

## Meeting the Language Needs of Today's Adult English Language Learner: Issue Brief



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## Introduction: The Case for Increased Rigor in Adult English Language Instruction

Careers and educational opportunities in the United States today require an understanding of more complex language, higher reading levels, stronger communication skills, and more critical thinking skills than ever before. For example, employees are expected to solve problems, understand and produce complex written communications, and apply concepts to new contexts (Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006; Trilling & Fabel, 2009). At work, adults may need to read charts, forms,

and work instructions, which all require the use of different reading strategies (Parrish & Johnson, 2010). In order to succeed in any postsecondary setting or work-related training, adult English language learners (ELLs) need to read and comprehend complex nonfiction texts and write reports or research papers.

These increased language demands can be particularly challenging for adult ELLs, many of whom may have low literacy levels, limited formal schooling, and limited English language skills. In fact, according to the National Commission on Adult

### Issue Brief

A project of American Institutes for Research


#### Acknowledgements:

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*Graphic Design:* Corey Grant, Center for Social Innovation



Literacy (2008), it has been estimated that, of the nearly 2 million immigrants entering the United States every year, close to half have limited access to citizenship, jobs and job training, or other postsecondary education because of these limited skills. Furthermore, many adult English language acquisition or ELA programs (known typically as English as a Second Language or ESL programs)<sup>1</sup> have traditionally focused largely on life skills such as banking, shopping, or enrolling a child in school. Although programs designed to help ELLs transition to college and careers are not new to the field (Mathews-Aydinli, 2006), those programs have typically targeted learners who are already at an intermediate to advanced level of English proficiency. Rigorous instruction in academic and career readiness skills can start from the very beginning levels of adult English language instruction.

Increased rigor in ELA programs is not necessary only for work or school readiness; it is also needed for performing everyday literacy tasks. For example, adult ELLs need to read mail selectively, listen and take notes if they receive important phone messages, or assist their children with homework. They may want to attend neighborhood meetings or interact with teachers at school conferences, which may require using higher order listening and communication skills in English. They need to make decisions about services in their communities, such as health care, which will require print and digital literacy as well as critical thinking skills. This issue brief is a part of the LINCS ESL Pro suite of resources on Meeting the Language Needs of Today's Adult English Language Learner. The purpose of this Issue Brief is to provide an overview of the need for increased rigor in *all* English language acquisition programs, whether in a literacy level class for newcomers or a contextualized career pathways program. It is intended to provide a broad background for additional in-depth resources for teachers and administrators. Although this Issue Brief provides links to resources that help illustrate rigorous instruction practices, it is not intended to be a comprehensive instructional overview. There are two related resources that provide comprehensive, targeted information available from the [ESL Pro landing page](#) of the LINCS Resource Collection on Adult ELLs:

- *Meeting the Language Needs of Today's Adult English Language Learner: Professional Development Module*. This online, self-access module on meeting the language needs of adult ELLs in today's world provides in-depth information for teachers as well as administrators.
- *Meeting the Language Needs of Today's Adult English Language Learner: Companion Learning Resource*. This resource, written specifically for teachers, provides a practical, comprehensive instructional resource on increasing the rigor of instruction for adult ELLs.

## Context: A Changing Landscape in Adult English Language Instruction

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA, 2013–2014) emphasizes the need to prepare all adults, including English language learners, for employment in high-demand industries and occupations that lead to economic self-sufficiency. There is a direct correlation between educational attainment and the well-being of adult immigrants and refugees and their families. In 2011, those without a high school diploma were nearly twice as likely to be unemployed compared to those with at least some college (Foster, Strawn, & Duke-Benfield, 2011). In 2014, earnings for those with some postsecondary education were over 50% higher than for those without a high school diploma (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). According to analyses of data for immigrants in the United States from the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), a low skill level in the areas of literacy, numeracy, and digital technologies is correlated with low-skilled jobs. Furthermore, immigrants with low skills in these areas are far less likely to access training programs (Batalova & Fix, 2015). These data speak to the power of education and the dire need to provide instruction that helps adult ELLs achieve their educational, professional, and personal goals.

Another factor contributing to the urgent need for more rigorous instruction in adult English language programs is the introduction of the College and Career Readiness (CCR) standards in adult education. These standards are meant for *all* students. The introduction of CCR standards has prompted some key instructional advances for preparing learners for the demands of postsecondary training and work, and these advances can inform English language planning and instruction.

