

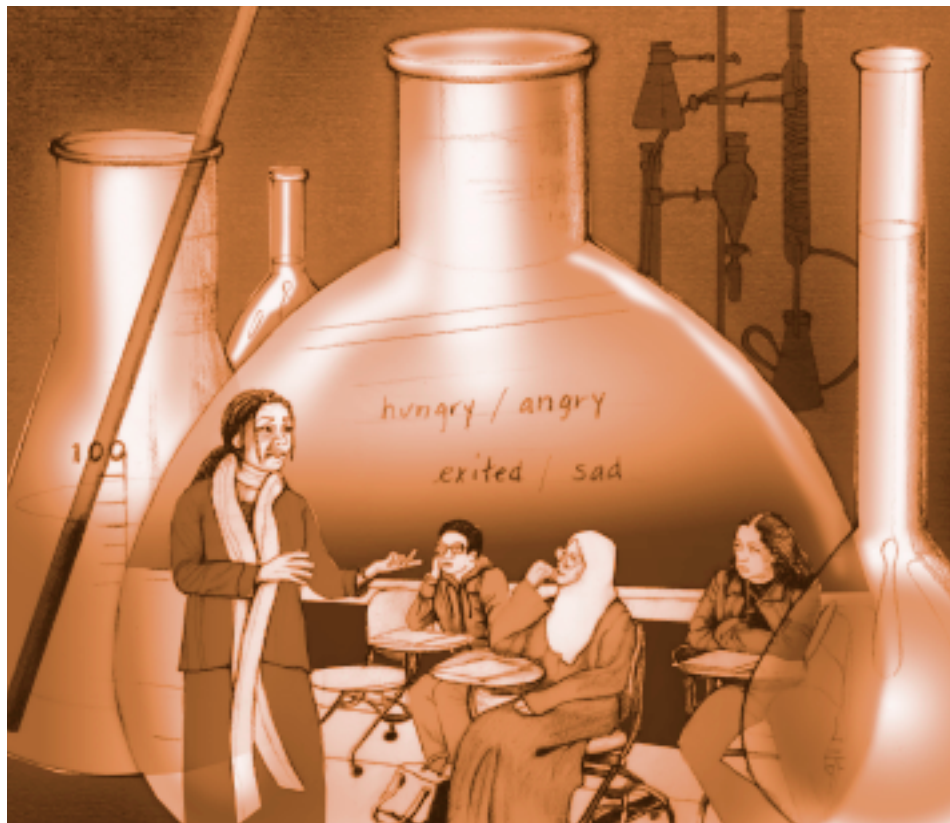
# Focus on Basics

CONNECTING RESEARCH & PRACTICE

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NCSALL RESEARCH

## The “Lab School”

by Steve Reder

**F**or the past four years, NCSALL at Portland State University (PSU) has been collaborating with a community college to run what is termed a lab school: an adult English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) program. The Lab School, one of numerous program delivery sites operated by Portland Community College (PCC), has been designed and outfitted so that researchers and practitioners can gather research data from classrooms of an ESOL program. Many of the articles in this issue of Focus on Basics present findings from the Lab School. This article provides an overview of the purpose, focus, and design of the Lab School.

*continued on page 3*



**F**ocus on Basics is the quarterly publication of the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy. It presents best practices, current research on adult learning and literacy, and how research is used by adult basic education teachers, counselors, program administrators, and policymakers. *Focus on Basics* is dedicated to connecting research with practice, to connecting teachers with research and researchers with the reality of the classroom, and by doing so, making adult basic education research more relevant to the field.

All subscription and editorial correspondence should be sent to:

**Focus On Basics**  
World Education  
44 Farnsworth Street  
Boston, MA 02210-1211  
e-mail address: [FOB@WorldEd.org](mailto:FOB@WorldEd.org)

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Editor: Barbara Garner  
Layout: Mary T. White  
Illustrator: Mary T. White  
Proofreader: Celia Hartmann

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**NCSALL**

National Center for the Study of  
Adult Learning and Literacy



# Welcome!

According to the US Department of Education's Report to Congress for the year 2002-2003, English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) students make up 43 percent of the learners served by USDOE-funded adult basic education programs, and 52 percent of the ESOL learners are at beginning levels. So it comes as no surprise that NCSALL's ESOL Lab School, a joint project of Portland (Oregon) University and Portland Community College, decided to study the learning processes of beginning-level ESOL students. Many, but not all, of the articles in this issue are written by researchers and teachers from the Lab School.

In our cover article, Steve Reder, director of the ESOL Lab School, describes the focus of the research and how it is conducted. Researcher Kathryn Harris reports on one aspect of her study of pair work in the ESOL classroom. Learners she studied individualized their pair work, adapting the activities to their language learning needs. Read about how to ensure that this happens in your classroom in the article that starts on page 7; turn to page 11 for pair activities provided by Donna Moss of Arlington, VA.

Sustained silent reading has been found to encourage many students to read: does it do the same with beginning-level ESOL learners? It is a viable practice with this group, explain Sandra Banke and Reuel Kurzet, who participated in this Lab School study. Their experiences and suggestions are in the article that starts on page 12.

To improve their students' speaking and listening skills, teachers often set up conversation groups. What if the conversation leaders were university students who studied immigration and cultural adaptation as well as strategies for initiating and keeping conversations going? Betsy Kraft chronicles her classes' experiences leading conversations with Lab School students; see page 16.

Anyone who has taught an ESOL class with students from a variety of language backgrounds has noticed the chatter that goes on, in English, during breaks. Dominique Brillanceau was curious about whether this casual conversation occurs in class as well, and, if it does, what role it plays in learning. She shares her observations from her Lab School study, page 22.

Starting conversations can be hard for anyone; it's even harder in a new language. John Hellermann explored the nuance of initiating and turn-taking in conversations in Lab School classes. He provides some suggestions on how to help learners hone this skill; go to page 25 for his report.

Some ESOL learners get stuck, and teachers struggle to find out why. Robin Schwarz, now of Ohio, shares case studies from her years of work with ESOL learners and teachers and provides tips on how to find out what might be the problem, page 29.

\*\*\*\*\*

I'm sad to say that Volume 8 may be the last volume of *Focus on Basics*. NCSALL has funding to publish this issue — 8A — and 8B, on engagement, and 8C, on the longitudinal study of adult learners. After that? It's hard to say. We'll keep you informed.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in orange ink that reads "Barbara Garner".

Barbara Garner  
Editor

## The “Lab School”

*continued from page 1*

*Editor’s Note: Throughout this article, ESOL refers to adult English for speakers of other languages programs in the United States rather than to overseas English as a Foreign Language (EFL) programs or to intensive English language programs for international college students. All of these are sometimes included under the umbrella of so-called ESOL programs.*

## Purpose

Instruction in English is the largest and fastest growing area of adult basic education ([www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/OVAE/pi/AdultEd/aeacts.html](http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/OVAE/pi/AdultEd/aeacts.html)). To provide more effective instruction for adult ESOL, many questions need to be answered, among them: how adults learn the English language, what program design is effective, how best to prepare teachers, and how to assess teaching and learning. The Adult ESOL Lab School focuses on beginning ESOL learners. The instructional program has four levels for beginning and intermediate students, comprising student performance levels (SPL) 0-6. (SPL levels were initially formulated to provide ESOL programs with a shared language about ESOL learners’ skill levels.) The Lab School’s Level A is the lowest and Level D the highest level of the program; in the articles in this issue of *Focus on Basics*, Level A is referred to as the beginning level; Level D is advanced, see the box on page 4 for more information on levels.

Although research-based program improvement can benefit all levels of adult ESOL instruction, research about the lowest levels of instruction, where student recruitment, retention, and progress often seem most challenging, is particularly needed (Condelli et al., 2003; Wiley, 2005). Relatively little classroom language

research has been conducted on the beginning as opposed to intermediate and advanced levels of instruction, partly because their emerging second-language forms and nonverbally conducted communication are difficult to gather, represent in transcripts, and analyze. The Lab School was designed to address these problems.



## Focus

The focus of the Lab School is on student-to-student language and interaction in beginning-level classrooms of adult ESOL. Much classroom research in language education focuses on teacher language: what the teacher says and does in the classroom and its impact on student learning. There is good reason, however, to think that student-to-student language in the ESOL classroom plays an important role in the learning process (see, for example, Ohta, 2002). Relatively little research on student-student language has been done and almost none at the beginning levels of ESOL. Our focus on student language can add much to the research literature and to the base of

information utilized by adult ESOL teachers.

Students use language in a variety of contexts in the ESOL classroom. Students may, for example, generate language in responding to individual or whole-class prompts given by the teacher, in reading written materials aloud, or in talking to one another either spontaneously or in activities set up by the teacher. Lab School

research focuses on the language students’ construct in dyadic conversations: verbal interchanges and interactions between pairs of students. Growing evidence indicates that interactions and conversations among students are very important in the language classroom. Swain and colleagues (2002) review studies in which student pair work is particularly effective, both in child and adult second-language learning (although not with low-level adult ESOL) classrooms.

How are beginning students helped more by talking with one another than by talking with the teacher or other proficient English speakers? Conversations

among beginning students include, for example, many nonstandard forms of the target language or erroneous corrections. However, recent research on higher-level ESOL learners than those in the Lab School, reviewed by Swain et al. (2002), found that the dyadic conversations that give students opportunities to use the emerging second language with someone near their own level of proficiency involve greater production of language (and no lower a level of quality) than student conversations with the teacher or other native speakers.

With a focus on student language, the Lab School research agenda involves two primary strands of studies: dyadic interaction studies and microgenetic longitudinal (i.e., longitudinal case) studies.

## Studies of Dyadic Interaction

This strand of research systematically examines the language and social interactions constructed by student pairs in the classroom. Many ESOL teachers are familiar with pairing up students to engage in a task. The emphasis here is not on pair work per se but on the promotion of student-student interaction and language in the ESOL classroom and how it is influenced by instruction. Although teachers may have considerable experience with pair work, little has been known prior to the Lab School research about naturally occurring student-student language in low-level classrooms. Jen Garland's (2003) thesis, which used Lab School data, was the first close look at student-student language in pair activities. She discovered an extraordinary limitation on what teachers may know about pair work and student-student language. As a teacher comes close enough to hear student-student language during pair work activities, his or her presence changes the student interaction. What the teacher hears and sees is quite different from what goes on when the teacher is out of viewing/hearing range. This has major (and heretofore unappreciated) implications for what teachers may be able to hear and follow in their own classrooms. This offers a powerful motivation to use the Lab School's close-up recordings of naturally occurring student conversations for both research and professional development. They can be found at <http://www.labschool.pdx.edu>.

Several types of dyadic interaction research projects are taking place:

- Microanalyses of dyadic interaction and language examining how students' emerging new language builds on their own knowledge and communicative resources as well as those of their conversational partners;

- Influence of classroom contexts on students' construction of language, as illustrated in Kathryn Harris' article in this issue, "Same activity, different focus" (see page 7); and
- Effects of dyad composition (e.g., differences within a pair in age, gender, educational background, etc.) on language produced and learned by students, and how dyad composition can be seen as a microcosm of the broader social world of the classroom.

## Microgenetic Longitudinal Studies

This strand of research examines second-language development over time in beginning-level adult students, analyzing changing language patterns among individual speakers learning English as a second language. Studies in the longitudinal strand will be helpful to ESOL teachers by highlighting the ways in which students' existing communicative resources (e.g., their first language, gesture, knowledge of writing systems, shared physical setting) are deployed in the development of student language, how communicative resources provided by teachers fit into second-language acquisition, and by identifying what aspects of the new

language may be best learned with direct instruction, with modeling, or without any formal instruction.

Several types of projects are being conducted in this strand:

- Longitudinal case studies of individual adult second language learners include one project examining individuals' use of conversational practices as part of second-language acquisition, as described in John Hellermann's article (page 25), "Turn taking and opening interactions".
- Systematic comparisons are being made of case studies of learners with different background characteristics (e.g., age, gender, first language, prior education).
- Research is underway on classroom interaction and the evolution of literacy by adults, including students with no first-language literacy.
- Other research is looking at the acquisition of different grammatical features of English: past tense markers, discourse markers, and articles, among others.

## Design

The Lab School was designed so that we could gather the kinds of data needed for our research and professional development agenda.

## Class Levels

Four levels of ESOL classes participated in the Lab School research described in the articles in this issue. According to the Portland Community College web site, students in Level A (SPL 0-2) are beginners who "usually can say their names and addresses, need help to conduct day to day business and usually have trouble giving or writing personal information independently." Students in Level B (SPL 2-3) are high beginners who "usually can give information about themselves, can use common greetings, but usually can not engage in fluent conversation." Students in Level C (SPL 3-4) are low intermediate students who "can satisfy common communication needs in daily life, can ask and respond to questions and initiate conversations, but may need repetition for unfamiliar topics or when talking about abstractions." Students in Level D (SPL 4-6) "can initiate conversations on a variety of topics. They can express their opinion about immediate surroundings and about more abstract ideas and concepts." (<http://www.pcc.edu/pcc/pro/basic/esl/levels.htm>).

To make reading easier, in the articles in this issue Level A is referred to as beginning level; Level D is advanced. ❖

Our initial experimentation with observing and recording student language helped us realize what could be observed and analyzed — and what could not — which, in turn, helped us refine our research questions. This has led to further experimentation with the Lab School design, and so forth.

We did not want to create a special ESOL program that we could then study. We wanted to study ESOL instruction as it naturally occurs in a program. This required bringing a well-established adult ESOL program into a university research laboratory. To do this, we built on an existing partnership between Portland State University (PSU) and Portland Community College (PCC).

PCC runs a large noncredit adult ESOL program at numerous delivery locations in the Portland, Oregon, metropolitan area. The Department of Applied Linguistics at PSU offers a master's in TESOL program that trains many of the region's adult ESOL teachers, including those who work at PCC. PCC and PSU created a partnership and joint governance agreement for the Lab School that established a decision-making structure sensitive to the needs of the ESOL students and teachers, the requirements of planned research and professional development activities, and the institutional requirements of both PCC and PSU.

In designing the Lab School, we had a number of goals. We wanted to offer PCC's existing four-level instructional program for adult ESOL following the program policies and practices established for all PCC ESOL sites. We wanted the student to find attending the ESOL program at the PSU site to be just like attending any other PCC site. We therefore used PCC's existing recruitment, intake, orientation, and placement processes; PCC adult ESOL teachers taught at the Lab School site.

A key feature of the partnership

has been the practitioner-researchers. They are highly experienced teachers who work half-time for PCC teaching classes at the Lab School and half-time for PSU doing research and professional development for the ESOL Lab School project. They collaborated on refining our research design and questions, helped implement a wide range of research in their own classrooms, and contributed the deep reflections and analyses they have made about their own teaching and their own students' learning. The articles in this issue of *Focus on Basics* by Dominique Brillanceau and by Sandra Banke and Reuel Kurzet illustrate the quality and potential of such collaboration.

This close collaborative partnership enabled us to use a wide range of research designs and methods. We implemented random-assignment teaching experiments, for example, in which two classes at the same level were offered side-by-side at the same time, making it easy to assign students randomly to two conditions without the logistical and ethical complications that so often hamper such experiments. The Banke and Kurzet article (see page 12) describes a reading experiment carried out in this manner. Another example of the flexibility made possible through this partnership is the experimentation with in-class conversation partners. Betsy Kraft's article, which starts on page 16, describes that work.

