Program Types and Challenges

The major source of federal support for basic skills programs are grants to states authorized under the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA), Title II of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998. The purpose of the basic grant program is to provide educational opportunities for adults to function effectively in the workplace or in their daily lives. Both English as a second language (ESL) programs and family literacy services are supported by AEFLA funds.

Adult ESL programs in the United States work with adults (16 years and older), whose first language is not English and who are no longer attending public schools, to help those not fully fluent and literate in English to communicate effectively in English. This means developing their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Programs are designed to help these adults acquire the skills they need to meet their personal, vocational, academic, community, and employment goals. Many adult basic education (ABE) programs that serve native English speakers also serve adults learning English.

Family literacy programs are designed to help children become successful in school while their parents develop language and literacy skills in English. The Adult Education and Family Literacy Act reflects this dual goal in its encouragement of adults to "become full partners in the educational development of their children." The act also names as a goal helping adults to "become literate and obtain the knowledge and skills necessary for employment and self-sufficiency" (Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, 1998).

Adult ESL and family literacy programs serve a diverse population through a variety of funding streams depending on learners'

- Status (e.g., immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers);

- Goals (e.g., basic or functional literacy, family literacy, workplace education, citizenship preparation, academic credentialing or preparation); and

- Circumstances (e.g., parents with young children, youth needing a high school credential, employed or displaced workers, farm workers, incarcerated youth and adults).

The diversity of learner populations served, program settings, systems of delivery, and instructional philosophies embraced result in a wide range of program designs and instructional practices. To be effective, programs need to offer classes that vary in terms of class schedules, location, duration, and content in order to maximize access to learning opportunities while accommodating the realities and constraints of adult learners' lives.

Program Types

The most common contexts in which adult ESL instruction is offered include the following:

Lifeskills or general ESL classes focus on developing English language skills in the context of topics or functions of daily life, such as going to the doctor, getting a job, shopping, or managing money.

Family ESL literacy programs address the family as a whole, providing English language and literacy instruction for adults and children. Often these programs include parenting elements and information that parents can use to further their children's literacy and general educational development. Some programs, such as Even Start, are collaborations between K–12 and adult education programs.

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

Vocational ESL (VESL) programs prepare learners for jobs. These programs may concentrate on general pre-employment skills such as finding a job or preparing for an interview, or they may target preparation for jobs in specific fields such as horticulture or hospitality.

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

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

For more information about types of programs see National Center for ESL Literacy Education, 2003; Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages [TESOL], 2003.

Open Entry/Open Exit Programs

One choice that all types of programs must make is whether to have an open or closed entry and exit system for students. Open entry and exit programs allow students to enter and leave when they can or need to. Some programs (e.g., in community colleges) provide self-paced courses, designed for students to progress through the course content at their own pace without attending regularly scheduled classes. Students meet with instructors and mentors and work at home or in a computer lab. However, open entry systems make it difficult for programs to gather information on learner progress in English. Furthermore, educators report that adult learners themselves prefer structured programs with stated beginnings and ends and clear criteria for completion and promotion (Marshall, 2002; Sticht, 1999). For these reasons, some programs have chosen to follow a closed entry and exit system (also referred to as managed enrollment), where students can enroll and enter classes only at specific times (for example, in a 12-week course at the beginning, after 3 weeks, and after six weeks).

Program Resources

Program resources and staff expertise vary from region to region and program to program. In some areas of the country, resources are limited because immigrant populations are new and programs have not been developed; there are few trained adult ESL teachers available; and professional development opportunities for teachers are limited. In contrast, some states, such as California and New York, have worked with immigrant and refugee learners for several decades and have better developed programs, more trained teachers, and better training systems for these teachers.

(For more information about program resources see Florez & Burt, 2001; Van Duzer, 2002).

Program Standards

Efforts to develop standards and indicators for program quality and learner performance are underway. These efforts include program standards and a program self-review instrument for adult ESOL programs from TESOL (2003) and state standards projects.

- Arizona adult education standards (www.ade.state.az.us)

- Maryland adult ESL program standards (www.research.umbc.edu/~ira/ESLstand.html)

- Massachusetts adult ESL frameworks (Department of Education, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1999: www.doe.mass.edu/acls/curriculum_frameworks.htm)

For an annotated bibliography of states' ESL content standards, see Florez, 2002a, www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/bibliographies/constanbib.html; and for an annotated bibliography of program standards, see Florez, 2002b, www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/bibliographies/prgstandbib.html

Instructional Configurations

Given the increasing demand for adult ESL instruction in many parts of the country, large classes or classes of learners with widely varied English language proficiency levels (multilevel classes) are becoming common (TESOL, 2003). In some places, instruction is provided in one-to-one tutoring, small-group, or large-group sessions. Some states and local ESL programs provide distance education opportunities for learners who cannot come to class consistently. The amount of instructional support that these distance programs offer varies. A combination of self-study and teacher support has shown promise in helping learners learn the language and in facilitating the transition into classroom-based programs (Center for Impact Research, 2002). Support may take the form of videos and other materials the learner takes home, in-person appointments, or periodic group meetings with an instructor or instructional aide.

Program Challenges

Programs face a number of challenges in responding to the needs of learners in their geographic area, maintaining high quality, and fulfilling accountability requirements from funders. Two major challenges discussed here are (1) the recruitment and ongoing professional development of high-quality teachers and (2) assessment of learners and reporting results for program accountability. A helpful publication for adult educators seeking to establish, expand, or improve a program is *Program Standards for Adult Education ESL Programs* (TESOL, 2003).

