

We Are The World: Serving Language Minority Adults In Family Literacy Programs

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Language minority families, families that speak a language other than English at home, often face tremendous challenges in making a life for themselves and supporting the education of their children. Many live under difficult circumstances because family members are scattered in different countries.



Financial resources are often scarce,

especially if they are shared with relatives still living across the border or overseas.

Economic opportunities are often limited as well, particularly for those who had to leave school in the primary grades. Lack of English and differences in culture pose significant obstacles, as parents have to navigate systems that are complex and confusing, while trying to learn a language that is no less so.

Family literacy programs have great potential for addressing these issues. They can offer parents opportunities to learn English and improve their education while helping them to sort out the challenges that living in the U.S. presents. They can help those who live in two cultures and with two languages explore the role of language in their lives and engage them in shared literacy experiences, experiences that draw on the strengths of the family and the values within it. But they can also provide assistance and comfort to families that are falling apart under the pressures of resettlement. On the adult education side, these programs can further strengthen the competence of parents so that they are prepared to access higher education, get a job that pays a living wage, challenge

inequities and participate in building strong communities. And, by collaborating with other agencies, they can help parents address problems that affect the wellness of the family, such as issues related to health care, legal rights, work and education.

Given all these options, how then are programs to decide where to put their focus? Working with communities and parents to determine priorities and choosing a guiding philosophy can be good starting points. Examining demographic trends can help programs get a better sense of the educational needs of new immigrants and plan for the future. Finally, exploring what has worked for other programs, reviewing the literature and discovering new ideas can breathe new life into a program and energize teachers and students to move into new directions.

This chapter addresses some of the challenges and opportunities inherent in working with language minority families. Part I describes demographic changes related to diversity, and discusses some of the educational orientations available to programs seeking a coherent philosophy to immigrant education. Part II lays out promising practices from the field, including projects and processes that specific programs have created as part of their desire to offer rich educational experiences that are meaningful to families and make a difference in their lives.

Shifts in Demographics¹

More people came to the U.S. in the 1990s than in any other decade in the nation's history. As a result, all across the country, schools are seeing more and more children whose parents speak a language other than English at home. Many of these families are recent arrivals, and a significant number are settling in different states than earlier immigrants. In Iowa, Georgia, Kentucky, and North Carolina, for example, 40% of all immigrants have come to the U.S. within the last 10 years. Some of these states, like Arkansas and Idaho, have seen their immigrant populations rise by over 150% within that time frame, a trend that presents new challenges for communities and schools (Passel, J. S. & Zimmermann, W. (2001, April).

¹ Some of the information in the demographic section has been adapted from an earlier paper by Wrigley, Richter, Martinson, Kubo and Strawn (2003), *The language of opportunity: Expanding employment opportunities for adults with limited English proficiency*. Washington, D.C. Center for Law and Social Policy.

New immigrants tend to have lower English skills than earlier arrivals. In fact, the 1990 Census showed that almost half the immigrants who had entered the country during the previous three years did not speak English well (compared with one quarter of all foreign-born residents). This trend will require family literacy programs to design services for parents and children who are both new to English and new to the U.S. Meeting this challenge will demand significant investments in literacy services that help newcomers understand both language and culture, so they can navigate services and systems and advocate for themselves, their children and their communities.

What is the overall demographic picture within which family literacy programs serving immigrants operate? Currently, the foreign-born population in the U.S. is over 30 million, making up about 11 percent of the country (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002).

New immigrant adults may come from English speaking countries or may have studied English abroad. A significant number are new English learners. Indeed, among those who speak a language other than English at home, 5.7 million adults report not speaking English “well.” An additional 2.6 million adults say they do not speak English “at all.” These data add up to over 8 million adults—nearly 5 percent of the adult population—who have limited proficiency in English and could benefit from English language and literacy services. Family literacy programs provide one such option, at least for parents of young children

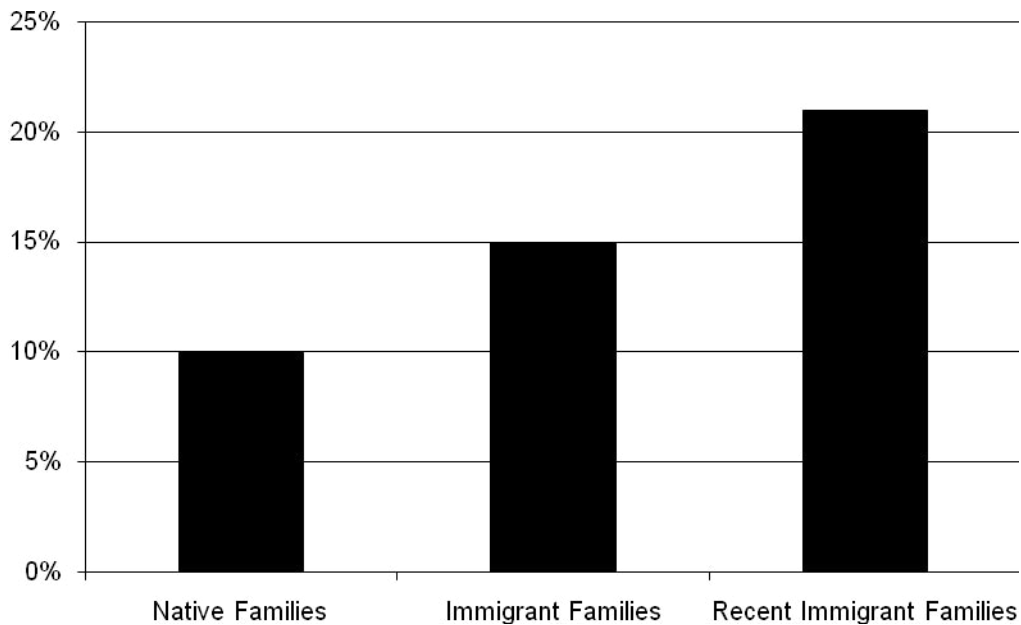
A very high proportion of immigrants (about 43%) come from Spanish speaking countries. The vast majority of are from Mexico (30% of the overall immigrant population). According to the 2002 Census, 19,594,395 people in the U.S. are Spanish speakers and half of these report speaking English less than very well, making up a significant group of adults and families who could benefit from language and literacy services.