The most challenging aspect of the Lab School partnership has been blending elements of the two institutions' organizational cultures. The Lab School's day-to-day operations needed to mesh closely PCC's culture of delivering instruction with PSU's culture of conducting research. The smooth integration of ESOL students, administrative staff, classroom teachers, graduate students, and faculty demanded innovation and flexibility from both institutional

partners. At the forefront of these tensions were the practitioner-researchers, who were both instructors within one organization and culture and research staff within another.

## Recording Classes

Although we wanted the Lab School site to be very similar to PCC's other sites, our research and professional development goals required something not done at other sites: comprehensive recordings of classroom language. Not only did these recordings need to record what the teacher was doing and saying, but we also needed high-quality audio and video recordings of what students were doing and saying, especially to each other. It was essential that student language could be recorded, examined, and understood in the physical and social contexts in which it occurs in the classroom.

Since we wanted unobtrusive recordings made on an ongoing basis with the informed consent of the students, we added an informed consent procedure to PCC's standard intake and orientation process. Prospective Lab School ESOL students were shown a video (narrated in their native language) and given a tour of the Lab School classrooms and recording facilities to familiarize them with the recording protocols. They were then given the opportunity to sign an informed consent (again in their native language) for agreeing to participate in the research and allow their recorded voice and images to be used. They understood that they could freely transfer to other PCC program sites at any time if they were not comfortable with the research or recording process. Very few ever chose to leave. We were quite surprised and pleased at how unobtrusive the students found the recording process to be.

Figure 1 diagrams the classrooms and recording facilities of the Lab School. Two adjacent classrooms are

separated by a small control room with one-way observation windows into the classrooms. It houses the recording equipment that digitizes the video and audio streams from the permanently installed cameras and microphones in the classrooms. Each classroom has 12 desks, each of which accommodates two students. The desks and chairs are easily rearranged into various group configurations when needed. The six oval dots shown in each classroom are small ceiling-mounted video cameras. The four corner cameras in each room provide panoramic views of the classroom as a whole. We found these fixed panoramas to be essential for following what the teacher and whole class are doing, thus providing vital context for understanding the more focused, close-up views of individual student activity and language in which we are primarily interested. Close-up views are provided by the two ceiling-mounted cameras in the middle of each room, remotely controlled by staff working in the control room, who aim and focus these cameras according to an observation protocol.

Each classroom had several permanently installed ambient microphones and three radio microphones, one always worn by the

teacher and two by students. The two students wearing microphones in a class were systematically rotated from day to day, so that we obtained high-quality audio recordings from each given student (and his or her deskmate) several times per term. Microphone rotation, like attendance marking, was routinely and unobtrusively incorporated into class procedures.

The two remotely controlled cameras in each classroom generally were focused on the two students wearing the radio microphones on the given day. This protocol provided high-quality audio recordings on camera of those two students and their language and interaction with other students (and the teacher). The student-to-student language, captured in its visual and social context, provides key data for understanding and representing the language and interaction of beginning-level language learners. These unique multimedia data are central to the research and professional development activities of the Lab School. Individual students can be evaluated over time as they acquire English and progress through the instructional program (the microgenetic longitudinal strand); the language and interaction of dyads

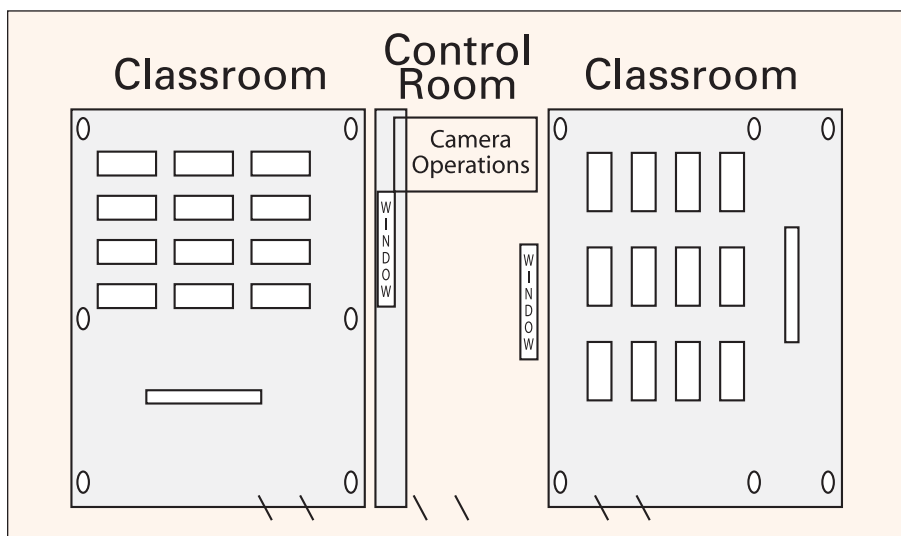
paired at a student table can be closely analyzed and compared (the dyadic interaction strand).

Four years of adult ESOL classes have been recorded, encompassing approximately 4,000 classroom hours, each digitally recorded with six cameras and multiple microphones. These multimedia recordings of the classrooms are coded and transcribed for research purposes and entered into a database that maintains its links to the original media segments to which they apply. Detailed descriptions of the coding and transcription systems used are available in work by Reder and colleagues (2003).

Over the four years of this program, approximately 700 students were recorded, about 60 percent of whom are women and 40 percent men. These students come from about 50 countries of origin and speak about 30 first languages (40 percent Spanish, 16 percent Chinese, 9 percent Vietnamese). The students range in age from 16 to 83 years and have diverse educational backgrounds, from no schooling to graduate degrees.


All of the classroom recordings and related data and materials are gathered into a searchable, all-digital multimedia corpus that we term the Multimedia Adult English Learner Corpus (MAELC). MAELC has been designed to be a valuable resource to scholars and practitioners in adult ESOL for years to come. More information about MAELC is available in work by Reder et al. (2003) and on the project web site: <http://www.labschool.pdx.edu>.

Figure 1



## More Information and Resources

More information about the Lab School is available at <http://www.labschool.pdx.edu>. The web site contains information about Lab School activities, references and links to publications and professional development materials, examples of multimedia clips, details of the

ClassAction software and download links, information for other researchers and professional developers wishing to work directly with the MAELC data and ClassAction software, and contact information for various types of follow-ups. 

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### About the Author

**Steve Reder** is University Professor and Chair of the Department of Applied Linguistics at Portland State University, Portland, Oregon. His research interests focus on adult literacy and second language development. He is the Principal Investigator of two NCSALL Projects: the Adult ESOL Labsite project and the Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning. 















# Same Activity, Different Focus

*Pair activities allow students to interact in English, but what they interact about varies depending upon their needs*

by Kathryn Harris

**D**igna and Vladilen are participating in a pair activity. It's Digna's turn; she is trying to describe one of a number of pictures at which they are both looking. Vladilen's job is to point to the picture she is describing. Several words appear under each picture. Below the picture to which Digna is referring are "is buying" on one line and "gasoline" on another. Moments earlier, Digna had asked Vladilen to point to the picture with the words "is washing" and "clothes" beneath it.

Speaker	Student language ((Gesture))	Research Observation
 Digna	ok. is washing gasoline.	Digna starts her turn.
 Vladilen	what?	Vladilen indicates that he does not understand and asks for clarification.
 Digna	is washing gasoline (pause) washing gasoline (pause) is washing gasoline.	In response to Vladilen's lack of understanding, Digna repeats her phrase and continues to repeat it as Vladilen continues to not understand.
 Vladilen	((points to what he thinks might be the correct response))	Vladilen guesses.
 Digna	no gasoline is washing gasoline	Digna indicates that his answer is not correct and then repeats her phrase.
 Vladilen	is washing	Vladilen repeats her phrase as he contemplates the choices.
 Digna	is wa_washing_washing? washing gasoline	Digna now understands that Vladilen does not understand her. By her question, we get the sense that she isn't sure that washing is correct.
 Vladilen	((points)) is buying	Vladilen points to the correct picture and indicates the phrase that he thinks is correct (is buying). This gives Digna information about what part of her phrase wasn't correct (is washing).
 Digna	yes ye_	Digna agrees.
 Vladilen	is buying	Vladilen repeats his phrase.
 Digna	is buying gasoline yeah	Digna puts the phrase from Vladilen (is buying) together with the noun from her phrase (gasoline) to produce the target phrase
 Vladilen	is buying gasoline	Vladilen repeats the phrase to confirm it.

continued on page 8



A video of this interaction is available for viewing at [http://www.labschool.pdx.edu/Viewer/viewer.php?pair\\_interaction](http://www.labschool.pdx.edu/Viewer/viewer.php?pair_interaction). Look at the pull-down menu—first clip, called Washing gasoline.

**Same Activity, Different Focus**  
*continued*

These beginning-level adult students of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) are enrolled in the Lab School, a partnership between Portland Community College (PCC) and Portland State University (PSU), in Oregon. Created to conduct research on lower-level adult ESOL, the National Labsite for Adult ESOL



(known locally as the Lab School; <http://www.labschool.pdx.edu>) is supported, in part, by the Institute for Education Science, US Department of Education, to the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL). The classrooms and research facilities are housed at the university while the registration, curriculum, and teachers are from the community college.

This pair interaction was videotaped as part of research into what actually happens during pair activities: classroom activities in which students work together to complete an assigned task. There are many types of pair activities (see page 11); in this example, one learner must produce the target language, the other must show evidence that he or she understands the language by pointing to the correct picture. Although Digna had practiced “is buying” and “is washing” in class, not until she engaged in the pair activity did she realize that she was not using “is washing” correctly.

**The Role of Pair Work**

Researchers have long believed that student-to-student interaction is important to second language acquisition (e.g., Gass et al., 1998; Long, 1983; Mackey, 1999; Nakahama et al., 2001; Pica, 1994; Swain, 1995). The belief is based on research on children interacting with adults (e.g., Snow, 1986) and language learners

interacting with proficient speakers (e.g., Gass & Varonis, 1994; Polio & Gass, 1998). In all of these interactions, speakers use conversational modifications that help both partners participate in the interaction and understand its meaning. Language learners working in pairs also use conversational modifications to help each other understand (e.g., Gass & Varonis, 1985; Hardy & Moore, 2004). In Digna and

Vladilen’s case, when Vladilen modified the phrase “is washing” to “is buying,” Digna understood she had been saying the wrong word and corrected herself. Digna and Vladilen used other conversational modifications: Vladilen requested clarification by asking “what?,” for example, and he requested confirmation of his guess “is buying.”

As speakers negotiate with their partners, each is pushed to try new forms or to modify existing ones (Swain, 1995), which opens the door for language development. The negotiation is triggered by some indication that the hearer doesn’t understand, such as Vladilen’s “what?” (Gass & Torres, 2005; Varonis & Gass, 1985). After the trigger, student pairs negotiate word meaning, pronunciation, and sentence form (Swartz, 1980). The resulting negotiation helps the speaker to focus

on the problem area (Gass & Torres, 2005): in this case, the use of the word “washing” for the word “buying”. This focus increases the likelihood that the target language element will be learned (Long, 1996).

**The Research**

The Lab School conducted research to understand what happens during pair activities, scrutinizing half of all transcribed pair activities conducted in two 10-week adult beginning ESOL classes. In this case we were looking to see if and how beginning learners negotiate meaning when working in pair activities, in which negotiation is likely to occur. The research team analyzed 40 student pair interactions that were videotaped and recorded on 20 days. The analysis revealed that pair activities do set the stage for negotiation. Regardless of the fact that the students were performing the same activity, in the same class, at the same time, they negotiated around different aspects of the language. For example, one pair negotiated around the meaning of one set of words, while



another negotiated pronunciation. More than just allowing students to practice already-learned forms, pair work opens the way for students to try forms that they are not sure about. Through negotiation, each student discovers what part of the language area needs to be worked on.



## Another Example

At the third class meeting during the research, the teacher introduced adjectives of emotion using pictures from *The Basic Oxford Picture Dictionary* (Gramer, 1994). To check understanding, she paired students up, asking one member of the pair to follow her oral model and say “Show me \_\_\_\_\_” (angry, happy, sad, nervous, bored, scared, or excited). The listening partners were instructed to respond by pointing to the appropriate picture, indicating the number of the picture or saying the adjective. The transcripts of two pairs (Chyou and Domingo, and Jin and Zoya) illustrate how pairs performing the same activity can focus on different elements. Both pairs spoke approximately the same number of words (262 vs. 293) and both pairs worked for about the same amount of time (six minutes and eight seconds vs. six minutes and 10 seconds). Within the activity, the students in each pair chose different words from the seven on the list, and focused on different things about those words. Chyou and Domingo negotiated around the pronunciation of excited, angry vs. hungry, bored, and nervous. In the same six minutes, Jin and Zoya worked to confirm the meaning of excited, angry vs. hungry, and nervous. In addition, they helped another student with the pronunciation of sad.



To see the video of this classroom interaction, go to [http://www.labschool.pdx.edu/Viewer/viewer.php?pair\\_interaction](http://www.labschool.pdx.edu/Viewer/viewer.php?pair_interaction). Look at the pull-down menu—second clip, called Chyou and Domingo-excited.

Chyou started, asking Domingo to show her the picture of a person who looks excited: “Show me e...ex...” she trails off. Domingo provided the full word: “Excited.”

“Uh?” asked Chyou.

“Excited” repeated Domingo.

Chyou tried to pronounce excited again. She said “Excit—”

Domingo, in the meantime, said

“zidee” pronouncing part of the word in a different way. Chyou started to spell: “e x z” she said. Domingo said “cited” and Chyou echoed with “cited.”

“Seven,” said Domingo, indicating the number of the picture that he thought demonstrated the emotion “excited”.

“Seven. Oh” confirmed Chyou.

Domingo repeated: “Seven, cited, excited”, confirming meaning and pronunciation. But Chyou still wasn’t sure of the pronunciation and asked for confirmation, saying “cite?”

Domingo confirmed the pronunciation: “Exzided.”

Chyou used the correct pronunciation for the first time: “Excited.”

Domingo repeated the word, saying, “Excited.”

Chyou twice connected the spelling with the pronunciation and Domingo twice confirmed it.



To see the video of this classroom interaction, go to [http://www.labschool.pdx.edu/Viewer/viewer.php?pair\\_interaction](http://www.labschool.pdx.edu/Viewer/viewer.php?pair_interaction). Look at the pull-down menu—third clip, called Jin and Zoya-excited.

At the same time, Jin and Zoya negotiated the same word. For them, pronunciation wasn’t the issue; meaning was. Zoya started the sequence by saying “Please show me excited. Excited. Uh Seven.” Even though Zoya had provided Jin with the correct picture number, Jin checked to confirm that she had the correct meaning by pointing to the picture and saying “Seven? Seven.” This alerted Zoya: Jin wasn’t sure of the meaning, despite knowing the correct picture. Zoya confirmed Jin’s correct answer: “Uh huh, excited.” To check her understanding of the meaning of the word, Jin waved her arms in the air, looking excited. Zoya responded, “Nice. Nice. Ok, Nice, uh huh”, providing Jin with confirmation that Jin’s understanding of the meaning of excited was correct.

