



---

# Journal of Adult Education

## Information Series, No. 1

Vol. 40, 2011



---

## Principles of Adult Learning: An ESL Context

Donald Finn  
Associate Professor of Education  
Regent University

### Abstract

Given the current global economic situation, industries have been forced to examine their efficiency and effectiveness, and this is also true for adult education programs. Many programs, whether public or private, face budget downsizing which leads to questions of how to effectively instruct the adults they serve. This article provides an overview of the characteristics of adults who participate in English language programs. Potential barriers to participation and factors that might motivate them to persist in these programs will be briefly examined. Finally, this article concludes with an examination of principles of adult learning and their role in designing effective activities and environments for adult learners.

### Adult Learning in an ESL Context

#### Demographics and Participation in Adult Programs

Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) submit that for the first time, the number of adults in our society is greater than the number of youth. Furthermore, they add that these adults are better educated and that they represent greater cultural and ethnic diversity (p.7). Merriam et al. cite census statistics that show immigration trends have shifted from an influx of Europeans in the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century to being primarily from Latin America (52%) and Asia (25%) in 2002. Given these trends, Merriam et al. state that by 2050, minorities will make up approximately 50% of the overall U.S. population, up

from 31% in 2000 (p. 10). These immigration trends are evident in English literacy programs as reported by the National Reporting System (NRS). According to the NRS website, [www.nrsweb.org](http://www.nrsweb.org):

The National Reporting System for Adult Education (NRS) is an outcome-based reporting system for the state-administered, federally funded adult education program. Developed by the U.S. Department of Education's Division of Adult Education and Literacy (DAEL), the NRS continues a cooperative process through which State adult education directors and DAEL manage a reporting system that demonstrates learner outcomes for adult education. The project is being conducted by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) in Washington, DC. The NRS reported that during the 2004-05 program year Latino students made up more than 70% of the student population in

English language (EL) classes and the second largest group was Asian students comprising 14% (“Characteristics of the Least-Literate,” 2005).

### **Adult Participation and Barriers**

There are many reasons that adults participate in education programs, however, Merriam, et al. note that the vast majority of adults, (90.6% according to a 1997 UNESCO study), participate in adult education programs for career- or job-related reasons. These reasons are categorized accordingly: 58% cited professional or career upgrading, 18.3% cited “other,” 17.6% responded to earn a college or university degree, 3.8% to earn a vocational or apprenticeship certificate, and 2.3% cited to complete secondary school (Valentine, 1997 as cited in Merriam, et al., 2007). Researcher and noted adult educator, Cyril Houle conducted a noteworthy study in 1960 that included 22 learners who were considered active and engaged. From this study, Houle determined that these learners fell into one of three subgroups: goal-oriented learners, activity-oriented learners, or learning-oriented learners (Merriam & Brockett, 2007, p. 132). Among Houle’s three types of learners, the most common type in Adult English language settings is the *goal-oriented learner*. Goal-oriented learners enter the education environment with specific desired outcomes to be achieved at the end of participation. A common goal of English language learners (Ells), is the desire to advance economically, however, this desire may be inhibited by their life situation. Orem, (2000) notes that “They [Ells] see education as an opportunity for self-improvement, but they lead very complex lives, which limits their access to classes” (p. 441). These complex lives may include erratic work schedules, low-paying and low-skill jobs, working multiple jobs, and lack of job stability. Carp, Peterson, and Roelfs, 1974 (as cited in Merriam and Brockett, 2007) refer to these types of barriers as “situational barriers” (p. 133). Situational barriers are a reflection of the life circumstances of an individual at a given point in time, and in the world of Ells, these barriers often impact multiple facets of the their lives,

and the lives of those around them. Orem (2000), notes that for Ells “their lack of language skills, in turn, affects not only their access to housing and employment, but may also limit the role they play with their own children’s education” (p. 441). It is important for instructors and program administrators to remain sensitive to the potential situational barriers of their students.