Speakers of Asian and Pacific languages report similar proficiency levels; that is only half report speaking English “very well.” As illustrated in Census Figure 1, representing the foreign-born population, a single language group, Spanish speakers, constitute close to half of all foreign-born immigrants (43%), while those who speak languages associated with Asia and the Pacific Islands make up a much smaller percentage (26%).

Figure 1: The Foreign-born Population by Language Spoken

below the poverty rate, a proportion twice as high as that of the native born-population, as illustrated in Figure 2, based on the 2000 Census. (U.S. Census Bureau, date unknown). That means that many of the clients who come to family literacy programs need support services to help them deal with the issues and concerns associated with poverty: limited access to quality child care, limited transportation option, need for health care services, and need for advice on how to negotiate the social service system.

Figure 2. Poverty Rates Among Immigrants, 1999



Low wages are also common for many adults whose certificates and degrees don't transfer from their native country to the U.S. As a result, immigrants who had good jobs at home often find themselves underemployed and struggling in their new surroundings, circumstances that can lead to bitterness or depression. As one refugee from Russia explained, "In my country, I was a truck driver" (an important job in Central Europe); "here I am nobody." When serving uprooted participants whose lives are now much sadder than before, many family literacy programs try to find ways to bring joy into clients' lives and providing emotional support along with language and literacy services.

Education, English Proficiency and Literacy

The vast majority of language minority parents who participate in family literacy programs are not yet fully proficient in English and come with the goal of improving

these skills. Some are able to develop literacy in English quite easily while others struggle a great deal learning to read and write in English.

What factors influence the acquisition of English literacy skills the most? One would think that the further away the writing system of the home language is from the system to be learned (English), the more difficulty learners would have acquiring literacy in their new language. This situation tends to be true, but both research and practice show that other factors tend to matter as much, if not more than mere similarity among print systems. These factors include first and foremost the opportunities for schooling that parents have had and, along with that experience, the level of literacy they have attained in the native language. For example, the written forms of both Spanish and Hmong use the Roman alphabet and follow a phonetic pattern so that individuals who can read some in these languages should find reading in English relatively easy. Russians, on the other hand, use the Cyrillic alphabet and therefore could be expected to have more difficulties reading English than Spanish speakers. Chinese speakers come from a different system altogether, a system that uses characters based on symbols rather than the alphabet. We therefore could expect this group to have the most difficulties of all when having to deal with print in English. Yet experience paints a different picture. Russian and Chinese parents who had the opportunity to complete high school in their home country often pick up English literacy quite easily, while Mexican and Hmong parents, who often have not attended school beyond the elementary level, often find it extremely difficult to make sense of print in English. For those who never went to school or had to leave in the elementary grades, lack of experience with school-based skills, which include such seemingly simple tasks as holding a pencil and forming letters, makes writing hard work, as does trying to understand that marks on the paper are not there as decoration, but that letters and words stand for sounds and convey meaning. The process, however, becomes easier over time. Once parents have *cracked the code* of literacy and see the relationship between the language encoded in print and the thoughts and ideas expressed in oral language, progress can happen fairly quickly as long as the text makes sense and is accessible both in terms of language and content. Given these differences, programs are well served in trying to respond to the needs of parents who lack schooling, offering them opportunities to become familiar with print in a variety of ways, including offering

literacy in the native language to build the underlying skills necessary to process print.

One Size Does Not Fit All: Approaches to the Adult ESL Curriculum

Many family literacy programs struggle with finding a philosophical approach to ESL and literacy that ties together curriculum and teaching, provides a common language for discussing program goals, and inspires both students and staff to work hard around a common goal. In my experience, programs where staff share a common perspective have an easier time making decisions about teaching and learning, and are less likely to chase new funding that doesn't match the program focus. Being in a program that has a clear focus has benefits for children and parents as well, as it allows them to see why the program has selected a certain approach and how individual pieces fit within the model. Conversely, parents are often confused and frustrated when classes merely present a series of activities (fun though they may be) and fail to engage them in literacy work that is both important and worthwhile.

What to teach and why has long been a question for educators (Bruner, 1996; Freire 1985; Eisner 1994; Pinar 1995, Wrigley, 1992). And debates about the merits of various ideologies have a long history (Eisner, 1974). Among the different conceptualizations of curriculum, five orientations frequently manifest themselves in adult immigrant education. Each is rooted in history and offers the possibility of serving as a guiding philosophy for family literacy programs.

1. Fitting In: Social and Economic Adaptation

The *fitting in* orientation sees the function of education as helping to meet the critical economic and social needs of learners, their community, and the society at large. Programs that follow this model are designed to help families acquire the skills and knowledge needed to be self-sufficient, to function effectively in society, to access services, and to integrate into mainstream society. This model is probably the most common currently in place. It has its roots in the Applied Performance Level Study of the 1970s (Crandall, J., & Imel, S.1991) and the early refugee resettlement curricula developed in Europe in the early 1980s (Sheils, J.,1988).