These data show us that we as teachers can not predict what

students will do in their pair activities, except that it is likely that different student pairs will be working on different aspects of the language in the activity. This is not bad: pair work allows lessons to be individualized automatically to the needs of each learner.

## Implications for Teaching


Teachers find that pair work is good for language learning. The results of this research confirm that belief and call for more pair work when possible. This, as well as other research in the field, suggests that negotiation between students is an important part of language acquisition. To this end, teachers can choose pair activities that promote or maximize negotiation between their students. Teachers can try a variety of activities and monitor their own students: do their students negotiate more when the activities are highly scripted? Require an exchange of information? Allow free conversation? With beginning-level students, it is not clear that one type of pair activity generates the most interactivity, so teachers must determine what promotes negotiation for their specific students.

These findings also suggest that students will learn what they need to learn in their pair-work negotiations. This means that teachers can expect to hear students negotiating around different elements of the same pair activity, but these will be the elements of language that students need, when they are ready.

One persistent and unexpected finding in our research that teachers consistently confirm and find useful is that when teachers approach the student pairs, the negotiation almost always stops (Garland, 2002). Students appeal to the teacher for the correct answer, or they go back to a previous item to perform it for the teacher, or they start interacting with the teacher directly. The Northwest Practitioner Knowledge Institute, a professional development workshop organized to

provide ESOL teachers with access to research, an opportunity to try something new in their classroom, and a forum in which to discuss their results, helped several teachers conduct research in their own classes. These teachers discovered that students negotiated more and for a longer time when the teacher stayed away from the pair activities (Claussen, 2005; Domman, 2005; Greif, 2005; McFadden, 2005; Solberg, 2005). The teachers expressed surprise and pleasure at the degree to which their students' language skills improved as a result of this negotiation.

## In Conclusion

The Lab School provides a unique opportunity to learn about language learning and teaching by watching students closely in their classroom experiences. What we have learned is that beginning students do negotiate meaning and form when they have the opportunity to work in pairs. We have also learned that student pairs doing the same activity often work on different pieces of language. The different foci reflect the area of language that prompted negotiation between the students in the first place, suggesting that negotiation in pair work creates the opportunity for student pairs to focus on their particular area of communicative difficulty. 

### Blog on Pair Work

As part of the Northwest Practitioner Knowledge Institute, an adult ESOL practitioner in California has been conducting a practitioner research in her classroom, focusing on student interactions and pair work. The Institute created a blog for these projects at <http://calpronwkpkipairwork.blogspot.com/>. Visit it to learn about the ups and downs of her experience.

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## About the Author

**Kathryn Harris** is a researcher at the NCSALL Adult ESOL Lab School and an Assistant Professor in Applied Linguistics at Portland State University in Portland, OR. Her research interests include interaction in adult ESOL classrooms, classroom instructional design, and teacher development. ❖

# Interactive Classroom Activities

by Donna Moss

A number of activities for pairs foster interaction and focus on meaningful communication (Ellis, 1999). Some activities have very specific guidelines and parameters; others are more loosely constructed. In interactive classroom instruction, various activities are used depending on the lesson's goals and objectives. These activities include, but are not limited to, information gap, conversation grid, ordering and sorting, problem-solving, and discussions.

**INFORMATION GAP** activities are widely used in ESOL instruction. At the most basic level, two people share information to complete a task. In one-way information gap activities, one person has all the information (e.g., one learner gives directions to a location and the other plots the route out on a map). In two-way gap activities, both learners have information to share to complete the activity. Two-way information gap activities have been shown to facilitate more interaction than one-way information gap tasks (Ellis, 1999).

**CONVERSATION GRID** activities work well for beginning-level learners. They provide learners with an opportunity to practice gathering and giving the same information over and over again, thus helping to build automaticity. They also provide learners with a chance to negotiate meaning. For example, to review asking and answering personal identification questions in a family literacy class, learners can speak to classmates to gather information and complete a table such as the one below.

First Name	Last Name	Child's Grade	Child's Teacher's Name

The number of rows can vary depending on how many interviews you want students to conduct. A conversation may ensue, such as:

Ana: What's your first name?

Marta: Marta

Ana: Spell, please

Marta: M-A-R-T-A


Ana: M-A (student writes the letter E)

Marta: M-A...A...no E

**ORDERING** and **SORTING** activities include classification, ranking, and sequencing (Willis, 1996). For example, in a discussion about talking to children about drugs and alcohol, parents are given cards with statements such as, "Beer is not alcohol" or "The legal drinking age is 21". Learners work in pairs and must put the cards in either the "True", "False", or "I'm not sure" pile. To complete the task, learners have to discuss their choices, provide explanations for them, and achieve consensus (Siteki, 2004).

**PROBLEM-SOLVING** activities work at all levels. Learners work in pairs and discuss issues relevant to their lives, such as finding ways to use English outside the class, or how to plan a budget for a family of five. Problem-solving pairs work well when each person has a specific role and the tasks are clearly set out for them. Learners use language to communicate for real reasons: to explain their ideas, make suggestions, and eventually reach a consensus.

For beginning-level learners, problem-solving activities can be created using picture prompts or picture stories that deal with everyday problems adults commonly confront. Using the language experience approach, learners tell the teacher what is happening in each picture and the teacher writes what they say (Singleton, 2002). After the story is established, learners can make suggestions about how characters in the story can solve their problems. (See <http://www.cal.org/caela/health/> for examples of problem-solving picture stories related to health issues.)

**DISCUSSIONS**, which are an obvious way to promote interactions, can be about almost anything, from cultural issues, education, learning English, to current events and "hot" topics. Discussions seem deceptively easy to set up, but they require preparation and thought so that they run smoothly and learners get the most out of the exchange of ideas. The purpose of the discussion should be made very clear to the learners. The benefits of pair discussions to language development should also be articulated: they are an opportunity to practice listening for main ideas and details, build vocabulary, use English to explain and elaborate, and use strategies to keep the conversation from breaking down. It is helpful to set time limits, assign roles and responsibilities, and debrief all participants after the discussion. 

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## About the Author

**Donna Moss** is the family literacy specialist at the Arlington Refugee Education and Employment Program (REEP) in Arlington, Virginia. She has been in adult ESOL education for more than 20 years as a teacher, curriculum developer, teacher trainer, and researcher. She was a contributing author of the *Collaborations: English in Our Lives* series from Heinle and Heinle. ❖

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## Modified Sustained Silent Reading

*Does it benefit beginning learners of English?*

**O**ne of the many research projects carried out at NCSALL's National Adult ESOL Labsite, or Lab School, in Portland, Oregon, focused on beginning-level reading. The research project tested the use of sustained silent reading (SSR) as a methodology for teaching reading to very beginning learners of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). Classes were conducted by Portland Community College (PCC). Sandra Banke, one of the teacher/researchers in the project, and Reuel Kurzet, professional development associate/researcher for the project and chair of PCC's English as a second language (ESL) department, spoke to Focus on Basics about the project and what they learned from it.

**FOB:** Let's start with the basics. What is SSR?

**SANDRA:** Sustained silent reading, or SSR, was introduced in the late 1960s or early 1970s. It was intended

for K-12 native speakers. If you look at the original guidelines for SSR, everyone in the school building, even the custodians, was supposed to drop everything and read a book of their choice for about ten minutes. The idea was that adults model reading behavior for the students. To make reading a more pleasurable and worthwhile experience, not something you're always having to answer comprehension questions about, there was not supposed to be any follow up, or postreading, activities.

In the early 1980s, SSR started being used with ESOL populations in K-12 settings. Researchers found that, as a result of SSR, the students showed improvement in their attitudes towards reading. Results varied regarding improvements in comprehension, vocabulary development, and other language skills, but studies that continued for more than four to six months did find gains in various reading and language skills. Studies that failed to find skill gains often had shortcomings or limitations in their implementation or research design..

**FOB:** So why experiment with using SSR in low-level adult ESOL classes?

**REUEL:** It had been shown to be effective in changing learners' attitudes about reading, and some learners showed

gains in comprehension and fluency. There were indications that it worked at higher levels. The question was: Would SSR work for low-level adult ESOL learners? Would they leave in droves? Would they improve their reading skills? Would they improve their reading habits at home?

**SANDRA:** We also found that there weren't many studies of SSR done with ESOL students, and none on SSR with absolutely beginning-level adult English-language learners. The studies that had been done involved high-school ESOL students; any adult studies were with university-level ESOL or matriculated ESOL students, getting ready to take or having taken the TOEFL [Test of English as a Foreign Language]. None had been done with low-level ESOL students. None had anywhere near the numbers of students in the samples needed to make viable statistical comparisons. Many of the studies were short-term; ours was going to be 12 months.

**REUEL:** In PCC's program, the reading instruction is skills-based. It is designed from the bottom up: phonics, word recognition, and preteaching of vocabulary; and from the top down: schema-building, so students think about what the topic is, what they already know about it, what can they gather from the pictures, headings, and the vocabulary they already know. Some of our students knew how to read in their first language, some didn't. Using SSR with students who had no literacy skills was different.

**FOB:** Trying SSR with absolute beginners was new?

**REUEL:** Yes. It was also challenging because any kind of research with really low-level adult students is hard. Most low-level ESOL classes are in community-based programs, where the population is transitory, it's hard to get consistent numbers, and the funding is transitory.

**FOB:** Were there any other concerns?

**REUEL:** Not really. First, the

students attend three hours of ESOL class twice a week, and SSR was only one hour a day, or less than that at the beginning. So the students were still getting at least four hours a week of high-quality ESOL instruction. Also, PCC's program is not focused as much on how instruction is done as on outcomes. It's not rigid about how to get to those outcomes. So there is always room for new methodology. Plus, we have an agreement with PCC that provides some leeway for research.

**FOB: What did the implementation using SSR for reading instruction look like?**

**SANDRA:** Students entering the program at the lowest level of instruction were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions: control or intervention. Random assignment is important to experimental research so that differing student characteristics (in our case, age, gender, prior education, and work status), do not disproportionately affect the results in either condition. Random assignment distributes students with these characteristics between the two conditions.

Whichever condition the students were placed in at intake they stayed with for the entire year. From their perspective, their instruction didn't change; a given student had either SSR [intervention] or skills-based instruction [control] all year. The teachers, however, changed; the other teacher/research associate, Dominique, taught the SSR group in the fall and winter quarters while I was teaching the control group, using our skills-based approach to reading. For the spring and summer quarters, we switched. This prevented findings from being attributable to the instructor instead of to the intervention. Throughout the year, the learning gains of students in both conditions were measured through standardized language proficiency assessments administered in class. Some students also volunteered to

participate in in-home interviews and were tested during those.

**FOB: What did you do to prepare to teach using SSR?**

**SANDRA:** A big issue was finding reading materials suitable for beginning adult readers. Not all children's books are appropriate for an adult audience. We did find some books with adult characters or adult situations, such as divorce, for example, presented from a child's perspective.

Dominique selected some books from her own children's library; we also had some medical literature; we weren't really sure what would work. We had a few of what would be considered classroom readers as opposed to chapter books, with comprehension questions at the end.

We also had alphabet books, which we found were appropriate for students who were literate in a Chinese but not a Roman alphabet. Because we had the funds to put together a library, we bought materials: readers from Penguin and New Readers' Press, two publishers that specialize in materials for adult literacy students; nonfiction science books written for children, and appropriate children's picture books. We had *National Geographic*, cookbooks, and some lifestyle magazines.

**FOB: What about the teaching model?**

**SANDRA:** Dominique did quite a bit of reading about how SSR had been done with native speakers. We decided that we couldn't do the classic model without follow-up activities or student accountability, for the following reasons. Unlike SSR with native speakers, for whom the context is reading instruction, we were doing SSR in a language-learning context. Oral practice is essential, particularly in the beginning-level classes. Activities that help the students focus on the

meaning of what they had read were necessary. The teachers expect it, and the learners expect it. We also needed to have some kind of accountability worked in to the reading to maintain participation. If the students had viewed it as an uncontrolled activity, with no follow up or review, their participation (i.e., attendance) would have decreased in that part of the lesson. Finally, in order to study the implementation and effect of SSR in the classroom, we needed to have visible (and audible) evidence of the students' participation and the language they were getting from their reading.

It had to be modified, which is why we called it mSSR: modified sustained silent reading. We used a postreading activity to help the students reflect on and process what they had just read: each day we gave them a question to talk about with a partner. We knew that the lowest-level students would have difficulty talking about the book without a prompt, so each day we gave them a task. For example, share one interesting idea, or tell about one person in your story. Or even: Where does the story happen? Or Show your partner the title and author of your book. Often the students ended up talking about some other aspect of their reading, not necessarily the given questions, which was acceptable. The idea was to get them talking about their reading and expressing their opinions about the material: an authentic literacy practice.

**SANDRA:** The follow-up activities were also to give the students a sense of accomplishment. We had them fill out reading logs, in which they wrote the dates, the title of the books, and whether they liked, didn't like, or were neutral about what they had read. This let us know how long they stayed with one book and what was being checked out compared what wasn't. At the very least, these were valuable literacy activities: the

students learned how to fill out charts and file their reading logs alphabetically.

**FOB: You mentioned earlier that SSR was one hour a day, twice a week?**

**SANDRA:** We needed to have the reading easily locatable in the research videos, so it was not feasible to have it at different times each class session. Even though it felt a little bit artificial, we put all of the reading instruction, regardless of condition, in the last hour of class. This hour in the SSR condition generally followed the same format. After the class break, the students had 10 minutes to select a book from the library cart, or to retrieve the book that they had been reading the previous class session. Then they had silent reading time for 30 minutes. The beginners, because of the novelty of the activity, as well as their language proficiency, started out at 20 minutes per class, gradually building up to 30 minutes of reading time. I extended the reading time by five minutes or so with advanced beginners, if they seemed particularly engaged. The next 10 to 15 minutes were then devoted to pair discussion of what students had read. The last five minutes of class were then spent on filling out and filing the reading logs.

I think it wasn't artificial to do the reading all at one time in the class period, because it is such a defined and self-contained activity. However, skills-based reading instruction is usually more interwoven throughout a three-hour class period, so putting it at the end in the skills-based class felt artificial.

**FOB: What about the learners?**

**SANDRA:** Our learners were beginning-level students, all of whom were adult immigrants and permanent residents, from the Far East, Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa. They ranged in age from 17 to 77. We had the full range of educational backgrounds from less than six years of schooling to some students with post-

secondary degrees. They were in a full range of employment situations as well. The total number of students in the beginning-level ESOL classes for the year was 190. Each term we had two beginning classes and two advanced beginning classes, with 15 in a classroom at a time. We have managed enrollment: no one can join the class after the fourth week of the term.

**FOB: How did you introduce the idea of SSR to low-level adult ESOL learners? Your ability to communicate with them was certainly limited.**

**SANDRA:** Dominique started them off. She demonstrated the activity and said "Now we're going to do reading. Here are the books, pick one [she had talked about what "pick" meant] and sit with that book for 20 minutes." We told the advanced beginning class that research shows that the more you read, the better you read. We also explained that we were doing an academic investigation: that term is a cognate in some of the students' languages.