### **Program Orientations and Student Motivation**

Wlodkowski (2008) notes that “adults want to be successful learners” (p. 100); however, the different forces that pull on adult learners can have a negative impact on their motivation to learn. Wlodkowski adds: “If adults have a problem experiencing success or even expecting success, their motivation for learning will usually decline” (p. 100). Adult learners often have a practical mindset when choosing to participate in educational programs, and they often expect to experience success quickly. Because adult learners are busy, they must weigh the “opportunity cost” of participating. This means determining if they will gain more from the educational program than their costs (money, time, etc...) of participation. Understanding and addressing the consumer orientation of adult learners is critical to the success of the learner and of the program.

When speaking of program delivery, Orem (2000) notes that ESL programs are delivered in a varied settings by different public, private, and religious groups. Because of the variety of delivery contexts, “one of the more significant trends in adult ESL program development has been the efforts made by program planners, materials developers, and teachers to pay close attention to the needs of the learner and the social nature of learning.” (Orem, p. 442) Citing the work of Wrigley (1993), Orem shares six philosophical orientations for developing ESL programs: 1) a common educational core, 2) social and economic adaptation, 3) development of cognitive academic skills, 4) personal relevance, 5) social change, and 6) technological management (p. 442).

Among these orientations, three in particular stand out, especially for lower level Ells. The *social and economic adaptation* orientation centers on preparing learners for specific roles in society and in the workplace. This approach may have a vocational emphasis that develops workplace competencies. It should be noted that critics of this approach cite that this orientation's "hidden curriculum" of life skills teaching directs ELLs into limited social and work roles (Orem, 2000, p. 442). Although this assertion can be supported or disputed, the need for such programs will be high for as long as Ells desire to become employed in order to advance economically. This orientation is related to the *personal relevance* orientation. With an emphasis on personal growth, primarily through literacy, this approach is grounded in the desire of adults to be self-directed in assessing and pursuing their learning needs and the avenues to achieve these needs. Finally, the *development of cognitive and academic skills* orientation centers on *learning how to learn* through the development of cognitive and academic skills. This approach is related to the desire among adult learners to become self-directed and to pursue opportunities to better themselves in one or many of their life roles, including, but not limited to citizen/community member, parent/family member, and worker. In the mid-1990s these roles were researched and broad areas of responsibility for each role identified by the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) as part of the Equipped for the Future project (see Stein, 2000).

### **Adult Learning Principles**

"The purpose of teaching is to facilitate personal growth and development that impact the professional, social, and political aspects of learners." (Galbraith, 2004, p.3) Regardless of classroom setting or program orientation, it is essential that instruction be approached and designed from an adult perspective. Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2005) submit that the term "adult" can be viewed by at least 4 definitions: biological, legal, social, and psychological (p. 64). The biological definition centers on the ability to reproduce;

the legal considers the time at which the law allows us certain freedoms or rights; socially, adults are defined by roles they assume in society such as voting, parenting, etc..., and psychologically adulthood is reached when an individual becomes responsible for their own life (p. 64). Each of these perspectives work in concert to move an individual into adulthood, but Knowles, et al. (2005) submit that "most of us probably have full-fledged self-concepts and self-directedness until we leave school or college, get a full-time job, marry, and start a family" (p. 64).

### **Andragogy**

Andragogy is a term that is commonly associated with the instruction of adults. The foundation of the term is in based upon the assumption that adults and children learn differently. The first use of andragogy can be traced to a German grammar school teacher, Alexander Kapp who in 1833 used the term "andragogik" to describe the educational approach of Plato (Knowles, et al., 2005). Andragogy literally translates into *leader of adults* and is derived from the Greek words *anere* meaning adult and *agogus* meaning leader of. In contrast to pedagogy which translates as *leader of children*, andragogical approaches should employ methods that recognize the characteristics that distinguish adults from children. Merriam, et al., (2007), submit that in the late 1960's, Malcolm Knowles offered a paradigm for distinguishing the art and science of teaching adults (andragogy) as being different and distinct from the art and science of teaching children (pedagogy). Knowles initially offered 4 assumptions for teaching adults:

1. As a person matures, his or her self-concept moves from that of dependent personality toward one of a self-directing human being.
2. An adult accumulates a growing reservoir of experience which is a rich resource for learning.
3. The readiness of an adult to learn is closely related to the developmental tasks of his or her social role.

