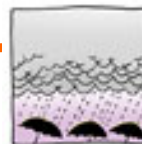


four seasons in one day –

literacies in changing climates

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Research findings into strategies for low-level adult literacy students

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This workshop presents the findings of the research project into Strategies for low-level adult literacy students, which was recently completed. Attendees will also be provided with an extensive list of effective strategies for low-level students that were identified in the research.

As a teacher of low-literacy students I have had the opportunity to trial a variety of strategies. In the course of my trials I have experienced some level of success and retention of students, and have identified strategies that appear to work. My own experience of working in the field has prompted me to seek further understanding and investigation of the strategies that I apply.

I was also very curious about what other teachers were doing. From my brief encounters with other teachers, I discovered that teachers have in fact a wealth of ideas and information. Adult literacy teachers in Australia have developed many successful strategies. They have developed a great deal of expertise in offering programs that are complex, specialised, varied and effective. This knowledge is acquired not only through their training and professional development but also from their years in teaching practice. It is through their own trials, errors, and evaluation that they have developed successful strategies. They have discovered what works for adult learners and what doesn't.

Currently adult literacy teachers, particularly in the Adult Community Education (ACE) sector, have few opportunities to meet and discuss effective teaching strategies for low-level literacy students due to the majority being employed on a sessional basis and/or working in isolation. Teachers are allocated minimal hours for developing their skills, meeting and training. There are also minimal processes in place to collate the experiences of teachers. Too often teachers leave and the knowledge and experience they have acquired have gone with them. Such knowledge would assist new teachers in this field, help teachers to continue to improve their teaching skills, and provide support to teachers who work in isolation. Collecting this knowledge would also provide teachers in the adult literacy field with recognition for their expertise.

It was this hunger for knowledge that led me to begin the journey to seek answers from my own teaching experiences and the knowledge held by teachers in the field.

Subsequently, Olympic Adult Education was successful in obtaining funds from the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) to carry out a research project.

The aims of this research were as follows:

- To investigate through both qualitative and quantitative methods what are, if any, innovative strategies for low-level adult learners, what strategies and approaches work and don't work for low-level literacy learners, and do these strategies differ with higher level learners?
- To provide a focus where teachers of low-level literacy adults were participant researchers by reflecting on their teaching practices and strategies.
- To produce a final report that provides practical strategies and approaches that could be applied in the classroom.
- To provide a foundation for developing resources, and curriculum for low-level literacy students.

This research acquired data through four methods: a structured survey, group interviews, summaries of reflective journals, and a workshop at the ACAL conference. The data collected from all four sources have shown similar findings.

Initially the research was to investigate "Innovative strategies for low-level adult learners. Based on the evidence from this research into innovative strategies for low-level adult literacy learners, it is apparent that respondents are not clearly able to define whether the strategies they are implementing are indeed innovative. To measure accurately if strategies are purely innovative an in-depth analysis would be required on each strategy as to their origin and this would more than likely surface further

complexities. Furthermore, it would be information that would not be of great value to teachers. The question is raised are the strategies innovative, effective or evolving?

What have emerged however, as evidenced particularly in the reflective journals, are elements of innovation and creativity whereby teachers are taking strategies and modifying them to address the students' needs and achieve learning. For example, one teacher used modeling as a strategy, however rather than present the whole piece, she would model work one step at a time.

Another teacher used role-playing as a strategy by inviting two guests to present a clowning workshop. What was creative here was that she drew on the expertise of someone else to present the strategy.

Using computers is an increasingly popular tool to use for low-level learners. What are creative are the various methods employed by teachers. One teacher would get her students to do an image search on different vocabulary using the Google search engine. Students would then have a visual representation of the vocabulary. There were also many games that teachers created to assist with learning, for example one teacher uses many variations of oral word games such as each person must say the name of a different animal. Another teacher was creative when she organised an excursion without the students knowing until the day that they went, avoiding the lack of attendance that she had previously experienced. While another was creative when she used aromatherapy to provide a relaxed environment for her and her students in the class. Another was also creative when he got the women to talk the men in the class through a recipe, which the men then had to go and cook.

It could be said that the research study itself is innovative, in acquiring and documenting information on approaches and strategies that teachers are practicing with adult learners who have low-level literacy skills.

The research also provided profiles of low-level literacy classes. Overall classes were small in numbers with 13 students on average, there were generally more women in classes than males, and there were a significant number of students in classes who had intellectual or physical disabilities. There were also a significantly high number of students who were unemployed. Over 80% of the classes had 16-24 year olds in them. The data showed that teachers were using many similar approaches and strategies. General approaches included flexibility, variety, and establishing rapport with students. Common strategies included discussions, and using topics that were familiar and relevant to the students. A high number of respondents also used pair work, reading aloud, comprehension, question-answer referential, direct content explanation, cloze, brainstorming, games and excursions.

Teachers also used other approaches and strategies that were effective for students. These lend themselves to further exploration.

The summaries of the reflective journals provided greater insight and understandings. They demonstrated that teachers in this area were receptive to trialling new strategies and approaches. They were willing to give things a go and explore whether something will work or not. This is evidence in itself that approaches and strategies for low-level learners are not set and that they are evolving and developing, as expressed by these teachers:

...The strategies I have mentioned here are ones I will use again as I believe them to be effective. They will continue to be fine tuned by the students as I learn from them. And there is much learning still to be done. (*Helen Keanne*)

I don't know that they are innovative but they are effective for me and, of course, constantly evolving. One of the joys of teaching is student recognition of learning

and the challenge is to constantly source strategies that will engage that learning.
(Sarah Deasey)

The summaries of the reflective journals also identified that many of the teachers are aware of who their students are, where they are from and what experiences they have had and take this into great consideration when they are planning their classes, ensuring that they are meeting their interests

It became apparent through the reflective journals that the approaches and strategies that teachers used also reflected the teachers' preferences. For example, a teacher who does not like using song may not use song or may use it half-heartedly. A genuine belief in a strategy may impinge on determining its success. This aspect was not measured in the research. The reaction from students may also impact on a strategy. Students may not want to do it; they may be embarrassed or fearful about using a particular strategy. However a student's perception may change as time proceeds. Similarly a teacher's perception may change.

Finally, undertaking this research project has been an enriching experience for all those who have been involved. Benefits have already been experienced, even before the distribution of the final report. Teachers who have been involved have carried their reflections back into the classroom, improving their teaching practice, and learners have benefited from this as a consequence. Maintaining a reflective journal was in particular a very effective process for all the teachers involved.

What is clearly evident in this project is that teachers have developed a great level of expertise over the time they have been teaching low-level literacy students. This expertise is seldom passed onto other teachers in any comprehensive way. It largely remains with the individual teacher or group of teachers within a centre, and leaves when he/she/they leave. There is a need to continue to share this knowledge so that new teachers and learners can benefit from it. There is more chance that learners will experience success if teachers utilise strategies that have been found to be successful. The following recommendations may assist in what future directions should be taken.

Recommendations

- Further research into what are effective strategies with low-level students, with a focus on the learners, their perceptions and monitoring their progress.
- An interactive Internet site for teachers of low-level adult literacy students, with a discussion forum and where teachers could contribute lesson plans, worksheets, resources, information and tips, which could be downloaded and utilised in the class.
- The site could also have a separate section where students could undertake self-access activities.
- A resource package with lesson plans, worksheets, and resources specifically based on the findings of this research.
- Funding for teachers to undertake reflective practice.

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