

Teaching Adult Learners of ESL

During the past two centuries, increasing numbers of adults around the world have studied English as a Second Language (ESL). Some have needed to learn English because their countries required it for government service; others wanted to enroll in an institution of higher learning where instruction was offered in English. Historically, Adventist colleges and universities in English-speaking countries have faced the same challenges as secular institutions, especially in enrolling non-native English speakers: (1) setting proficiency requirements and (2) offering courses to improve their language skills. Today, most American Adventist colleges and several of the church's international schools have ESL instruction for individuals needing to improve their proficiency for academic purposes.

Why Adults Want to Learn English

Many adults have a strong academic motivation for learning ESL, but there are other reasons as well. Many adults have an instrumental motivation (i.e., to use English as a means toward a goal). As a *lingua franca* of the world, English is required for many professions and jobs. For example, all commercial airline pilots and ground controllers must communicate in English. (Yes, even if they both speak the same native language, they are required to use English!) The global economy depends on communication in English. International professional, scholarly, and diplomatic conferences/meetings are usually con-

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ducted in English. Our own international General Conference meetings are conducted in English, although translations are available through headsets. Finally, the publications distributed by these groups are usually in English.

However, adults also have integrative motivational reasons (i.e., to become part of a group) for wanting or needing to learn English. Take an immigrant family wishing to integrate into American life; they'll need to learn English. Or, as happens at some schools like Newbold College and Saleve Adventist University, a dating couple speak different native languages, in which case they may need to use English to communicate. To continue their relationship, both need to improve their English skills. Sometimes, an inter-

national student dates and eventually marries a monolingual English speaker.

The level of proficiency adults need to achieve will depend on their reasons for acquiring English skills. Do they desire survival English—the ability to do basic things like shopping for food and clothes, answering the phone, talking to a doctor, etc.? Do they want to go into a profession, such as medicine, journalism, or teaching? Or do they want only to be able to read a foreign language? The answers to these questions should inform what kind of ESL classes they take as well as how long it is likely to take for them to achieve their goals.

Descriptors of the Adult Learner: Some Positive, Others Inhibitive

It is important for ESL teachers to recognize the similari-

BY STELLA RAMIREZ GREIG AND JEANETTE WRIGHT BRYSON

ties and differences between the processes adults and young children go through in learning ESL. On their way to becoming English speakers, both groups go through inter-language stages.¹ Some of these stages are influenced by their native lan-

so concerned with protecting their language egos. The danger for this kind of learner is fossilization³ (reaching a particular level of proficiency and getting stuck there). Usually, fossilization occurs when learners no longer feel the necessity to improve proficiency. They feel they can accomplish what they wish at their current skill level, and feel little pressure to improve. Anyone with immigrant friends from a non-English-speaking country probably knows several whose English has fossilized. Teachers and friends need to motivate such individuals to keep studying, especially if the learner's career goals or other language-dependent aspirations have not been met.

Another important difference between child and adult learners is the amount of time they have to commit to learning a second language. Just as when acquiring their first language, children learning a second language have several years to devote to the task. Adults, on the other hand, feel they need to proceed quickly, especially if they have instrumental motivation: They want to get into a college program, apply for a particular job, or get certified in an English-speaking country to practice their profession. They often feel they don't have the money or the time to spend studying English. Teachers of adult ESL students need to be aware of these and other adult concerns and attempt to alleviate them.

Methodology

Language is dynamic, so learning a second language involves interaction between learners and teachers. Parker Palmer's advice, "Teach the person, not the subject,"⁴ is relevant to language teachers when choosing an approach, method, or technique. Based on the assumption that teachers teach individuals, not groups of people, selecting a method or a set of procedures to facilitate the learning of a second language requires that the



Korean ESL teachers enrolled in an Andrews University extension program at Samyook Seventh-day Adventist Language Institute in Seoul, Korea, work in small groups to create lesson plans.

guage, others by the learning process. However, many of the differences are based on the students' relative ages. Children have an advantage in acquiring native-like English pronunciation. In general, the later one begins acquiring a second language (especially after the onset of puberty), the harder it is to sound like a native speaker. On the other hand, adults are able to think more abstractly, and thus can discuss and understand the structural differences between their L1 (native language) and L2 (the language being studied), which a young child cannot.

In acquiring a second language, certain adult characteristics can inhibit progress. One of these is anxiety, which is connected to self-image and language ego.² *Language ego* refers to the view we have of ourselves (part of our self-image) based on our fluency and expertise with language, usually in connection with our native tongue. As adults begin to learn a new language, they are often under stress, which causes anxiety. Some anxiety is healthy and facilitates learning. Too much anxiety, however, inhibits progress. Some adults worry that they sound too child-like in their language production. They get frustrated when they can't think of a word or its pronunciation, or a sentence structure; and they feel foolish. This is damaging to their language ego and self-image.