4. There is a change in time perspective as people mature—from future application of knowledge to immediacy of application. Thus, and adult is more problem centered than subject centered in learning. (Knowles, 1980, pp. 44-45, as cited by Merriam, et al. 2007, p. 84)

Brookfield, (1986) notes that Knowles “does not present andragogy as an empirically based theory of learning painstakingly derived from a series of experiments resulting in generalizations of increasing levels of sophistication, abstraction, and applicability... it should be treated as a set of assumptions” (p. 91). Merriam, et al. (2007) note that Knowles added a fifth and sixth assumption to andragogy in later publications:

5. The most potent motivations are internal rather than external, and
6. Adults need to know why they need to learn something (p. 84).

Based upon the andragogical model, it is paramount that adult educators keep these widely accepted assumptions in mind as programs and curricula are developed for adult learners. These principles are:

1. Adults are self-directed
2. Adults draw from life experiences
3. Social roles help to determine an adult’s readiness to learn
4. Adults are problem-centered than subject centered
5. Adults are internally motivated to learn
6. Adults need to know why they need to learn what they are learning.

### **Adult Learning Applications**

It has been established that adult learners have unique needs and motivations for participating in educational ventures. In order to design appropriate adult learning experiences, it is important that the environment, learner’s experiences, and the relevance of the instruction be taken into consideration.

### **The Environment**

Merriam and Brockett (2007) submit that successful adult learning outcomes are connected to the environment in which the learning takes place. They break the environment into three categories: physical, psychological, and social. Merriam and Brockett note that *physical* factors such as “room size, temperature, lighting, acoustics, seating type and arrangements, and how technology is arranged and used in the learning space” play an important role in successful learning outcomes by cutting down on learner discomfort and distraction (2007, p. 150). The *psychological* environment centers on a learning climate where teachers and learners can engage in *genuine exchange* in a welcoming and supportive environment that addresses the doubts and fears of learners as well as their previous life experiences which can serve as learning resources (a key principle of andragogy). Finally, the *social* environment “centers on the culture of the teaching-learning setting... which recognizes the importance of factors such as race and sex in relation to have adult educators work with learners” (p. 150). These environmental considerations, coupled with an understanding of different cultures represented in a program can help to make ELL classrooms more effective places of learning and development.

### **Experience**

Rogers and Horrocks (2010) draw attention to the idea of *Total environment*. Part of the total environment recognizes the physical world that we inhabit and the built world which has been created along with the mental and social environments with which we are “bound in perpetual engagement” (p. 116).

Rather than experience being outside of ourselves, something which we can reflect critically on and from which we can learn, these views suggest that we are all made up by our experiences; that the experience is us, so to speak: “Cognition and environment become simultaneously enacted through experiential

learning” (Fenwick 2001: 47). (Rogers & Horrocks, 2010, p. 116)

Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2005) note that the experiences of adult learners distinguish them from youths. “This difference in quantity and quality of experience has several consequences for adult education” (p. 66). Among the consequences is that educators need to be sensitive to the experiences of the individual and how this might necessitate individualized teaching and learning strategies. It is critical that teachers of adults become familiar with the individual learners and their experiences. Experience can have an impact on the types of learning strategies that are employed in the adult education classroom. Individual learner’s experiences may enhance instruction as learners participate in group and peer-helping activities.

As Woldkowski (2008) suggests, instructors do not want to make people fail; they, (along with their learners) want to lead their learners toward experiencing success. A key to fostering learner success is being an empathetic instructor meaning “giving learners things to do that are within their reach” (p. 65). This involves striking a balance between activities that are too challenging, which can lead to frustration and possibly dropping a program, and those that are too easy that may lead to boredom or disinterest. Getting to know students’ abilities and experiences can be accomplished in a variety of ways that include “interviews, paper-and-pencil tests, simulations, exercises, or whatever helps us know what our learners can or cannot do relative to what we are offering them” (p. 66). These evaluations can lead to creating more relevant and useful experiences that can motivate adult learners to do well. Employing such approaches can help to enrich the learning environment and may enhance the motivation of learners through building their sense of self-identity by accepting them as individuals who have much to contribute to the learning process (Knowles, et al., pp. 66-67).

