

Professional Development for Experienced Teachers Working With Adult English Language Learners

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Background on Adult Learners

Adult education programs serve both native English speakers and learners whose first, or native, language is not English. Native English speakers attend adult basic education (ABE) classes to learn basic skills needed to improve their literacy levels; they attend adult secondary education (ASE) classes to earn high school equivalency certificates. Both ABE and ASE instruction help learners achieve other goals related to job, family, or further education. English language learners attend English as a second language (ESL), ABE, or workforce preparation classes to improve their oral and literacy skills in English and to achieve goals similar to those of native English speakers.

Audience for This Brief

This brief is written for experienced teachers working with adult English language learners and for program administrators and trainers seeking to implement high-quality professional development for these teachers.

Introduction

Despite high staff turnover and a predominance of part-time positions in the field of adult education (Crandall, 1993; Mathews-Aydinli & Taylor, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 2006), some adult education teachers create careers for themselves that span many years—even decades. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2007), teachers are the most important factor in improving student achievement. Knapp (2003) points out that professional development is a critical link to improved teaching. Nonetheless, in a field characterized by limited opportunities for professional development (Hawk, 2000; Mathews-Aydinli & Taylor, 2005; Smith, Hofer, Gillespie, Solomon, & Rowe, 2003; Wilson & Corbett, 2001), there are fewer resources and less insti-

tutional support for professional development for experienced teachers than for preservice and novice teachers (Crandall, Ingersoll, & Lopez, 2008; state adult education staff in four U.S. states, personal communication, March 6, 2010).

Experienced teachers differ from novice teachers in important ways. They are likely to need professional development that affirms the knowledge, experience, and intuitive judgment they have cultivated during their careers. At the same time, teaching experience does not necessarily result in expertise (Tsui, 2003, 2005). Some experienced teachers are not as receptive to professional development as are new teachers, even though they might benefit from opportunities to reflect on and enhance their knowledge and refresh their enthusiasm for teaching (state adult education staff in two U.S. states, personal communication, March 6, 2010). Administrators and professional developers must recognize and address this potential resistance while remaining mindful of experienced teachers' characteristics and needs.

This brief begins with an overview of the definitions and characteristics of experienced and expert teachers and of the ways that these teachers differ from novice, or beginning, teachers. It continues with a discussion of considerations involved in providing high-quality professional development for experienced teachers. Models of professional development that have been suggested for meeting the unique needs of experienced teachers are presented, and areas for future research are identified.

Research on teacher cognition, a relatively new field that includes the nature of teacher knowledge and ways to develop it, is limited. Such studies are rare in the

area of teacher preparation for working with students learning a second language and rarer still in the area of adult education. Most studies cited in this brief pertain to K–12 teachers, and many involve disciplines other than English language education. Some (e.g., Maggioni & Parkinson, 2008; Waters, 2006) were undertaken with the goal of strengthening preservice teacher training programs, so they focus on how to help novice teachers. Nonetheless, it is hoped that the findings from these studies will inform adult English language instruction and professional development for teachers in this field, although further research focusing on experienced teachers in adult language education settings is needed.

Identifying Experienced Teachers

The definition of what constitutes teacher experience varies greatly across the scant literature on this topic. Novice teachers are relatively easily defined as those with little or no classroom experience. They are often student teachers or teachers who have less than 2 years of teaching experience (Gatbonton, 2008). The identification of experienced teachers is more complex. Teachers and administrators might define experienced teachers as those who have taught for many years, are able to motivate students and hold their attention, know how to manage their classroom effectively, and can change course in the middle of a lesson to take advantage of unforeseen opportunities to enhance student learning. In the literature, however, the definition of experienced teachers seems to hinge principally on the number of years taught; time-related criteria can range from 2 years (Texas Administrative Code) or 3 years (Bastick, 2002) to 9 years or more (Atay, 2008; Bivona, 2002). Most commonly, studies identify experienced teachers as those who have approximately 5 years or more of classroom experience (Gatbonton, 1999; Martin, Yin, & Mayall, 2006; Richards, Li, & Tang, 1998; Tsui, 2003, 2005).