As a result, some adults may drop the ESL class or seek out a tutor instead. They believe they must speak or write "correctly." While accuracy is a laudable goal, it slows the learning and production progress. Some adults are hesitant to speak for fear of making a mistake. Other adult learners have an outgoing personality and focus more on communication than on form. These latter learners are risk-takers and are not



Graduate students at the Samyook Language Institute teach about syntax by combining sentence parts.

teacher know the language being taught and the context in which it is used, as well as that he or she become acquainted with individual students and the background and culture of their language.

The goals of the adult second language learner should influence the teacher's choice of method(s), particularly with English for professionals, and English for specific purposes (ESP), where language and cultural immersion are designed for the specific occupations, business, ministry/church leadership, and for people working in hospitals, hotels, restaurants, shops, etc.

In her book on methodology, Dianne Larsen-Freeman stresses the importance of instructors choosing to teach in ways that lead to learning. She counsels that "teaching is more than following a recipe."⁵ In other words, teachers need to be deliberate about the methods they use, consciously taking into account the reasons for their choices and adapting them as necessary. They need to become familiar with the various approaches and models currently in vogue, as well as identifying techniques, devices, actions, and activities that work for both the teacher and the learner.

There was a time when "being educated" meant learning Latin and being able to translate the written language. The goal of learning a second/foreign language was not for oral communication but rather to understand written language. The teaching approach for this goal used to be referred to as the Classical Method and more recently, the *Grammar-Translation Method*. Grammar rules are taught deductively, with examples—moving from general to specific. The main activity involves translating well-known passages.

The shift away from analytical grammar translation (where teaching is in the first language and little attention is given to content or pronunciation), to a more interactive approach led to the introduction of the *Direct Method*. In this method, language is taught in the target language, and learners are not allowed to use their first language. Grammar is taught inductively—specific observation to general—with examples that help learners understand the rules. The Direct Method is also grammar-based, and correct pronunciation is stressed. Preferably, students are immersed in the language and learn to listen and imitate it. A question-and-answer format works well for lessons in this method.

The *Audio-Lingual Method (ALM)* developed from the Direct Method with its emphasis on pronunciation, but ALM drills were built on the theories of the 1940s and 1950s. At that time, principles from

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behavioral psychology (Skinner) were being introduced into the teaching and learning practices of language teachers. This approach is still popular today.

In this method, lessons begin with a dialogue; memorization is important, grammar structure is taught inductively, pronunciation and vocabulary are important. The goal of lesson activities is to form new linguistic habits through repetition and substitution drills. Everyday language use is stressed. Alphabet games, storytelling, and imitation form a base for activities. One concern regarding this method is the lack of creative language use.

Each of the methods mentioned thus far places the teacher



Korean ESL teachers at the Samyook Language Institute practice their skills.



Left to right, front row: Program instructors Chonglim Yoon, Diane Staples, Stella Greig, and Jeanette Bryson with a group of Korean ESL teachers (back rows) who were studying at the Samyook Language Institute.

in the role of director of the learning process and the learner in the role of follower or imitator. Within the discipline, practitioners began to react against teacher-centered methods, and by the 1990s, teaching began to be more student-centered. Rubin and Thompson, in the book *How to Be a More Successful Language Learner*, suggest that it is best for the learner to take charge, participating to discover what works best for him or her.⁶ The learner thus discovers or creates rather than merely memorizes or repeats. The use of manipulatives—sound-color charts, stars, cars, and rods—and problem-solving approaches

form the basis for activities. Simulations such as *BafaBafa*⁷ are excellent techniques to use with adults. In their own way, each of the following methods is student-centered.

The *Silent Way* is regarded as one of the first methods to develop from the view that students should rely on one another and themselves rather than on the teacher. In this method, it is the teacher who is mostly silent, while the students do most of the talking. Having some knowledge of the learners' first language is helpful for the teacher using this method, since it allows him or her to plan situations that allow the learner to

Productive Language Activities Outside the Classroom

In their desire to save tuition money and speed up the learning process, ESL students often ask, What can I do outside of class to help improve my English? Here are several things teachers can suggest that really work:

1. *Read the Bible in the language you are trying to learn.* Choose a version such as the Revised Standard (RSV), New King James (NKJV), or a paraphrase. English professor Frank Knittel once told a group of Master's students the story of his phenomenal acquisition of Gothic—an extinct Germanic language—when he was a doctoral student. It was a small class, but Frank was the only one who really “got it.” Pausing, he smiled and said, “Of course, [given] the fact that the only extant manuscripts in Gothic are parts of the Gospels, all I needed to do was discover which story of or by Jesus the text was about, and I could translate it quite handily.” When I [Greig] took German in college, I sometimes read the Sabbath school lesson using my German Bible. Knowing something about the text message helps to underpin one's study efforts.