**REUEL:** The instructors found that during the first couple of classes they needed to explain that they were doing this investigation. Although the students understood about the research in general, and all of them had gone through a native-language informed-consent process to be research participants, some had difficulty understanding the specifics of the SSR experiment. Particularly if they were brand new students, they wondered what the instructors were doing, since the teacher was reading her own book and not teaching during SSR time.

**SANDRA:** By the time I started teaching the SSR group, six months after the program began, the veteran SSR students had started to explain to new students what to do. The veterans would explain that we're doing this research; that the more you read the more you get used to reading; and not to feel bad about making mistakes: the teacher will help you. They were explaining all these things in Spanish

or Chinese to their classmates. I had little explaining to do. When I wheeled the library cart in and set out the books, even though some of the students were new to the class, they were ready.

**FOB: Did students have problems finding books that were appropriate?**

**SANDRA:** According to SSR, you shouldn't tell students what to read, but the students with little previous experience with books had trouble making a selection. They might never have had to choose a book in that manner, and so had no basis upon which to make a selection. We couldn't let them continually flounder (and get discouraged), so we would choose three books at their level that we thought might be of interest, and ask them to pick from those. Gradually they began to choose independently. Usually the students more literate in their native language could determine if a book was appropriate for them or not.

We originally had the books organized by difficulty level, assuming that the students would pick by their level, but they didn't know how to do that. So then we clustered the books by theme.

**FOB: What was the students' reaction to SSR?**

**SANDRA:** They were pretty good-natured about the whole process of using the follow-up reading logs, and checking whether they liked, didn't like, or were neutral about each book. The reactions were mixed. Some people enjoyed having that quiet time. One woman said she didn't have quiet time at home and was happy to have it in class to read. Others were glad to have access to a wide variety of texts. Some had difficulty, but they stuck with it. Some kept and read the same book for several class sessions.

**SANDRA:** Of course a few students voted with their feet and left, but there were very few. It was about the same number in the SSR group and the skills-based reading group. In

both types of classes, very few students left during the break to avoid reading

**FOB: What was hard?**

**SANDRA:** We had to come to terms with both practical and philosophical issues. For example, if I observed a student having trouble with the activity, I couldn't help him or her, or I wouldn't be following the design of the SSR condition. As in classic SSR, I had to be reading also, to model the reading behavior. That was the hardest thing for me: to be sitting at the front of the room reading my own book. A teacher's natural instinct is to watch the students and help if there is a problem. Of course, if students came up to me and asked me questions, I helped them. However, if students started doing this repeatedly, I reminded them it was silent reading time. One student often asked me about vocabulary; this was fine since he was engaged in his book. One student in particular, however, wanted me to read everything out loud. I discouraged this.

It was really difficult for me to watch students and to recognize what skills they needed to be able to manage this reading but not be able to intervene. You want to help your students. The pace of a class and how you set up lessons are based on the cues you pick up from the students, yet as part of a research experiment I couldn't really do any of that.

It was difficult to do the SSR exclusive of other reading instruction, at both beginning and advanced-beginning levels, but mostly with the beginners. Beginning-level students were able to do SSR, but I felt they would have gained more if I had given them some reading instruction before I set them loose on the books. The experiment was set up so that I wasn't supposed to do that.

**REUEL:** I think this is a constraint of doing any classroom experimental research. At the Lab School, we've come to define effective teaching not as the teacher's one-way transmission of knowledge

and skills but as a reciprocal, interactive process. The teacher designs language activities that provide learning opportunities. Then, during class, the teacher observes and reflects on learners' responses to those activities in real time and deftly makes adjustments as the class period unfolds. In contrast, to meet rigorous experimental conditions, any in-class research must consist of completely preplanned activities and procedures that are strictly adhered to regardless of the learners' response. This inflexibility is a huge constraint in teaching and affects the learning situation in ways that are not always recognized.

**FOB: What did you learn?**

**SANDRA:** We learned that SSR can work; it can be done at beginning levels of ESOL instruction. The students can gain some meaning. We recognized that by watching the students talk about their books, looking at their logs, and seeing them progress from one book to another. They were able to start talking about reading as an activity, get meaning from the text, choose a book, hold the book. The student who just reached over and grabbed something off the cart at first was thumbing through different books to select one by the end.

I also learned that reading behaviors aren't innate. I was surprised when some students were reading the credits page. Although the students with limited educational backgrounds knew how to hold the book and turn the pages by the end, this was not the case at the beginning. The other students and I modeled that behavior. There was the sense that some reading skills might profitably be taught.


**FOB: And the findings?**

**REUEL:** Students in both the skills-based and SSR groups made substantial advances on all of the assessments that we gave. From teacher observational data, however,

we'd recommend starting with skills-based reading and introduce SSR a bit later.

**FOB: What suggestions do you have for others who are interested in doing SSR?**

**SANDRA:** Besides working to put together an accessible and appropriate library, I would suggest not doing SSR in a vacuum. Some skills-based reading instruction is beneficial, and the SSR is beneficial as well. Since both work, and work well to build different aspects of reading, do both. SSR influences affect, or a student's emotional response toward, or enjoyment of, reading. Skills-based instruction influences technique: vocabulary skills, predicting, reading speed, and so on.

**REUEL:** That's the kind of thing that effective ESOL teachers do anyway: a variety of things to meet different needs. This is another example of that. The more we learn about teaching and learning, the more we reject simplistic notions of there being one best way to teach. Thoughtful, principled use of a variety of teaching strategies is necessary to address different learners' needs. 

**Resources on Sustained Silent Reading**

As part of the Northwest Practitioner Knowledge Institute, a teacher decided to use mSSR and conduct related practitioner research. To read her blog, go to <http://calpronwpkimssr.blogspot.com/> For SSR-related links, go to <http://calpronwpkissrresources.blogspot.com/>

To see how one teacher used SSR to help ABE students reach individualized goals, go to <http://www.ncsall.net/idex.php?id=738> and read Susanne Campagna's article in Volume 7C of *Focus on Basics*, "Sustained silent reading: A useful model."

# Rewarding Conversations

*When university students partner with ESOL learners for English practice, who learns more?*

by **Betsy Kraft**

**I**t is the second week of summer term, and the university students have arrived a few minutes before their first conversation hour in the community college's class in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). The university students are a little nervous, but many of their conversation partners have been involved in this exchange for several terms. The ESOL students' warm welcome puts their university partners at ease. One of the university students describes her first session.

"Today was my first day doing a conversation group with the higher-level students. When we first arrived, the class was on a break and the ESOL students were congregating in the hallway. A student started to talk to us right away, which eased my nerves tremendously! ... I got the opportunity to speak with Roberto, from Mexico, and with Sam (Saman is his real name) from Iran."  
—Heidi

Heidi and other Portland State University (PSU) students were enrolled in an academic course taken during their senior year. They were leading conversations at the Portland Community College (PCC) ESOL program located in the PSU Lab School. The university students and

the ESOL students were conversation partners, meeting once a week throughout the term as part of their respective courses.

The university students were not volunteers; their participation was part of a six-credit, academic course with a community service component. They were proficient speakers of English (although not necessarily native speakers), and part of their coursework involved learning strategies to start and maintain conversation with language learners.

Their conversation partners, all immigrants, participated as part of their ESOL course. Both groups were providing a service to each other: they all gained practice in communicating across cultural and linguistic differences. The two groups of students taught each other about family, work, art, literature, sport, and friendship. They shared stories about their lives, exchanging advice, and, as part of that process, learning about cultural differences. They broke down barriers and confronted assumptions as they got to know each other.

Although the Lab School is located on the Portland State University campus, there had been very little

interaction, beyond the research project, between the university community and the community college ESOL students. By bringing university seniors into the Lab School classrooms, both communities had the opportunity to learn about inter-cultural communication. ESOL students could practice their developing conversation skills with proficient speakers other than their teachers and engage in conversation with a variety of adults from varying backgrounds. Forming a partnership between the university and the Lab School classes provided a chance to capture the nature of conversation between language learners and proficient speakers on videotape as part of the research.

## The Participants

The ESOL students in the Lab School classes represent a wide range

*"They were proficient speakers of English (although not necessarily native speakers), and part of their coursework involved learning strategies to start and maintain conversation with language learners. Their conversation partners, all immigrants, participated as part of their ESOL course. Both groups were providing a service to each other..."*

of educational backgrounds, literacy levels, age, work status, language groups, and countries of origin. Many have completed high school in their countries of origin, some have higher



degrees, and some have not completed high school. A small group has fewer than six years of education in their first language. Their ages range from 17 to 77. First languages include Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese, Russian and Ukrainian, Korean, Arabic, Tigrinya, Indonesian, Japanese, Thai, Amharic, French, Lao, Tamil, Tibetan, Burmese, and various Mayan languages.

The conversation project involved 12 university students each term: six who conversed with the Lab School's intermediate-level ESOL classes and six who conversed with the higher-level class, for one hour a week. The university students registered for the class on a first-come, first-served basis and, by coincidence, during most terms the class included approximately six students born in the United States and six who either had immigrated here or were international students. They ranged in age from 21 to mid-50s, and more women than men participated. Of the 72 university students involved over six terms, about one-third majored in applied linguistics education, or a foreign language.

## Preparing the ESOL Students

To prepare the ESOL students, their instructors often asked them to formulate questions for their university partners; they practiced the questions in class before conversation time. Sometimes, the students were given topics, either in class or as part of their homework, so they could look up vocabulary and background information and formulate questions. If the students were focusing on something specific in their coursework, the ESOL instructor informed the university partners so that they could bring up the same topic during

conversation time. For example, before a holiday or a local or national election, the ESOL class focused on specific vocabulary and background information, and then during conversation time the students might compare and contrast the customs in this country to those in their native country. Local elections provided rich material for conversation, since



Oregon was debating several social issues such as doctor-assisted suicide and gay marriage during this time. When the university students knew what topics were covered in class, they could brush up on the knowledge of the subject, anticipate questions their partners might pose, and bring articles, posters, or pictures to the conversation.

## Preparing the University Students

The university students' coursework focused on basic principles of intercultural communication, strategies for maintaining conversation with English language learners, and issues related to immigration in the United

States. To introduce intercultural communication, I presented Bennett's developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (Bennett et al., 1999), which describes one's experience of cultural difference through a model suggesting six stages of increasing intercultural sensitivity. We also used DeVita and Armstrong's book, *Distant Mirrors: America as a Foreign Culture* (2002), which provides a wide perspective on American culture.

In selecting specific strategies for the university students to use in maintaining conversation, I turned to Kathleen Olson's article in *ESL Magazine* called "Content for Conversation Partners" (Olson, 2002). She stresses fluency over accuracy, conversation content that is familiar to the participants, and leading, open-ended questions based on a relevant topic designed to stimulate conversation. She also advocates giving feedback, using gestures, and asking for clarification. We discussed giving "wait-time" to the ESOL students so they could formulate what they wanted to say. I handed out examples of leading

questions collected from the interview guidelines for the Southern Oral History Program, Department of History, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (English Language Institute of Virginia Tech, n.d.). The questions fell under topics such as family history, parents and older relatives, childhood and adolescence, courtship and marriage. The university students formulated open-ended questions that encourage analysis, synthesis, and evaluation and took them with them to conversation class. Even if they never referred to their prepared questions, the exercise expanded their ability to spark or maintain conversation.

One important component of the university class was the students'

opportunity to observe their assigned ESOL class before conversation with partners began and then several additional times during the term. In observing, the students watched the ESOL instructors using myriad strategies to encourage learners. In their logs, the university students described what they saw and what they wanted to try themselves.

**When we observed, I tried to pay attention to my group, but also to the others in the class. David and Jin are less dominant in class than they are in conversation groups. [The instructor], I noticed, is very visual. I could not hear so well today, which had its benefits. I paid closer attention to how [she] used her hands. When she described a place, she “drew” the place in the air. . .**

**When we worked with our groups, I was a copy-cat. I used my hands far more, and it seemed to work better than my attempts to explain and re-explain x, y, z. When I have attempted to explain something more than two or three times, I confuse everyone, including myself. —Karyn**

The university students also studied attitudes toward immigration and current American immigration policy, analyzing and evaluating it in light of its social, economic, and political ramifications. They investigated attitudes about American culture and what it’s like to immigrate to America, using journal articles, Andrew Pham’s book *Catfish and Mandala*, the anecdotal stories of their classmates and their conversation partners, and a variety of films. They explored organizations and agencies that provide services to immigrants, both locally and nationally. They examined organizations that inform policy on immigration, analyzing their rhetoric of persuasion,

statistical data, and their political, economic, or social agendas. They analyzed the content of the articles they read on immigration in light of information they discovered about the authors or the organizations the

pated in the partnership differed in their ability levels, the instructors’ unique teaching styles, and class chemistry. Because we integrated flexibility into the conversation groups, the instructors were free to experiment with grouping and guidance; sometimes groups stayed with the same partner all term, sometimes they traded partners when it seemed appropriate, based on participants’ linguistic skill, adaptability, and personalities. Three times during the six-term project, a university student enrolled who was shy, soft-spoken, or difficult to understand, so the instructor paired that student with another, forming larger conversation groups that had two university students and three or four partners from the ESOL class. A few times, a group had a member who dominated the conversations, and in those situations the ESOL instructor moved

students around appropriately. The instructors could step in for support or guidance at any time.

The university students kept logs of their participation, and both instructors communicated regularly with me, sharing their impressions of the exchanges. In the following excerpt from a log, the student tells about a session where the ESOL partners had prepared questions to ask her, and had drawn a timeline marking events from their lives.

**“They asked me questions about my life as I drew a timeline diagram, providing short phrases describing the event. I helped them transfer the information into complete sentences in their notebooks, correcting grammar and spelling mistakes when the students asked. I had already told them a lot about myself during last week’s class, so most of the information I was giving was a review for them.**

**I asked them to tell me about their timelines. I interjected with**

authors represent; they applied what they learned about immigration to their own experience as members of a community; and then they added to their understanding their emerging pictures of the lives of their conversation partners: who they were, what brought them to the United States, their hopes and dreams, their struggles and accomplishments.

## The Conversation Groups

Arriving while ESOL students were on their break, the participants mingled and then settled into their groups together. Three ESOL students and one university student usually sat around a table designed for four. A video camera was focused on the table in the center of the classroom, where the ESOL students wearing microphones that day sat with their university partner. The instructors rotated this group each week.

The ESOL classes that partici-



questions to get them to expand a little more on their sentences. This activity went well because the students already had something written out to start from, making them more confident to expand on the events orally. Several times during the students' descriptions of their lives we got into lively discussions regarding their differing cultural customs and traditions. The students are becoming much better at negotiation of meaning between each other. They were also less shy with me and eager to share information about their lives. Annie, from Hong Kong had brought in some pictures of Hong Kong and her family. I let her explain the pictures and the other students and I asked her questions. —Susan

As the proficient speakers in the conversation groups, the university students were responsible for encouraging all their ESOL partners to participate. They engaged quiet partners by asking them direct questions; they monitored the ratio of their own speaking and listening and the ways they gave feedback; they maintained an awareness of their tempo, tone of voice, and the clarity of their speech. They utilized a variety of methods to negotiate meaning, including use of synonyms, antonyms, writing, and illustrating. The ESOL partners helped each other understand concepts or phrases, using many of the same strategies their university partners employed, and this all became part of their conversation.

