
**RATIONALES FOR ADULT NATIVE
LANGUAGE LITERACY AND
DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH**

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RATIONALES FOR ADULT NATIVE LANGUAGE LITERACY AND DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

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Abstract

Increasing numbers of nonnative speakers of English entering U.S. adult education programs lack basic literacy in their native languages. Adult literacy providers serving these learners have typically followed one of two general strategies. Most frequently, educational efforts are directed exclusively toward English language and literacy proficiency. A small but growing number of programs, however, have begun to offer initial literacy instruction in the mother tongue or some combination of native language literacy and ESL instruction. This report examines (a) the characteristics of adult literacy programs offering native language literacy instruction; (b) the models for curriculum and instruction that they employ; and (c) the political, social, and linguistic rationales that providers give for offering native language literacy instruction, as based on survey data and focus group meetings with expert practitioners. The paucity of existing research and the need for further systematic inquiry to determine the conditions under which native language literacy is effective are examined.



INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, adult literacy providers across the United States have found that large numbers of adults entering their English-as-a-second-language (ESL) classrooms have never had the opportunity to develop basic literacy skills in their native languages. No one knows for sure how many limited-English-proficient (LEP) adults in the United States lack basic literacy skills. In the recent National Adult Literacy Survey, LEP adults responded to an oral questionnaire but were not tested directly in their native languages (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, & Kolstad, 1993). Whatever the exact numbers, coping with the challenges of ESL literacy is now an everyday reality in many ESL programs, especially in the states most heavily impacted by immigration, such as California, Texas, Florida, New York, and Illinois.

Most programs place ESL literacy learners in beginning-level classes that focus on developing their speaking and listening skills in English. Basic reading and writing instruction, when it is offered, uses English as the medium of instruction. In many cases, however, teachers report that less literate learners find it difficult to succeed in typical ESL classes. Many are unfamiliar with a school-like environment. Often teachers rely on printed texts, the use of the blackboard, and grammatical explanations, even to teach spoken English. Social stigmas associated with illiteracy may cause learners to be reluctant to admit their difficulties. Not surprisingly, programs report high dropout rates among less literate learners.

A small but growing number of programs in the United States have responded to this problem by offering literacy classes in the native languages of learners. Various models for combining native language (or mother tongue) literacy education and English language instruction exist. Some programs offer native language literacy classes concurrently with oral/aural classes in English. Others utilize bilingual teachers to integrate both languages within the same class. Still others wait until learners have achieved some degree of basic literacy in the native language before asking them to make the transition into regular ESL classes.

Interest in native language literacy instruction is spreading at the grassroots level. Practitioners offering initial literacy in the native language claim that, for some students, the native language literacy classroom provides the most effective entry point into adult education. In these classrooms, students can not only acquire basic strategies and processes for learning to read, but can also explore with a teacher from their own culture issues associated with adjusting to life in a new country. Learners with a strong first experience in adult education, practitioners assert, are less likely to drop out and more likely to continue their education into ESL classes and higher levels of instruction. Moreover, they contend, the reading and writing skills learned in the first language transfer to the acquisition of a second language, allowing students to learn to read and write more quickly in English. Many teachers also stress their belief that the opportunity to learn to read and write in one's own language should be a basic human right and that bilingualism should be celebrated as a valuable national resource. Funding and overall support, however, have been extremely limited.

Moreover, there currently exists little systematic inquiry that might reveal the effectiveness of this approach or assist practitioners in determining the conditions under which it might be most useful.

This report provides a brief overview of the nature of native language literacy instruction for adults, the reasons provided by practitioners for offering it, and avenues of inquiry that might further the field. The first section introduces readers to key characteristics of adult native language literacy programs around the United States, based on survey data. In the second section, we describe what we have found to be five key reasons for offering native language literacy. These are based on the literature, evidence provided by interviews with expert practitioners, and, when it exists, the research. In the third section, several potential directions for further research are suggested and various constraints and limitations associated with conducting research with this group of learners are discussed.

CHARACTERISTICS OF ADULT NATIVE LANGUAGE LITERACY PROGRAMS

Although researchers have documented the history of bilingual education in the public schools (Malakoff & Hakuta, 1990), we know much less about how native language literacy instruction has evolved in the field of adult education. Adult literacy instruction in the mother tongue may have taken place in the many private and parochial schools that offered instruction to children in German, French, Spanish, and other languages prior to World War I. After World War I, however, the prevalence of these schools diminished as English became the predominant medium of instruction. The first systematic information about native language literacy instruction for adults in recent years did not emerge until the early eighties when Cook and Quiñones (1983) published the results of a national survey of Spanish native language literacy programs conducted by Solidaridad Humana, a community-based educational program in New York City. They identified 14 Spanish language literacy programs around the country: four in New York City; one in upstate New York; two in the Chicago area; two near Hartford, Connecticut; one in New Jersey; one in California; and one each in Washington, DC, San Antonio, Texas, and Miami, Florida. None of the programs was more than four years old at the time. Most, they found, were small (and usually underfunded) components of larger community-based organizations offering a variety of services in addition to Spanish literacy. The recent advent of bilingual education in public schools was undoubtedly one reason for the interest in native language literacy instruction for adults. Another impetus was an even more recent movement in adult education that took into account the needs and interests of learners (Knowles, 1980), particularly as it was elaborated by the work of Brazilian literacy educator, Paulo Freire (1970).