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<sup>1</sup> The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act uses the term *English Language Acquisition* (ELA) to describe English language instruction for non-native English speakers rather than the traditional ESL or ESOL terminology.

These advances are: (1) giving learners practice with complex texts and the academic language in those texts; (2) reading, writing, listening, and speaking grounded in evidence from a text; and (3) building learner content knowledge through the use of content-rich, nonfiction texts (Pimentel, 2013). These advances can pose particular challenges when working with adult ELLs. For example, texts found in U.S. school and work contexts may assume prior content knowledge (e.g., the Civil War, a prominent U.S. historical figure) that is unfamiliar to adult ELLs. Adult ELLs may come from educational systems that advocate a didactic, teacher-centered approach to schooling, where testing on factual information is emphasized. Some ELLs may not have formal classroom experiences that required them to analyze text, infer meaning, or look for evidence to support a claim.

Gaps exist between what is traditionally taught in adult ELA classes and the actual language demands of work, further education, and training. In a study of the alignment between practices in adult education and community college, Johnson and Parrish (2010) surveyed 45 instructors in Minnesota from each setting and found that adult English language instructors tend to focus on narrative texts on personal topics (holidays, family, etc.). They also tend to provide limited practice with synthesizing information from multiple sources, minimal instruction in digital literacy, and limited focus on listening and note taking—all of which were deemed very to extremely important to the community college faculty surveyed in their study (also see *Integrating Digital Literacy Into English Language Instruction: Issue Brief*, available from the [ESL Pro landing page](#) of the LINCS Resource Collection). Life skills curricula that focus on the language needed for common, everyday situations, such as shopping or going to the doctor, are important for newcomers, but they may not adequately address these more complex language and critical thinking skills. It can take ELLs, especially those with limited formal education, many years to acquire such skills (Collier, 1989; Cummins, 2000). Therefore, we need to imbed these higher order, more complex academic and career-readiness skills early and often at all levels of adult ELA instruction.

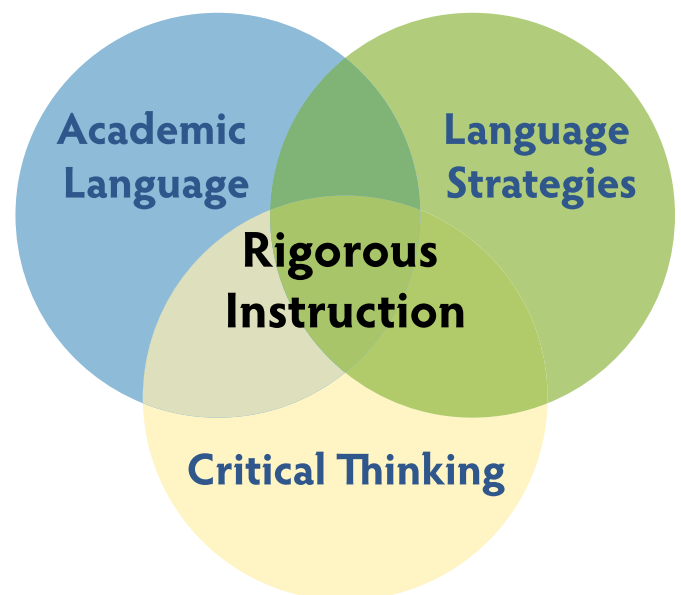
## Key Considerations: Making Instruction Rigorous Right from the Start

### The Language Needed for Success in Today's World

This section outlines the key areas that need to be included in adult ELA programs to promote success for adult ELLs in today's world: academic language, listening and reading strategies, and critical thinking.

**Academic language and access to opportunities.** Academic language contains complex features of English required for the completion of higher education, access to meaningful employment, and the opportunity for professional advancement and rewards (Scarcella, 2003). Zwiers (2014) defines academic language as "... the set of words, grammar, and discourse strategies used to describe complex ideas, higher-order thinking processes, and abstract concepts" (p. 22). In the realm of K–12 education, command of academic language allows young ELLs to access and develop content knowledge along with their mainstream peers in K–12 schools. In the case of adults, it is language that can be used in more complex interactions in work, community, and school contexts (e.g., the actual phrases used for building on another's ideas in a discussion, such as *Another thing to consider is...*). (For practical suggestions on teaching academic language to adult ELLs, see also Unit 2 of *Meeting the Language Needs of Today's Adult English Language Learner: Professional Development Module*, available from the [ESL Pro landing page](#) of the LINCS Resource Collection.)

