



## SHOP TALK # 27: TRANSITIONING ESL LEARNERS TO ACADEMIC & POSTSECONDARY PROGRAMS

Adults study English as a second language in a variety of settings for a variety of purposes. But the differences between academic/postsecondary programs and adult ESL can present real challenges to the English language learner. In fact, English language learners seeking to make successful transitions into GED preparation, vocational training, and certification and recertification courses, or a college degree course of study often encounter a curricular disconnect in purpose, content, and context in their studies.<sup>1</sup>

The curricular disconnect starts with purpose: The goal of federally funded adult ESL instruction is to (1) *assist adults to become literate and obtain the knowledge and skills necessary for employment and self-sufficiency*; (2) *assist adults who are parents to obtain the educational skills necessary to become full partners in the educational development of their children*; and (3) *assist adults in the completion of a secondary school education*<sup>2</sup>. Programs are designed to provide learners with the language skills needed to function in American society, and to attain and retain a job. In contrast, the goal of academic ESL instruction is *to help individuals of limited English proficiency achieve competence in the English language*<sup>3</sup>, thus equipping English language learners with the grammar, vocabulary, reading, and writing skills necessary to succeed in developmental and mainstream academic coursework.

Content: In adult ESL programs, the focus is on oral/aural communication, reading comprehension, and writing. Vocabulary and content center on personal expression and interests/needs in the home, workplace, and community. Academic ESL usually includes a thorough examination of grammar, less frequently used vocabulary, and longer readings. The content is frequently a precursor to upcoming subject study and not as personal in content.

Context: In contrast to a focus on adult life issues, with many contextual clues provided, language study in post secondary academic and ESL classes is often context-reduced, with few clues to help with meaning, or where clues to meaning come from other surrounding text.

What learner outcomes can adult ESL and transitional initiatives facilitate to enable learners to bridge the gaps to postsecondary academic or GED programs? Judith Rance-Roney suggests seven strategies:<sup>4</sup>

1. Motivate the students' belief in their own ability to face the challenges of academic demands and administrative systems, including inflexible standards such as passing the GED exams or course tests.

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<sup>1</sup> Mathews-Aydinli, Julie, 2006. *Supporting Adult English Language Learners' Transitions to Post Secondary Education*, CAELA.

<sup>2</sup> Workforce Investment Act – Title II, Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, SEC. 202. PURPOSE, Public Law 105-220, 105th Congress, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Workforce Investment Act – Title II, Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, SEC. 203. DEFINITIONS, Public Law 105-220, 105th Congress, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Rance-Roney, Judith 1995. *Transitioning Adult ESL Learners into Academic Programs*. ERIC Digest.

2. Form collaborations that help everyone understand the norms of the academic community and the transition skills needed to bridge the gap. Gaps are best bridged when educators on both sides of the divide realize that outreach to non-traditional learners is essential.
3. Help students develop critical thinking skills such as synthesis, analysis, and evaluation. These skills are critical to GED success and post secondary studies/occupational training.
4. Focus on language accuracy or careful language by providing appropriate correction and feedback so that learners recognize the rule-based nature of mainstream language use.
5. Help students work toward reading whole text materials (textbook chapters, novels, texts unrelated to learners' lives), with extensive written responses for practice in use of correct grammar, rhetorical organization, and written sentence structure.
6. Help students develop a larger vocabulary corpus centered on less frequently used academic or technical terminology. Try Krashen's *narrow reading* approach – assigning several articles on the same topic – to strengthen vocabulary development and critical thinking skills.
7. Encourage learners to apply first language skills to complete difficult tasks that exceed their English language skill levels (note taking and vocabulary building, for example).

So how can adult educators help English language learners who want to pursue a GED or some form of postsecondary education/training make the transition? The following chart can be used as an exercise to initiate discussion with instructors and identify concrete opportunities to help students bridge the gap. (Cut and paste for a professional development opportunity.)

### **The Curricular Disconnect: Bridging the Gap in Purpose, Content, and Context**

	<b>Adult ESL</b>	<b>Opportunities to Bridge the Gap</b>	<b>GED/Post Secondary ESL, Academic, Occupational Studies</b>
<b>Purpose</b>	Provides learners with language skills necessary to function in society and to attain/retain a job.		GED subject preparation, test savvy, and study skills. Learners expected to be familiar with grammar, vocabulary, reading, writing skills necessary to succeed in standardized testing situations, developmental studies, academic/occupational courses.
<b>Content</b>	Focuses on oral/aural communication, reading comprehension, writing. Vocabulary and content center on personal expression & survival needs in the home, work place, community.		Focus is on knowledge in English, math, science, social studies, and reading/writing. Less personal. Students learn language through an examination of grammar, less frequently used vocabulary, and longer readings. Content is a precursor to upcoming academic or occupational coursework.
<b>Context</b>	Centers on issues within the context of adult life, such as making a doctor's appointment or looking for a job.		GED and post secondary learners access texts, literature, and discourse with instructors for subject matter mastery. Language study is context-reduced with fewer clues or with clues buried in surrounding text. In occupational studies, text may be associated with contextual illustrations or may require hands-on application.

**SHOP TALK** is a series sponsored by Texas LEARNS to highlight promising practices and address issues, concerns, and questions related to meeting the adult education needs of Texas' emerging, incumbent, and displaced workers. For additional information or to request that a particular topic be addressed, contact Barbara Tondre at [btondre@earthlink.net](mailto:btondre@earthlink.net)