Nearly a decade later, in 1991, the staff of the Center for Applied Linguistics conducted a new survey of programs offering some form of native language literacy instruction or combination of native language and ESL instruction to adults or out-of-school youth (Gillespie, 1991). Project staff collaborated with the National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education (NCLE). From among 573 programs then in the NCLE database, and through word-of-mouth, 68 programs that indicated they offered instruction in learners' native languages were identified. Forty-nine of the 68 programs (72%) completed an oral or written version of a questionnaire in time to be included in an analysis of the data for the first report on which the information below is based (Gillespie, 1991). Although this is the most extensive survey to date, it should be pointed out that CAL primarily was able to identify larger programs within local education agencies, community colleges, community-based educational programs, and other traditional sources of adult basic education. Many smaller native language literacy instructional efforts may take place within churches, civic groups, and other organizations more difficult to reach through traditional sources.

The CAL survey found programs from 20 states and the District of Columbia that offered some form of native language literacy instruction, often in combination with ESL instruction. Not surprisingly, the states with the most programs were New York, Illinois, Texas, and California, all states with high numbers of LEP adults. Sixty-nine percent of the 49 programs were located in large, urban areas. Most classes (49%) were offered within community-based organizations. Twenty percent were under the auspices of community colleges and another 18% described themselves as part of public school-based programs. Only a small number were found within workplace, library-based, family-literacy, or correctional education programs. Over half of the programs had come into existence since 1988.

Fully 90% of the 49 programs offering mother tongue instruction did so in Spanish. This was true even though many programs had students from many language groups enrolled in their school. Seventeen programs had between four and ten different language groups; one noted that 34 languages were represented. Only five programs offered native language literacy in more than one language and only one offered it in three languages (Spanish, Arabic, and Chinese). Other languages included Haitian Kreyòl, Hmong, Tagalog, and three American Indian tribal languages. Seventy-six percent of the native language teachers in the programs surveyed were native speakers of the languages they taught.

In two cities, organizations had been formed by teachers to share information and materials and to promote native language literacy. The Comité de Educación Básica en Español in New York City now has 12 program members and works closely with three local Kreyòl programs (Rabideau, 1992). In Chicago, 11 programs participate in an Hispanic Literacy Council (Gillespie & Ballering, 1992) and over a dozen additional programs within the greater urban area offer this form of instruction.

Among native language literacy programs, the most common usage of native language literacy is for basic reading and writing instruction at the beginning (and low intermediate) levels. Several models of instruction exist (Wrigley & Guth, 1992). Some programs choose a *sequential model*, where learners attend native language literacy classes until they acquire a certain

threshold level of literacy. They then make the transition into an ESL class. Another popular model is the *bilingual model*, in which the native language and English are both used within the same classroom. This model has the advantage of allowing students to acquire literacy and English at the same time, but requires bilingual teachers or teacher aides with a background both in literacy instruction and in the teaching of ESL. A third model employed by programs is the *coordinate model*, in which learners' time is split between a basic literacy class in the native language and an ESL class that focuses primarily on speaking and listening skills. Native language instruction has also been used in various ways in bilingual/vocational education, family literacy, and amnesty/citizenship classes.

Regardless of the model employed, one of the greatest challenges facing native language literacy teachers has been the need to develop appropriate curriculum materials. In the beginning, some programs tried using materials prepared for national literacy campaigns in developing countries. Most soon found, however, that materials developed outside the country did not reflect the experiences of immigrants in urban settings in the United States (Rabideau, 1989). Since many native language literacy teachers express a learner-centered philosophy, the use of participatory approaches such as problem-posing, learner-generated writing, and theater have been common. A number of articles in adult education newsletters, journals, and texts describe various innovative approaches to native language literacy. Young and Padilla (1990), for example, recount ways in which popular education techniques can be used to develop themes of importance to learners. Rivera (1990b) investigates the use of drama and video as a means to engage learners in the critical analysis of issues they face in everyday life. McGrail (in Nash, Cason, Rhum, McGrail, & Gómez-Sanchez, 1992) elaborates on how she used photographs to generate themes for writing, first in Spanish and later in English. Spener (1991) reports on how dialogue journals can be used in a bilingual context. Dean (1990) has developed Spanish language materials based on teaching the alphabet, vowels, consonants, and basic math skills. And finally, Ada (1989), Quintero (1990), and Eno (1987) describe how the native language can be used in family literacy contexts.