Number of years teaching, however, does not guarantee expertise as a teacher. Some experienced teachers may be considered expert, while others remain “experienced non-experts” (Tsui, 2003, p. 3). While little research has been done on expertise in teaching ESL, programs have used a combination of more than 5 years of teaching experience, recognition from administrators, and high student achievement to identify their own expert ESL teachers (Tsui, 2003). In practice, the consideration that an experienced teacher is an expert may be subjective

and arbitrary, and not all stakeholders may share this view. In addition, teachers’ beliefs about expert instruction do not always match their own instructional practices. For example, Farrell and Lim (2005) examined the beliefs of two experienced teachers and discovered some discrepancy between what the teachers said they did in the classroom and what they actually did. Both teachers were observed to be using a teacher-centered, traditional approach in the classroom, although both reported employing student-centered strategies.

Attributes of Experienced Teachers

Studies have shown that experienced teachers share many attributes that distinguish them from novice teachers. Bastick (2002) found that experienced teachers in Jamaica were less extrinsically motivated (e.g., motivated by salary) and significantly more intrinsically motivated (e.g., motivated by the emotional rewards of working with children) than were novice teacher trainees. Similarly, Bivona’s (2002) study of K–12 teachers’ attitudes found that teachers with more than 10 years of experience had more positive attitudes toward teaching than did less experienced teachers. In addition, Martin, Yin, and Mayall (2006) found that experienced teachers managed their classrooms more effectively than less experienced teachers. They took more control than did novice teachers in establishing classroom routines and monitoring group work and were less controlling and reactive in dealing with individual student behavior. Similarly, Gatbonton (2008) found that novice ESL teachers in K–12 programs were more preoccupied with student behavior and reactions than with pedagogy and student outcomes. Experienced ESL teachers were more concerned with ensuring that learning was taking place and less concerned about students’ negative reactions to class activities or to the learning process.

A number of studies have looked at experienced teachers’ skills, knowledge, and confidence. Akyel’s (1997) study comparing experienced ESL teachers with student ESL teachers found that experienced teachers considered a wider and more varied range of instructional options in response to student cues. They welcomed student initiations (i.e., student questions or comments that prompt a change in the direction or topic of a lesson) because they believed this would lead to meaningful communication in the class. They were less likely than student teachers to be concerned when

students' initiations caused a divergence from their lesson plan. Walls, Nardi, von Minden, and Hoffman (2002) found that expert teachers rely more on procedural knowledge (their own practical knowledge of what steps and techniques have worked well in the past), whereas novices rely more on declarative knowledge (the theoretical knowledge they have gleaned from teacher training programs). Akyel (1997) concluded that experienced teachers are not as concerned as student teachers about adherence to rules and models in their teaching or about approval from external sources. Novice teachers, on the other hand, see learner ideas and errors as possible obstacles and focus principally on maintaining the flow of their lesson plans. Much more than experienced teachers, they worry about the appropriateness of their instructional strategies. According to Mullock (2006), novice teachers are also more likely to engage in self-criticism. Gatbonton (2008) found that experienced teachers may be less concerned with promoting learners' acquisition of specific language items, such as using *s* with third person singular verbs in the simple present tense, than with ensuring that genuine and meaningful communication occur.

Richards and Farrell (2005, p. 7), drawing on work by Tsui (2003), point out that expert teachers tend to share the following characteristics, setting them apart from novice teachers:

- A rich and elaborate knowledge base
- Ability to integrate and use different kinds of knowledge
- Ability to make intuitive judgments based on past experience
- Desire to investigate and solve a wide range of teaching problems
- Deeper understanding of students' needs and student learning
- Awareness of instructional objectives to support teaching
- Better understanding and use of language learning strategies
- Greater awareness of the learning context
- Greater fluidity and automaticity in teaching
- Greater efficiency and effectiveness in lesson planning

Professional Development Needs of Experienced Teachers

It has been established that experienced teachers differ from novice teachers in their knowledge, skills, and beliefs. Thus, it may be inferred that they also differ from novice teachers in their professional development needs. Nonetheless, most of the research on teacher learning focuses on teacher training at the preservice level (Waters, 2006). However, teachers continue to evolve as they remain in the teaching profession (Tsui, 2005), and several researchers (e.g., Zeichner & Noffke, 2001) have emphasized the importance of lifelong professional learning for teachers in all fields. Providing meaningful professional development for experienced teachers may be considered central to this goal.

