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Developing Adult Immigrant English Language Learners' Career and Life Competence in an ESL Program

According to the American Immigration Council, there were 28.4 million immigrant workers in the United States in 2018, comprising 17 percent of the labor force. As a result, English as a second language (ESL) programs have been developed by educators and policy makers to help them acquire English language proficiency. Some immigrants, especially older immigrants, have a pressing need to improve their quality of life by improving on their competence. Unfortunately, their immediate learning needs were not taken into consideration in the ESL program where I, as an ESL instructor, was affiliated. This article describes how I implemented theories of adult education in an eight-week ESL class, which aimed to help older adult immigrants develop career and life competence by using authentic and adapted learning materials. This article provides reflections on my instruction and recommendations for future implementations.

Keywords: adult immigrants, ESL, career and life competence, authentic materials, adapted materials

Introduction and Literature Review

As of 2018, there were 28.4 million immigrant workers in the United States, totaling to 17 % of the labor force (American Immigration Council, 2020). Among these immigrants, most come from Mexico, making it the top country of origin of the total immigrant population. In regards of immigrants' English language proficiency, those from Mexico and Central America are reported as having the lowest rates of English proficiency—34% and 35%, respectively (Pew Research Center). Given that a lack of English proficiency can limit the opportunities or waste the talents that adult immigrants bring with them, it continues to be important to provide resources to help this population (Becker, 2011).

Most adult immigrants are goal-oriented learners who monitor the effectiveness of their learning and are more motivated when they realize that their learning is authentic and reflects their actual lives (Finn, 2011; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2017). Therefore, English as a second language (ESL) curricula could significantly impact their success of English language learning. However, their motivation for learning is very likely to decline if they have a difficult time finding success or if they find learning unimportant due to the lack of alignment between the ESL curricula and their learning needs (Finn, 2011; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2017).

Since adult immigrants have many characteristics (including their first language [L1] and second language [L2] literacy levels, study habits, and learning goals) that differentiate them from other groups of learners, it is crucial that teachers carefully consider their own unique learning environment, experiences, and the general relevance of provided instruction when designing appropriate adult learning programs. By doing so, we may better provide and maintain inviting, engaging, and personally rewarding experiences for students (Finn, 2011).

The term "andragogy" is usually associated with the instruction of adults; the underlying assumption behind this term is that adults and children learn differently. Knowles (1980) proposed six assumptions when teaching adults, which were cited by Merriam et al. (2007, p. 84):

1. As a person matures, their self-concept shifts from one that is dependent in nature to one that is more self-directing;
2. An adult accumulates a growing reservoir of experience, providing a rich resource for learning;
3. An adult's willingness to learn is closely related to the developmental tasks of his or her social role;
4. As people mature, a change in time perspective shifts from a future application of knowledge to an immediacy of application;
5. The most potent motivations are internal rather than external; and
6. Adults need to know why they need to learn something.

Although Knowles's (1980) assumptions are over 40 years old, they still influence the field of adult education today. Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (2017) acknowledged the insights that these concepts bring to the field of adult education. They viewed these assumptions stemming from the individualistic and pragmatic culture in the U.S. where learning is closely associated with real-life application so that students can transfer the knowledge, skills, and abilities that they learned from school to real-life settings. Because of the strong need that adult learners have to apply what they have learned outside of class, adult education is believed to enhance personal and professional competence.

This article will describe how I, as an ESL instructor, prepared my adult immigrant ESL learners for workplace and life readiness by incorporating both authentic materials and adapted materials in my curriculum. Before moving to the discussion of further details of my curriculum design, I offer a brief overview of authentic materials and adapted materials.

Authentic materials are defined as containing "real language, produced by a real speaker or writer for a real audience and designed to convey a real message of some sort" (Gilmore, 2007, p. 98). Vaičiūnienė and Užpalienė (2010) categorized authentic materials into three groups: daily objects (such as instructions, application forms, and emails); broadcast texts (such as newspapers, TV, and radio programs); and websites. They serve as a link between the formal environment of the ESL classroom and real life. They create an immersion environment and offer a realistic context for tasks that adult learners encounter in their daily lives.

However, scholars also caution that using authentic materials in class can be ineffective if materials are not carefully chosen, especially with beginning level learners (Torregrosa Benavent & Sánchez-Reyes Peñamaría, 2011). When the difficulty level of the reading texts falls beyond students' English language capabilities, students may feel overwhelmed by the number of new words and the level of syntactical complexity. One way to measure text readability to ensure that the texts can be understood

by learners is to use those widely used readability formulas such as the Flesch Reading Ease Score (Flesch, 1948) and the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level (Kincaid, Fishburne, Rogers, & Chissom, 1975). As a way to address these concerns, authentic materials are usually modified to match students' language proficiency level before being distributed to students. These materials are commonly referred to by Kincaid et al. as "adapted materials" (p. 3).