RATIONALES FOR NATIVE LANGUAGE LITERACY INSTRUCTION

Why do programs choose to offer native language literacy instruction to their adult learners? As teachers and administrators from around the country were surveyed, it became evident that the reasons are varied and complex. In this section, five of the most common rationales cited by practitioners in support of native language literacy instruction for adults are discussed. The first is *sociopolitical* in nature, related to the role minority languages can or should play in our society. The second is *linguistic* and refers to research related to the role of the first language in facilitating second language acquisition. A third, the *sociocultural* rationale, centers around the role of

native language literacy in fostering a sense of sociocultural identity vital to the learning process. A fourth rationale centers around issues related to the social context of adult learning. The last rationale considers the role of the native language in acquiring knowledge and skills in the content area.

THE SOCIOPOLITICAL RATIONALE

Native language literacy instruction for adults cannot exist outside of the political and ideological contexts for language usage and language rights in the United States. The degree to which native language literacy instruction is supported or opposed varies widely around the United States. Residents of the United States often have widely divergent views on language diversity. While some laud it as a “resource,” others see it as a serious “problem” in our society.

The resource orientation sees both economic and personal benefit in multilingualism, regarding the language skills of immigrants as a resource that should be conserved, developed, and invested in, particularly in schools and the workplace The language-diversity-as-“problem”-orientation, however, views cultural diversity as a weakness to be overcome rather than as one of the country’s greatest strengths. (Ruiz, 1988, as cited in Wrigley & Guth, 1992, p. 109)

A third orientation ignores literacy in languages other than English and considers English literacy as “the only literacy that counts.”

When this orientation shapes policy, several negative outcomes may result: 1) important knowledge and skills are ignored, 2) literacy surveys present a skewed picture of the true levels of reading and writing of the population, 3) program decisions are made on false premises, and 4) learners are defined by what they don’t know (English), rather than what they do know (the mother tongue). (Wrigley & Guth, 1992, p. 110)

While most native language literacy providers view multilingualism as a resource, many express concern that few policymakers recognize that biliteracy can be an asset (Rabideau, 1989). Although they acknowledge English as the language of power, providing access to jobs and prestige, and advocate the importance of learning English, they point out that many immigrant adults have language needs other than English. In large urban areas and in the Southwest, much daily activity and commerce take place in non-English languages. There is an increasing demand for Spanish language media. Three major national Spanish language television networks, over 100 Spanish language newspapers, and nearly 250 Spanish language radio stations are currently available around the United States (Usdansky, 1993). Many Chinese and Asian language media also exist. In an age of electronic communication and air travel, immigrants are also able to maintain closer ties with their home countries by visiting or maintaining international business contacts. Unlike many immigrants in the past who felt they had to give up their native tongue, many immigrants today seek to maintain their first language by speaking it at home and in social situations.

Native language literacy providers vary in the extent to which they promote literacy instruction in the native language as an end in itself or as part of a more efficient transition to English language acquisition. Those who support a maintenance model of bilingual education believe learners have a right to be

educated in their own language. They point to the ways in which language has been a tool for dominant groups to exclude language minorities from access to jobs and services and from taking part in decisions about which language should be officially used in the country. Klaudia Rivera, director of El Barrio Popular in New York City, asserts with pride that, regardless of oppression, the Puerto Rican community there has managed to retain use of its language (Rivera, 1990a). In her program, a key aspect of the curriculum is analyzing the status of the Spanish language in the community. At the Haitian Multi-Service Center, providers report that older learners share with newer learners the importance of learning and maintaining the native language. The learners also discuss the politics of Kreyòl as it relates to French, Haiti's official but second language. For many in the program, learning to read and write in Kreyòl makes a political statement about who should have power in Haitian society. Providers argue that for their learners, reading, writing, and seeing their native language in print is a key step toward helping them to recover their own political and social voice (Gillespie & Ballering, 1992).

Programs advocating language maintenance and the incorporation of sociopolitical themes related to language within the curriculum often struggle against strong public opposition. The current political backlash against immigrants has created a bias against investing in services for immigrants and a reemergence of efforts to limit the use of languages other than English (Chisman, Spruck-Wrigley, & Ewen, 1993). Even within programs themselves, there may be varying views among staff and learners concerning the appropriateness and strategic value of using English or the native language. As linguistic minorities grow to comprise greater and greater portions of the U.S. population, the role of native language literacy will undoubtedly continue to be shaped in large part by these larger sociopolitical issues.

THE LINGUISTIC RATIONALE

Among adult literacy educators, the most commonly cited reason for offering native language literacy instruction (and for convincing funders and the general public of its value) is what Snow (1990) and Rivera (1990a) refer to as the *linguistic* rationale. Associated with this rationale are various areas of research related to how instruction in the native tongue (L1) facilitates the acquisition of a second language (L2). Since little research in this area has been conducted with adult learners, adult educators (Rabideau, 1989; Rivera, 1990a; Wrigley & Guth, 1992) have turned to studies conducted with LEP children to elaborate this argument. They have found support in the work of Jim Cummins (1983). According to Cummins' common underlying proficiency hypothesis, the development of L1 competence provides a foundation of proficiency that does not need to be relearned for another language. Thus, if children reach a threshold level of linguistic competence in the L1, they will have a stronger base for learning in a second language than will students taught entirely in L2.

