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ABSTRACT
        Although resources and training vary from program to
program, adult English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL) teachers and
English learners across the country are integrating computers and Internet
use with ESOL instruction. This can be seen in the growing number of ESOL
resources available on the World Wide Web. There are very good reasons for
this: learners like computers and technology; the Internet levels the playing
field for immigrants; and numerous skills can be developed through Internet
activities. There are also several challenges in successfully bringing the
use of the Internet and World Wide Web into the ESOL context. These
challenges include the fact that both content and language difficulty may
keep learners from benefiting; many adult ESOL programs have limited or no
Internet access; training needs and costs are high; and language learning is
largely a communicative process. Nevertheless, if these challenges can be
overcome, computer and Internet use can be effective in facilitating language
learning. (Contains 12 references.) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL
Literacy Education) (KFT)

Benefits and Challenges in Using Computers and the Internet with Adult English Learners

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July, 2000

Current Status of Use

Although the resources and training vary from program to program, adult English ESOL teachers and English learners across the country are integrating computers and Internet use with ESOL instruction. This can be seen in the number of ESOL websites, web projects, and articles about Internet use. The National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) maintains the NIFL-Technology listserv for ABE/ESOL. There is surely a correlation with the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS), Equipped for the Future (EFF), and K-12 standards that call for technology skills. The world has changed because of the Internet, and adult ESOL has changed with it.

Examples:

There is an increase in the number of presentations and the availability of software, etc. each year at the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) annual convention. Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) is now an important Interest Section of TESOL.

In the late 80s and the early 90s there were very few software programs and Internet sites geared specifically to adult English learners. There has been a proliferation of software and websites within the last four or five years. Examples include such software as the Oxford Picture Dictionary CD-ROM and the Azar interactive grammar program, as well as the Hands-on English website for teachers and the Email Projects Home Page site for learners and teachers.

Benefits

1. Learners like computers/technology.

Examples:

Educator and listserv moderator David Rosen included ESOL learners when he conducted a study, "How Adult Learners are Using the Internet" (Sept. 8, 1996): An excerpt from his report follows:

"Adult literacy/basic education/ESOL students are beginning to use the Internet. An increasing number are very interested in using it for a wide range of purposes: for learning (e.g. to improve reading and writing skills, or take a course); to access a wide variety of information (e.g. information about the weather, health, travel, other cultures, American news, and -- in the case of ESOL students -- news from their native countries); for classes at school; for shopping; to communicate with friends, family members, other students, or key pals; for entertainment; for virtual travel; and for the sense of control and power one can feel when using a computer and the Internet."

In March 1998 a high-intermediate adult ESOL class at the Arlington Education and Employment Program (REEP) in Virginia conducted a survey about computer use among REEP learners using questions they had generated themselves. They polled 137 students (some in native language) at all

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levels. Forty-one said that they used computers at work and 14 used them at home. Only four learners reported that they did not like using computers at school, two because they were not interested, one because that person was very tired and one because it was "pretty boring" (Arlington Education and Employment Program & Spring Institute for International Studies, 1998).

2. The Internet levels the playing field for immigrants.

Once online, adult immigrants may find the cyber world more equitable than the one they face every day. Opportunities to email family and friends, search for the best deals on cars, apartments and appliances, and access school websites to find out about parent-teacher conferences and homework are available for everyone. Immigrants can also research sites such as INS, Social Security, and health sites to prepare themselves before interviews and doctor's appointments. In a very short time, the Internet has begun to level the societal playing field for those who can access and understand the information available on the World Wide Web.

3. Numerous skills can be developed through Internet activities.

Using the Internet can facilitate the development of language skills, employability skills, and critical literacy.

Language skills:

- Skimming and scanning
- Reading narratives, charts, and graphs,
- Accessing ESOL and lifeskills content sites
- Writing: completing forms, emailing requesting information, etc.

Employability skills

- Analyzing and evaluating information
- Decision making
- Problem solving
- Technology skills
  (Silc, 1998).

Since information on the web in not always accurate or objective, it is also great place for ESOL learners to develop critical literacy skills. The Web provides opportunities for students to learn to question, classify, and analyze what they read (Silc, 1998).

Challenges

1. Both content and language may keep adult learners from benefiting from the Internet.

The "Digital Divide" report released by the Children's Partnership on March 15, 2000 is relevant to adult ESOL learners and teachers. The study indicates that both the language and content of the Internet do not always "serve" immigrants. Adult learners like using computers and accessing the Internet, and the Internet provides many learning opportunities. However, the "divide" keeps the Internet from being as useful as it could be. The following excerpt is from the press release located on the website:

The report, _Online Content for Low-Income and Underserved Americans: The Digital Divide's New_

Frontier, analyzed the availability, quality and appeal of Internet content for low-income Americans and those with limited literacy levels. The study found limited local and community-based information, especially local jobs and housing; extremely limited information written at a literacy level that can serve up to 44 million Americans who lack functional literacy skills; limited content in multiple languages; and limited content designed to communicate with diverse cultures.

2. Unlike K-12 classrooms, many adult ESOL programs have limited or no Internet access.

While many adult ESOL classes and programs have access to learning labs or classroom computers with Internet connection, many others are still without or struggling with out-of-date equipment. An example of this can be seen in the metro Washington area where one Virginia suburb, Arlington, is "connected" but its larger neighbor, Fairfax, is not. The difference is even greater in outlying areas. Jessie Auten, an ESOL teacher from REEP expressed is this way, "I felt like a guru, because everyone else there (at a technology workshop) was from some ESL program with one and a half students and a clunky Apple to work with. They were so impressed with us." (personal communication, April 2000)

3. The training needs and cost are high.

The cost for programs to acquire and maintain technology is high. Equally steep is the cost to train teachers to use computers and the Internet in the classroom. In _Using Software in the Adult ESL Classroom_ Susan Gaer reports, "Robert Bickerton, Director of Adult Education for the state of Massachusetts, has said that for every dollar spent on computers and software, another dollar should be spent on staff development".

Teachers want to learn about new technologies and how to integrate them into instruction, and that takes resources, time, and money. The suggestion that using computers and the Internet may eliminate the need for a trained teacher does not appear to be true. Computers can facilitate independent learning, but teachers, assistants, and volunteers are needed to clarify, to assist, and to work on the technical problems that will occur.

4. Language learning is largely a communicative process.

ESOL teachers need to make sure that communicative activities still take place when learners are using computers and the Internet. One way to accomplish this is to ask learners to work in pairs on a computer. Using the Internet in project-based learning is another way to facilitate the development of learners' language skills as well as their teamwork and other communication skills so needed in today's world.

Example:

At REEP, teachers have noticed that when students go to the learning lab where they have many learning options, not all of which involve computers, many opt for conversation or listening groups, although they clearly like the option of computer and the Internet. This seems particularly true with the higher levels, perhaps because they can work on the Internet at home. At school they want to converse with peers.

Conclusion

Appropriate software, Internet use, distance learning, video, etc. are being developed for adult immigrants. This technology is becoming an important part of the complex learning and teaching that

goes on in ESOL programs. Both learners and teachers like using computers and having access to the Internet. Adults learning English can use both to take charge of their own learning and meet their learning goals. When computers and Internet technology are integrated into regular instruction, they can become an effective tool to facilitate language learning.

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