Despite the fact that the language in these adapted materials is unnatural to native speakers, the level of readability is within the students' capabilities and will be less likely to cause overload. Students tend to be more motivated by the content when it is within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), thus increasing their reading abilities. The next section of this article will illustrate how selected authentic and adapted materials were deliberately used in an ESL classroom to address adult immigrant ESL students' learning needs.

Classroom Context

The two-hour English Language Acquisition (ELA) course used in this study is routinely offered twice a week in an eight-week session at a community college in a Midwestern town in the U.S. The population of the town was 3,750 at the 2020 census, with Hispanics or Latinos comprising 55.7% of the entire population. Students were 10 middle-age adult Spanish-speaking immigrants who came from Mexico or South America. The students had limited educational backgrounds (holding elementary to high school degrees) and limited English language proficiency levels (ranging from beginning to intermediate). Many of them had arrived in the U.S. within the past few years and were holding entry-level positions at local companies.

Implementation

During the ELA class, students learned the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) through relatable topics to their lives and careers such as describing weather, paying utility bills, and preparing for job interviews. This ELA class belongs to the general ESL class, one of the four types of ESL classes that immigrants often enroll in (Wonacott, 2000). Other types of ESL classes include family literacy, workplace, and civics education. General ESL programs usually center instruction on a variety of meaningful real-life topics, such as housing, shopping, and recreation. Pre-employment instruction is sometimes provided in general ESL programs to teach students some important soft skills (meaning the skills that are natural and unique to each individual) such as time management and conversational ability and hard skills (meaning the skills that must be obtained through learning) such as using the computer and developing technological expertise. Family literacy programs aim to enhance the oral and literacy skills of immigrant parents so that they are able to support their children's literacy development. Workplace programs provide English language training such as on oral and written skills for a particular occupation to increase career readiness and competence. Finally, civics classes prepare students for the naturalization exam, encourage them to vote, and participate in civic events.

As mentioned earlier, general ESL programs usually focus instruction on different meaningful real-life topics, such as housing, shopping, and recreation, as well as provide pre-employment instruction on some important soft and hard skills. Despite the usefulness of what students learned in relation to their real lives and the target language that students could use to address real-life problems, I decided to implement an additional independent in-class reading session. I added this extra lesson throughout the

entire course to address a lack of in-depth coverage of real-life language use in the textbook, which I felt would enhance the students' real-life language competence.

This decision was based on the results of the needs analysis survey administered on the first day of the class. I administered this survey to get to know students' purpose and goals of learning English and what they hoped to obtain from the class. The results were not surprising given their current socioeconomic status; many of the participants expressed their desire to improve the quality of their life. Therefore, I decided to bring materials related to the workplace and life into the classroom, which was done to ensure that the immediate needs of adult immigrants learning English for workplace and civic development in order to improve living quality was not ignored.

Thus, in the last twenty to thirty minutes of each class over the entire semester, students read some materials on their own, followed by group or class discussion. An overview of the content for each session is listed in Table 1.

Table 1
Overview of Reading Sessions

Week	Class	Content
1	1	No reading and discussion done, completed the needs analysis survey
	2	Newspaper advertisements (such car sales, local events, etc.)
2	1	Newspaper advertisements (such car sales, local events, etc.)
	2	Simple English Wikipedia listing on apartment renting and house purchasing
3	1	Simple English Wikipedia listing on apartment renting and house purchasing
	2	Craigslist room advertisements (such as apartments needed/offered)
4	1	Movie theater websites (such as recent movie releases, ticket purchases, movie theatre information, etc.) (computer-accessed)
	2	Simple English Wikipedia listing on U.S. history
5	1	Simple English Wikipedia listing on U.S. history
	2	Occupational Outlook Handbook website (such as qualifications, outlook, wage, etc.) (computer-accessed)
6	1	Occupational Outlook Handbook website (such as qualifications, outlook, wage, etc.) (computer-accessed)
	2	Craigslist job advertisements (such as jobs needed/offered)
7	1	Craigslist job advertisements (such as jobs needed/offered)
	2	Sample resumes (such as educational backgrounds, work experience, skills and certificates, etc.)
8	1	Sample resumes (such as educational backgrounds, work experience, skills and certificates, etc.)
	2	No reading and discussion done, wrap-up