Many adult educators, however, have not had the opportunity to become familiar with the wider range of research that has been undertaken with school-aged populations. Although over the years opponents of bilingual education have initiated much debate regarding the quality of bilingual education research (see Baker, 1993; Baker & de Kanter, 1981; Ramirez,

1992; Willig, 1985), as Hakuta (1990) points out, after three decades, consensus is emerging in several areas. A few of these of most relevance to adult educators will be briefly highlighted here. First, a body of research confirms that: “The native language and the second language are complementary rather than mutually exclusive” (Hakuta, 1990, p. 4). Cross-sectional and longitudinal studies report consistently high levels of cross-language correlations among proficiency levels in the two languages. Second, although during the 1960s it was thought that a key difficulty associated with learning a second language was related to overcoming previously learned habits in the first language, “this view is not held by current researchers” (Hakuta, 1990, p. 4). Errors related to the interference between languages, although certainly noticeable and measurable, do not have as strong a negative impact on second language acquisition as was once supposed. Another common notion disproved by research has to do with the role of age in language acquisition. Although “studies of older limited English proficient people who began studying English at a mature age suggest that the acquisition of phonological and grammatical skills in a second language decline with age,” (Hakuta, 1990, p. 6) this decline is much slower than previously thought and not an overriding limiting factor in second language acquisition.

Recent researchers have also found, however, that determining the length of time required to develop language proficiency is much more complex than was once thought. “Skills used in interpreting contextualized, face-to-face conversational settings develop more rapidly than skills needed to interpret decontextualized language (oral or written)” (Hakuta, 1990, p. 5). Thus, for example, earlier assumptions that children could acquire English in a short time, do not reflect the development of all aspects of language use. Recent longitudinal studies (Collier, 1992; Ramirez, 1992) have revealed that second language skills for more decontextualized academic learning require an average of five years or even longer to develop. These findings create a stronger rationale for providing LEP children (and adults) with access to the core curriculum or content area knowledge in their primary language. Such instruction may be necessary for a longer period of time than previously thought in order to allow children to catch up to their English-speaking peers in the content areas. Without bilingual instruction, students too often can fall below the national norms on nationally standardized tests as well as state performance assessment measures. However, students who have received bilingual instruction for a period of five to six years or more not only catch up but perform better than their monolingual peers on these same tests (Collier, 1992; Ramirez, 1992). Children in two-way bilingual programs (where English speakers and language minority students receive academic subject matters through two languages) perform even better yet. According to Hakuta, bilingual children also show greater “cognitive flexibility and awareness of language” (1990, p. 7). Bilingual students, for example, have been shown to perform better on tests of analysis of abstract visual patterns and measures of metalinguistic awareness. While there remains controversy over the conditions under which these positive advantages appear, “there is widespread agreement among researchers that these effects are real” (Hakuta, 1990, p. 7).

Although these research findings are of great interest to adult educators, as mentioned earlier, research specifically focused on the adult education context is quite limited. Moreover, research with adult education populations brings with it unique problems. Two studies found positive effects of first language literacy on second language acquisition. Robson (1982) examined the effects of Hmong

literacy in a Roman alphabet on the performance of 62 Hmong refugees in an ESL program at a refugee processing center in Thailand. Participants were divided into groups according to the presence or absence of formal education and their reading ability in Hmong. Students' ability to read Hmong was measured at the beginning and end of the program, using a test developed by Robson and her colleagues. In addition, a test designed by the Oregon Indochinese Refugee Center to be particularly sensitive to the needs of low-literate learners was used to measure oral production, comprehension, and reading in English. Previous experience with schooling, based on the presence of literacy in any language, Robson found, had an effect on a subject's performance on the ESL tests. Frequently cited by adult educators, this study has important implications for further research. Its findings, however, are limited by the small sample size, the short period of instructional time (three months), and the fact that the learners were studying outside the United States.

A second study of adult learners was conducted by Burtoff (1985) with a group of Haitian Kreyòl-speaking adult learners in New York City. The study was performed to determine whether, when total hours are equal, learners who receive native language literacy instruction in addition to ESL instruction develop greater proficiency in English than those who receive only English instruction. Burtoff found that among the 29 subjects studied, those who received native language literacy instruction in addition to ESL instruction during the 24-week course developed English language proficiency comparable to those who were enrolled in the English-only group (even though the English-only group received more total hours of English instruction).

Burtoff's frank discussion of the logistical and methodological difficulties she encountered highlights the particular problems of conducting research with adult learners. Although she tested 130 subjects (90 of whom were found eligible for the study), due to high dropout rates, only 29 subjects could be included in the final research. Accurate attendance records were not kept even for the 29 remaining subjects. In addition, classes were of different sizes, at varying sites, and there was no control for teacher differences or course content. In spite of the constraints, however, this study does allude to the importance of native language literacy in adult education not only as an end in itself, but also for the role it might play in facilitating English language acquisition.