Tsui (2003) asks how experienced teachers maintain enthusiasm for their work and why some become expert teachers while others remain experienced non-experts. Huberman (1993) identifies three actions taken by teachers in non-novice stages of professional development that are likely to lead to the development of expertise and long-term career satisfaction.

- *They shift roles.* Experience teachers might teach a new subject or a new learner level. Alternatively, they might mentor or coach new teachers or take on other responsibilities. Fessler and Christensen (1991) found that involvement in professional development and assuming new roles could result in more enthusiasm and commitment among teachers.
- *They engage in classroom-level experimentation.* Experience teachers might change classroom routines or engage in action research (Chisman & Crandall, 2007).
- *They participate in activities that challenge their knowledge and stretch their skills.* Experience teachers learn more about a topic in their field, replace their customary materials or activities, or otherwise push themselves to the “edge of their competence,” where improvement occurs (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1993, p. i).

Huberman's list of actions, which reflect Bereiter and Scardamalia's theory of development of expertise in teaching, suggest implications for the professional development of experienced teachers. Challenging, role-changing, experimental activities may increase teachers'

satisfaction and help them learn and grow. Richards and Farrell (2005) suggest that reflective and collaborative professional development activities can be particularly beneficial for experienced teachers, as can activities that place them in a mentoring or coaching role. Likewise, Wallace (1991) argues that effective professional development for language teachers includes mentoring and coaching, reflection, and opportunities to apply theory and research to practice.

Professional Development Activities for Experienced Teachers

Professional development activities designed to meet the needs and desires of experienced teachers have the potential to guide these teachers into new and challenging roles; expose them to new information in the field; and lead them into fruitful self-reflection, collaboration with colleagues, and investigations within their own classrooms. Appropriate areas of focus for these activities include action research; mentoring, coaching, and peer observation; and opportunities for reflection. Specific activities may be initiated by practitioners themselves or by a program, district, region, or state. They may be carried out or delivered individually, in pairs, or in groups. Experienced teachers who are isolated geographically might benefit from the use of technology in the professional development process. For example, they might participate in a workshop or study circle series that includes online components, share the results of self-reflection or action research through a social networking site, or share the results of product development on a website.

Action Research

Action research provides a concrete focus on experimentation and improvement. Ferrance (2000) defines action research as “a disciplined inquiry done by a teacher with the intent that the research will inform and change his or her practices in the future” (p. 1). While many types of action research are conducted in the classroom, common components include identifying a challenge, determining the current status and the changes to be made, changing one or more variables, monitoring results of the changes that were made, and reflecting on results to inform improvement (Finch, 2003).

Action research brings control of the research topic, classroom setting, and parameters directly back to the

Action Research Example

A teacher thinks there needs to be more student-to-student interaction in her classroom. To confirm this impression, she videotapes herself teaching and reviews the video (either with a group or alone) to determine the number of teacher-to-student interactions, student-to-teacher interactions, and student-to-student interactions. She finds that there are indeed many more teacher-to-student and student-to-teacher interactions than student-to-student interactions. She reviews the research on how to encourage student-to-student interactions and decides on three strategies to try. She then videotapes herself employing the strategies and reviews the videotape to determine if the number of student-to-student interactions increased. Finally, she reflects on the changes in her instruction and the results and decides how to proceed to continue to improve the number and quality of student-to-student interactions in her classroom. Next steps may include refining the new techniques and strategies, carrying out additional research to find other strategies to add to her repertoire, or reflecting further with colleagues.

teacher, thus tapping into personal motivation and meaning (Atay, 2008). Teacher research may lead a teacher in new directions of pedagogy and classroom practice and raise the teacher’s confidence and work status (Francis, Hirsch, & Rowland, 1994).