Participants were learning content related to real-life and workplace situations for several weeks of the semester, such as looking for housing, paying bills, searching for jobs, and having phone interviews. To prepare them for potential reading difficulty, I taught vocabulary words and some detailed information on these same topics in our regular class times before they read relevant information in this session. To maximize the learning outcomes, I matched the materials that students read in the last half hour of the

class with the content they learned (See Table 1). For example, in the first few units of the textbook, students were introduced to different community events and learned expressions of how to participate in those events. In a following unit, they learned how to search for housing and speak with a leasing agent. When searching for materials to read, I tried to find texts with the same themes in order to bring real-life reading materials to students to enhance their knowledge and language use in these areas. I turned to several search engines such as the Craigslist (https://www.craigslist.org) and the Occupational Outlook Handbook website (https://www.bls.gov/ooh/) to find authentic texts while ensuring their text readability based on my judgement of the text. Meanwhile, I also searched for texts from the Simple English Wikipedia (https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page) which adapts its language for English language learners for better comprehension.

The reading content for this session was comprised of two parts. The first half was selected to develop students' life competence and the second half was selected to develop students' workplace competence. Among the first part of the materials (as shown between week 1 and week 4 in Table 1), I also included several movie theatre websites as options for students to be familiar with. The reason for this was that there was a movie theatre near the community college which was one of the few places people went to for recreation in the small town. I hoped my students would have the ability to read movie theatre websites and make use of the community facility.

All of these reading materials that were selected to develop students' life and workplace competence were printed out for students, except the movie theatre websites and the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*. The former required students to read and search for information online, whereas the latter contained detailed information about hundreds of different careers in the U.S. As the students were employed and self-directive in terms of finding the career path that matched their interests, it was better for students to choose what they thought was relevant on the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* to suit their needs. Additionally, in consideration to text readability, I asked the beginners to read only the "quick facts" section under each vocation, which contained basic information about the job. Intermediate-level students read both "quick facts" and the detailed summaries.

After the independent reading session, students were asked to discuss what they had learned from the reading materials with peers who were at the same proficiency level. There was no formal requirement for the structure of the discussion session, but a few questions were provided to guide the discussion such as "Can you summarize the information/components in the materials? What did you learn from these materials? Are you able to select/identify useful information from these materials? Can you draft an advertisement/resume like the ones you just read?" Students were encouraged to share their opinions and questions about the reading texts with their peers.

During the group discussion session, I participated in different groups to hear students' thoughts and questions. If there was some time left after the group discussion, students were given an opportunity to draft a document by using the language and structure of the texts they just read. Additionally, I asked students to keep all the reading materials and their written products in a folder. By the time the eight-week session ended, each student had developed a portfolio containing the reading texts and their own writing samples.

Reflections

In this section, I reflect upon my instructional practice by discussing the challenges that I encountered and the achievements that I was able to make. I hope to provide readers with a further understanding about the entire preparation and implementation process.

Challenges

Many challenges occurred during the preparation and implementation stages. Below are some challenges, followed by detailed descriptions.

1. ***Finding authentic and adapted materials with appropriate language difficulty was very time-consuming.***

Because of the purpose of this add-on session which was aimed to develop students' life and workplace competence, I had to select materials that were as authentic as possible and at appropriate levels for students. Meanwhile, I tried to include a wide range of topics in order to stay aligned with the content they learned from the textbook and their real-life applications. Thus, I spent nearly two weeks searching for materials.

2. ***Students may struggle to read online material.***

I tried to manage the difficulty level of reading materials within students' competency levels by offering them printed copies. However, as I mentioned above, it was better for students to choose what they were curious about in the Occupational Outlook Handbook. Thus, it was a challenge to track students' reading process as they may read something on the website that was beyond their reading abilities, which may affect their reading comfort and confidence.

Accomplishments

Despite these challenges, I was very excited about the achievements that were possible because of this special learning session I added to each class. Below is a list of these accomplishments, followed by detailed descriptions.

1. ***Students were motivated to read through the use of authentic and adapted materials.***

I was very glad to see that students found useful information in the reading materials by observing them while reading and talking with them after reading. When information in the reading texts addressed students' needs, tastes, and interests, students were able to focus on the reading materials for longer periods of time and became more motivated to read as it encouraged them to integrate their own topic knowledge with that of the reading materials. For example, when reading the Craigslist room advertisements, some students were excited because they were able to understand and identify important information from the advertisements (one student said delightfully "Oh, I find it!" while trying to find the rent information). Some students also wrote an advertisement about their own room for rent and decided to publish it online. One student who was not quite motivated during the regular class sessions was very enthusiastic when reading U.S. history, because this was something she read when taking the citizenship exam. She had a lively discussion with her classmate during and after the reading session. Another student was very happy to find career information for her daughter when reading the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, because she said it was better to know the job qualifications at an early stage. The career information seemed to engage her as she was very concentrated while reading.