More research on how native language literacy instruction might facilitate English language acquisition among adult learners is clearly needed. Potential areas for research will be discussed later in this paper. However, as we have seen with respect to studies of school-aged children, adult educators may do well to keep in mind that the availability of research to demonstrate the positive outcomes of bilingual instruction alone is often not enough to counterbalance pervasive sociopolitical arguments against bilingualism and cultural diversity.

THE SOCIOCULTURAL IDENTITY RATIONALE

In her study of bilingual education among school-age children, Snow (1990) identifies what she calls a sociocultural identity argument for bilingual

education. For many members of minority groups, she reflects, schools are alien institutions.

In schools, the rules that govern behavior, the goals of the actors, and the messages that are conveyed are often mysterious It is very difficult to present hard data to document the degree to which the strangeness of the school environment affects the achievement of language minority children, but there is ample data from ethnographic studies of classrooms and from classroom discourse analyses to conclude that children from different cultural groups have very different expectations about how classrooms should be organized. (p. 63)

A similar sense of alienation has also been reported among adult learners (Auerbach, 1993). For example, when Klassen (1991) looked closely at nine Latino men and women living in Toronto, most of whom had little formal schooling and varying levels of Spanish literacy, he found that there were many language domains—home, the streets, shops, offices, and some work settings—where they managed to get along very effectively using whatever linguistics tools they had in either language. ESL classes were among the settings in which these adults felt most powerless. This ethnographic study seems to indicate that the English-only instructional model was not breaking down a sense of alienation from school.

In adult education programs where attendance is not compulsory, learners often respond by voting with their feet. Many providers interviewed cited high dropout rates in ESL classes as a key impetus for initiating native language literacy. Strei (1992), for example, reported that the dropout rate for literacy learners in his Palm Beach County, Florida program decreased from 85% to 10% after native language literacy classes were started. The Lao Family Community, Inc., in Milwaukee, started their Hmong bilingual classes after ESL enrollment began to fall. Results of a survey conducted by the refugee leadership indicated that among the 79 refugee adults attending ESL and vocational classes, two thirds said they experienced “great difficulty” understanding their teachers. Half “did not understand what they were studying in class” and most felt that “help must come from someone who could speak their language” (Podeschi, 1990, p. 59).

Many native language literacy providers believe that, just as is the case with school-age children (see Snow, 1990), the achievement of adults improves when they are provided with teachers from their own language and cultural groups (Auerbach, 1993). The importance of teachers who have a deep understanding of the cultures of their learners emerged as a major theme of the CAL working group meeting. working group members were quick to point out that teachers who do not share the language and culture of their learners can also be effective (Gillespie & Ballering, 1992). They also acknowledged that all teachers must have appropriate training in areas such as second language acquisition and theories of reading. However, they believe the unique qualifications of bilingual teachers have been underestimated, and that not enough effort has been made to hire nonnative speakers of English as literacy teachers. Many at the working group meeting joined the following teacher in the belief that:

The linguistic justification for native language literacy claims it makes sense to teach literacy in a language that students understand. But then it stops there. What really makes the difference are all the things around language: the kind of teaching, the kind of involvement the teacher has, the fact that you share the culture. (Ballering, 1992, p. 3)

The cultural nuances within the classroom may be subtle, but powerful. In one of the few studies of cultural behavior in adult education classrooms, Hvitfeldt (1986) found that Hmong adults felt they could learn best in an environment quite different from the typical classroom. They preferred that their teacher stress cooperative achievement, the denial of individual ability, and the belief that everyone's classroom work belongs to everyone else, all cultural norms highly valued within Hmong culture, rather than foster the values of competition and individual achievement associated with American culture (Hvitfeldt, 1986, p. 72). Teachers who share similar backgrounds with learners, working group members pointed out, are often able to establish a vital level of trust with learners (Gillespie & Ballering, 1992). A Hmong teacher recounted how he found ways to encourage all learners to participate in classroom activities, while still respecting traditional values concerning the gender and age of his students. A Haitian teacher described his need to reassure new learners accustomed to the kinds of political reprisals they suffered in Haiti that he would not harm or inform on them. This was a necessary step before moving on to the task of learning to read and write.

Native language teachers often also share with learners the experience of being an immigrant to the United States. They may have a keen awareness that the literacy classroom is the learners' first point of access not only to the American classroom, but also to social services and other educational programs. As a result, they are often willing to allow learners to bring up issues of immediate concern in their lives. "I think the biggest difference is with us they feel they can ask all kinds of questions. They don't feel like they have to know everything or hide their problems, either personal or survival," observed one working group teacher (Ballering, 1992, p. 10). In her experience training native language literacy teachers, Auerbach (1993) has found that:

Where English is being taught to immigrants and refugees transplanted to a new country, it is not just the experience as a language learner, but the experience of sharing the struggles as a newcomer that is critical There is something about having actually lived these realities which enables immigrant teachers to make connections that are otherwise not possible." (p. 26)

Many working group members also emphasized the impact on learners of seeing others who have succeeded in furthering their education. At El Barrio Popular, the highest priority is placed on the goal of having the program managed and run by students and former students. Two of the teachers in the program are previous GED learners; others live in the surrounding community. Teachers also use their own life stories as a means to encourage learners to continue their education beyond initial literacy. Everyone in the program takes pride in the educational achievements of students who were

once enrolled in the program. “What effort I make is not only for myself but also for my people,” said one teacher (Ballering, 1992, p. 6).