**Language strategies for accessing complex written and oral texts.** Adult ELLs need proficiency in document and informational literacy, and they need to be able to read a variety of text types, media, and formats, such as charts, graphs,



or web pages (Parrish & Johnson, 2010; Wrigley, 2007). Skilled readers use a variety of strategies to access these complex written texts. Some are bottom-up strategies, such as decoding words, and many are top-down strategies, such as drawing on expectations and making assumptions, using visual cues to aid comprehension, and drawing on prior knowledge (Burt, Peyton, & Van Duzer, 2005). When following complex instructions at work or listening to lectures, skilled listeners listen selectively for particular words or phrases, monitor their comprehension, and determine what listening strategies are best suited for a particular situation (Graham, Santos, & Vanderplank, 2008). ELLs need explicit practice with these reading and listening strategies to develop more automatic use of them at work, school, and in their communities. The following table presents a number of language strategies for accessing complex oral and written texts; these strategies need to be developed at all levels of instruction. (For practical suggestions on teaching reading and listening strategies to adult ELLs, see also Unit 3 of *Meeting the Language Needs of Today's Adult English Language Learner: Professional Development Module*, available from the [ESL Pro landing page](#) of the LINCS Resource Collection.)

## Strategies for Accessing Complex Oral and Written Texts

| Strategy                                      | Description   |
|---|---|
| Drawing on prior knowledge                    | Make use of background knowledge to understand new information.   |
| Drawing on expectations and assumptions       | Draw on previous experience with similar texts.   |
| Using context clues                           | Look at pictures, titles, subheadings, and captions in a reading; take note of facial expressions, body language, or other visual supports while listening.                             |
| Drawing inferences                            | Interpret and make inferences; make logical connections between ideas.  |
| Summarizing and synthesizing information      | Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas; draw on information from multiple sources, oral and written. |
| Analyzing relationships between sets of ideas | Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of written or oral language.  |

**The role of critical thinking in today's world.** Expectations for critical thinking in educational and work contexts in the United States can differ greatly from what adult ELLs may be accustomed to from their own cultural experiences (Lun, Fischer, & Ward, 2010). Refugees may be in the United States because of the threat of speaking up or challenging authority in their home country. Prior formal school experiences may have rewarded regurgitation of facts and thwarted attempts to challenge assumptions or "experts" in a particular field of study. However, adult ELLs employ critical thinking skills in their daily lives. Adult ELLs need to engage in classroom tasks that promote critical thinking in school and work settings, such as recognizing and solving problems, analyzing relationships between ideas, evaluating evidence, or applying ideas to a new situation.

Two related considerations are the link between text complexity and critical thinking, and the development of language needed to express critical thinking in both speaking and writing. Adult ELLs need to learn the English phrases used to support ideas (*An illustration of this could be...; In the text it said that...*), or challenge others' opinions (*Another way to look at this could be...*) (Zwiers & Crawford, 2011). Building these critical thinking skills as well as the language needed to engage in critical conversations gives adult ELLs tools for higher levels of independent decision making and analysis for success in today's world. (See Beaumont [2010] for a systematic approach for practicing critical thinking skills using *The House on Mango Street*; see Hughes [2014] for practical suggestions on scaffolding instruction in critical thinking skills.)



## What Does Rigorous Instruction Look Like?

**Systematic integration of academic language, language skills, and critical thinking.** At all levels of English language instruction, adult English language educators can enhance the rigor of instruction thoughtfully and systematically through the content chosen, skills practiced, and choice of questions asked in class.