Teacher Recruitment and Professional Development

The demand for qualified personnel to work with adult English language learners has greatly increased in recent years as a result of ever-increasing demands for classes (Florez & Burt, 2002). New teachers are entering the field, experienced teachers are being asked to take on greater challenges, and many adult basic education teachers are working with English language learners who are in classes with native English speakers. Much of this is occurring in areas where the adult ESL infrastructure is limited or nonexistent. Experienced, effective teachers need to be recruited for programs, and ongoing professional development needs to be provided.

Most adult ESL teachers are part-time, hourly employees who come to the field with varied backgrounds, training, and experiences. The wide range of instructional contexts (e.g., academic, workplace, family literacy, and volunteer programs) and curriculum content (e.g., employment, parenting, life skills, and civics) makes uniform professional development challenging. Certification and training requirements for teachers vary from state to state, and sometimes from program to program within a state (TESOL, 2003).

Descriptions of professional development efforts in adult education indicate that effective professional development is ongoing, extensive, and based in solid theory and research; involves teachers in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the training efforts; provides teachers with opportunities and support to try new skills on the job and engage in feedback and follow-up activities; and provides adequate financial support for full-time and part-time teachers to participate in professional development activities. (For more information see Belzer, Drennon, & Smith, 2001; Florez & Burt, 2001; Smith, Hofer, & Gillespie, 2001).

Uses of technology for professional development are being explored by programs to increase delivery options and to address broad, often geographically dispersed audiences. Emerging technology applications for professional development include Web-based courses and training programs that integrate face-to-face meetings with Internet-based, video-based, or teleconferencing components.

Learner Assessment and Program Accountability

Learner assessment is an important priority in adult ESL education. Many adult ESL programs use a variety of assessments to place learners in classes, inform instruction, evaluate learner progress, and report outcomes. Informal assessments, for teachers' and programs' use in placing students and tracking their progress, include materials-based and teacher-made tests, projects, demonstrations, and portfolios that compile learners' work.

Formal assessments are used for accountability reporting purposes. The Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA; Public Law 105-220), Title II, The Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA) provides funding for adult ESL instruction through the U.S. Department of Education. WIA requires states to evaluate each local program's performance according to outcome measures established under the National Reporting System (NRS) (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, Division of Adult Education and Literacy, 2001). States have flexibility to choose the assessments and procedures they will follow to measure these outcomes within acceptable parameters. Some states have chosen one standardized test, and others allow programs to choose from a list of approved tests. (For more information about learner assessment, see *Assessing Adult English Language Learners*, page IV–25, and *English Language Assessments for Adults Learning English*, page IV–31. See www.nrsweb.org for a description of the purposes and structure of the NRS.)

Conclusion

The number of adult English language learners in the United States will continue to grow. To ensure that these learners receive the best instruction possible, adequate resources and creative strategies are needed to address the challenges in the areas of learner assessment and reporting requirements and the recruitment and ongoing professional development of high-quality teachers.

References

Adult Education and Family Literacy Act of 1998, 20 U.S.C.A. §9201 *et seq.* retrieved on July 25, 2004 from http://www.gpoaccess.gov/

Belzer, A., Drennon, C., & Smith, C. (2001, March). Building professional development systems in adult basic education: Lessons from the field. *The Annual Review of Adult Learning and Literacy, 2*. Retrieved July15, 2003, from http://ncsall.gse.harvard.edu/ann_rev/index.html

Center for Impact Research. (2002). *What's new? Reaching working adults with English for speakers of other languages instruction (ESOL): A best practices report*. Retrieved July 25, 2003, from http://www.impactresearch.org/documents/esolwhatnew.pdf

Florez, M. C. (2002a). *An annotated bibliography of content standards for adult ESL*. Retrieved December 14, 2004 from http://www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/bibliographies/constanbib.html

Florez, M. C. (2002b). *An annotated bibliography of program standards for adult ESL*. Retrieved December 14, 2004 from http://www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/bibliographies/prgstandbib.html

Florez, M. C., & Burt, M. (2001). *Beginning to work with adult English language learners: Some considerations*. Retrieved December 14, 2004 from http://www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/digests/beginQA.html

Marshall, B. (2002). *Preparing for success: A guide for teaching adult English language learners*. Washington, DC, and McHenry, IL: Center for Applied Linguistics and Delta Publications. Available from www.calstore.cal.org/store

National Center for ESL Literacy Education. (2003). *Adult English language instruction in the 21st century*. Retrieved May 17, 2004 from http://www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/languageinstructionEng.pdf

Smith, C., Hofer, J., & Gillespie, M. (2001, April). The working conditions of adult literacy teachers. *Focus on Basics, 4*(D), 3-7. Retrieved May 17, 2004 from http://gseweb.harvard.edu/~ncsall/fob/2001/smith.html

Sticht, T. G. (1999). *Open entry/open exit: Can teachers teach and adult students learn under this policy for adult education?* El Cajon, CA: Applied Behavior and Cognitive Sciences.

Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages. (2003). *Program standards for adult education ESOL programs*. Available from http://www.tesol.org

U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, Division of Adult Education and Literacy. (2001). *Measures and methods for the National Reporting System for adult education: Implementation guidelines*. Retrieved May 17, 2004, from http://www.air.org/publications/documents/draftgui.pdf

Van Duzer, C. H. (2002). *Issues in accountability and assessment for adult ESL instruction.* Retrieved December 14, 2004 from http://www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/digests/accountQA.html