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT AND NATIVE LANGUAGE RATIONALES

In recent years, educators working with adult beginning readers have recognized that literacy acquisition involves much more than simply learning a set of isolated skills. Many factors in the social context of learners’ lives play a powerful role in literacy acquisition in adulthood. Lytle (1990), for example, has developed a model for understanding the dimensions of literacy that takes into account adults’ beliefs about literacy and learning, their everyday literacy practices, the metacognitive processes by which they learn to read and write, and their changing plans for the use of literacy in their lives. While most of the research in this area has been conducted with adult basic education (ABE) learners, many native language literacy practitioners share the view that the use of the native language plays a facilitating role in allowing learners to explore these sociocontextual dimensions of literacy (Gillespie & Ballering, 1992).

Within the dominant culture of the United States, Fingeret and Danin (1991) have observed that the inability to read and write well is “highly stigmatizing, giving rise to a profound sense of shame” (p. 223). Although adults may be very competent and confident in other aspects of their lives, when it comes to literacy, many have internalized those stigmas, with significant consequences for their self-esteem and self-concept. A key part of the process of becoming literate, these researchers have found, is when learners begin to “transform the underlying basis on which judgments of self-esteem are calculated” (p. 223) by moving from self-blame to an analysis of the social conditions that contributed to their limited reading and writing abilities.

Many providers we interviewed recognize these same processes in their work with non-English-speaking adults, who are stigmatized not only within their own communities for their inability to read and write, but also within the dominant culture for their inability to speak English. Learners often feel overwhelmed by the unfamiliar classroom environment, experience a sense of inadequacy with respect to their ability to help their children with their schooling, and wonder if they themselves are too old to begin the process of learning to read and write. Women may see becoming literate and learning English both as something to desire and also to fear, as it may become a threat to the stability of the family when husbands oppose their attending classes (Rockhill, 1987).

Too often, teachers say, important discussions examining beliefs about learning cannot take place in the beginning ESL classroom, where the language barrier requires that complex discussions be oversimplified, or, in the words of one teacher, “deadened.” “You’ve got so much more power in your own

language,” reflected another teacher in the working group. “You can be more confident, and that’s what it takes to realize you can learn another language.” (Ballering, 1992)

To be willing to make the commitment to continue their education, adult learners in beginning level literacy classes must first develop a belief in their ability to learn. At the working group meeting, Heide Spruck-Wrigley remarked

on the changes she saw as she interviewed learners around the country for a study of promising practices in ESL and native language literacy.

What we saw was a change in the way people looked at themselves, at each other, and at their possibilities for the future. They began to see that, “Now I can do it.” Learners kept saying to us, “We know we’re not really literate yet, we cannot do all the things that we want to do, but now we feel that we can.” (Wrigley & Guth, 1991, p. 11)

Another dimension of literacy acquisition that practitioners believe can be facilitated by the use of the native language is the development of a metacognitive awareness of language and learning. Often, learners come to the classroom with a limited view of what reading and writing are all about. Seeing reading as a process of constructing meaning from text and of learning to use semantic, syntactic, and graphophonemic cues is more efficient, they claim, when the native language can be used. This also applies to metalinguistic discussions of the rules and patterns of the English language, which teachers saw as instrumental in helping learners to develop listening and speaking skills in English. These processes, teachers have observed, allow learners to develop an awareness of language that later transfers to the learning of English (Gillespie & Ballering, 1992).

RATIONALES RELATED TO CONTENT-BASED INSTRUCTION

A final argument in support of native language instruction has to do with its role in fostering the learning of knowledge and skills in various content areas. As we saw earlier, current research in bilingual education has shown that learners require many years of instruction to master the academic uses of English (Collier, 1992; Ramirez, 1992). Just as children may fall behind in the content areas without bilingual instruction, many adult educators argue that adults, too, may miss out on acquiring valuable knowledge and skills in content areas varying from health, parenting, and legal rights to math instruction, prevocational skills, specific vocational training, and citizenship education. Many adult native language literacy instructors may concur with this CAL working group member who noted that her students have “a right not just to learning a language, but to a basic education as well” (Gillespie & Ballering, 1992, p. 8).

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Although teachers and administrators make a compelling case for native language literacy instruction based on programmatic experiences, many are well aware that without additional research, overall support for adult native language literacy instruction will continue to be meager. This section highlights a few key areas in greatest need of further research and discusses various factors that might facilitate or constrain the research process.