2. *Expand into other English reading.* Read articles or books on subjects you're knowledgeable about or are interested in—e.g., airplanes, biology, literary works, etc.

3. *Make friends with an English-speaking person, especially one who doesn't know your native language.* Find someone who can spend an hour or two with you several times a week, just talking about common interests. Perhaps you can be walking (or other exercise) partners. When I [Greig] was directing the Andrews University English Language Institute, one year the staff and I noticed that two of our Arabic speakers had made phenomenal progress in their English proficiency in just one quarter of study. When conducting our new-quarter interviews, I casually asked whether they had been having help outside of class with their English. “Oh, yes,” they replied. “We both have English-speaking girlfriends.” I laughingly said to the college dean, “Perhaps we should require that all ESL students have a monolingual English-speaking boyfriend or girlfriend!”

4. *Watch TV programs in English.* If you live outside an English-speaking country, listen to English-language radio programs, such as the BBC. From newscasts to family sitcoms, television and radio offer a useful variety of dialects and levels

of formality/informality. You can hear models of English for informative, social, and relational purposes.

5. *Listen to English songs.* For some learners, music is helpful in learning (musical intelligence). In addition, repetition plays an important role in songs, whether religious or secular, so this makes it easy to learn them.

6. *Work on intonation.* Intonation refers to the up-and-down pitch of the voice as it produces an utterance/sentence. Aside from teaching the intonation differences between questions and statements, teachers rarely deal with this topic in the ESL classroom. Yet it is very important for intelligibility. Some English-only speakers cannot understand other dialects or certain varieties of spoken English because the intonation or rhythm of that dialect is too different from their own. If second-language learners speak the new language using the intonation of their first language, native English speakers may have difficulty understanding them, not because they are mispronouncing the individual words, but because the rhythm and flow of the sentences are so different. Listen to a



native English speaker using your native language [say, Italian] and notice the intonation pattern. The person may be speaking Italian words, but probably will be using English intonation. The Pickering article, listed in the “References & Suggested Reading” section at the end of this article, shows how mimicking an English speaker using your native language can help you acquire English intonation. Second-language learners often ignore working on intonation, yet it is the one aspect of production that most affects intelligibility.

7. *In oral production, both the pronunciation of individual words (perhaps putting the stress on the wrong syllable) and the intonation contour of utterances may produce accented speech.* For an adult learner, the goal of native-like speech is difficult to achieve. A more realistic goal is to speak so that one can be understood; in other words, so what one says is intelligible to the native English listener. If you speak English like a native, your native English hearer will expect you to have all the socio-cultural knowledge, as well as the linguistic knowledge of a native speaker. However, if you speak English intelligibly but with an accent, this signals to the hearer, “English is not my native language; if I say something foolish or offensive, please understand.”

build upon existing knowledge. The underlying principle of the theory is that learners can discover and use a language, sometimes with manipulatives or copies of the material to be learned, but without repetitive drilling.

The focus on the learner brought about a more in-depth search for non-defensive learning. *Community language learning* and the need to create a learning environment where adults who fear that learning a second language will be nearly impossible, can develop confidence in their ability to learn have generated a discussion about the ways

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that adults acquire a new language. Even the terms *Suggestopedia* and *Desuggestopedia* imply that psychological barriers to learning can be overcome. Teachers take deliberate steps to create a calming atmosphere for the learners. The use of fine arts (music, drama, etc.) is encouraged. The idea that learning a second language is an “adventure” is changing the approaches. Trust and respect are thought to break through the language ego. Singing songs, playing instruments, and even the use of puppets (fantasy is thought to reduce barriers to learning) are incorporated into the lessons. Communicative learning activities include role playing and interpreting picture strip stories.

For beginning levels of language learning, *Total Physical Response* (TPR) has been successful in assisting adult learners. It simulates a more natural approach based on Krashen’s theory of pre-production, early production, and extended production.⁸ Activities involve following directions without translation, and the use of pictures, realia, and classroom objects. Proponents of TPR believe that a kinetic, physically active response experience lacking the pressure of producing oral language is the best way to begin the language learning process.