Family literacy programs that have adopted this model tend to focus on survival skills and competencies. They help parents to become familiar with the school system and understand what the expectations of the teachers are. Key competencies are often

pre-established, at least as a guide for teachers to follow, and assessments are matched to the curriculum. When the goal is to prepare parents for the workplace, programs often select standards and competencies that focus on employment-related communication and literacy skills variously known as “necessary” or “essential skills.” These include national skill sets such as the those developed by SCANS (Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills) in the United States (see <http://wdr.doleta.gov/SCANS>) or the framework for “Essential Skills” developed by HRDC (Human Resources Development of Canada) (see <http://www15.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/english/es.asp> for details).

Critics of the approach (Auerbach, B. R. 1986; 1989Tolleffson; Collins, M., Balmuth, S. D. & Jean, P., 1989; Tolleffson, 1995; 2001) point out that when programs put the major emphasis on fitting immigrants into the existing society, they silently accept the status quo and teach students to do the same. As a result, inequities in the system remain unchallenged, immigrants are taught to know their place, and children learn not to question authority.

Critics also see the fitting in orientation as part of earlier Americanization movements that supported forced assimilation. They also point to the efforts of the government during the same time to remove Native American children from their families and put them into boarding schools so that they could more easily learn English and accept the values of the white culture.

2. Learning how to Learn: Developing the Cognitive Skills Related to Literacy

The learning how to learn orientation is based on models of cognitive processing which in turn are extrapolated from brain research (Bransford, J. D., Brown, A. L., & Cocking, R. R., 1999; Cromley, J., 2000; Hartman, H.J., 2001). This approach tends to stress process over content, strategies over skills, and understanding over memorization. The approach is linked to a constructivist perspective which holds that there are no “objective” interpretations of texts; instead all meaning is constructed by a reader who interprets what is read, bringing to bear perceptions, experiences, and prior knowledge. This interpretation is also influenced by the social contexts in which literacy occurs (Hudelson, 1994; Jonassen, 2000; Taylor, 1999).

The cognitive approach to learning, although widely discussed in the literature (Kucer, 2001; Rumelhart, 1994; Smith, 1994a), is not often encountered in the practice of

immigrant education, at least not on the adult level. Both national studies that I have been involved with (Wrigley & Guth, 1992; Condelli & Wrigley, 2003) found almost a total absence of approaches that stress strategies for meta-cognition, or for developing language awareness as a way to understand how English works or how literacy is used to convey meaning. The reason for this absence lie probably less in a rejection of the model by teachers and programs, and more in the fact that strategy-based learning, apparent in methods such as *inquiry grammar* (trying to discover grammar rules rather than merely memorizing them) or *comparative analysis* (discussing how one's native language differs from the language to be learned) is generally not part of the staff development that English as a Second Language (ESL) instructors and family literacy teachers receive.

Learning how to learn has its detractors as well. Critics see the cognitive models as merely acknowledging issues related to social context but generally avoiding the realities in which literacy occurs. They see supporters of the model as choosing to focus on the individual's interaction with print, in the process failing to recognize that requirements for English literacy are often used to limit access for language minorities. From this perspective, though the model may be appropriate for young children who are learning to read, it is too limiting for adults trying to cope with literacy in an often unjust world.

3. Basic Skills: A Common Educational Core Experience

The basic skills orientation has its roots in academic rationalism (Hirst & Peters, 1974) and reflects the notions of a core curriculum designed to provide for all students a common set of educational experiences, including the development of basic literacy skills, an acquisition of standard English, and an understanding of key concepts associated with various fields, such as American culture and history. In terms of literacy, that might mean a great deal of emphasis on the acquisition of decoding skills along with practice in proper pronunciation of the sounds. In terms of English language, the focus is likely to be on standard grammar.

Advocates of this perspective emphasize that the country can only survive if newcomers are taught the values that Americans share. They maintain that failing to teach proper skills and accepted standards means cheating students and limiting their opportunities (see also Delpit, 1995). They also point to the need of newcomers to

develop the skills needed to pass the GED or TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) so they can succeed in college credit programs. Proponents also point out that unless language minority parents learn to speak standard English or write without major errors in grammar and spelling, they will not be able to help their children with homework.

In the field of family literacy, the basic skills approach manifests itself most commonly in programs that stress a grammar-based approach to English or prepare parents for the GED (in English or in Spanish). But as the emphasis on decoding continues in the reading field, more and more ESL literacy programs are adopting a basic skills model to teaching initial literacy.

Critics of this approach are many. Linguists and literacy educators stress that language and literacy are developmental processes and that making errors is a necessary part of the process (Lightbown, P., & Spada, N., 1993; Kucer, S. B., 2001). They hold that learning a language and learning to read requires hypothesis testing and a process of trial and error as learners try to discover how language works (Brown, D. 1994; Ellis, R., 2002). Opponents also point out that a “just do it” approach to literacy fails to teach students that meaning making and comprehension are cognitive processes that rely on active involvement with ideas and texts. They further maintain that when the social aspects of learning are ignored, adult students are robbed of the opportunity to engage in inquiry and collaboration (Auerbach, E. R., 1989; Lambert, L., & Walker, D., 1995). As a result, they may actually be ill-prepared to take on the challenges of the world beyond the classroom where language and literacy are not neatly laid out, but appear in tasks that tend to be rather fuzzy and ill defined.

4. Celebrating Our Differences: Personal and Cultural Relevance

The personal relevance orientation emphasizes the primacy of personal experience and sees language and literacy as means to express feelings and thoughts. Grounded in the humanism of Carl Rogers (1969) and Abraham Maslow (1954), this philosophy supports the educational development of the individual and the psychological freedom that results from experiencing a personally relevant curriculum within a non-coercive environment. Proponents of the approach maintain that adults are able to assess their own learning needs and goals and, if given the right tools, are capable of evaluating

what works for them and assess their own progress. Self-actualization of the individual is one of the major goals.