STUDY OF THE TRANSFER OF L1 LITERACY KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS TO L2

Within the field, one important study that has been proposed would measure the effects over time of native language literacy instruction on the acquisition of oral communication and literacy in English of adult immigrant students. At a minimum, such a study would compare the gains of students who receive only ESL instruction with those who receive initial literacy instruction in the native language and then later make the transition into ESL instruction (described earlier as the sequential model). If funds were available, a larger study could also compare the differential impacts of the sequential model with the bilingual model (i.e., use of the native language and ESL within the same classroom) and the coordinate model (i.e., simultaneous enrollment in native language literacy and oral/aural ESL courses).

Within each organization selected to participate in such a study, it would be necessary to identify a population of age-peer cohorts of learners who share similar socioeconomic characteristics—the same non-English mother tongue, comparable levels of educational attainment in their countries of origin, and levels of native language literacy and English proficiency that fall within the same range at the outset of the study. In addition, special controls would need to be created in order to assure that the size of the programs, the scope of the curriculum, and the quality of personnel were comparable.

Depending on the exact features of the programs under study, additional research questions could also be investigated. It would be useful to examine whether or not there is a positive transfer of literacy ability from English to an adult's native tongue when literacy instruction is offered only in English. It would be equally important to ascertain whether students receiving only literacy instruction in the native language and not enrolled in ESL classes show gains in English reading and writing ability. Concurrently, in order to understand why such results occur and to understand the broader outcomes of instruction, a qualitative component should also be included. Data gathered should include participation rates, educational achievement in ESL and native language literacy over time, and learners' perceptions of what has been gained from instruction.

As discussed earlier (Burtoff, 1985; Robson, 1982), the development of rigorous and well-designed studies of adult education populations presents many conceptual and logistical challenges. Beder (1992) points out:

Learners participate voluntarily, in response to diverse needs and operational contexts; many different types of programs have evolved; a part-time teaching force and poorly developed infrastructure constrain program innovation and improvement; despite recent and dramatic funding increases, the resource base is extremely lean. (p. 2)

Several design issues in the proposed study would require particular attention. Given the small size and limited resources of many programs, organizing groups of learners to participate in the study would require careful planning. Programs would need additional support, both financial and logistical, in order to recruit and retain students and to assure that accurate baseline and postenrollment data can be kept. A precise account of the amount of instruction must also be maintained and decisions regarding when to posttest

must be carefully considered by researchers in close collaboration with practitioners. In addition, many practitioners and researchers alike stress the importance of tracking learners beyond the completion of their initial literacy course, since, as Beder (1991) reminds us, “While the short-term effects of adult literacy education may be modest, the long-term effects, compounded over a lifetime, may be enormous” (p. 157). A longitudinal component of the proposed study, which would involve tracking a subset of students’ educational experiences, work histories, and reading and writing experiences, would greatly enhance the value of such a study.

Another very different but equally important set of considerations concerns finding appropriate assessment tools for use in the study. Although suitable tests of oral proficiency in English may be available, many questions remain concerning the reliability, validity, and appropriateness of existing standardized tests of reading and writing both in English and in the native language. Only a few ESL tests for nonnative speakers of English include reading and writing components. Moreover, questions exist in particular about the usefulness of pencil-and-paper tests for beginning level learners. In addition, most of the standardized tests available for beginning readers in languages other than English (such as Spanish or French) were developed for children and may not be acceptable for adult learners. In undertaking a study of this nature, it would be necessary to pay careful attention at the outset to selecting, developing, and field-testing assessment tools. Researchers should also investigate the value of using various alternative means of assessment, such as portfolios and performance assessments, now being developed by native language literacy practitioners.

Such a study would clearly be an ambitious one. If funds were available, a study involving multiple sites, a qualitative component, and a longitudinal study of a subset of learners would be extremely valuable to those planning educational programs. However, even a smaller, more short-term study of one or two sites would be an asset to the field. In either case, in order to achieve the credible results so needed by literacy educators, rigorous attention must be paid to the research design and particularly to the use of experimental controls.

PROGRAM-BASED RESEARCH AND DEMONSTRATION PROJECTS

Within the field of adult education, it is important to remember that any research project can only measure practices within programs that currently exist (Beder, 1991). Many programs remain seriously underfunded. Providers often can envision a quality of instruction that they are not able to deliver. Given this reality, another direction for research might be the establishment of several research and development projects involving a collaboration between native language literacy providers and researchers. Several program models in various contexts could be developed, implemented, evaluated, and pilot-tested. The pilot programs could then also be evaluated. The research projects would need to extend over a long enough period of time so that the impact of native language instruction could be assessed over the long term and so that research could be conducted concurrently with program development. Wide dissemination of the results of the projects would also be important. Such a process could have tremendous value in moving the literacy field forward and might be

particularly effective in helping us to examine the conditions under which various models for native language and ESL literacy work best.

Another practical process of systematic inquiry would be the development of a common data bank through which programs could collect and share information (Beder, 1992). For example, many providers believe native language literacy instruction leads to an increase in student enrollment and higher retention rates. By developing similar kinds of data and record-keeping processes, and then analyzing enrollment data, providers in programs around the country would be able to begin the process of confirming or denying this assertion (information which would be of particular interest to funders). Other kinds of information could also be collected, depending upon the needs and interests of practitioners. For example, assessment tools such as language inventories, attitude scales, and writing portfolios developed in one program could be shared and field-tested at other sites, leading to the eventual development of a series of common benchmarks to measure progress in native language literacy programs. Although practitioners would need funds to defray the costs of gathering data and assistance in developing their research activities, a common data bank could play a valuable role in helping to overcome the isolation felt by many native language literacy practitioners and in developing the expertise of teachers and administrators.