Cooperative Learning Techniques are very successful in creating an atmosphere where information is shared between and among learners rather than collaboration, where the learner works only with the experts [teachers]. Richard-Amato⁹ quotes Kagan in separating the cooperative learning types: (1) peer tutoring, (2) jigsaw, (3) projects, (4) individualized, (5) interaction. Education buzz words such as *pair-share*, *four-square*, *jigsaw*, and *carousel*, *metaphor*, *analogy*, *paradox*, *inquiry*, and *concept attainment* become a part of the vocabulary of the language teacher using this approach.¹⁰

Each method is being used somewhere in the world. As the identification of various intelligences is acknowledged and the understanding of emotional intelligence is clarified, the approaches to the above methods have been modified. Larsen-Freeman stresses that activities should fit the learning style needs of the learners, including their intelligences. The following list attempts to correlate activities with the multiple intelligences.¹¹

1. Logical/Mathematical—puzzles and games; logical, sequential presentations, classifications and categorizations.
2. Visual/Spatial—charts and grids, videos, drawing.
3. Body/Kinesthetic—hands-on activities, field trips, pantomime.
4. Musical/Rhythmic—singing, playing music, jazz chants.



Thirty-two 2007 recipients of the TESL Certificate celebrate their accomplishments with administrators and instructors at the Samyook Language Institute (front row).



Andrews University ESL students enjoy their introduction to Michigan’s winter.

5. Interpersonal—pair-work, project work, group problem-solving.

6. Intrapersonal—self-evaluation, journal keeping, options for homework.

7. Verbal/Linguistic—note-taking, storytelling, debates.

Finally, careful thought must be given to the method(s), approach(es), and technique(s) used, whether the teacher is a behaviorist, who believes the learner's mind is just waiting to be taught; a cognitivist, who sees language as an innate skill the learner is born with and instruction needs only to present specific skills, or a constructionist, who views learning as interactive but believes in a biological timetable. Regardless of their philosophical orientation, language teachers need to "teach the person," and not just the system of arbitrary signals and combining rules used to communicate in a given language.

An effective way for ESL teachers to really understand how to "teach the person" is for them to take a course or two in a language they don't know. This will give them a better understanding of the challenges adults face learning English and help make them better and more empathetic teachers. In addition, by studying a second language, they will learn more about English; or rather, what they subconsciously know about English will be brought up to the conscious level. Even more important, they will become citizens of the world! ✍



Professor Diane Staples demonstrates English pronunciation at the Samyook Language Institute during the TESL Certificate program in the summer of 2007.

English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA) program is another educational option.

Other Suggested Reading

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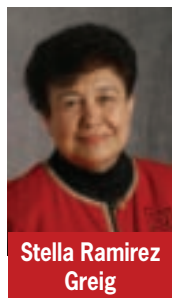
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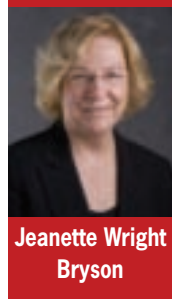
NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. See chapters 2, 8, and 9 in Susan Gass and Larry Selinker, *Second Language Acquisition: An Introductory Course* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001).
2. Douglas H. Brown, *Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy* (San Francisco, Calif.: Longman, 2001), pp. 69, 70.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 268ff.
4. Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach* (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 1998), p. 3.
5. Diane Larsen-Freeman, *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. x. This article's discussion of different methodologies relies on Brown, Larsen-Freeman, and Richard-Amato.
6. Joan Rubin and Irene Thompson, *How to Be a More Successful Language Learner* (Boston: Heinle and Heinle, 1994), p. 59.
7. *BaFa BaFa* is a simulation game that provides an interactive experience for learners. It is designed to teach cultural awareness and influence attitudes. Information is available at Simulation Training Systems.com.
8. See Stephen Krashen and Tracy Terrell, *The Natural Approach: Language Acquisition in the Classroom* (Hayward, Calif.: Alemany Press, 1983).
9. Patricia A. Richard-Amato, *Making It Happen: From Interactive to Participatory Language Teaching: Teaching and Practice* (White Plains, N.Y.: Longman, 2003), pp. 315ff.
10. Robyn M. Gillies, *Cooperative Learning: Integrating Theory and Practice* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2007); Spencer Kagan, *Cooperative Learning* (San Juan Capistrano, Calif.: Kagan, 1994).
11. Larsen-Freeman, *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching*, op cit., pp. 169, 170.



Stella Ramirez Greig

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Jeanette Wright Bryson

In addition to classes for students wanting to acquire or improve English proficiency, Andrews University offers a teaching minor in TESL, as well as an M.A. in TESL. Its graduates currently teach in the U.S. and overseas. In addition to those trained professionally, there are volunteer ESL teachers with varying levels of preparation. To help fill their needs, Andrews offers a four-week summer intensive called "The TESL Certificate Program," with 100-120 hours of instruction. This introductory overview of TESL

lays a basic foundation for the beginning ESL teacher. At the international level, Cambridge University's widely recognized Certificate of