In family literacy programs, this orientation manifests itself in students' being invited to write personal accounts and short autobiographies, work as a group to create language experience stories, or engage in collaborative projects that place their experience within a cultural framework. In some of the programs that support personal relevance, learners' lives become the entire curriculum (Weinstein, 1999). An emphasis on personal and cultural relevance also supports learner projects, particularly those that focus on common cultural experiences and self-directed learning. Quite a few family literacy programs in the field are taking on this approach (Wrigley, 1998).

In the research we have conducted with ESL literacy programs, we found the personal and cultural relevance orientation to be quite common. The *language experience approach*, " where students work as a group to write about a common experience, is perhaps the most popular method for connecting oral language and print for both children and parents. And the creation of stories, poems and pictures that depict culture are an integral part of most family literacy programs.

Critics of this orientation highlight a number of shortcomings. They point out that personal relevance might be a good starting point for literacy development but it may not be sufficient to prepare students for the expectations of higher education or the workplace (Delpit, L., 1995). They also hold that focusing primarily on students' experiences fails to stretch students in new directions and keeps them from taking on more challenging reading tasks (Adams, M. J., 1990). These critics also claim that a focus on the kind of multiculturalism that celebrates differences and invites us, as Rodney King did, "to all get along," fails to take on hard issues like racism or other social inequities that are part of immigrant life. In terms of assessment, most funding sources find it suspect if learner progress is largely self-defined. They point to the need to capture progress in language and literacy in more objective forms, such as those mandated by Even Start and the National Reporting System. (For a further discussion of this dilemma, see Wrigley, 1998)

5. Making a Difference: The Social Change Orientation

Issues of power lie at the heart of the social change orientation that looks toward social reconstruction and liberation movements. Some theorists see schools not just as

learning sites but as cultural and political sites as well (Apple, 1993; Aronowitz, S. & Giroux, H.A., 1993). They, along with others, see the educational system as places where certain forms of literacy are legitimated while others are devalued. Proponents stress that, although literacy can be used as a tool for empowerment, being literate in itself does not confer power and control. From this perspective, limited literacy and education are the result of inequitable social conditions. If literacy is to make a difference in the lives of immigrant families, then individual literacy development must be linked to community change and social action. In ESL literacy programs, this orientation finds its strongest implementation in program designs that follow a model laid out by the Brazilian Paulo Freire who linked literacy teaching with community issues and explained that “reading the word is reading the world.” (Freire, P & Macedo, D., 1987)

The social change perspective has given rise to participatory ESL literacy programs that are Freirean inspired. These programs use issues in learners’ lives for both exploration of social realities and development of literacy. Many of these programs focus on helping parents understand how the school system works. They try to *unpack* school expectations while exploring strategies for advocacy and change. In some cases, programs take on community issues such as a lack of safe places for children to play, or they may question the policies that place bilingual children at disproportionate numbers in special education classes.

Truly participatory programs with a strong emphasis on social justice and community action are rare, however, particularly in family literacy programs where parents speak different languages and still struggle with English. In our work, we found very few programs that were committed to participatory practices, not just to learner-centered teaching with a socio-cultural emphasis. The participatory programs we did find were run by community-based organizations where students and teachers shared a common language so that discussions of hot issues and community concerns were possible (see also Auerbach, 1996, 2002; Rivera, 1999).

The social change orientation has been criticized on various grounds: political, educational and practical. On the political side, opponents maintain that the role of immigrant education should be integration into society and acceptance of a common set of values and beliefs. Some fear that a focus on societal problems may result in

alienation, pessimism, and cynicism and may lead immigrants to feel their powerlessness even more acutely without being able to do something about them. From an educational perspective, participatory teaching is sometimes seen as an abdication of the teachers' responsibility to teach the skills that students want to acquire (English and literacy) and that politics should remain outside of the classroom door. In this view, any time taken up with discussion of social ills and politics detract from the study of basic skills.

Even those who are sympathetic to participatory approach sometimes raise concerns on practical grounds. They emphasize that most ESL teachers are not from the community of the learners and know very little about the specific problems that students face. They may know even less about the systems that students will need to navigate to get issues resolved such as fighting an eviction notice; responding to a summons because of a shooting in the neighborhood; or dealing with the stress of being without "papers." Some critics maintain that because teachers have little experience with community development, they sometimes provide wrong information and may end up trivializing important issues.

Toward a Synthesis

As seen above, the literature makes clear distinctions between the various orientations and ideologies. Program practice, however, often looks quite different. The educational experience that children and parents receive in family literacy programs tends to depend much more on the preference of a particular teacher or the materials available than on the philosophy the program has chosen.

In the final analysis, programs and teachers often end up mixing and matching approaches as teachers come and go and funding mandates shift with the wind. In our work, when we ask teachers what their philosophies are, "eclectic" is by far the most common answer. Eclecticism, however, may not be the best choice, if the goal is to build a quality program. Although exposure to a variety of approaches might serve students well at times, trying to be all things to all people can result in a smorgasbord of literacy activities that are overwhelming to the teacher, confusing to students, and in the end less effective than a more focused approach.

There are great benefits that come from choosing, if not a single philosophy, at least complementary approaches that adhere to the principles of adventurous teaching and

engaged learning. The result can be an educational orientation that is flexible enough to encompass teacher preferences and student goals.

The following section on promising practices offers more practical examples of programs doing literacy work with language minority adults in a family literacy context.

