, U.S. Department of Education, has released its multimedia learning package, **English for All**. This program of twenty 15-minute video episodes and accompanying materials is designed for use with adult English language learners. Master copies of the videos and CD-ROMs will be available to all state directors of adult education. Print materials can be downloaded (in PDF format) from the Web. For more information on the project and how to access the materials, see the *English for All* (<http://www.myefa.org>) or Cyberstep (<http://www.cyberstep.org/>) Web sites, or contact your state's office of adult education.



Ali and Nino: A Love Story

By Kurban Said (1937/2000)
Anchor Books, ISBN 0-385-72040-8

Reviewed by Miriam Burt

We were a very mixed lot, we forty schoolboys who were having a Geography lesson one hot afternoon in the Imperial Russian Humanistic High School of Baku, Transcaucasia: thirty Mohammedans, four Armenians, two Poles, three Sectarians, and one Russian."

So begins Kurban Said's *Ali and Nino*, set in the early 1900s, just prior to the Russian Revolution and World War I. Baku is an area of the world where East meets West below the Caucasus Mountains.

The novel (first published in 1937) was written by a transplanted resident from Baku and a convert to Islam from Judaism. Initially, the novel received little attention, until it was discovered at a bookstore in Berlin over 30 years later and translated into English.

Ali, a Muslim prince, and Nino, a Georgian (Russia) princess, grow up together in the trans-Caucasian region of Baku and fall in love. Their love affair brings into collision Europe and Asia, Islam and Christianity, and traditional and modern views of women. In the end, as the Soviet army marches into Baku to take over, Ali is forced to choose between his love for Baku and his love for his wife.

Before that inevitable decision, however, there are adventures enough to fill a book more than twice its 273 pages. There is the trip to Tiflis (Tbilisi), where Bacchanalian feasts are followed by sulfur baths and massages; a kidnapping followed by a chase across the desert where a rider on a golden horse overtakes an automobile; the blood feud and exile of Ali to a harem in Tehran, where he takes part in a religious procession of self-flagellation. Finally, there is the birth of Ali and Nino's daughter and of the short-lived Azerbaijani Republic.

The novel is soaked in symbolism from the East and the West. A prevailing symbol is that of the desert and the forests. Nino says to Ali, "I love woods and meadows and you love hills and stones and sand. And that's why I am afraid of you, of your love and your world."

This image appears again and again. It is discussed at length by Ali and an old Georgian nobleman, Dadiani. Ali says, "The world of trees perplexes me ... it is full of fright and mystery, of ghosts and demons. You cannot look ahead. You are surrounded. The sun's rays are lost in the twilight of the trees.... I love simple things: winds, sand and stones. The desert is simple like the thrust of a sword. The wood is complicated like the Gordian knot. I lose my way in the woods."

Dadiani replies, "Maybe that is the one real division between men: wood men and desert men. The Orient's dry

intoxication comes from the desert ... where the world is simple and without problems. The woods are full of questions.... The desert man has but one face and knows but one truth, and that truth fulfills him. The woodman has many faces."

The love story is passionate and affecting, and the plot moves quickly, each chapter bringing a new twist to the lives of the characters, while revealing the history of this complex region. The images evoked by the simple, direct language are powerful, as when Ali describes the aftermath of a battle:

"Camels came into town from the desert, with long sad steps, carrying sand in their yellow hair, looking far into the distance, with eyes that had seen eternity. They were carrying guns on their humps, the barrels hanging down their sides, crates with ammunition and guns: loot from the big battles."

Although a novel, the book resonates with my own experiences of working with Middle Eastern students. As an adult ESL colleague said after reading the book—referring to Ali having to decide whether to escape to Paris with Nino and their daughter, or remain on the Gandsha Bridge at Baku and face all-but-certain death from the invading Soviets—"Can't you just see it? All the young, male, Middle Eastern students we've had? They'd stay at the bridge, wouldn't they? They'd all be at the bridge."

3. **Bring authentic materials to the classroom.** Use materials like newspapers, signs, sale flyers, telephone books, and brochures. These help learners connect what they are learning to the real world and familiarize them with the formats and information in such publications. However, do prepare learners beforehand (e.g., pre-teach vocabulary) and carefully structure lessons (e.g., select relevant, manageable chunks of the authentic material) to make this work.
4. **Model tasks before asking learners to do them.** Learners need to become familiar with vocabulary, conversational patterns, grammatical structures, and even activity formats before producing them. Demonstrate a task before asking learners to do it.
5. **Foster a safe classroom environment.** Like many adult learners, some English language learners have had negative educational experiences. Many are unfamiliar with classroom activities and with expectations common in the United States. Include time for activities that allow learners to get to know one another.
6. **Watch your teacher talk and your writing.** Teacher talk refers to the directions, explanations, and general comments and conversations that a teacher may engage in within the classroom. Keep teacher talk simple and clear; use pictures, gestures, demonstrations, and facial expressions to reinforce messages whenever possible. Use print letters with space between letters and words, and do not overload the

chalkboard with too much or disorganized text.

It is certainly important for the teacher to understand the structure of the English language. However, it is not always appropriate to give learners explanations of each discrete grammar and vocabulary point. At times it is enough for learners to know the correct response.