Action research may be done individually, with a single topic for improvement, or it may be done collaboratively, with a small group of other teachers or school-wide, with a focus on improving instructional practice and building community (Ferrance, 2000). Collaborative action research may be conducted by heterogeneous or homogeneous groups, depending on the goals of the research. Levin and Rock (2003) found benefits for all participants in pairing preservice teachers with experienced teacher mentors over a period of a year. In shaping their identities as teachers, new teachers had the benefit of their mentor’s experience. Mentors benefited in varying degrees, depending on their willingness to re-examine their own practice as they reflected on instructional practice more generally with their novice teacher partners.

Beginning and experienced teachers can make changes in planning, delivering, and analyzing instruction as part of the action research process (Farrell, 2008).

Mentoring, Coaching, and Peer Observation

Mentoring, coaching, and peer observation provide teachers with opportunities to step out of their normal teaching roles and develop new paradigms for their own work based on observations of other teachers' classroom instruction (Levin & Rock, 2003). All three activities involve observing another teacher at work in his or her class. There are indications that experienced teachers reflect on their own practices, as well as on those of the teacher they are observing, during the coaching and mentoring process (Richards & Farrell, 2005).

According to the Center for Coaching and Mentoring, mentoring is an open-ended process that focuses on and is responsive to the needs of the individual, while coaching is focused on the performance of a specific task (Starcevich, 2009). Generally, mentors and coaches are experienced practitioners who serve as experts in a subject matter or in instructional strategies and who use supportive observation, feedback, and questions to encourage action and achievement. Through coaching and mentoring, experienced teachers can help other teachers understand new concepts, encourage changes in point of view and action, and provide support over an extended period of time (Levin & Rock, 2003). For example, in the action research project described in the box on page 4, a mentor might work with the teacher initially to help her discern the topic she wants to focus on for her own professional development. A coach might model for her the new strategies she wishes to try or observe her videotape and provide suggestions on how to implement the new activities more effectively.

Peer observation allows teachers to extend themselves beyond their own classrooms. Experienced and novice teachers exchange observations so that both can benefit from seeing each other at work. New teachers can see experienced teachers in action, and experienced teachers can see alternative methods for handling daily challenges. The observations also create opportunities for social integration that can alter the often solitary nature of language instruction (Richards & Farrell, 2005). Peer observation usually does not include evaluation and allows teachers to choose the observation focus that will provide the most benefit to their instruction.

Observing teachers refrain from participating in the class and discuss their observations with the colleague they observed as soon as possible. In a small study of ESL teachers, both observing and observed teachers reported significant benefits and potential for improving instruction based on their own findings in each other's classes (Richards & Lockhart, 1994).

Outcomes that can be expected from mentoring, coaching, and peer observation activities depend on the work environment. Certain conditions in adult education, such as student migration patterns, shortage of funding for professional development, and temporary and part-time teacher status, may present challenges to successful coaching, mentoring, and peer observation. The following dynamics should be in place to increase the chances of success (Amy, 2003):

- Teachers and their mentors, coaches, or peers should collaborate over a period of time so that participants can process the observations and feedback and trust the feedback they receive.
- Participants need reasonable access to each other so that they can work closely together to meet their objectives.
- Observation and mentoring should include focused planning and goal setting.

Opportunities for Reflection

A number of approaches to professional development give teachers opportunities to reflect on their knowledge and instruction with the goal of improving both, either alone or working with others. When teachers are supported as they face new challenges and information, they can learn to do things differently (Tsui, 2003). There are several ways for experienced teachers to reflect on their practice in a supportive environment with their peers, including the use of study circles, reflective teaching, and reflective writing.

