Frequently Asked Questions

Regarding Terminology

Q. What is ESL?

A. ESL is the popular term for English as a Second Language. It is used when referring to the teaching of English, in an English-speaking country, to people whose native language is not English.

Q. What is ESOL?

A. ESOL is the acronym for English for Speakers of Other Languages or for teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages. Some people prefer this term to ESL, as it takes into consideration that some learners may already speak a second language and are now learning a third, fourth, or fifth language.

Q. What is EFL?

A. EFL stands for English as a Foreign Language and refers to the teaching and learning of English in countries where English is not the official native language.

Q. What is ELL?

A. ELL stands for English language learner. This phrase is frequently used to describe non-native English speakers in K-12 education.

Q. What is SLA?

A. SLA stands for second language acquisition, and SLA research focuses on the processes and outcomes of learning a second language.

Q. At what levels do adult English language learners function?

A. The National Reporting System (NRS) establishes descriptors for functioning levels of adult ESL learners. The levels include, from lowest to highest levels, Beginning ESL Literacy, Low Beginning ESL, High Beginning ESL, Low Intermediate ESL, High Intermediate ESL, and Advanced ESL. (See the chart starting on pages IV-

Regarding Adult English Language Learners

Q. How many adults in the United States do not speak English as a native language?

A. More than 35 million adults in the United States are native speakers of a language other than English. (See *Adult Non-Native English Speakers in the United States*, page I–1.)

Q. From which countries do adult immigrants come to the U.S.?

A. The foreign-born population in the United States comes from all over the world. The largest group of immigrants comes from Mexico and other Latin American countries. The next largest group comes from countries in Asia. (See *Adult English Speakers in the United States*, page I–2.)

Q. What languages do adult immigrants in the United States speak?

A. The majority of individuals who speak a language other than English at home speak Spanish (60%). The number of Spanish speakers is more than 10 times the number of individuals who speak the second most prevalent language, Chinese. The remaining eight of the top 10 languages spoken are (in this order) French, German, Tagalog, Vietnamese, Italian, Korean, and Polish. (See *Adult English Speakers in the United States*, page I–2.)

Q. Where do adult immigrants live?

A. Most foreign-born residents live in six states: California, New York, Florida, Texas, Illinois, and New Jersey. Other states also are experiencing rapid growth of their immigrant populations: North Carolina, Georgia, Nevada, Arkansas, Utah, Tennessee, Nebraska, Colorado, Arizona, and Kentucky. (See *Adult English Speakers in the United States*, page I–2.)

Q. How many adults are studying English as a second language?

A. In program year 2002-2003, close to 1.2 million individuals were enrolled in ESL classes in state-administered adult education programs, about 43 percent of total participants. This percentage does not include those served in other segments of the educational system – in adult basic education (ABE) and adult secondary education (ASE) classes, private language schools and academic institutions, and programs sponsored by community-based organizations and volunteer literacy organizations. (See *Adult English Speakers in the United States*, page I–1.)

Q. What are the characteristics of the adults learning English?

A. The population of adult English language learners is diverse. These adults may range in age from 16-year-olds who are not attending high school to adults in their 90s. They may be permanent residents, naturalized citizens, legal immigrants, refugees and asylees, and undocumented immigrants. They have a variety of educational backgrounds, ranging from no education at all to advanced degrees. (See *Adult English Speakers in the United States*, page I–1 and I–2.)

Q. How can I identify adult English learners who might have learning disabilities?

A. Identifying adult English language learners who might have learning disabilities is a complex task. Before labeling or testing an adult learner, teachers should look for other reasons for a lack of expected progress. Educators have noted numerous reasons for slow progress in learning English. These behaviors or problems most often affect all learning, whereas a learning disability usually affects only one area of learning. (*See Adult English Language Learners and Learning Disabilities*, page IV–59.)

Q. Some English language learners in my class have come from war-torn countries. What advice can you offer me in serving these students?

