

Applying Research Findings to Instruction for Adult English Language Students

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Reasons Adult ESL Practitioners Need to Understand and Use Research

Teachers and administrators working in programs that serve adults learning English want to know how to help their students acquire proficiency in the language. The following are reasons that research may help practitioners achieve this goal. Teachers and program administrators...

- _ want to **know more about their students** and about what helps them stay in programs and succeed in reaching their goals. Research provides information that teachers often do not have time to gather about who students are.

- _ want to **know how to help students learn** and what works effectively in instruction. They often seek such information from other teachers, from professional development opportunities, and from publications. Research also provides information about what works in different contexts with different students.

- _ often experiment with new techniques to **learn what best helps their students learn**. Research describes what others have learned when they have used new techniques.

- _ are under increasing pressure to **demonstrate that students are making gains** in language proficiency and achieving their work, family, civic, and personal goals as effectively and quickly as possible. Research findings can inform teachers and program administrators about the types of programs, instruction, and support services that help students succeed and make demonstrable gains.

- _ are being asked to **demonstrate that they use evidence-based practice** in their work. Research findings are part of evidence-based practice.

How Teachers Can Access, Understand, Evaluate, and Use Research

There are a number of ways that teachers can find out about research and have access to it, understand the key points of research studies and the implications for their instruction, evaluate the validity and relevance of the research, and use it to guide their practice.

Getting access to research: The easiest way to locate research findings is on the Internet. A key resource for information about student populations and studies related to language learning is the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) (<http://www.cal.org/>). The Center for Adult English Language Acquisition (CAELA) at CAL (www.cal.org/caela) has downloadable briefs, fact sheets, and research summaries and articles written specifically for practitioners working with adults learning English.

Another resource is NCSALL (<http://www.ncsall.net/>), which publishes *Focus on Basics*, a quarterly research magazine for practitioners. Searching the “Subject Index” for “ESOL” on NCSALL’s Home Page will produce a list (with links) of ESL-related articles and reports. Other resources include California Adult Literacy Professional Development Project (CALPRO) Research Publications and Digests (www.calpro-online.org); the archived resources from the Clearinghouse on Adult, Career and Vocational Education (ACVE) (www.cete.org/acve/textonly/fulltextresource.asp); and the research (academic, practitioner, and student) page of the LINCS English as a Second Language Special Collection, sponsored by the National Institute for Literacy (www.eslcollection.org/tt-b.html).

Understanding research: Teachers can better understand research studies and findings by asking themselves questions while reading: Who were the students participating in the study, and do they resemble the students in my class or program? What question(s) were the researchers trying to answer? Do the conclusions that the researchers draw make sense from the information they gathered? When was the research conducted? Teachers also can discuss the research with their colleagues. Teachers can ask their program director or the professional development specialist in their state to help them find professional development activities, such as workshops, institutes, and study circles that include research as part of the content of the professional development.

Evaluating research: After hearing, reading about, and understanding the research, teachers should ask themselves if the practices suggested by the research are valid for the population of students with whom they work. They can also ask themselves if the findings confirm or contradict the data that they already have about what works with their students. They can talk with other teachers in the program or start a study group to look at the research on a specific topic.

Using research: Teachers can begin by trying out just one strategy or approach suggested by research. As they begin to use a strategy, they need to think about what criteria they will use to determine if the strategy works better, worse, or the same as the strategies they have used before. Teachers can also keep a journal of what they learned after trying out a new strategy, or join electronic discussion lists and share strategies with other teachers.

Conclusion

Research studies do not address all of the issues that adult ESL teachers face. Research is not likely to describe, for example, a specific strategy that a teacher can implement in class immediately. Furthermore, there are many questions that teachers have about teaching the wide range of adult students learning English; some of these questions may not be informed by research studies. The research that does exist, however, can provide information that teachers can integrate with their own and others’ professional wisdom to develop evidence-based practice. Research can also help teachers and program administrators challenge their assumptions about who their students are, how they learn, and what instructional strategies work best for them. Helping teachers become involved directly with research and researchers is an important strategy for opening up the world of research to teachers and program administrators.