Part II: Promising Practices

Language minority families are far from a homogeneous group. They differ in their languages and cultural backgrounds, their purposes for participating in programs, and in the goals they have set for themselves and for their families. Programs differ as well, in philosophy and focus, and in their commitment to providing the best possible program for all parents. How then do different kinds of literacy programs respond to the needs and goals of parents who speak a language other than English? How do they connect literacy to the daily lives of learners and classrooms to the community? Some of these practices are discussed below, organized by the educational orientations discussed in Part I. Several of the examples I highlight below come from Project IDEA, a state-wide staff development project in Texas that I was involved with for six years; others are examples from site visits for two national studies on adult ESL Literacy, one in the early 1990s and another from 1998-2003. Examples from Chicago and Socorro, Texas come from our research and technical assistance work with local projects in these areas.

Fitting In

The goal of many immigrant families is to find a place for themselves in U.S. society, a place where they can feel safe and comfortable, where they can raise their children to be happy and productive adults, a place where they might fit. For many, fitting in requires the essential skills necessary to find and keep a job that pays a living wage. Increasingly, ESL literacy programs are offering opportunities for parents to develop work-related communication and literacy skills, along with other employability skills, such as finding a job that matches their preferences, identifying work in the hidden job market and negotiating interviews. The more successful of these programs actively involve parents in discussing workplace issues, brainstorming ideas, and solving problems that might occur around issues related to child care, transportation, and conflicting demands of work and family.

In one project in Texas, parents decided to create videos that illustrated interactions in a job interview, focusing both on what to do and what not to do. As one can imagine, the negative examples were both funnier and more effective than the serious presentations. In one program, the women had gone all out to drive home the point of

“how to make sure you don’t get a job” in their video: they were dressed in high heels and black stockings and wore low-cut dresses. The job applicant chewed gum, slouched back in her chair and took out a mirror to fix her lipstick, while the interviewer was talking on the phone. She responded to statements about her job responsibilities with “whatever” and asked how long she had to work before she could take her first vacation. The women in the program spent a great deal of time identifying what counts in a job interview and then presenting the opposite, internalizing important issues in the process. Those who watched benefited as well, as they discussed which questions to ask and how to present themselves in a professional manner. As one student told me: “We learned what ‘wear your best clothes to the interview’ means, Sunday-going-to-church clothes, not Saturday night party clothes. By taking a serious situation and making it ridiculous, the women both presented the important issues and received credit for doing creative work. In the process, these women not only developed their language and literacy skills, but also acquired some of the essential skills associated with success in life and at work, such as working with a team to create a product within a deadline.

Here is a second example related to fitting in: As part of project IDEA, a group of students in Cleburne, Texas, created a bilingual phrase book to help other students just beginning to learn English. As part of their project, they brainstormed situations where English was needed and then generated English words, phrases and sentences that would be useful in these environments. Situational contexts included the post office, the store and the beauty parlor where knowing phrases such as “I think you overcharged me” or “I would like my hair layered with highlights” might come in handy. Along with the phrases and their Spanish translations, the students included a pronunciation guide. They also made sure the format would easily fit into a bag or pocket, calling the final product: “Pocket English.”

Learning How to Learn

Learning how to learn, marshalling cognitive and meta-cognitive abilities is a challenge for anyone taking on unfamiliar learning tasks. How difficult it must be for adults who went to school for only a few years and have little experience organizing learning materials or making meaning of texts that are unfamiliar. Many parents are aware that for themselves and for their children, how much English they learn and how

well they learn is closely tied to both educational progress and economic success, and that learning to read with understanding is an essential component of that process. A number of family literacy programs involve immigrant parents in the reading and writing process, modeling strategies for meaning-making and for discussing books with their children. Two projects I'm familiar with, each with a different group, were particularly successful in involving parents in writing books for their children.

In Long Beach, California, a group of Khmer (Cambodian) speaking parents wanted their children to see and read books that reflected their culture. Although the local community center had copies of traditional folk tales written in Khmer and in English, the children were much more drawn to the books they saw their peers read, where the illustrations were modern and the stories often funny. The moms decided to write a book of their own for the children, adapting one of the kids favorites and giving it a Cambodian twist. The book they selected was a favorite of the first graders, Judith Viorst's "Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible Day," the story of a little boy for whom everything goes wrong all day and who then, to top it all off, has to eat spinach for dinner. In the Khmer version, the young child faces similar misadventures, but the illustrations show a Cambodian home and the food he hates is a traditional Cambodian dish. Not surprisingly, the book project was a solid success. The children took it to school, the teacher read it to the whole class, and the Cambodian kids excitedly reported that their American friends were very impressed and kept asking, "Your Mom wrote a book just for you?"

In creating these stories, the mothers had used the writing process, a model designed to create cognitive engagement and build meta-cognitive awareness in new writers. As the women thought about their audience, struggled with the language they wanted to use, and wrote and rewrote various sections, they used many of the strategies that are integral to learning how to write. In the end, they spent much more time engaged with language and literacy than they would have in a program with a more conventional literacy component.

An Even Start family literacy class in San Antonio went through a similar process. The women in the program decided to create books and then read these books together with their children as part of a celebration of family literacy. They very much

wanted to demonstrate the reading strategies that they had learned as part of the program, strategies such as stopping at the end of a page, asking children to predict what might come next, inviting them to talk about the pictures they see, and encouraging them to connect their own experiences with what was happening in the story.