At the same time, the university students were encouraged to respect the privacy of their conversation partners. Although the university students investigated policy and issues pertaining to immigration, they were not in a position to offer immigration advice. They could, however, recommend

resources such as the government's immigration services web site or local agencies that serve the immigrant community. Finally, the university students were not ESOL instructors. Many times, their conversation partners would ask them questions about structure and grammar. The best suggestion was for the ESOL students to ask their instructors for specific grammatical explanations.

## Challenges

Experimenting with a conversation model captured on videotape presented its own set of challenges that might not occur in a different setting. For example, the students met in conversation groups in the same classroom, creating a noise level that could be bothersome. When one group was particularly animated, it drew the attention of the other groups. Likewise, if a group leader was shy, or if there was a lull in conversation, the group members were well



aware that other groups were engaged, which created discomfort. The instructors said that it was often difficult not to interfere, or to determine when interference would be beneficial. Some ESOL students expressed a

preference for spending their class time with their instructor, who is an expert in language development, and were not convinced that using class time to converse with a proficient speaker other than their teacher was valuable.

## Benefits

The model we created for the Lab School worked for a number of reasons, and over time we learned some basic principles that kept the partnership healthy. Because it was part of the students' coursework, all the instructors involved were able constantly to evaluate and make adjustments according to our sense of what was needed. Regular attendance and punctuality on the part of all the participants made for a more rewarding experience. Including conversation time as part of their respective classes increased the likelihood that students would show up. We also learned that the university students needed to be somewhat outgoing and willing to take risks, since it fell on them to keep the conversations going. When students had an opportunity to prepare a conversation topic, participation was more evenly distributed, especially for ESOL learners with intermediate-level skills.

## Transferability of the Model

The conversation groups captured on videotape ended during the winter term of 2005. The following summer, a PCC ESOL class was set up on a different campus specifically for conversation and journaling. Again, university students in my class met with small groups of English language learners. This time, the two groups of students met in the ESOL computer lab, adjusted their own groups, as needed, for absenteeism, and then walked together to the *continued on page 21*

## Excerpts from the Conversation Handbook, by the Fall 2003 Class

### Things to Remember

- Come prepared with activities and topics to stimulate conversation.
- It is better not to let one student dominate the conversation. If the more advanced students start talking too much, the less advanced ones get bored and lose interest. Try to keep everyone equally involved.
- Encourage each student to take an active role in asking and answering questions. Thank them for their questions as a way to encourage group involvement.
- Do not hypercorrect students: it may discourage them from participating. Remember, you are not there to perfect their grammar! Correct by restating.
- Always speak slowly and clearly by using examples, synonyms, or other methods, but don't speak too slowly. The students are not children, so don't treat them as such.
- Draw pictures to emphasize your point.
- Avoid using slang and idioms.
- Ask students to write down what they are saying if you have trouble understanding them, and vice versa.
- Don't act as if you understand the student when you don't; ask or use nonverbal cues (gestures, facial expressions) so that the students can pick up on such cues and help.
- Don't make assumptions about students' ability to converse.
- Be patient! Give the students plenty of time to think and formulate their questions or ideas.

### Conversation Starters

- Talk about what they know the most about: themselves, food, and weather.
- Have them tell a story.
- Current event topics in American and other cultures such as current holidays tend to spark conversation.
- Say something interesting to make them laugh and liven things up. Don't be too serious; tell jokes.
- Bring a blank world map. Ask the students where they are from: not only the country but also the city. Then, write their names in the map. This way you can easily remember their names as well as where they are from. Also, you can expand your conversation depending on which part of the country they are from (urban vs. country, mountain vs. seaside, etc.).

### Keeping It Going

- Create a conversation atmosphere that encourages

students to ask questions of all group members.

- Show interest in your conversation partner by using expressive body language and intonation.
- Talk about things that are personal, relevant, or otherwise important to the students. Some of the students are refugees and asylum seekers and have faced a lot of difficulties in their lives. They may not want to talk about all the details of their lives to a stranger.
- Allow for students to ask questions about the grammar they are studying. However, attempting to get them to do structured exercises will probably not get a positive response.
- Have some "emergency" topics, exercises, or questions in mind for when the conversation lags. For example, bring in pictures or ask the students to bring pictures.
- Be prepared to change the subject at any moment in case the discussion becomes too uncomfortable.

### When Things Fall Apart

There are the times when the time does need filling, when the structure one thought one had appears useless, and the students gaze silently at their notes, exchanging nervous smiles with the conversation partner.

Relax, you're only having a conversation, like any of the hundreds of conversations you've had during the past year. There is nothing inherently different about this one. So you might think: what do I usually talk about with acquaintances? If I were at work or school and bumped into someone I knew slightly, what might I ask them about their life? You might simply think of what has happened to you in the last week, and start with that. These are also times when having props can be of great assistance. Pictures, books, items collected on travels can all serve as seeds from which a conversation can grow.

When you feel that you do not agree with the students, do not overreact or argue with them. Students may sound very blunt or rude: usually that is because they have limited vocabulary or are still in the process of learning expressions.

Try to avoid the use of languages other than English. Begin the discussion group with a disclaimer that only English should be spoken.


Do not panic when you find yourself in the middle of drama. Both tutors and tutees are all human beings and it is possible to have a strong emotional breakdown during the session. Remember that it is absolutely human. If you feel that things are out of hand, seek help from the ESOL instructor. ❖

coffee shop or lounge area to talk. The university students brought with them short readings on a variety of topics as a focus for their conversations. Sometimes, the conversation partners had so much to talk about they didn't get to the readings. At the end of each session, both sets of students wrote log entries into an interactive web site the ESOL instructor set up so that she and I could both respond. Since neither of us was present during conversation time, this allowed us to monitor the needs of the groups and provide immediate feedback through electronic dialog. Like the model set up for the Lab School, the ESOL students had an opportunity every week to practice their English with a proficient speaker. Again, the university students learned about intercultural communication and immigration issues in their coursework and, in addition to conversation strategies, they were given some tools for tutoring reading and helping with journal writing. One of the university students expressed her enthusiasm for her conversation group in a log entry:

**Today, I lost all track of time and all ideas of teaching strategies and structure. We spent the entire time talking about our lives more in depth than ever before. I've**

**been thinking about these women so much lately, thinking about their lives and struggles, and I wonder how they relate to my life. It was really fulfilling to hear their stories, their reasons for coming here, and their feelings about children, marriage, cultural differences and things they can relate to each other by. I felt this was necessary today. Instead of doing reading and writing, I felt it was important both for them and for me to really explore each other as people and as women and be able to communicate with each other using English. —Christina**

ESOL instructors interested in forming a partnership between their language learners and proficient speakers could contact their local universities with courses in intercultural awareness, community-based learning, or service learning projects. Conversation tutors should be prepared with strategies to maintain conversation with English language learners and basic principles of intercultural communication. By looking into issues surrounding immigration in the United States, the tutors gain insight and compassion into some of the challenges their conversation partners face. This aspect of their preparation could be organized as part of

their coursework or training, through web-based dialog forums, or as part of continuing support meetings. Key to a successful partnership is the active involvement of the instructors and their ability to monitor and make adjustments according to the needs and dynamics of the conversation groups. This could be achieved by the instructors' presence in the classroom during conversation time, or by monitoring and providing feedback to students' electronic log entries. The organization should allow for flexibility in grouping, spontaneity of topics, and allow the classroom instructor the freedom to determine when to step in. Above all, the model needs to fit its unique situation. 

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## About the Author

**Betsy Kraft** earned a master's degree in TESOL from Portland State University, Oregon, after teaching elementary school for 22 years. In addition to the PSU class described in this article, she teaches ESOL and Education classes at Clackamas Community College, Oregon City, Oregon. ❖

## Links

To view video clips related to this article, go to:

<http://www.labschool.pdx.edu/Viewer/viewer.php?pl=Betsys%20NCSALL%20Clips&cl=Heidi>

<http://www.labschool.pdx.edu/Viewer/viewer.php?pl=Betsys%20NCSALL%20Clips&cl=International%20Student>

<http://www.labschool.pdx.edu/Viewer/viewer.php?pl=Betsys%20NCSALL%20Clips&cl=Ralph>

<http://www.labschool.pdx.edu/Viewer/viewer.php?pl=Betsys%20NCSALL%20Clips&cl=Scrapbook>

<http://www.labschool.pdx.edu/Viewer/viewer.php?pl=Betsys%20NCSALL%20Clips&cl=Set-up>

<http://www.labschool.pdx.edu/Viewer/viewer.php?pl=Betsys%20NCSALL%20Clips&cl=Better%20late%20than%20never>

# Spontaneous Conversations

## *A Window into Language Learners' Autonomy*

by **Dominique Brillanceau**

**I**t is break time. My beginning students of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) are milling around in the hallway, and I overhear them talking, in English. They are finding out where the closest coffee shop is, continuing a conversation that began in class, or perhaps comparing work schedules or family duties. I am amazed at their ease with the language. The fluency and the effectiveness of their communication differ from the language they use when engaged in a teacher-assigned task. Free from the artificiality of the classroom task, they display the kind of communicative competence we as instructors hope they will achieve. Sociolinguist Dell Hymes (1972) first coined the phrase and concept “communicative competence.” Grammatical competence is not sufficient to communicate effectively: the ability to use language appropriately, both receptively and productively, in real situations, creates that competence (Sinor, 2002). During the breaks between classes, my students display communicative competence.

Observing this communicative competence outside of the classroom led me to ask several questions

regarding their interactions within the classroom. Do the types of interaction I observe outside the classroom ever occur in the classroom? If so, when? What do students talk about outside of class? How do these instances of communicative competence contribute to learning? Do they foster learners' identity development in their new culture? I found the answers to these questions through systematic analysis of the videos taken in our Lab School classes. A closer look at one particular example will illustrate the richness of students' language as well as the role these conversations play in the development of identity in English. I also address here the implications that spontaneous conversations might have for the classroom.

### The Lab School

Established in the fall of 2001, NCSALL's Adult ESOL lab site (called the Lab School) is a partnership between Portland State University (PSU) and Portland Community College (PCC). ESOL classes are taught by ESOL faculty from PCC, using PCC's curriculum. Upon entrance into the program, our students are tested and placed into one of the program's four levels, which range from low-beginning to high-intermediate as defined by the National Reporting System (NRS) in correlation with Student Performance Levels (SPLs; see page 4 for more details on the program's class levels). Our student population is diverse:

they range in age from 17 to 77 years, with an average of 32 years. We have had students from 30 different linguistic backgrounds. They come from varied educational backgrounds: about half have high school diplomas in their countries of origin, the other half have either a few years of education or graduate degrees.

The two Lab School classrooms are each equipped with six ceiling cameras that videotape the classes; the students have agreed to participate in the research and are aware that recording is taking place. Four of the cameras are fixed and two move. Each of the two moving cameras follows one of two students wearing microphones. The microphone assignment is rotated each class session to capture each student at least twice in a 10-week term. The teacher also wears a microphone. To date, we have videotaped more than 3,200 hours of classroom interactions of all four levels of classes.

*“... a spontaneous conversation looks like a real conversation. The students no longer use the handout or the book; the rhythm of the exchange is not stilted or monotonous, but has a native-like fluency.”*

### Data for This Study

The data I used for this study came from a larger longitudinal study of one low-level learner from Mexico (Juan) and his language-related episodes (Brillanceau, forthcoming). I originally chose Juan because he stood out as an inquisitive and resourceful student and he only had had six years of education in his home country. The study I report on here emerged as I began to observe off-task

conversations taking place. In these conversations students were bringing the outside world with them into the classroom, using a quality of language reminiscent of the break-time conversations I have witnessed throughout my career. Using the video database querying function, I found each class time in which Juan was wearing a microphone, as well as each class in which he sat next to someone wearing the microphone. The data collection began in the winter of 2003, when Juan was in the high-beginning level class, and spans six consecutive terms at the same level. For the original study, I was able to view and transcribe about 40 hours of class time during which Juan and other students were engaged in various tasks by themselves, in pairs, or as a class. Of these, about 13 hours were of pair interactions. Of Juan's 16 partners in this data, only four were also Spanish speakers, and they seldom used Spanish together. Of about 13 hours of transcribed pair interaction, I was able to isolate 15 spontaneous conversations. This might seem to be only a few incidences for this time frame, but it is important to remember that the students' level of English is low and such conversations demand a certain fluency and confidence.

## Characteristics of Spontaneous Conversations

Spontaneous conversation stands out in the classroom as dialogue that is initiated and controlled by a pair of students. Such interactions usually happen between students during pair work directed by the teacher, whether highly or loosely structured. It may also happen outside of a teacher-led activity, when the partners are finished and waiting for others to be done, or between activities. In a highly structured activity, in which both the language structure and the theme are assigned by the teacher and students work either from a teacher

handout or a classroom text, a spontaneous conversation looks like a real conversation. The students no longer use the handout or the book; the rhythm of the exchange is not stilted or monotonous, but has a native-like fluency. As one would expect, spontaneous conversations also occur in loosely structured activities, with students ending up off topic. For a researcher, spontaneous conversations conducted during loosely structured activities are more difficult to identify.

The transcript in the box to the right (and on the following page) shows an example of a spontaneous conversation between Juan and Abby, a young Chinese woman. This took place at the end of a three-hour class, after they had finished discussing the books they had been reading. As indicated in line 1 of the transcript, the teacher then tells them the next step: to record what they read in their reading logs.

The spontaneous discussion is easily identified here: it is obviously not related to recording their reading, as assigned by the teacher. From lines 5 to 51, the topic and the conversation initiated by Juan are about work. From lines 52 to 56 there is a brief shift in topic, with Abby expressing her concern about the relationship between low English skills and not being able to find another job. Juan's questions are well-constructed and Abby's short answers have a quality like those of a native speaker. They ride through a few misunderstandings but persist in the topic, culminating with line 57 where Abby starts questioning Juan about his work situation, which is an indication that the topic matters to her as well.

## Implications for Learning

Spontaneous conversations serve two learning purposes. Students continue to acquire language skills, particularly as a result of negotiating meaning; and they help the learner

### April 4, 2003 Conversation Between Juan and Abby

1. Teacher: ok now please come up and get your reading logs, look for the
2. letter of your name and your reading log is inside.
3. ((Both J & A finish listening to the teacher's task directions. J
4. looks at A and points to her as a sign of turn allocation))
5. J: where do you work.
6. A: mmmm?
7. J: where do you work.
8. A. whe[re?]
9. J: [(where)
10. A: in downtown.
11. J: in downtown?=  
12. A: =in restaurant.=
13. J: =in a restaurant? What kind of restaurant.
14. A: Chinese restaurant.
15. J: Chinese?
16. J: how many hours do you work?
17. ((A looks to the ceiling, brushes her fingers through her hair, looks back at J))
18. A: how man- how many?=  
19. J: =hours
20. A: hours?
21. J: how many (.) hours.
22. A: ((uses her fingers to represent number two)).
23. J: ((looks surprised)) tw(o
24. A: [two days
25. (.)
26. A: [( ) two days a week.=
27. J: [(only two days?)
28. J: =in a-week
29. (.)
30. J: ( )
31. A: two days a week.