**Authentic materials and complex, nonfiction texts.** Many adult ELA curricula focus on topics that could be considered quite basic, such as places in the community, life experiences, foods and healthy eating, holidays, or school. Within any curriculum, instructors can enhance these topics with content that mirrors what students may encounter in academic settings or at work. Rather than learning about holidays, adult ELLs may be more engaged by learning about differences in deep cultural values and beliefs. Students can explore the connections between cultural beliefs and workplace expectations and practices ([View a listening lesson](#)<sup>2</sup> that uses short videotaped interviews on cultural expectations and practices). When learning about transportation, have students explore the benefits of public transportation to the community rather than learning only how to read a bus schedule. Teachers can also enhance an existing curriculum with readings or materials on environmental issues, current events, causes of common diseases, mental health issues, cultural norms, values and beliefs, or comparisons of educational systems and practices ([View a reading lesson](#)<sup>3</sup> using a text on personality and birth-order theory).

**Evidence-based instructional strategies.** Adult ELA instruction should focus on content, language skills, and strategies that are representative of work and further training and also help ELLs develop listening and reading comprehension skills along with note taking, data analysis, and critical thinking skills. Ewert (2014) suggests that tasks that promote content learning need to integrate the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing; include collaboration among participants; and promote thinking on multiple levels—all of which can be achieved through the following practices:

- Use *graphic organizers* as while-reading or while-listening tasks along with informational texts. Have students fill in a grid with information as they listen or read to practice information transfer and graphic literacy. (Indeed, in one study [Jiang & Grabe, 2007], students using graphic organizers as while-reading tasks outperformed those students who were asked comprehension questions on the same readings.) Choose a graphic organizer that represents the text genre (a linear string for a chronological text, a flow chart for a text describing a process, or a grid for a text that describes categorization). Parrish and Johnson (2010) provide [sample lessons](#) that illustrate the benefits of using graphic organizers while listening or reading.

Systematic integration of academic language, language skills, and critical thinking

Authentic materials and complex, nonfiction texts

Evidence-based instructional strategies

2 The video titled “Developing Listening Skills with High-intermediate Learners” may be accessed from the New American Horizons Foundation Web site: <http://www.newamericanhorizons.org/training-videos> or directly from <http://bcove.me/5p6grdyb>.

3 The video titled “Developing Reading Skills for Intermediate/Advanced Learners” may be accessed from the New American Horizons Foundation Web site: <http://www.newamericanhorizons.org/training-videos> or directly from <http://bcove.me/5p6grdyb>.



- *Use jigsaw reading and listening with informational texts.* Jigsaw reading or listening consists of assigning different texts, or parts of texts, to different students so that they can become experts for their sections, which they then present to their colleagues in class. This approach adds practice in communication strategies (seeking clarification), selective listening or reading strategies, and critical thinking (analyzing and synthesizing information). (View a [jigsaw reading lesson](#)<sup>4</sup> and a [jigsaw listening lesson](#)<sup>5</sup> to see how the approach promotes these skills).
- *Use project-based learning.* Project-based learning consists of learners working collaboratively in teams to develop a product, such as a booklet on community health resources. It is an excellent way to make use of real-world data and authentic texts. While students focus on real-world issues or concerns, they use language in a variety of ways “to collaborate on a plan, negotiate tasks, contribute ideas and constructive criticism, assess progress, and achieve consensus on various issues that are important to the learners’ lives” (Finn Miller, 2010, p.4).
- *Teach the language of critical thinking.* Zwiers (2011, 2014) provides [resources and activities](#) for developing academic language and the language of critical thinking. Teachers can provide sentence and paragraph frames to build learner confidence in engaging in critical conversations. Learners should engage in activities that require elaboration, synthesis of ideas, or support of an argument. (For practical suggestions on integrating practice with critical thinking skills, see Unit 4 of *Meeting the Language Needs of Today’s Adult English Language Learner: Professional Development Module*, available from the [ESL Pro landing page](#) of the LINCS Resource Collection. )
- *Focus on evidence in a text.* Adult ELLs need to be able to use evidence to support their position when discussing a problem with a boss at work, during work or community meetings, or during class discussions. Students need to gather evidence from what they

have listened to or read when completing academic writing tasks. Further, it is important that they learn that “evidence” does not refer to their personal opinion on the subject. Instruction in this area marks a shift from language practice focused on particular language functions (greetings, making complaints) or competencies (opening a bank account). Classes should be supplemented with practice in finding evidence to support claims to better prepare adult ELLs for the demands of speaking and writing tasks required in postsecondary and work contexts. This can be done in any type of curriculum.