A Word of Caution

These projects were successful in large part because the parents involved were excited about books and had sufficient English proficiency to tackle writing a story. There is a need for a bit of caution, however. For parents new to English and new to literacy, the admonishing to “read to your children” may not be useful and may even be counterproductive. Both children and parents tend to feel uncomfortable when the parent still struggles to read, and stories of children correcting their parents’ English are not uncommon. It is easy to see how this practice undermines the authority of the parent, causing both confusion and frustration. Furthermore, children learn a great deal from talking about stories they hear and about their own experiences in similar situations. If parents are encouraged to talk about books with children in English, and their English is not yet strong, the conversation is likely to be shallow, focusing on surface facts, rather than on deeper understanding. Though some parents enjoy reading books to children in the home language, others may lack the literacy skills in the native language to do so comfortably. Some parents may not see reading books together as a very important part of their parenting repertoire, preferring other activities instead. In working with parents, we need to remember that there are many ways for parents to support the education of their children.

Basic Skills: Word Power

Learning to speak English well is the primary goal of most immigrant parents who participate in family literacy programs. Many of these parents come to learning with very traditional notions of what it means to “do school.” They may enjoy carrying out projects and writing stories, but they also want to develop their English skills from the bottom up: getting rid of accents that interfere with communication, understanding how English works (grammar and structure), and learning scores of new words.

These adult learners know that an ever increasing vocabulary will allow them to get ideas across even with limited control over the language and help them pick up basic

information from newspaper headlines, from notices the schools send home, and in conversations. Helping these adults increase their English vocabulary may be one of the best ways of responding to their needs for basic skills instruction while fostering language and literacy development. The following strategies, observed in classrooms with beginning ESL students, help serve that goal.

Personal Dictionaries

Personal dictionaries, a collection of words that students want to remember, are an effective way to help students focus on those words that have meaning for them, instead of trying to remember all the words that are introduced as part of a learning unit. As different words and phrases are introduced in conversations and in readings, students select those they want to remember and build their own dictionaries, using personal address books or putting the letters of the alphabet on top of the pages of a note book. I've seen teachers print up pages for students to fill in and keep in a three ring binder, although pages created this way are not as portable as smaller books that allow students to study their words on the bus or as they wait in line during errands. In some family literacy programs, parents show their children how to create these dictionaries for themselves, encouraging them to add pictures and drawings for key concepts they need in school.

What's Your Favorite?

Asking students to focus their learning on a few favorite words they want to remember and teach to others helps students who are new to English take charge of their own learning. As part of vocabulary study, each student identifies a word to focus on. The vocabulary item may be a word that strikes them as unusual (*butterfly*), or one that gives them trouble (*catastrophe*) or it may be a word that represents a familiar feeling, such as *homesickness*. At set times during the week, selected students present their special word to the class, using a large poster board, overhead projectors, or a computer screen. In teaching their "vocabs" to the class, they highlight meaning, pronunciation, and use while other students repeat the word and take notes. Beginning students in particular can benefit from this activity because it offers them a measure of control while gently pushing them into new directions, such as having to present information in front of a group. I once watched a class in Chicago where the students worked in factories around

town. One worker taught his favorite word, explaining both the meaning and modeling pronunciation and word stress. Everyone had great fun saying the word and remembering it. The word was “re-im-burse-ment.”

You Can Take it With You

A teacher I know at Portland Community College devised a clever way to help her low literate students remember basic information that schools, clinics, and social service agencies kept asking for. She helped her students create index cards with their address, phone, and social security number on them, hole-punched the cards, and showed her students how to put them on key rings. Students were thrilled to have a handy reminder of data that they could not always remember and kept adding important information on the cards.

Remembering in a Flash

Flashcards have long been the mainstay of language teaching. Students write words that they want or need to know on one side of the card and write a sentence with a blank space where the new word might fit on the backside. Students can look at the word and generate the sentence on the back, which helps them to understand the environment in which a word is used. They can then start with the sentence that contains the blank and try to think of the word that might fit, helping them to remember key vocabulary. Alternative ways include putting the translation on back of the card or putting a picture or drawing on the back, helping visual learners to make associations between pictures and print. Flashcards lend themselves easily for use in family literacy programs because the method works well for all language learners, whether they are children or adults. We’ve used this approach with elderly immigrants in Chicago who kept complaining that they were “too old to remember anything.” To show solidarity with her students, the teacher wrote words she wanted to remember in Serbo-Croatian and encouraged the students to test her on her knowledge of their language. Intrigued by this method, some of the grandparents have created flashcards to teach their grandchildren some key Bosnian words, such as *bombon* (candy).

Social and Cultural Relevance

The social and cultural relevance orientation to literacy is perhaps the most popular approach found in programs that serve language minority families. Activities

within that orientation range anywhere from setting up a multi-cultural pot luck dinner so that students from different countries can get to know each other to discussions of differences and commonalities across cultures, societies and political systems.

Artifacts and Cultural Memories

Several of the teachers in Socorro, all part of the “El Civics On the Border” project, have asked students to bring in an item that reminds them of home and discuss what it means to them. Several students brought in bibles that had been in their family for several generations while others displayed items that their mothers and grandmothers had used (a hand made shawl, a tortilla press, and a large *mocajete* (a lava basalt mortar for grinding corn or spices). As a follow-on project, the women decided to teach students elsewhere how to make home made tortillas from scratch creating an illustrated guide in the process. They used the techniques used in creating story boards that had been introduced as part of the civics curriculum and then developed a sequence of pictures and texts, using photographs taken with digital cameras to illustrate the process.

I first saw the artifact activity demonstrated in the El Barrio Popular Education Program where the teacher had brought in an instrument, a food item, and a religious icon, and asked students to talk and write about three questions: “What is it?” “What do you know about it?” and “What do you want your children to remember?” By starting with physical items that have meaning in students’ lives, teachers are able to highlight cultural traditions and connect the generations in ways that are much more immediate than written texts alone.