*Continued on page 24 . . .*

**Juan and Abby**  
*Conversation continued . . .*

32. J: why?  
 33. A: ((shakes head))  
 34. J: slowed down?  
 35. A: mh?  
 36. J: slowed down?  
 37. A: what slowed down?  
 38. J: slowed down (.) slowed down, not to- not too much customer.  
 39. A: mm:. (.) no. is ah (.8) too much too much waitress.  
 40. (1.5)  
 41. J: why do you have too too much hours or too much days.  
 42. A: too much day?  
 43. J: uh huh  
 44. A: why I just a two days (ah yes)? (.) .hh uh::  
 45. J: which day do [you work  
 46. A: [another people is ah: (.) four days a week. I work  
 47. in ah two days a week.  
 48. J: do you have, do you have just one work?  
 49. A: mm?  
 50. (.)  
 51. J: d- do you have a other other work?  
 52. A: yes, I think (but), I c-I speak English not very well.= It's very  
 53. hard find another work.  
 54. J: ((laughs and nods))  
 55. A: yeah.  
 56. J: ((nods))  
 57. A: you work in the kitchen?

acquire an identity in the new language. This identity emerges as learners master the different vocabularies that reflect their multiple roles as adults. Throughout the interaction, Abby and Juan often repeat what the other person says, either to confirm what as heard or as a request for clarification. These strategies help them to negotiate meaning, which in turn promotes learning (Long, 1996). For example, Juan uses the phrase “slowed down” in line 34, a colloquial expression not taught in the classroom. By bringing it from the outside world, and explaining it to Abby in the context he probably learned it from, he teaches her a new term. This adds to her vocabulary. She verifies its meaning by applying it to her own work context: after Juan defines “slowed down” for her as “not too much customers” (line 38), Abby shows her understanding by saying that there are too many waitress (line 39). As the conversation continues, Juan asks the same question twice, the second time in a slightly different way (lines 48 and 51), because Abby didn’t respond the first time he asked. Juan’s self-correction shows the versatility of his language; while Abby doesn’t respond directly to his question, he has exposed her to two different ways of asking the same question. This is an example of comprehensible input, which, suggests linguist Stephen Krashen (1985), contributes to learning.

Motivation and investment are necessary for language learning to take place and for the learner to acquire an identity in the culture of the new language (Norton, 2000). Students are motivated to talk about what matters to them most: work, health, and education, including the difficulty or challenges of learning a new language. Other topics often include family background, and cultural information, and transportation. Motivation and investment were present in the 15 incidents I observed for this study, the latter manifest through the students’ level of engagement. Juan initiates the conversation and the two speakers

continue communicating even though they have to negotiate meanings. Abby shows her engagement when she asks him about his situation. Their interaction allows them to express their identities as workers, healthy community members, and lifelong learners in a safe environment. The topic of work as discussed by Juan and Abby brings up their economic concern as immigrants. Juan is able to engage Abby because they share the same concern. Her response to whether she has other work brings in yet another concern, that of her English skills, which she perceives as a barrier to getting more work. Juan’s nodding and laughing seem to enable her to feel connected with him and, in turn, ask him about his situation.

## Implications for Teaching

As teachers, we need to be aware that spontaneous conversations occur and that the kind of learning they promote is valuable and complements our teaching. Students use English to discuss concerns that may or may not be part of the curriculum. Spontaneous conversations create additional opportunities for negotiation of meaning, which is thought to facilitate learning. The recurrence of themes used by the students suggests that they are important to them. We need to create an environment that will allow spontaneous conversations to happen. The use of pair work in the classroom facilitates communication among peers. Pair activities should be set up to minimize the teacher’s involvement: without the teacher’s presence students are pushed to negotiate more; if the teacher is present, students tend to model the activity and not challenge themselves any further. Teachers need to allow time for the task to be done but also for learner-directed conversation to take place; learners need to create their own space for learning.

Students in this study have many different first languages; I cannot say




### Web Link

This link will allow you to view the video from which the transcript is derived.  
<http://www.labschool.pdx.edu/Viewer/viewer.php?sponconvfob>



whether spontaneous conversations also occur in English in classes where students share the same language of origin. Managing pair work so that spontaneous conversations can occur might be a greater challenge in that situation, since students might be tempted to share their real-life concerns in their native language.

If, as teachers, we model communication to promote and maintain community, students will follow and use English in a similar manner. Being aware that spontaneous conversations happen gives us an opportunity to eavesdrop on our learners' linguistic needs, which is helpful in planning subsequent classes. 

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## About the Author

**Dominique Brillianceau** has taught adult immigrants and refugees in the Portland area since 1986. For the past four years, she has been a teacher and a researcher at the NCSALL Lab School. Her research interests are literacy, second language acquisition, and immigrant identity. ❖

# Turn-Taking and Opening Interactions

by John Hellermann

**T**he teacher set up a task in which students practiced using the yes/no question form about possession: "Do you have \_\_\_?" She wrote the form on the board, modeled appropriate questions and answers, and demonstrated with several students in front of the entire class. Her students were accustomed to working in pairs, so they had no questions about what to do next when she said "Now, ask your partner. Ask your partner, 'Do you have \_\_\_\_\_?' 'Do you have a book?' 'Do you have paper?' Practice with your partner."

**But I had a question: What does happen next?**

Most instructors working with adult English language learners are aware of the advantages of having their students work together on tasks in small groups or pairs. Research has shown that by using English, learners of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) gain opportunities to co-construct or negotiate meaning (Long, 1983; Pica, 1988). Carrying out tasks with others in English gives learners opportunities to use the language and to test out hypotheses about vocabulary and language structure in a safe environment. Learners have fewer inhibitions about using English correctly when talking to other learners (Price, 1991).

To do this rich language work,

learners must become facile in the practices that make possible the back and forth of talk in interaction. They must also learn to manage the practices that get their interactions underway; in other words, they must learn how to start a conversation in English (Mori, 2002). When humans meet in face to face encounters, one of the parties in the interaction (in most cases) starts talking (Goffman, 1963). In the context of the language classroom, in task-directed interaction with a classmate, these so-called natural practices are used in slightly contrived contexts. Yet, in each case, inside or outside the classroom, an issue for learners of a language as well as first-language speakers is who says what and in what sequence. Boxer (1993) has suggested that language learning through the negotiation of meaning is facilitated when learners are fluent in turn-taking in the language being learned: the back and forth with language in which people routinely and unconsciously engage.

## The Research

It is obvious that ESOL instructors cannot easily monitor every pair in their classrooms. Not much teacher wisdom has been gathered about what students do to start pair activities, nor has much empirical research been done in this regard. One surprising outcome of research on small group interaction is that when instructors become involved with their students' small group or dyad interactions, they alter the dynamic of that group to the detriment of learning (Ford, 1999; Garland, 2002).

In this article, I report on

research into practices for turn-taking that adult learners of English used to start their teacher-assigned, task-focused dyadic interaction with their peers in an ESOL classroom. I also discuss the implications of this research for instructors. The study was conducted at the National Lab Site for Adult ESOL, known locally as “The Lab School,” funded by the Institute for Education Sciences, US Department of Education, via the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL). The Lab School is a partnership between Portland State University (PSU) and Portland Community College (PCC), both of which are in Portland, Oregon. The school and research facilities are housed at PSU, while the registration, curriculum, and teachers are from PCC. The ESOL classrooms have six cameras embedded in the ceilings. During every class period, two students and the teacher wear wireless microphones. Two microphones in the ceiling capture audio from the entire classroom. Specially designed software enables researchers to view the six views of the classroom video and multiple audio tracks simultaneously, providing as complete a picture of the classroom environment as possible (Reder et al., 2003).

The study focused on five adult learners of English who participated in classes at the Lab School for at least four terms, starting in beginning-level classes (Student Performance Level ((SPL)) 1-2) and progressing to upper-level classes (SPL 4-6). They were not all in the same classroom each term. I collected 100 interactions from these students: 50 when they were in beginning-level classes and 50 when they were in upper-level ones. The study compares the turn-taking in openings done by the five students when they were in the beginning-level class with the practices they used in their peer-to-peer interactions when they were in the upper-level classes. Such turn-taking practices include working out

what, exactly, the task is (task clarification); inquiries into health or other light banter (interpersonal exchanges); and deciding who will take the first turn and who will go second (turn allocation).

## The Data

The data show distinct differences between beginning-level and upper-level classes. In the beginning level (Box 1), the students used many fewer pre-task moves than when they were in the upper-level classes. These students’ beginning-level interactions were characterized by turning to face one another (achieving mutual postural alignment) after the teacher’s final task instructions and then immediately starting the activity without any intervening talk (what I am calling a direct launch). In the beginning level, 60 percent of the students’ openings for the pair work were characterized as these direct launches. In the upper-level classes, only 24 percent of the peer interactions were direct launches of the teacher-assigned task.

While the beginning-level students tended to launch directly into pair work, when these students got to the upper levels of proficiency they possessed a greater repertoire of verbal moves for opening interactions. These

moves reflect greater linguistic sophistication, subtlety of action, and integration into the community of the ESOL classroom. They include turn allocation, evident in Box 2; starting the interaction with a joke, in Box 3; and starting the interaction with clarification of the task, in Box 4.

Boxes 2, 3, and 4 show a few examples of the task-prefatory talk

## Transcription Conventions

- ((turns))* double parentheses are transcriber’s comments
- ?* high rising intonation contour
- .* final falling intonation contour
- ,* continuing intonation
- :* consonant or vowel sound is stretched
- >then he say<* talk inside angle brackets is faster
- [* indicates overlapping talk
- (.)* micro pause
- (10.0)* pauses timed in seconds
- (words)* words transcribed in single parentheses indicates transcriber uncertainty

### Box 1

<http://www.labschool.pdx.edu/Viewer/viewer.php?FOB1jkh>

#### Pre-Task

#### Beginning Level

#### Task: To practice the question form “Do you have?”

- Teacher: Now, ask your partner. Ask your partner,  
 Jeanette: Okay.  
 Teacher: Do you have. Do you have a book. Do you have paper.  
 Jeanette and FuQin: ((Turn to face one another as teacher is talking))  
 Teacher: Practice with your partner  
 Jeanette: Mmm  
 FuQin: Mmm Do you do you have a book.  
 Jeanette: Yeah I have. ((moves book toward FuQin))

### Box 2

<http://www.labschool.pdx.edu/Viewer/viewer.php?FOB2jkh>

#### Turn Allocation

#### Upper level

#### Task: To practice the question form “going to”

- Teacher: Ask your partner. Ask your partner those questions. Maybe you are sure you’ll say yes I’m going to do that or, it all depends. I’m not quite sure. Ask your partner for about five minutes. ((Students looking directly at the board))  
 Reinaldo: Okay. ((as he turns to Manal)) first=  
 Manal: What (are) ((as she turns to Reinaldo))  
 Reinaldo: Okay (you)  
 Manal: Okay okay  
 Reinaldo: >you first you first<  
 Manal: Okay go ahead  
 Reinaldo: Okay thanks. ((turns to board)) what are you going to do when you finish this course

used by students in the upper-level classes. In Box 2, Reinaldo uses an imperative for turn allocation: "You first." In Box 3, Kathryn tells Reinaldo she is ready to start the task and then makes an ironic remark about the difficulty of the task. In Box 4, Tommy and Abby engage in a rather lengthy clarification of the task assigned by the teacher.

## Instructional Implications

One of the primary goals of student dyadic tasks is student engagement in language for face-to-face interaction, and not simply the completion of a teacher-designed task. Instructors should make sure that students understand this goal for

their interactive tasks. Allocating some extra time around pair tasks will give students time to engage in talk that is not explicitly task-oriented, but has been called spontaneous conversations (see the article on page 22 for more on this).

Students should be encouraged to use all their social skills in their everyday classroom interactions. These include prefacing tasks with interpersonal talk such as joking and inquiring into the well being of their partner, and, more directly as part of their tasks, inquiring into readiness and asking for clarification.

One way for instructors to help students become aware of and improve their skills at opening interactions is to video record first-language speakers' opening interactions at the places where students will need to interact using English, such

as the post office or grocery store. The teacher can transcribe the recorded interactions, review the transcripts with students in class, and then play the recordings and analyze the recordings and transcripts with the students. After the students practice these openings, a homework assignment might be to go to these locations and try the openings that were analyzed and practiced in class. Students can then report back to the class on what was successful or not successful about starting their interactions.

Recording student interaction in the classroom raises students' awareness of the details of turn-taking that constitute successful interactions in English. With more advanced students, the focus on successful turn-taking in English can easily move to the discussion of cross-linguistic differences in language routines (pragmatics) such as salutations, leave-taking, and other speech acts such as thanking, apologizing, requesting, and appropriate responses to these actions.

## Reflections

In the beginning-level interactions, even without pre-task talk, students manage to get into and accomplish their assigned task without incident. Although these practices of opening interactions may evolve naturally, increasing students' awareness of turn-taking practices can only help.

Students have different personalities and interactional styles. However, all adult ESOL learners, who are immigrants and/or refugees to a new culture, face similar difficulties involving the use of English that can be ameliorated through the adoption of interpersonal communication skills. These start, I believe, with the micro-level sequential aspects of turn-taking as practiced in the language classroom. Mastering the sound system or grammar of a second language is a

### Box 3

<http://www.labschool.pdx.edu/Viewer/viewer.php?FOB3jkh>

Joke

Upper level

**Task: To practice the question form "need to" followed by the infinitive verb form**

- Kathryn: Yeah, I'm ready. Yeah. Very easy.  
Eh heh [heh heh  
Reinaldo: [For you not for me,  
Kathryn: No, I just joking. I'm just yeah I'm just joking.  
Reinaldo: What did you do: What did [you do  
Kathryn: [tchha ok. ok. I I am just looking it's now I am just looking.  
Yeah, I'm (recent joking) going to now (in the past).  
Kathryn: Yeah.  
Reinaldo: Yeah?  
Kathryn: Yeah.  
Reinaldo: What did you do. (.) What did you do  
Kathryn: What did you do?  
Reinaldo: What [did you do  
Kathryn: [Yesterday.

### Box 4

<http://www.labschool.pdx.edu/Viewer/viewer.php?FOB4jkh>

Task Clarification


Upper level

- Teacher: So look at your questions, look at the example, and check. After five minutes, we'll put all of the questions on the board.  
((lines missing: clarification with student))  
for five minutes together with your partner, check your questions you can look at your old questions but make sure they are in this order. One, two, three, four. Just for five minutes, and then we'll put the questions on the board.  
Abby & Tommy: ((start turning towards one another and moving items around on desk))  
(11.0)  
Tommy: ((looks at Abby))  
Abby: From the: \*this story,  
Tommy: mm (.) one sixty.  
Abby: One sixty.  
Tommy: From this story. Write [the question five questions.  
Abby: [This story.  
Abby: Twice,  
Tommy: Yeah you can write out five questions ( )  
Abby: From this story.  
Tommy: Yeah.  
Abby: From the story.  
Tommy: Yeah you write five five questions.  
(12.0) ((students start the task after this pause))

\* ((mutual posture alignment occurs on "this"))

long-term process. In the meantime, a practiced repertoire of opening moves for starting their interactions in English can go a long way toward helping learners achieve cooperative exchanges in English with native speakers who may be less than patient when talking with language learners.