Study Circles. Study circles give practitioners the opportunity to enhance their knowledge of language learning theory and research, reflect on their current practices, apply new theories and research in their classes, and reform their teaching practices based on this learning process (Coro, 2004; see also Peyton, Moore, & Young, 2010, for discussion of the use of study circles to understand evidence-based instruction). Study circles begin with reading about theory, research, and instructional

techniques in a focused topic area, such as the development of literacy in learners with limited literacy in their native language and in English. Practitioners work together to understand the material and its relevance to their classroom practice, return to the classroom to try out their ideas, and, optimally, meet again as a group to discuss and process the results of their classroom efforts. For example, after reading articles on the theory behind student-to-student interaction, a study group member might choose to try an activity in her classroom suggested by the readings. She might then report on the experience during subsequent meetings with the study circle group, reflecting on the success (or lack of success) of the activities in the classroom and considering next steps.

Reflective Teaching. Chisman and Crandall (2007) describe the City College of San Francisco's practice of reflective teaching, in which small groups of experienced teachers meet with a facilitator on a monthly basis (with a commitment to participate for at least one year) to engage in a cycle of inquiry and reflection. In these groups, one teacher presents an issue or problem to colleagues, who offer their interpretations of the issue along with suggestions for how to address it. A phase of experimentation follows, as the teacher tries to implement the suggestions in class. In the next meeting, the teacher provides feedback on the experimentation, and the group discusses the results. The program has high participation rates and has received positive evaluations from practitioners. Chisman and Crandall point out that inquiry and reflection are becoming central to the professional development of experienced teachers and that through these processes, experienced teachers "are encouraged to try new methods and materials, to take risks, and as a result, to become reinvigorated as teachers" (pp. 98-99).

Reflective Writing. Professional development that includes reflective writing enables experienced teachers to process their current and new practices in a deliberate and focused fashion. When engaged in reflective writing, teachers may examine instructional practices they might otherwise have ignored. (See Burton, Quirke, Reichmann, & Peyton, 2009, for a discussion of reflective writing in professional development.) Reflective writing can take several forms:

- *Journaling independently, interactively, and online* allows busy teachers to self-pace their work, reflect on it, and interact to varying degrees with other practitioners (Lai & Calandra, 2007).
- *Creating a cumulative teacher portfolio* helps teachers document changes in their writing, classroom practices, and projects over time (Scott, 2005).
- *Writing critical analyses of incidents or case studies* helps teachers focus on specific topic areas that can yield change in thought and practice (Nath, 2005).
- *Participating in online professional development discussion boards* introduces teachers to a variety of perspectives on topics pertinent to instructional theory and practices (Hawk, 2000).

Professional development using reflective writing presents a number of advantages to the ESL instructional community. First, it gives teachers flexibility in time, place, and degree of effort for each project. Second, it is often easy to administer in terms of logistics and funding while still providing a tangible product for assessment of outcomes. Third, collaboration among teachers or programs in reflective writing can help reduce the isolation that often accompanies ESL instruction in large institutions (Orem, 2001).

Farrell (2007) cites the case of an ESL teacher who reported receiving unsolicited negative comments from a student after class. As a result of reflecting on this incident in writing with a group of peers, the teacher was able to view the comments in the larger context of her teaching practice and to understand the comments as coming from the student's desire to learn. In the case of the action research project described in the box on page 4, the teacher could have kept a journal of the changes she made in her classroom to increase student-to-student interaction, reviewed her growth over time by compiling a portfolio of her lessons and classroom activities and sharing it with a mentor, or shared her experiences online, describing her challenges and successes in trying out new strategies to improve student-to-student interaction.

Conclusion

Experienced teachers need opportunities for self-directed, collaborative, and reflective professional development

that recognizes the rich knowledge base and intuitive judgment they have developed over time. Professional development activities that challenge experienced teachers, foster role changes, or encourage experimentation in the classroom can rekindle their enthusiasm for teaching and expand their knowledge and skills. This brief has discussed some promising approaches to professional development for experienced teachers. Additional research on the knowledge, practices, and needs of experienced teachers of adult English language learners, as well as on models of professional development that can meet those needs, would greatly benefit the field.

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Additional Reading

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