STUDIES OF LANGUAGE USE IN CLASSROOMS AND COMMUNITIES

Within the field of adult literacy, there is limited knowledge of the process of becoming literate from the perspectives of immigrant and non-English-speaking adults. However, useful studies do exist. Qualitative researchers, who have investigated the functions and uses of literacy in the everyday lives of various social groups, have done much to clarify the differences between home and school literacy. Reder (1987), for example, helped the field recognize the collaborative nature of literacy practices among members of Hmong, Eskimo, and Hispanic communities. In her work with Hmong adults, Weinstein-Shr (1994) showed that the strength of immigrants' social networks was often much more important for survival than their degree of skill with literacy. In Chicago, Farr (1994) explored how informal literacy learning took place among a group of men of Mexican origin. In Philadelphia, Hornberger and Hardman (1994) studied the use of English and the native language of Puerto Rican and Cambodian learners enrolled in adult ESL classes and a GED program. Not all studies show a learner's preference for native language literacy instruction. Studying the lives of a group of immigrant women, Rockhill (1987) found that many women preferred learning English, since it was a route to escape oppressive family conditions associated with their native language.

Many more studies of this nature are needed to understand the complex ethnic, gender-related, cultural, and economic variables among minority populations enrolled in adult education. Additional studies are needed, for example, to further understand the various uses of English and the native language and the circumstances under which literacy instruction in English may be preferred over instruction in the native language. As Hornberger and Hardman (1994) have argued, making linguistic choices is less of an either/or choice than one of context. Investigations of the multiple and complex

interrelationships between bilingualism and literacy should play a useful role in deciding how to offer instruction and in what language.

NATIONAL SURVEYS OF FUNCTIONAL LITERACY

In addition to the studies already mentioned, survey research is also needed to ascertain how many LEP adults lack basic literacy skills and what their educational needs are. Although the recently issued National Adult Literacy Survey (Kirsch et al., 1993) improves understanding of the literacy needs of English-speaking residents of the United States, the survey does little to assess the abilities of nonnative speakers of English. Although non-English speakers were included in the sample, the test itself was given only in English. Those who could not read and write in English completed a brief questionnaire in their native languages. As Chisman, Spruck-Wrigley, and Ewen (1993) point out, while the field may learn somewhat more about the literacy levels of the language minority population when the data related to them are analyzed, this analysis will not provide all the necessary information about the language instruction needs of the nonnative speaker of English. The test assessed English reading ability only. It did not assess how well non-English speakers could speak or understand spoken English, how well they could write in English, or how well they could use English in their daily lives. In addition, the test did not assess whether adults who speak a language other than English could read and write in their native language.

Many practitioners believe that a national survey should be undertaken that would focus on nonnative speakers of English. Such a survey would need to measure proficiency in speaking and understanding English as well as in reading and writing it. To the extent that it is feasible, reading and writing proficiency in the native language should also be measured in the major language groups represented in the United States. The survey might also assess other variables such as subjects' educational attainment levels, educational goals, and the kinds of educational and training services that they need (Chisman, Spruck-Wrigley, & Ewen, 1993).

CONCLUSION

In spite of a lack of recognition of native language literacy at a policy level, chronic and pervasive underfunding, and occasionally vocal public opposition, the number and variety of native language literacy programs for adults are growing. Native language instruction appears to be effective for some adult literacy learners for a variety of reasons. One factor may be that native language literacy teachers who share the language and often the culture of learners are able to establish an atmosphere of trust and demonstrate an understanding of the immigrant experience that fosters learning. Another factor may be the facilitating role that the ability to use the native language plays in allowing teachers and learners to communicate complex information. Use of a common language facilitates the discussion and examination of issues related to adjusting to a new culture and makes it possible to discuss topics such as strategies used in learning to read and write and learners' literacy needs. Some content areas such as those related to life skills, math,

and job training can also be addressed more efficiently. Although studies confirming the effects of native language literacy instruction on adult English literacy acquisition do not yet exist, research with other populations indicates that many reading and writing skills learned in the native language transfer to the learning of reading and writing in a second language. Thus, for most beginning level learners, some basic introduction to literacy in the native language may actually lead to more rapid acquisition of English literacy than ESL literacy instruction alone.

In addition to all of these reasons that support native language literacy instruction, there also exists a powerful sociopolitical rationale. Demographic trends indicate that increasingly more adults in the United States will speak a language other than English at home in the years to come. Given this reality, it is especially important that support be found for research related to the potential effectiveness of native language literacy instruction for adults and the conditions under which it may be more or less useful. This information could contribute much to the ongoing dialogue concerning the role the native language can play within our adult educational system.



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