The turn-taking practices in task openings might be thought of as student resources that, nurtured in the classroom, are used and facilitate further language development. This and other continuing research at the Lab School (Harris, 2004; Brillanceau, 2005) suggests that students engaging in student-student interaction will activate and use resources that they bring into the classroom if more than enough time is allocated to complete the teacher-assigned tasks. Evidence for this seemingly invisible process for the acquisition of aspects of language such as turn-taking in the context of opening dyadic interactions should

assure instructors that having students work together in pairs offers them potential language learning opportunities beyond the language tasks that teachers design. 

**“Students should be encouraged to use all their social skills in their everyday classroom interactions.”**

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### Resources

Readers interested in the cultural aspects of initiating and sustaining conversations may want to explore these resources.

#### Books

***Look at Me When I Talk to You: ESL Learners in Non-ESL Classrooms***, by Catherine Eddy and Sylvia Helmer, is published by Pippin Publishing, Don Mills, Ontario, [http://www.pippinpub.com/search.asp?srch\\_string=Look+at+me+when+I+talk+to+you&Submit=++Search+%21++](http://www.pippinpub.com/search.asp?srch_string=Look+at+me+when+I+talk+to+you&Submit=++Search+%21++)

***Gender and English Language Learners***, by Bonny Norton and Aneta Pavlenko, is published by TESOL International, Alexandria, VA. [http://www.tesol.org/s\\_tesol/sec\\_document.asp?TrackID=&SID=1&DID=1854&CID=283&VID=2&RTID=0&CIDQS=&Taxonomy=False&specialSearch=False](http://www.tesol.org/s_tesol/sec_document.asp?TrackID=&SID=1&DID=1854&CID=283&VID=2&RTID=0&CIDQS=&Taxonomy=False&specialSearch=False)

#### Videos

***Understanding Conversation Styles Around the World*** by Susan Steinbach, is available from Alta Book Center Publishers, Burlingame, CA <http://www.altaesl.com/Detail.cfm?CatalogID=2003&>

***Conversation Styles in the USA: Learning to Play*** by Susan Steinbach, is available from Alta Book Center Publishers, Burlingame, CA <http://www.altaesl.com/Detail.cfm?CatalogID=2004&Basketball>

—Provided by Terrence Kelley

### About the Author

**John Hellermann** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Applied Linguistics at Portland State University. His research interests include classroom discourse and talk in social interaction in the language classroom. Previously, he taught English as a second language in the United States and in Hungary. ♦

# Taking a Closer Look at Struggling ESOL Learners

by Robin L. Schwarz

**A** *Anna Maria, a quiet South American woman in her early 60s, had spent more than two years in the same low-intermediate English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) phonics class. At intake, Anna Maria had reported two years of schooling in her native country. According to her teachers, she did not always complete homework and was frequently absent. In addition to her age, the staff of the program saw her lack of education, absences, and failure to do homework as probable causes of Anna Maria's failure to progress. Although other students with these issues generally make progress of some kind, Anna Maria did not. Yet she persisted. Her persistence and deep disappointment about staying in the same class caused Anna Maria's teachers to ask that she be referred for testing for a learning disability.*

The failure of ESOL learners like Anna Maria to progress in learning often leads teachers to conclude that these learners must have learning disabilities. A learning disability is suspected because learning has been so profoundly affected that it seems impossible that

anything else could be the cause of the problem. In fact, my more than 20 years of study and research into ways that learning disabilities can be differentiated from other challenges in adult ESOL learners have taught me that many other factors may impede learning. Some may be related to the learner's cultural and linguistic background; sometimes there are physiological or psychological factors involved. In this article I present examples illustrating some of these types of impediments and provide some ideas on how to find out more about what may be causing learners to fail to learn.

## A Variety of Problems

As in the case of Anna Maria, teachers want learners to be evaluated to find out what is holding up their learning. However, my experience indicates that often nearly all we need to know can be obtained in an interview with the student. Anna Maria's interview, for example, revealed multiple causes of her difficulties in learning. She had a significant hearing problem. Frequent ear infections had kept Anna Maria out of school in her beginning years. Eventually she had to be hospitalized and never returned to school. As a teen, she was sent to

Boston to have her entire left ear canal removed. Hearing in the other ear was much reduced as well so that Anna Maria was about 75 percent

hearing-impaired.

Anna Maria had never told anyone about her hearing loss and, instead, struggled with it daily in class. Because she was often exhausted from trying to concentrate on the class proceedings, she sometimes chose not to come to class. When she was there, she missed hearing much of what the homework was, because assignments were often given orally.

The hearing loss was only part of the story. Her teachers thought Anna Maria's problems stemmed mostly from low literacy.

Another "Tell me more" question about dropping out of school prompted her to say that she could read Spanish-language books and magazines and often wrote letters in Spanish to people at home: she was fully literate.

Moreover, her self-evaluation of her English was high. She liked learning new words and, having been in this country a long time, knew many words that more recently arrived classmates did not

know. In fact, Anna Maria felt frustrated at seeing new students come into class and then move past her when she knew so much more English than they did. A writing sample of about seven sentences showed that not only did she have a good vocabulary but also her long, interesting sentences were perfectly coherent, with few spelling mistakes, which seemed to contradict the phonics problems she was reported to have.

Anna Maria also experienced stress and depression. She became very emotional when asked about her absences and missing homework. As the sole caretaker of her mother, who had Alzheimer's disease, she could not easily find someone to stay with her mother to attend class. Worse, if she took books or papers home, her



mother would hide them and then, of course, not remember doing so. Anna Maria did not take work home anymore. She confessed that the strain of this situation had caused clinical depression, for which she was taking medication, but sometimes the medication did not prevent her from feeling overwhelmed and sad. And just as she had not shared other information, she had never offered these real reasons for her struggles in participating in and attending class.

In the workshops I facilitate, participants from other cultures nod vigorously in agreement when I note the reticence of older ESOL learners in talking about the disabilities or other difficulties that Anna Maria experienced. This means we cannot expect that these learners will be forthcoming about such problems. At the same time, American teachers often tell me that they do not ask their learners too many questions because they believe that inquiring about such issues as physical disabilities, mental health, or low literacy will seem intrusive or insensitive. Yet the consequences of teachers' not knowing are clear in Anna Maria's case. Not only was Anna Maria's difficulty incorrectly thought to be a learning disability, but she was also not accommodated as a person with physical impairment. In addition, because her problems were not recognized for what they were, she was placed far lower in her program than her actual skills warranted and she was believed to be lacking motivation and commitment to learning. Once her teachers learned the true nature of her difficulties, her teacher and the director re-evaluated her and put into place accommodations such as making sure all assignments were written and helping Anna Maria find a solution to the homework dilemma.

## Ask Privately and Gently

Having conducted hundreds of interviews with adult ESOL learners experiencing problems in learning, I have found that learners rarely withhold critical information — as long as the questioning is done privately and gently. Sometimes they are eager to have someone listen, as in the case of Henri, an older Haitian man who had



sat for nearly a month in his beginning ESOL literacy class without responding or doing anything. Once the door was closed for our interview and I told him his teacher was concerned, Henri poured out a touching story about prostate problems that totally preoccupied him. His daughter wanted him to learn English, he said, and he came to class only to make her happy. Knowing why Henri was making slow progress helped his teacher to feel less frustrated and more positive about him. His teacher started to provide careful encouragement, congratulating him for being in class at all and for any effort he made to participate, rather than focusing on Henri's comparative lack of progress. Tiny successes — completing an activity in class with

another student; participating in an oral activity successfully — helped Henri to be more engaged while he wrestled with his health problem.

## Impact Underestimated

Sometimes a factor that is understood to have an impact on learning is completely obvious, but that impact is underestimated. Then the learner may be judged deficient, when in fact she or he is being asked to learn things or perform tasks beyond his or her skills or knowledge. Surer, a native of Somalia in her 50s, illustrates this problem. When I met her, Surer had spent two years in the same beginning ESOL class and, according to her teacher, had barely made any progress. Surer was completely nonliterate when she joined the class whereas most of her classmates had beginning literacy skills in their first languages. With Surer's limited oral English precluding much of an interview, her teacher helped to explain the situation. The teacher told me she was frustrated and completely puzzled about Surer's inability

to grasp the grammar the class was reading and writing: activities and tests of negation in sentences and conjugation of verbs, for example.

Unlike her classmates, Surer lacked basic concepts of literacy when she started. Her teacher confirmed that Surer had not even had such fundamental skills as being able to hold a pencil or discriminate visual information on her arrival in class. Surer needed a full range of preliteracy skills that her class was not designed to cover and that her teacher was not prepared to provide. Experience with adult learners such as these three tells me that their reluctance to inform their teachers about their problems very likely was influenced by culturally based reluctance to stand out as someone

needing special consideration of some kind. This kind of fear is certainly not limited to ESOL learners.

## Culturally Appropriate Questions

Sometimes, cultural attitudes are even stronger and more direct and become barriers to learning, as in the case of seven Sudanese young men from the Dinka culture. After three years in an adult ESOL program, their speaking and listening skills were relatively good. But these young men were not progressing in reading and writing and thus towards their goal of a certificate of General Educational Development (GED).

They were described as only mildly interested and putting out little effort despite regular attendance. Although some of the Sudanese refugees in adult education programs have little or no literacy, these young men reported that they had basic literacy in Arabic, but not in their native Dinka, which is an unwritten language. The fundamental literacy issues affecting Surer did not seem to apply, nor did these young men seem to have the physical or psychological problems that affected Henri and Anna Maria.

The Dinka language is quite different phonologically and syntactically from English. Believing that these differences might have been part of the young men's difficulties, the director of their program brought in a consulting teacher to help the Sudanese with their pronunciation and other language skills. This teacher was not met with enthusiasm but rather by increased indifference. When he tried to find out what the young men thought of their classes and teachers, he elicited only the most basic responses, both orally and in writing. Of the seven, only two completed the written response. Knowing that I had spent some time investigating problems of Sudanese learners, this teacher asked me what I thought was going on.

I have learned from Sudanese informants that Dinka generally do not voice opinions directly. Nor do they usually ask or answer direct questions requiring that they give such opinions; rather, they may answer evasively and politely to avoid offending, as they did to this teacher when he asked their opinion of their program and teachers. Furthermore, Dinka may prefer not to answer what they consider to be useless questions because they believe, say informants, that the person asking already knows the answer. I suspect that the young men did not see any point to answering a question about why they wanted to learn

English: to them it was all too obvious that they needed English to succeed in the United States.

At my suggestion, the consulting teacher changed his tack. Instead of asking direct questions, he created an informal conversational situation to discuss how education could help someone and what one needed to go on to higher education. This permitted the men to express opinions indirectly without implicating any teacher or their program directly. To his surprise, the young men eagerly participated in this conversation and vehemently expressed their desire to read and write about topics they

## An Intake Interview

Questions should be structured so that they are grammatically simple and do not contain idioms.

### **1. Information about health and medications: mental health; physical impairments; eyeglasses; dates of recent visual, hearing, and health screenings**

In many cultures it is not polite to ask directly about health issues or a person's family situation. Persons from other cultures may not believe that such issues interfere with learning or may cause them to be excluded from a class. Information may need to be obtained in a less direct way or through use of examples or pictures of persons with difficulties. Interpreters who are given express permission by the learner to hear and pass on private information can be extremely helpful in getting this information. Young children of adults should not be used as interpreters. Learners who have glasses that are several years old should be counseled to undergo a visual screening immediately. Persons whose glasses are uncomfortable or who do not like them tend to leave them at home.

### **2. Amount and nature of literacy**

Wanting to appear to have some education, learners may report several years of schooling, when in fact their schooling was interrupted or of very short duration. Ask them to describe their schooling in more detail. If schooling was incomplete, ask why they stopped. If they give only a little information, say "Tell me more."

### **3. Language of literacy**

Learners from countries that were colonized or people who may have moved often will not necessarily be literate in their first language. Do not ask if the learner is literate in the first language. They will simply say no. Ask what the home language is and if it is a written language. If it is, then ask if the learner can read and write in that or any other language. If the language of literacy is one you do not know about, find out the basics of how its phonological and syntactical structures differ from those of English, and what cultural and pragmatic differences there may be in its language.

Note that even the best interviewer may not obtain entirely accurate or true information. Be prepared to learn later on that schooling was briefer or problems more severe than you were first told, or that health or physical problems exist when the learner may have denied them earlier. It is only human to want to look good in the eyes of your teacher. ❖

believed would help them achieve their goals. They were adamant about not wanting to study more ESOL grammar or vocabulary of the type they had had for more than two years. These opinions were new to the program staff.

The teacher also changed the

**“...it is essential to learn as much about our learners as possible through a more extensive intake process. Second, these cases illustrate that staff need more education about the variety of noneducational issues that can impede learning.”**

writing assignment, giving them a choice of topics such as their preference for jobs or their favorite sports team. Again he was surprised to find that all seven wrote at least a full page about their chosen topics. When their cultural responses to activities were taken into account, their performance changed significantly.

### Resources

LDA Minnesota (2003). *Taking Action: A Resource Guide for Instructors Serving ESL Adults with Learning Difficulties or Learning Disabilities*. Minneapolis: LDA Minnesota, 2003. Available at: [http://www.ldaminnesota.org/programs/educational\\_products.html#action](http://www.ldaminnesota.org/programs/educational_products.html#action)

Visit <http://www.culturalorientation.net/pubs.html>, the web site of the Center for Applied Linguistics' Cultural Orientation Resource Center, for information on the cultures of the major refugee groups to the United States over the past 20 years. ❖

## Extensive Intake; Staff Development


What do these cases teach us about finding out what is holding up learning? First, we see that it is essential to learn as much about our learners as possible through a more extensive intake process. Second, these cases illustrate that staff need more education about the variety of noneducational issues that can impede learning.

Time is often an issue at intake, when a roomful of adults is waiting to be processed and program requirements mandate only a certain number of hours for intake in relation to instruction.

However, these case

studies show that critical information about physical problems, health, living situations, the amount and nature of students' literacy, and the nature of their first language can be key to ensuring that learners' true needs are not missed and that educational time and effort are not wasted. Programs should strive to strike a balance between the need to process new learners efficiently and the value of having this information.

When such information is gained at intake, staff need to know how to respond to it. Staff development about visual and hearing impairment, mental and general health issues can alert teachers to problems such as those of Anna Maria and Henri. Support in gaining awareness of cultural beliefs and differences and their impact on their learners is needed for all ESOL teachers, so that learners like the Sudanese men do not sink into unexpressed frustration. Finally, an understanding of the issues of preliteracy is important for all teachers working with learners from countries or cultures with very low literacy rates. Staff development that covers these

issues can only contribute to the effectiveness of teachers and programs in serving learners who would otherwise struggle as the learners in these cases did. 

### About the Author

**Robin Schwarz** is an ESOL tutor and LD specialist and consultant in ESOL/LD issues. She is a partner in the TLP Group in Columbus, Ohio. ❖

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# A Conversation with **FOB**...

## Learning How to Teach Health Literacy

**T**he *Health Literacy Study Circle+ Facilitator Guides* is a new series being published by NCSALL. Each of the three guides provides all the materials and methods needed to facilitate a 15-hour study circle that introduces teachers to a skills-based approach to health literacy. Focus on Basics spoke with NCSALL's Lisa Soricone, one of the Study Circle+'s authors; and New York City Literacy Assistance Center's (LAC) Winston Lawrence, a staff development facilitator who piloted the guides. We talked about what a Study Circle+ is, what a skills-based approach to health literacy is, and why both are valuable to adult basic educators.