## Relevance

As noted by Knowles, a key concept of andragogy

is that adults need to know why they need to learn what they are learning; in other words, what is the relevance of the learning experience? Woldkowski (2008) cites Scott (1969) by stating that “the first time people experience anything new or in a different setting, they form an impression that will have a lasting impact.” (p. 220) This is true in any learning setting, but is particularly true in ESL classes, especially in entry-level classes, but it is also true whenever a new concept or unit is introduced. Woldkowski suggests five criteria for making a learning activity “an irresistible invitation to learn;” these are:

1. *Safe*. There is little risk of learners suffering any form of personal embarrassment.
2. *Successful*. There is some form of acknowledgment, consequence, or product that shows that the learners are effective or, at the very least, that their effort is a worthwhile investment that is connected to making progress.
3. *Interesting*. The leaning activity has some parts that are novel, engaging, challenging, or stimulating.
4. *Personally endorsed*. Learners are encouraged to make choices that significantly affect the learning experience.
5. *Personally relevant*. The instructor uses learners’ concerns, interests, or prior experiences to create elements of the learning activity or develops the activity in concert with the learners. At the very least, a resource-rich learning environment is available to encourage learners’ selections based on personal interest. (pp. 220-221)

The idea of personal relevance (in addition to the previous four criteria) help to ensure learner motivation and engagement because the learners’ interests and needs are recognized and honored in the learning setting.

It is imperative that adult educators consider the concepts of *environment*, *experience*, and *relevance* when designing instruction for adults. The absence of

any of these concepts in the planning and execution stages of instruction will lead to learner frustration, and possibly, to learner drop out.

### Conclusion

English language instruction occurs in a variety of settings and programs and instructors have many perspectives to keep in mind when planning instruction. The most important of these is to remember that the learners they serve are adults and the instructional activities and settings must be constructed accordingly. Andragogical principles must be sufficiently applied for adult learners, (regardless of the English proficiency level: beginning, intermediate, etc...), in order to create and maintain experiences that are inviting, engaging, motivating, and personally rewarding.

### References

- Brookfield, S.D. (1986). *Understanding and facilitating adult learning: A comprehensive analysis of principles and effective practices*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Characteristics of the least-literate participants in adult basic education beginning literacy programs: 2001-2005 (2006). *NRS Fast Facts*. Retrieved from <http://www.nrsweb.org/docs/fast%20facts/Level1ABEFastfacts.pdf>
- Galbraith, M.W., (2004). The teacher of adults. In Galbraith, M.W. (Ed), *Adult learning methods: A guide for effective instruction, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition* (pp. 3-21). Malabar, FL: Kriegar.
- Knowles, M.S., Holton, E.F., & Swanson, R.A. (2005). *The adult learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development, 6<sup>th</sup> edition*. New York: Elsevier.
- Merriam, S.B., & Brockett, R.G. (2007). *The profession and practice of adult education: An introduction*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, inc.
- Merriam, S. B., Caffarella, R.S., & Baumgartner L.M. (2007). *Learning in adulthood: A comprehensive guide*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, inc.
- Orem, R.A. (2000). English as a second language in adult education. In Wilson, A.L., and Hayes, E.R. (Eds), *Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education, New Edition* (pp. 438-448). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Rogers, A., & Harrocks, N. (2010). *Teaching adults, 4<sup>th</sup> edition*. Berkshire, England: Open University Press/McGraw-Hill.
- Stein, S.G., (2000). *Equipped for the future content standards: What adults need to know and be able to do in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. Washington DC: National Institute for Literacy. Available online: [http://eff.cls.utk.edu/PDF/standards\\_guide.pdf](http://eff.cls.utk.edu/PDF/standards_guide.pdf)
- Wlodkowski, R.J., (2008). *Enhancing adult motivation to learn: A comprehensive guide for teaching all adults, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- 
- Donald Finn is Associate Professor of Education at Regent University, Virginia Beach, VA.
-