- *Ask the right questions.* Asking the right questions can lead adult ELLs to deeper thinking and analysis, as well as to a better understanding of how to find evidence in a text. In a reading or listening lesson, effective questions help students collect the evidence they need to support their claims and make conclusions about what they are listening to or reading. Teachers should construct questions that depend on information that can be found in the text (*What tells you Ivan was disappointed in his son?* versus *Tell us a time you were disappointed in your son.*). To promote critical thinking in any lesson, avoid display questions with only one right answer. Ask *How do you know...*, *What tells you...* *Why...* These questions allow ELLs to demonstrate their understanding, rather than simply supply a one-word answer that can be found in a dialogue or text. Asking such questions can promote the higher order thinking skills of analysis and interpretation as opposed to simple recall and reporting.


## Considerations for Administrators

There are clear connections between rigorous instruction and heightened expectations in the Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages Standards for ESL/EFL Teachers of Adults (TESOL, 2008). These standards make specific reference to promoting problem-solving and critical thinking skills, learning that requires collaboration, and instruction that prepares learners for real-world tasks. Program administrators can do a number of things to support efforts to heighten expectations of teachers and increase the rigor of instruction in ELA programs.

When observing teachers, program supervisors can tie teacher observation and supervision to increasingly rigorous instruction. Observation rubrics can include categories on how well a teacher promotes critical thinking in lessons and

4 The video titled “Developing Reading Skills for Intermediate/Advanced Learners” may be accessed from the New American Horizons Foundation Web site: <http://www.newamericanhorizons.org/training-videos> or directly from <http://bcove.me/5p6grdyb>.

5 The video titled “Developing Listening Skills with High-intermediate Learners” may be accessed from the New American Horizons Foundation Web site: <http://www.newamericanhorizons.org/training-videos> or directly from <http://bcove.me/5p6grdyb>.



the extent to which the teacher uses authentic materials and real-world data in lessons. Program administrators should provide time and professional development (PD) for teachers to understand language demands, and then respond accordingly in their curricula/instruction. Administrators should also provide time for teachers to work across different standards and resources to see how and where practice with academic language, language strategies, and critical thinking can be embedded.

Programs can make use of existing models and frameworks for ideas and guidance for increasing the rigor of instruction. Minnesota's Academic, Career, and Employability Skills (ACES) project (Adult Basic Education Teaching and Learning Advancement System, 2013) has developed the [Transitions Integration Framework \(TIF\)](#) for adult education. Although intended for all adult education, a number of the TIF categories correspond directly to the three core areas outlined in this brief: *academic language and skills, learning strategies, and critical thinking*. The [Employability Skills Framework](#) can also guide development of more rigorous, work-focused instruction (Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education, 2014).

## Conclusion

ELA programs that embed systematic practice with academic language, learning strategies, and critical thinking at all levels of instruction are positioned to serve the increasingly complex language needs faced by today's adult ELLs. The instructional suggestions outlined in this brief represent several ways to increase the rigor of instruction and include: making use of rich, nonfiction content; creating tasks and asking questions that promote critical thinking; and promoting practice with listening and reading strategies that allow ELLs to access complex texts. This move to increased rigor does not mean a complete overhaul of ELA programming. Rather, it represents a shift in our thinking about what constitutes the essential skills and language that can be included in any English language program.

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## Recommended Websites

Academic Language Development Network (<http://aldnetwork.org>) provides resources and ideas for teaching academic language to ELLs.

Academic Language and Literacy (<http://www.jeffzwiers.org>) is a site for helping educators accelerate ELLs' development of academic language, literacy, and content understandings in all classrooms. There are tools and tasks appropriate for adult ELA classrooms.

New American Horizons Foundation (<http://www.newamericanhorizons.org>) aims to enhance the development of teachers through a series of training videos, *Teaching ESL to Adults: Classroom Approaches in Action*. Videos in the series demonstrate the application of many of the strategies highlighted in this brief.

The Critical Thinking Community (<http://www.criticalthinking.org>) helps educators to develop an understanding of what critical thinking entails at all levels of education.

Understanding Language: Language, Literacy, and Learning in the Content Areas (<http://ell.stanford.edu>) from Stanford University provides resources, including articles, sample units, online modules, and more to support the education of ELLs in the content areas. While targeted at K–12 educators, many of the resources can help advance the rigor of instruction for adult ELLs as well.