7. **Use scaffolding techniques to support tasks.** Build sequencing, structure, and support in learning activities. Ask learners to fill in words in a skeletal dialogue and then create a dialogue of a similar situation, or supply key vocabulary before asking learners to complete a form. Recycle vocabulary, structures, and concepts in the course of instruction. Build redundancy into the curriculum to help learners practice using learned vocabulary or skills in new situations or for different purposes.
8. **Don't overload learners.** Strike a balance in each activity between elements that are familiar and mastered and those that are new. Asking learners to use both new vocabulary and a new grammatical structure in a role-playing activity where they have to develop original dialogue may be too much for them to do successfully.
9. **Balance variety and routine in your activities.** Although patterns and routines provide familiarity and support as learners tackle new tasks, learners can become bored. Give learners opportunities to experience and demonstrate their mastery of language in different ways. Chal-

lenge them with a variety of activities that speak to their lives, concerns, and goals as adults.

10. **Celebrate success.** Progress for language learners is incremental and can be slow. Learners need to know that they are moving forward. Make sure expectations are realistic, create opportunities for success, set short-term as well as long-term goals, and help learners recognize and acknowledge their own progress.

Teaching adult English language learners can initially be challenging for practitioners who are not accustomed to working with this learner group. While experiences and training in either ESL or adult education settings is helpful, they do not address all the issues that come into play in *adult ESL*. The strategies described here represent some practical, over-arching ideas to keep in mind as you start working with adult English language learners. 📖

This article is excerpted from the NCLE Q&A, Beginning to Work With Adult English Language Learners: Some Considerations (October 2001), written by MaryAnn Cunningham Florez and Miriam Burt. The Q&A also discusses understanding second language acquisition processes and facilitating learning for multicultural groups. It is available on NCLE's Web site (<http://www.cal.org/ncl/beginQA.htm>) or in print (202-362-0700 x200; ncl@cal.org).

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New ERIC Digests From NCLE

Using Music in the Adult ESL Classroom

by Kristen Lems

Music can be used to build listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills; increase vocabulary; and expand cultural knowledge. This digest offers strategies for incorporating music into the adult ESL classroom.

Beginning to Work With Adult English Language Learners: Some Considerations

by MaryAnn Cunningham Florez and Miriam Burt

Written for practitioners who want an overview of what adult ESL teachers need to know, this Q&A discusses issues in adult learning, second language acquisition, teaching multicultural groups, and effective instructional approaches.

Library Literacy Programs for English Language Learners

by Eileen McMurrer and Lynda Terrill

This digest summarizes the history of library literacy programs, describes current delivery models, and discusses initiatives in library literacy. A successful public library program that serves adult English language learners is profiled.

Reflective Teaching Practice in Adult ESL Settings

by MaryAnn Cunningham Florez

In reflective practice, with the goal of improving their teaching, practitioners engage in self-observation and self-evaluation to understand their own actions and the reactions they prompt in their learners. This digest discusses this process for adult ESL teachers.

Dialogue Journals: Interactive Writing to Develop Language and Literacy

by Joy Kreeft Peyton

What are the benefits of using dialogue journal writing with adult English language learners? What are the challenges? How can I manage the time and paperwork? This Q&A answers these questions and offers suggestions for interactive writing with English language learners.

ERIC Digests (Free)

- Using Music in the Adult ESL Classroom
- Beginning to Work With Adult English Language Learners: Some Considerations
- Library Literacy Programs for English Language Learners
- Reflective Teaching Practice in Adult ESL Settings
- Dialogue Journals: Interactive Writing to Develop Language and Literacy
- Civics Education for Adult English Language Learners
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Her NCLE's Worth from page 1

MB: What did you do when you came back to the United States?

PS: I wanted to keep working “internationally,” so I returned to refugee work at the United States Catholic Conference. Then at CAL again, this time as the director of the Refugee Service Center.

MB: And now ...?

PS: More change! Now, I’m the adult ESL specialist for the Maryland State Department of Education, and I’m happy to be back in adult ESL.

MB: As Adult ESL Specialist, what do you do?

PS: I manage the adult education grants for eight counties in Maryland and provide technical assistance to all of the ESL programs across the state.

MB: Can you tell us a little about the immigrant population in Maryland? Who are the adult ESL learners?

PS: Maryland’s foreign-born population makes up over 10% of the total population. Most have arrived since 1990, so the demand for ESL instruction is growing. Less than 5% are Spanish speakers, which is very different from the national figures of 45%.

We have large groups of immigrants and refugees from China, India, Russia and the Former Soviet Union, other Asian countries, and Africa.

MB: Are most of the new arrivals coming to the Baltimore and Washington, DC, metropolitan areas?

PS: Actually, no. Given the job market and housing costs, many immigrants and refugees are settling in outlying areas like Frederick County, Southern Maryland, and the Eastern Shore. The impact of even 100 new families can really be felt in communities that have little experience with these immigrant groups.

MB: And they will have an impact in the classroom, as well.

PS: Right. In some cases, it means a nonnative English speaker is in an ABE [adult basic education] class for the first time. In other cases, ESL classes are being offered in a program for the first time.

MB: What is the most challenging part of your job?

PS: Professional development. How do we offer training to a constituency that is overwhelmingly part-time, working only 4 to 6 hours a week in

the evenings? When do we offer training to teachers who already have full-time jobs and family obligations? How do we do peer observation, coaching, and mentoring when few of the teachers who would be observed have solid experience working with adult English language learners?

MB: Yes, these are issues that many states are grappling with. Do you have any advice for ESL professionals in this situation, or for that matter, in any situation?

PS: Listen to your learners. When I was teaching at REEP in the early ‘80s, I taught morning and evening classes. I stayed around in the afternoons and did a lot of reading and other professional development, but the best thing I did was to listen to the students. There was a brilliant Cambodian doctor learning English at REEP. He walked with a cane because of injuries he had sustained during the Pol Pot regime, when he had been forced to pull a plow. He said to me, “Listen to your students. Americans often don’t take the time to listen.” Listen to them. It’s the greatest gift you can give yourself and your learners. 📖