Women’s Stories

Many of the successful family literacy programs exist in areas where parents speak the same language and are grounded in the community where they live. Examples include the Hmong families in Fresno, California; Vietnamese in Arlington, Virginia; or Latinos in El Paso. Because students and teachers can use the native language to explain, clarify, and discuss, possibilities for rich literacy work exist. These possibilities are more difficult to realize where students don’t share a common language and have to struggle with English to get a point across.

Although more difficult initially, it is possible to share stories and forge ties across cultures in classes where multiple language groups come together. A project that

has been highly successful in that respect is the Refugee Women's Alliance (ReWa) in Seattle, which developed an ESL curriculum called "Family Talk Time." When I visited the program, the women who participated came from countries as diverse as the Ukraine, Laos, and Eretria. All were new to English and several were learning to write for the first time. As the theme for the month, the teacher had chosen "key events in our lives." She asked the students to share with each other what happened in their country when a baby was born, when a couple is married, or when a family member gets too old to take care of herself. The women struggled to explain and to understand while translators went from table to table to help clarify. Talk was slow but the women were highly engaged and fascinated by the events described. Each person used several means to tell the story – drawing pictures, sharing photographs, or writing down key words they wanted translated so they could communicate what they wanted to say. This lesson worked because the women were genuinely interested in what others had to say, which is often not the case when parents see literacy activities merely as "language practice."

Visual Information

Using pictures, photographs and video is one of the most successful ways of introducing English and literacy to parents whose English skills still need a great deal of development. The Coalition for the Limited English Speaking Elderly in Chicago (one of our demonstration projects) is using visual information as the core piece for the curriculum that is used with elderly immigrants and refugees from Bosnia, China, Assyria, Korea, India, and Vietnam. Funded by the U.S. Department of Education, the State of Illinois, and by the Retirement Foundation (which pays for field trips), they purchased overhead projectors, digital cameras, and a video camera for use by teachers. Pictures (still and moving) serve to introduce ideas, to show people and places, and to document students' experiences as they go on field trips to farms and supermarkets and to various ethnic neighborhoods. We asked the participants to tell us a little bit about their lives and explain how and why they came to the United States and captured their stories on video. These videos were then shown in the classrooms where other ethnic group studied and became a basis for conversation and further stories as each group contributed thoughts and feelings about themselves. Because decreasing social isolation and building a positive sense of personal identity are goals of the project, the program organizes visits

among the different language groups several times a year. Pictures and letters are exchanged after each visit between the immigrants who come from different countries and live in linguistically isolated neighborhoods. They serve as reminders that they are acknowledged and appreciated and provide opportunities for authentic communication with other newcomers.

An intergenerational component of the project involves U.S.-born students from a local high school who wanted to know more about immigrants and wanted to contribute to the community. The young students watched the video called “Immigrant Elderly Tell their Stories”, in which elder refugees talk about their lives before and after coming to the United States. The fact that several of these individuals had come from Baghdad made the stories all the more poignant. Through hearing real people talk about the trauma of war, the sorrow of being uprooted, and the difficulties of adjusting to a new country, they gained a much better sense of the lives and backgrounds of groups they knew little about. As part of service learning, these students participated in a Valentine’s Day party the project had organized and got to know the older people personally whom they had watched on video.

Family Projects


Designing cookbooks, family albums, and memory books has long been the hallmark of family literacy programs. Several projects stand out in my mind: A group of learners along the Texas-Mexico border created a “family quilt” using icons similar to “family crests” to communicate the values that they hold dear. One family had chosen a house to illustrate their dream that kept them working; another quilted a big “smiley face” on a square to illustrate to themselves and others that, although they were poor and struggling, they lived together in one place and had each other (in this areas, many of the families are split across the border). The quilt was given a place of honor on a wall in the children’s school.

An Ideal Neighborhood

For many of the poorer families, the dream of a house plays a big role. One parent/child group in the Even Start program in Socorro, Texas, used construction paper and a lot of imagination to create their dream houses and write a few sentences about them. Out of each window, a picture of the family peers out. One EL Civics class took

the project one step further. Students used the construction project to create an ideal community that included churches, clinics, schools, recreation centers, and parks, the latter two missing in their real neighborhoods.

My Wonderful Home



My home is made of love, tears, and sacrifice. That is why we love it and take care of it.

Each corner has something special. For example, the flower pot means happiness. My happiness is there because my husband and children are there.

Martina Vazquez

In other places students have participated in culture fairs, exhibiting food, wooden toys, or books of songs and stories that they remember from back home. There are also programs where women have spent a great deal of time making Christmas cards and decorating them with beads and glitter so that they could be shared with others. In some places, families have taken their cards to children's hospitals or nursing homes. In several communities, parents and children visited a local fire station, bringing along cookies and cakes to express their appreciation to the fire fighters in memory of September 11th. Parents and children still talk about their surprise at seeing that one of the *fireman* " was indeed a *firewoman* prompting discussions about gender and jobs.

Limitations of Cultural Celebrations

As popular as cultural projects are in family literacy programs, they do have their detractors. Some parents absolutely detest working with scissors, paper and glue. I remember one Chinese parent begging the teacher, "please don't make me do glitter," wondering perhaps how cutting and pasting with her children would help them get into UC Berkeley or Harvard. There are many parents, particularly those who have strong

literacy skills in the native language, who prefer more academic topics such as learning more about the geography, history, and government of the United States so they can increase their knowledge and answer questions their children might have and help them with their school work.

Participatory Education

As mentioned in Part I, taking on issues of power and social justice is often difficult in family literacy programs where objectives tend to be pre-defined, tests are standardized, and opportunities to challenge the system are limited by the bureaucratic structures in which the program operates. In fact, in all my years in education I have only seen one program where the women participants effectively ran the program and served on the board of directors. They made decisions about who should be hired as teachers and selected the courses that should be offered.