A. Virtually all immigrants and refugees are likely to be affected by stress that occurs when they move from one culture to another. It is difficult, especially for adults, to have to learn how to function in a new culture. Many of these learners are also coping with so-called traumatic stress from extreme events (such as assaults, war-related injuries, and torture) that occurred prior to or during their migration to the United States. It is

generally believed that traumatic stress caused by the deliberate actions of other humans is the worst kind of stress to live with. (See *Addressing the Needs of Specific Groups of Learners*, page IV–65.)

Q. Why do adults enroll in English language programs?

A. Adults enroll in English language programs for a variety of reasons, including job enhancement, educational advancement, improved communication with others in their everyday lives, citizenship attainment, and support of their children's education. (See *Adult English Speakers in the United States*, page I–3**.**)

Q. What challenges do adults face when participating in English language programs and learning English?

A. Although adult immigrants are generally highly motivated to learn English, they face other challenges in addition to communication difficulties: conflicting work schedules and multiple jobs; the stress of maintaining several jobs and family responsibilities; lack of transportation; limited access to affordable, high-quality child care; difficulty finding programs and classes that meet their needs and goals; lack of adequate, affordable housing; lack of adequate health care and medical insurance; and perhaps fear about their legal status in this country. (See *Adult English Speakers in the United States*, page I–3**.**)

Q. What strengths do adult English language learners bring to programs?

A. Adult English language learners have a great deal of life experience and background knowledge from which to draw when learning English. They are generally highly motivated to learn, and they usually enroll voluntarily in programs. If they have had formal schooling in their home languages, they have knowledge in subject matter areas like math, science, and social studies. Many adult learners also have strong and supportive families, and family members often help with child care. They may have support networks within their language and culture groups that help them adjust to life in the United States and access services. (See *Adult English Speakers in the United States*, page I–3**.**)

Q. What steps can I put in place so that new adult students will want to return after their first day in class?

A. By establishing an orientation process, administrators and staff will be prepared to welcome new English language learners into their program. Program staff anticipate questions new students may have, consider retention strategies, and consult community resource guides. (See *Orientation for New English Language Learners*, page II–1.)

Regarding Adult Education Programs and Instruction

Q. What types of education programs are there for adults learning English?

A. Following are the most common contexts in which adult ESL instruction is offered:

Lifeskills or general ESL classes focus on development of general English language skills. (See *Program Types and Challenges*, page I–8.)

Family ESL literacy programs address the family as a whole, providing English language and literacy instruction for adults and children. (See *Program Types and Challenges*, page I–8.)

English literacy/civics (EL/civics) programs integrate English language instruction with opportunities to learn about civil rights, civic participation and responsibility, and citizenship.

Vocational ESL (VESL) programs prepare learners for jobs by integrating language skills with vocational skills. (See *Program Types and Challenges*, page I–8.)

Workplace ESL classes are offered in work settings and focus on development of language that is directly relevant to that setting.

Pre-academic ESL programs concentrate on preparing learners for further education and training in postsecondary institutions, vocational education classes, or ABE and GED classes.

One-on-one or small-group tutoring situations may be offered in a variety of settings, such as libraries and community or religious organizations.

(See *Program Types and Challenges*, page I–9.)

Q. Are there standards for adult ESL programs and instruction?

A. Standards apply to both programs (quality of the program overall) and content (what is taught and expected outcomes). Standards have been developed by different entities.

- The membership organization, Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), has developed program standards and a program self-review instrument for adult ESOL programs titled *Standards for Adult Education ESL Programs* (www.tesol.org).

- Some states also have developed program and content standards. (See a list of state standards in *Program Types and Challenges*, page I–9, and in Part V, Adult ESL Resources, page V–9. See also an annotated list of program standards at www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/bibliographies/prgstandbib.html and of content standards at www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/bibliographies/constanbib.html. In the near future, check also for a warehouse of adult ESL standards. This is a work in progress, soon to be made available at the Web site of the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Vocational and Adult Education: www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/index.html.