**FOB:** Let's start at the beginning. What is a study circle?

**WINSTON:** A study circle is a group of anywhere from eight to 12 people who come together to discuss and explore a particular topic of concern. Each person in the group may be given an assignment to

investigate some aspect of the topic. Subjects can be anything, from sexuality, to Marx, to issues in the community. NCSALL has study circle guides on a variety of topics including learner persistence and accountability. Study circles have been conducted in many communities to discuss and understand conditions of social life. It's a discussion-oriented structure that enables people to arrive at a better understanding of a topic or issue.

**LISA:** Sometimes study circles culminate in a series of strategies and next steps that participants can pursue.

**FOB:** And the "+"?

**WINSTON:** While other study circles may end with the generation of ideas for further action, the Study Circle+ is designed to integrate action into the study circle experience. Teachers take the discussion from the group back to the classroom, where they conduct a needs assessment and try out new health literacy lessons. Teachers then return to the study circle and process these experiences with the group.

**LISA:** The "+" notion is that you don't just read and talk. You use the Study Circle+ discussions to guide new activities in your classroom and then build on that experience within the Study Circle+ sessions.

**WINSTON:** So the difference is the real practical outcome: the teacher tries out the lesson, returns to the study circle, and shares the results of the classroom experience.

**FOB:** How did you get involved in the pilot?

**WINSTON:** The Literacy Assistance Center, which provides professional development opportunities for ABE programs in New York City, was asked by the [New York City] Mayor's office to assist in developing a framework to inform students in literacy classes about how they could access low-cost health insurance. We are not direct providers of literacy services. We had never had an initiative like this on health literacy. And we certainly couldn't just go to programs and say "teach

*“Study circles have been conducted in many communities to discuss and understand conditions of social life. It's a discussion-oriented structure that enables people to arrive at a better understanding of a topic or issue.”*

health insurance.” So we were interested in finding a model that enabled teachers to bring health literacy into the classroom in a structured and integrated way. We knew that teachers were not very

comfortable teaching health content in the classroom. We said, “Let’s try to look for something else that would be more interesting and engaging.” We reviewed literature, we looked at who was doing what. In the course of investigating, we learned that Dr. Rima Rudd [of Harvard School of Public Health and NCSALL] was doing some work in this area and knew that we should talk with her.

**FOB: You also needed programs to work with. How did you find them?**

**WINSTON:** We looked at the literacy community [in New York City] and determined that this would be difficult to do across all five boroughs. It was going to be better to start with a few programs. We looked at context and neighborhoods, and also capacities of programs. As we looked for programs, we also thought that we could conduct a pilot with a couple of programs. Within that context we identified four programs. Thirteen teachers and 183 students participated in the project.

**FOB: Did they see health as an issue for their learners?**

**WINSTON:** As we raised the question, they all said that this would be interesting for their students. In Sunset Park, where there’s a large Asian and Hispanic community, they agreed that it was an area of concern. The Queens Public Library, which serves the most ethnically diverse community in the city and is reported to have the largest ESOL program in the country, said that health has always been a part of their ESOL curriculum. We also met with the Mid-Manhattan Adult Learning Center, based in Harlem, where ESOL teachers noted that their students were interested in health. Many of them were interested in pursuing health careers. Carroll

Gardens, in Brooklyn, saw this as an opportunity to work with its Arab-speaking women around health issues.

**FOB: So there was an opportunity, and a need. What about the approach itself? How did the Study Circle+ approach differ from other staff development approaches you’ve used in the past?**

**WINSTON:** We’ve done institutes, one-day workshops, and half-day workshops, but the Study Circle+ approach has some attractive

*“As teachers read data showing the connections between low literacy and poor health outcomes, I could see them opening up and becoming excited. The model of professional development is useful and valuable.”*

elements that makes it different. First, it did not take teachers away all day. As you know, many adult education teachers teach part time, sometimes in several places. If a teacher is working at different institutions, it’s difficult for that person to be in a workshop all day: it creates a gap at the other places they work. So the three-hour sessions seemed a good way to organize staff development.

The five three-hour sessions were really spread out: starting in December and ending in February. Teachers had time to get back to the classroom and test out what they were learning.

The role of the staff developer was that of a facilitator: providing teachers with research-based articles

from NCSALL and from the medical community. As teachers read data showing the connections between low literacy and poor health outcomes, I could see them opening up and becoming excited. The model of professional development is useful and valuable.

Finally, the model gives teachers the opportunity to receive feedback from peers. In the evaluation, most of the teachers said that receiving feedback was one of the most important elements of the project. The sharing of experiences was another positive aspect of the Study Circle+ model.

**FOB: What about the content?**

**WINSTON:** In the first place, the issue of disparity in health and how the health system treats people seemed to us an attractive proposition, because it gets teachers focused on a social objective. The Study Circle+ provides an organized framework from the point of view of what was to be learned. It organizes health literacy into three areas: health care access and navigation, managing chronic illness, and disease

prevention and screening. The framework allowed us to avoid engaging teachers in teaching health content such as cancer or diabetes. Health is the context, but the teachers focus on teaching language and literacy skills. The ability to instruct therefore doesn’t depend on the teacher’s interest in or knowledge of health.

**FOB: What were the challenges?**

**WINSTON:** One challenge was how to get literacy programs to send several teachers to attend five sessions of professional development. Some programs have to pay substitute teachers while teachers are away. We were fortunate enough to have a grant to provide some monetary assistance

to programs. Sometimes such funds are not available to literacy programs.

A related challenge is the time commitment required. The Study Circle+ takes 15 hours of professional development time. Many teachers who participated said they really benefited, but hoped the time could be shortened in future programs.

**FOB: Doesn't it take time to learn and implement fully a new practice?**

**WINSTON:** Yes, but as you know, that time is not available in ABE programs. The monetary resources needed to do a 15-hour staff development program on one topic, important though it may be, is a real issue. What incentive do teachers or programs have to make this kind of investment?

**FOB: The strength of the model is one reason to run a Study Circle+, but time is an important consideration. What else should staff development programmers consider?**

**WINSTON:** When considering these particular Study Circles+, one important issue for program managers is their own philosophy and whether they see navigating the health care system as a legitimate activity in which their students should be engaged.

A second consideration is the notion that as students' engage in contextualized learning, they are more likely to show educational gains. Teachers told us in the ESOL classes that students became quite engaged, they were asking questions, talking, discussing things. This can positively affect the NRS outcomes. [The National Reporting System is a student gain measurement system that programs must report on.] In fact, the preliminary evaluation showed that students who participated in health literacy classes showed early educational gains. Students become interested in these health issues, so they become engaged and motivated learners.

**FOB: Let's shift from the model of professional development to the concept of health literacy. What do you mean by a skills-based approach to health literacy?**

**LISA:** It's an approach that focuses teachers' attention on the reading, writing, math, and communication skills that adults need to carry out the wide range of skills needed to manage their health. It's not a content focus. The skills are the driving force behind the lessons and the units. The health content is limited, although it can be expanded by having, for example, a medical partner or resource person come into the classroom. With this approach, the teacher focuses on the literacy, language, and math skills that students need to carry out health-related tasks.

This approach isn't new; some teachers are already doing this kind of stuff. The Study Circles+ offer a way to make it more consistent, to encourage more teachers to do it, and to help teachers feel more confident doing this kind of work.

**FOB: Why is a skills-based approach to health literacy important?**

**LISA:** There are four reasons. First, the degree to which individuals have the capacity to use their skills to make decisions and take action on their health is important. It may involve deciding what foods to eat, habits like smoking, making sense of health information, accessing health care, filling out forms, finding your way physically in the health center. These are demanding tasks for all of us but really hard for folks with low education levels and limited English. This approach helps reduce disparities in the health outcomes of people such as our ABE students.

A second reason for using a skills-based approach to health literacy, if you're interested in health literacy, is that when teachers approach health education via content, they're

likely to feel limited. They're not health educators, and some topics, such as cancer, are touchy areas. Teachers are comfortable teaching basic skills, however, and that's the emphasis with this approach.

This leads to the third reason: by approaching health literacy via basic skills, it doesn't increase demands on teachers. Instead, it fits with their goals of building basic skills.

The fourth reason is transferability. The skills we're talking about with health literacy are also transferable to other contexts: advocating for yourself, asking questions for clarification, reading charts and tables for information, understanding instructions, and finding your way around a new environment. These are skills that people need at work, as parents, and members of their communities.

**FOB: What does it involve for teachers?**

**LISA:** The first step is to understand the connections between health-related activities and the reading, writing, math, and communication skills that teachers already work on in their ABE and ESOL classes. Teachers may already have some sense of such connections, such as in making a doctor's appointment, filling out forms, or reading labels, but there are many more links between health tasks and ABE/ESOL instruction. The Study Circle+ Series is designed to provide teachers with structured opportunities to explore these links with specific emphasis on the areas of health care access and navigation, chronic disease management, and disease prevention and screening. These are the three areas the health field has identified as critical for the populations served by ABE and ESOL programs.

Teachers can also continue teaching skills as they currently do but weave in examples related to health contexts. For example, GED teachers who work on reading tables and charts might use examples that relate to health, such as a health

insurance eligibility table or body mass index chart.

**WINSTON:** As the teachers participated in the project and saw the connections, they became much more enthused and committed to working with students on it. It seemed to renew their commitment to helping students navigate and access the health system.

As part of the study circle, teachers ascertain students' needs. That's another important area. The curriculum, in a way, is governed by students' needs. If the dominant concern in one community is asthma, learning activities can be designed to address that. Somewhere else teachers might focus on obesity. Teachers would then build language and literacy skills on the tasks students need to address these relevant issues. The framework allows for students to inform the process.

Ultimately, one of the objectives is that students can advocate for themselves and their families. When they become aware of the issues in their community, they can advocate around those issues.

**FOB: Study Circle+ encourages practitioners to partner with local health care providers. What should they be doing together? Why?**

**WINSTON:** At the LAC, when we looked at the model, we thought that if we were going to support teachers they would need a connection with a health care agency to provide access to health facilities and personnel. They need to take students to see the physical layout of health centers and hospitals. Many students have had a bad experience at hospital. It might have been traumatic situation and students might have had some incidental learning in the process. By seeing the system firsthand, students can engage in some deliberate learning.


Another reason to create these partnerships is that while teachers are focusing on language and literacy skills, sometimes students may say, "I need to know more on this topic." We don't want the teacher to be saddled with the responsibility [of being the content expert]. Through the program manager, someone from the hospital will visit the class and do a

*“As the health provider talks to the students, he or she gains knowledge that can be taken back to the hospital setting. This includes insights into issues that affect this population and about the barriers put up by the health system.”*

presentation on the topic in question. The partnering is necessary so that health staff are not being asked on an ad hoc basis but through a continuing, dynamic relationship. We're expecting that the literacy site can be seen as a laboratory for the health agency since the students in the literacy site are probably representative of the patients in that neighborhood. As the health provider talks to the students, he or she gains knowledge that can be taken back to the hospital setting. This includes insights into issues that affect this population and about the barriers put up by the health system. A mutual education process occurs.

In Harlem, students were invited to the Harlem Hospital, where they met with staff from various departments including Maternity and Emergency. The director of the Emergency Department, who had worked all night, was present the next morning to give


students a tour of the department. The students seemed so appreciative of that, and of hearing the explanations of what goes on. In presentations in their classrooms, they were able to tell their fellow students what they saw and share their changed views of the hospital. That's what you get in a strong partnership: a feeling of commitment on the part of the health sector to help the students know the system.

Another advantage of partnering is that when a major public health issue gets introduced, you already have this relationship to build on, allowing the health and education sectors to work together. This helps to build community capacity, with the two agencies working together and strengthening each other. 

To download the *Study Circle+ Facilitator Guides*, go to <http://www.ncsall.net/index.php?id=891>

### About the Participants

**Lisa Soricone** is a research associate and former fellow at NCSALL. She has taught adult basic education and English for speakers of other languages and did doctoral research on the labor market outcomes of Spanish GED recipients. Her current work focuses on evidence-based practice in adult education and the development of the Study Circle+ Series.

**Winston Lawrence** is a senior professional development associate with the Literacy Assistance Center (LAC) in New York City. He is responsible for implementing the LAC's Health Literacy Initiative. Winston has taught with the Department of Education, City University of New York, and in community-based organizations in New York City. He has a doctorate in adult education from Northern Illinois University 



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teaching approach, and presents strategies and tools for classroom and community settings. It is for educators interested in critical reflection and social action from diverse fields: ESOL and literacy, public health, labor and community organizing, health and safety education, community psychology and facilitation, high school settings, and teacher education and other professional education programs. Go to <http://secure.cartsvr.net/catalogs/catalog.asp?prodid=3372744&showprevnext=1> for information on both books.

■ **Something to Talk About: A Reproducible Conversation Resource for Teachers and Tutors** (2001) by Kathleen Dunn Olson (a member of the editorial board for this issue of *Focus on Basics*), is available from University of Michigan Press/ESL (<http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=23753>). The spiral-bound book provides teachers, students, and conversation partners with ready-to-use material for practicing conversation and language skills. Questions for conversation as well as unusual related information about American

culture provide lower-level students of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) with stimulating and engaging conversation topics. It includes 13 content areas, ranging from personal to societal. Each activity is independent and may be used in any order.

■ **Insights from Research and Practice: A Handbook for Adult Literacy, Numeracy and ESOL Practitioners**, edited by Margaret Herrington and Alex Kendall, is available from NIACE (21 De Montfort Street, Leicester, England LE1 7GE. <http://www.niace.org.uk/Publications/I/Insights.htm>).

Featuring a selection of articles from the *British Research and Practice in Adult Literacy* (RaPAL) journal, this text offers articles by teachers, managers, students, and researchers. The work is organized thematically, relating the key debates in areas such as assessment and accreditation, curriculum content and process, management of, provision of, and the nature of literacy and numeracy. ❖

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■ NCSALL works to improve the quality of practice in adult basic education programs nationwide through basic and applied research; by building partnerships among researchers, policymakers, and practitioners; and through dissemination of research results. A joint effort of World Education, the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Portland State University, Rutgers University, and the Center for Literacy Studies at The University of Tennessee, NCSALL is funded by the US Department of Education's Institute of Educational Sciences.

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This new professional development guide provides all of the steps, materials, and readings for conducting a 10.5-hour study circle for adult basic education and literacy practitioners. The study circle covers the latest research on reading instruction.

**Adult Development**

This 9-hour study circle for adult basic education and literacy practitioners addresses Robert Kegan's work in adult development theory and its application in the practice of adult basic education.

**Rethinking Instruction and Participation for Adult Basic Education**

This 9-hour study circle for adult basic education and literacy practitioners addresses the research about the structure and organization of instruction and how programs can broaden the range of options that students have so that classes aren't the only option.

**NEW!! NCSALL by Topic**

This new section in Connecting Practice, Policy, and Research brings together in one location various NCSALL materials, with annotations. The section is organized according to five key topics—authentic contexts, adult multiple intelligences, adult student persistence, GED, and reading.

**NCSALL Web Site**  
<http://www.ncsall.net>

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