The community-based program, El Barrio Popular Education Program in East Harlem, New York City, served women from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. The women had set full bilingualism as one of the goals of the program, and it offered Spanish classes from beginning to advanced (from Spanish literacy to the Spanish GED) as well as classes in English as a Second Language. As part of the program, the women also ran a food co-op, including a catering business, staged benefits (a fashion show), and created a *foto-novela* about sexual harassment. Art work became an important part of the curriculum as well. The art the women produced was later exhibited in the Museum for Modern Art in New York City. The program thrived under the guidance of a director who had experience in popular education and was talented at raising funds. As a result, the program became an example where students and staff “walked the talk” of participatory education (see also Rivera, K. M., 1999).

In some cases, aspects of participatory education evolve when an issue arises that students feel strongly about and opportunities for political participation present themselves. One such case involved a legislative proposal to allow all immigrants to obtain drivers’ licenses regardless of status. As discussions about legislative changes got underway, students in Sacramento met with lawmakers to discuss what a change in the law meant for them in a state where it is very difficult to get to work or to a hospital unless one drives a car. Other issues of local concern that students in different

communities have taken on include trash that is strewn all over the neighborhood, raw sewage that is dumped in a ditch close to a residential neighborhood, and the lack of job training opportunities for parents who speak little English.

In other instances, a program might integrate aspects of empowerment education into their curriculum. The Even Start Family Literacy and Adult ESL Program in Socorro, Texas, is a case in point. The program, which has a three-year grant from the Texas Educational Agency, is integrating English Language and Civics into their existing program through a model that combines project-based learning with engaged learning through technology. Starting with a focus on projects with a cultural and historical relevance, students visited local painters and muralists, interviewed bakers who had been serving the local community for over fifty years, and created an inquiry project that documented the history of the 400 year old missions that are still in use in the area. To document visits and present the findings of these projects, students created videos, brochures, and PowerPoint presentations, later showcasing their work at a city-wide conference for teachers in El Paso and a school-wide exhibit for other parents in the community.

In 2003, students took on social, economic, and political issues as well: They listened to a Woody Guthrie song about a group of Mexican farmworkers who, about to be sent back to Mexico, died in a plane crash in Los Gatos, New Mexico. The song, called “Deportees,” provided opportunities to discuss the nature of work in Mexico and the United States and learn more about the farm labor movements through Web searches on the Bracero program, Cesar Chavez, and the farm labor movements in the American South. The war with Iraq offered opportunities to look at the U.N. Declaration on Human Rights and discuss the role that individuals throughout history had played in peace and war. After reading a series of quotes by individuals who were active in working for peace and justice, students selected a quote and a person to research further, using print encyclopedias as well as the Internet. They then commented on the thoughts expressed by figures as distinct as Emilio Zapata (“It is better to die on your feet than live on your knees.”), Martin Luther King (“We should never forget that everything Adolf Hitler did in Germany was legal and everything the Hungarian Freedom fighters did was illegal”) and Ghandi (“Be the change you want to see in the world.”). Linking history, current

events, and personal insights allowed the students to form a broader perspective of world events while inviting them to grapple with the larger issues of peace and war, including those issues related to personal ethics and social morality.

What About the Men

Although the vast majority of parents in family literacy programs are women, men do participate. Teachers often struggle with finding topics and activities that engage the men and help them acquire the skills they want to learn. Inviting just the men to come together and discuss what interests them might help identify different types of subjects to include in the literacy curriculum. Here is an example: In an ESL literacy program in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, run by AmeriCorps volunteers, the men suggested that “motor-cycles” would make a good theme for discussion and inquiry. In their world (all were young unmarried Latinos in blue collar jobs), much of the social talk revolved around comparisons of the relative merits of a Harley versus a BMW or comments regarding the new Yamaha that was on display at a local dealer. The young men, up from small villages in Mazatlan, very much wanted to be part of these discussions. They were eager to learn the language associated with “guy stuff” - - machines, motors, tools and gear.

Some teachers respond to these requests to include a broader set of topics in family literacy by asking students (men and women) to bring in their favorite tools and demonstrate to the children how it is used. Some bring catalogues from Sears and other stores to the class and invite the group to create plans for a home repair business that they might run. As students create plans for their businesses, they also select tools and other materials to buy, comparing prices and creating budgets as they go.

Making sure we connect with the boys as well as with the girls in family literacy programs also deserves consideration. One teacher in El Paso, working in a middle class neighborhood where parents often did professional work, wanted to make sure that all of the kids could see the strengths that their parents have and feel proud of them. She personally invited parents to visit her 3rd grade class to demonstrate a skill that they had. The star turned out to be Mr. Acosta, a recent immigrant from Mexico, who showed the kids how he changed the oil on his ‘89 Chevy truck. In the children’s eyes, parents who

spend their days doing paperwork or using computers clearly could not compete with the talents of this dad. His son walked tall that day.

Conclusion

As programs hear more and more about the benefits of direct instruction and explicit teaching of reading, it might appear that the practices discussed above, although successful in the field, are not supported by research. This is not so. The latest national study on *What Works for Adult ESL Literacy Learners* (Condelli, L.&Wrigley, 2003.) strongly supports the kind of rich teaching that links classrooms to communities (while also stressing the need to also spend time on language and literacy practice.) In the end, we must acknowledge that adult immigrants bring a wealth of knowledge and experience to the learning process and that, in trying to negotiate life in the United States, they need much more than simply learning to read and write. Being aware of both the opportunities and challenges that language minority families face should make the task of selecting approaches and teaching practices much easier.

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