Q. How do I decide what topics and skills to address?

A. Different programs have different goals, and those goals help to determine the topics and skills to be covered. The program goals should be directly connected to the goals of the

adult English language learners they serve. (See *Needs Assessment and Learner Self-Evaluation*, page II–5**,** and *Parent Education Overview*, page III–1**.**)

Q. How can I work with learners in class when they have different needs and skill levels?

A. Learners come to class with different backgrounds, abilities, and perceptions of what constitutes learning. They progress at different rates in each of the language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Many other factors contribute to the multilevel nature of a class. Because of these variables, planning to teach a multilevel class may be time consuming, and classroom management may be challenging. Effective teaching of a multi-level class requires learning activities and materials that address the learning styles and skill levels of each learner in the class. (See Part II, *Activity Packets*.)

Q. What factors affect the literacy learning of adults learning English?

A. Factors to consider in instruction include the type and extent of the learners' native language literacy; educational attainment; English language proficiency; goals for learning English; age; motivations to read and write; socio-cultural backgrounds; learning abilities or disabilities; and instructional, living, and working environments. (See *English Language and Literacy Learning: Research to Practice*, page IV–1.)

Q. How can I help English language learners develop and expand their English vocabulary?

A. Readers need to know from 3,000-5,000 words in a language to read it independently. Teachers can employ multiple strategies and activities to enhance students' vocabularies. These range from teaching sight words to using computer programs. (See *Activities to Promote Reading Development*, page II–57**.**)

Q. What does an effective lesson look like for beginning ESL students?

A. A lesson plan for use with any learner identifies the skills necessary to meet the lesson objective, the materials and equipment needed, and the activities appropriate to accomplish the objective. It includes a warm-up, a review of previously taught material, an introduction to the new lesson, presentation of new information, opportunities to practice and apply the new language or information, and an evaluation of how the lesson went and what was learned. (See *Lesson Planning*, page II–29**.**)

Q. How can I promote interaction and communication in my classes?

A. Offering well-designed and well-executed communicative activities can help make the English classroom an active, safe, and enjoyable place where literacy- and beginning-level learners can be successful. Communicative activities may be used effectively in all class levels, but they are especially important for literacy- and beginning-level classes as vehicles to move adults from their fears and self-doubt toward independent and confident learning. (See *Activities to Promote Interaction and Communication*, page II–41**.**)

Q. How can I help adult learners make transitions through and beyond my program?

A. Adult learners face many challenges in making transitions through adult education programs into other education programs and work opportunities. A transitional program

provides orientation, counseling, and comprehensive services to help higher-level ESL learners proceed to higher education at community colleges and universities. (See *Helping Adult English Language Learners Transition into Other Educational Programs*, page IV–71.)

Regarding Learner Assessment

Q. What instruments can I use to assess the English language and literacy levels of learners in my program?

A. Learner assessments are used in adult basic education (ABE), adult English as a Second Language (ESL), and family literacy programs for many different purposes. Because of these different purposes, programs use a variety of assessment instruments and procedures. For accountability purposes, programs use specific assessments selected by their states and that are in line with federal requirements (e.g., *BEST*, *BEST Plus*, and *CASAS*). (See *English Language Assessment Instruments for Adults Learning English*, page IV–31, and *Needs Assessment and Learner Self-Evaluation*, page II–5.)

Q. What are the requirements of the federal accountability system regarding assessment in adult education programs?

A. The Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (Title II of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998) requires that each state report learner outcomes in the following areas:

- Improvements in English language proficiency and literacy, numeracy, and problem solving;
- Receipt of a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent (GED);
- Placement in postsecondary education and training; and
- Entry into employment or retention in employment.

See www.nrsweb.org for a description of the purposes and structure of the National Reporting System (NRS) and the ESL functioning level descriptors. (See *Assessing Adult English Learners*, page IV–25.)

Q. Are there any Spanish language assessments that I can use in my program?

A. There are a few. Some programs use Spanish language assessments with Spanish speakers to identify students' native language literacy levels and skills that may transfer from the first language to English. Few such tests are designed for use with adults in adult education programs, but some programs use tests designed for use with students in high school and postsecondary programs. No Spanish tests are used for accountability reporting for the U.S. Department of Education's National Reporting System (NRS). (See *Spanish Language Assessment Instruments for Adult Spanish Speakers Learning English*, page IV–53.)