These acts were an application of Knowles's (1980) andragogical model, in the sense that adult learners need to know why they learn something and be able to apply their experience into learning. They also reflected Wlodkowski and Ginsberg's (2017) theories that relevant learning can trigger or foster a positive attitude and can also help learners develop a sense of accomplishment by learning something that they can apply to real-life situations. Because my students did not have too much experience with reading in both first language and English in the past, motivation plays a crucial role for them.

2. *Students had the opportunity to develop life and workplace competence.*

In the past, students only had the opportunity to be exposed to real-life and workplace content through the textbook. However, the content and language written in the textbook only provided a surface-level understanding to students, which created a gap between what students learned in class and what they would encounter in real life. This special learning session filled the gap by bridging the authentic or adapted texts that students would read or write outside of the class with the class content. Students were given individual reading time to become familiar with the texts, group discussion opportunities to exchange learning outcomes with peers, and possible writing sessions following each reading session to produce written samples that could benefit their lives or careers.

Recommendations for Teachers

Instructional Orientation

Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (2017) discussed theories and approaches to enhance adult motivation to learn. The fundamental nature of adult learners, indeed, are goal-oriented and participate in educational programs with the desire to advance economically. As such, when designing curricula, teachers should align their instructional aims and activities with their students' specific learning needs. Although ESL student background information can be obtained according to the student's specific educational program and area of residence, teachers should still collect additional primary data from their students by offering a needs analysis survey, communicating with colleagues, and observing student performance. Furthermore, despite the fact that textbooks are widely used in classroom settings because they cater to specific language needs, the content and language input therein is often limited. Incorporating richer and more authentic materials is thus crucial. It is essential that instructors know their students' learning needs and employ a variety of materials for better instructional outcomes.

Material Selection

When selecting reading materials for students, teachers often need to determine the text difficulty first. This can be decided by utilizing the Flesch Reading Ease Score or the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level, one of the most widely used measures to calculate text readability (Iwahori, 2008). For instance, the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level measures readability based on factors including the number of syllables in each word and the number of words in each sentence. While choosing materials for my students to read, I paid attention to the text difficulty level by examining the qualitative features of the language, such as the amount of unknown vocabulary per sentence and the length of each sentence. However, somehow, I forgot to use the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level or the Flesch Reading Ease Score to quantitatively measure the readability, which could have saved me a good amount of time. Therefore, I strongly recommend teachers to use one of the measures or other similar measurements to calculate text readability when preparing materials. Additionally, it helps teachers to differentiate materials when they are tasked with instructing students of diverse English language proficiency levels.

Assessment

Every curriculum should have an appropriate way to assess students' learning outcomes. The negative consequence of assessment is that it may ruin students' reading enjoyment. However, assessing students' learning outcomes is still necessary so that teachers can evaluate their pedagogical approach and students' performance. In reading class, for instance, assessment helps teachers evaluate the appropriateness of the assigned reading materials. Teachers can develop alternative authentic assessment tasks that are beneficial to students in order to minimize the negative impact of assessment. For example, teachers can ask students to develop their own portfolio which includes the materials they receive from the class, information they find useful outside of the class, and their own writing samples. Teachers can use the portfolio to record students' learning outcomes in addition to classroom observations and teacher-student conferences. In my case, I was able to know what content knowledge and language skills students had already acquired and identify what they still needed to learn by reading their own writing samples. In the long run, the portfolio will also better prepare students for diverse career opportunities.

Conclusion

In this article, I talked about how I implemented an add-on session to develop students' life and workplace competence, the challenges and accomplishments I had, and recommendations for fellow teachers. As Finn (2011) stated, adult learners have unique needs and motivations for learning. When developing programs and curricula for adult learners, educators should keep in mind that the learners they serve have specific and immediate learning needs, and that the instructional activities and settings should be constructed accordingly. The andragogical assumptions that Knowles (1980) proposed provide a guideline for instructors that should be thoughtfully applied to adult education regardless of students' English language proficiency. I hope the article will offer teachers an in-depth understanding of how to develop curriculum for adult immigrant ESL students and offer specific ways of how to connect classroom learning with their real-life applications, to help them accomplish their learning goals.

Author

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