

**Philosophy of Teaching-Exemplary/Exceeds**

Teaching Philosophy Statement



**December 2010**

## **Beliefs about Second Language Learning**

For adult second language learners, becoming proficient in a language entails many things. Diane Larsen Freeman for example, describes language as form, meaning and use. Language is rule governed, meaning based, and used by adult learners as a means of learning about themselves, the world, and getting things done in that world. The communicative use of language, is to me the most important aspect of language learning, as far as teaching adults is concerned. Adults need to be able to acquire the language to use in real life contexts, for example at the bank, the post office, finding a job, talking to their child's teacher, etc. Adults need to be able to understand English linguistic forms and meanings to be able to use the language communicatively in speech and writing.

In helping students become proficient in a language, teachers have to see language learning in terms of what Kathleen Graves calls cognitive, affective, and social needs. Cognitive needs refer to the different mental processes of language learning. In this respect there are different learning styles, or as Howard Gardner refers to it "multiple intelligences." The best way to acquire language differs between learners. A teacher has to be aware of this in their teaching, to provide different learning opportunities to match these varied learning styles.

Affective needs of adult learners especially concern building self-efficacy in the language. An adult learner has to think he or she can succeed in acquiring and using the language. Continued frustrations in the language can cause a learner to stop attending class. Therefore, teachers need to provide activities that get students feeling good about their learning. Also, as Steven Krashen points out, "affective filter", the barrier to learning because of outside problems/concerns that students may bring to class, is something teachers need to be aware of on a daily basis.

There are some social contexts involved in language learning as well. Not only do learners need to know how to choose and use appropriate language, but they also need to be able to understand cultural norms and their relation to their own norms. They may also need to learn how to take action in their communities, complain about a bill, change their child's school, write a complaint letter to an insurance company. A teacher has to be aware of these social-cultural aspects of these students involved in language learning.

Language learning in the classroom occurs in a community. Building the concept of community, where students can learn and practice with each other, means that all of the above needs can be addressed. Learners need a safe, fun environment where students can practice and acquire the cognitive elements, feel good about themselves, and learn from others information that can improve their lives.

### **Beliefs about Second Language Teaching**

As an adult ESOL teacher, one of the principles I follow is that English language taught to non native speakers should be an interrelated and meaningful whole. According to McKay and Tom, approaches that isolate parts of language - like grammar rules and vocabulary- without a context, present the students with “meaningless bits” of language. This means that formal aspects of the language should not be separate from meaning, but taught “holistically”. In my teaching, this means that I should relate grammar and vocabulary to themes. For example, I can start a theme of “health” with vocabulary (parts of the body) and structure (I have a \_\_\_\_\_ache//my \_\_\_\_\_hurts). Furthermore, in terms of a meaningful whole, I should incorporate the four skill areas of reading, writing, listening and speaking when teaching a theme. This helps to reuse the material in various ways so that I can address differing student learning styles. Teaching should take different avenues and be applied in many ways.

In terms of language input in EL teaching, I agree with the principle that language should be just above what a learner knows and reachable for the students. Yvonne Freeman states, referring to “I+1” and the “Zone of Proximal Development”, that the language being taught should not be too difficult nor too easy for the student, but just above their level of knowledge. The students then have a better opportunity to gain the new language knowledge, ability or level. In doing this, Freeman remarks that the “teacher needs to give vocabulary or structures and connect it to what students already know.” For my teaching, this means that I need to build up structures and vocabulary gradually as the students move up the learning process. For example, in terms of grammar I should sequence it in steps, moving from the verb To Be, to Present Continuous to Present Simple to Simple Past, and not jump sequences too drastically. All the while I should be continuously getting students to compare what they have acquired in earlier

sequences to the new structures they are encountering currently. In short, grammar expectations are made developmentally appropriate to the students' level as a course goes on.

Vocabulary should be presented similarly. For example, students who have already learned some simple clothes words or colors would be ready for some more "advanced" clothes and colors vocabulary, since it can build on what they already know. Whereas trying to teach the advanced words without having that earlier stage of background knowledge would probably be too much for our students to learn. Getting students to know "azure" or "navy" before they know "blue", or "bell bottoms" before they know "jeans" may create too much of a gap between what students know and can acquire, a zone too far for the students to reach realistically every day in language classrooms.

Another important principle for me is that instructional activities should be student centered. This means that as a teacher I should create activities that help student-to-student interaction rather than teacher to student. Nina Spada, states that interacting provides "comprehensible output" and pushes students linguistically and in their attention to form. In the classroom, this means I should provide lots of opportunities for student interaction, including pair work and group work. More specifically I can get students in pairs to do shared reading activities, listen and sing to jazz chants, create meaningful dialogues or role plays, work on comprehension or vocabulary questions together, manipulate realia, peer edit each other's writing, among other tasks. As a group they can perform plays, stage a debate, create class rules, publish a collection of their writings, or do other projects. These are just some examples that could address different learning styles and encourage student interaction in the classroom.

Additionally, as a teacher I should also aid student centered activities by helping students learn how to ask for clarification, repetition, or check for listening understanding. Richard Young states that "interactional modifications" such as these are vital in having students help improve each other's output and thus language acquisition. As a teacher I need to create activities that help students understand and use these forms: "What did you say?", "Could you repeat that please?", etc. By encouraging these student strategies, it also puts less emphasis on the teacher ("Teacher, what did he say?") as translator in the classroom, and keeps student interaction focused on one another, thereby ensuring continued exchanges and output that can further language acquisition.

Measuring student output is also an important aspect of language teaching. The most important consideration of student output for teachers is how to deal with error correction. As an instructor I feel I should allow students to make mistakes as they progress on their way to language competency. Unlike older teaching methods that emphasized forcing students to always try from the beginning to produce language accurately, errors are now seen as a natural part of learning a language. Brown states that some errors can be systematic and part of the “Interlanguage” process that students’ language undergoes on the way to “full competence in the target language”. Larson-Freeman states that errors give us an opportunity to “know what is going on in our students’ brains”. By discovering student errors, teachers know where students are going wrong and maybe discover if their errors are part of the Interlanguage process or interference from the students’ first languages. As a teacher, this means that even though I can provide opportunities from time to time to identify errors and point them out to students, during classroom activities I should encourage fluency over accuracy, and allow students to speak without fear of being corrected with every utterance or sentence written. That should help create a classroom atmosphere that encourages students to try out language and be risk takers.

### **Beliefs about Second Language Programs and Curricula**

Probably the most important elements needed to make an adult ESOL program effective are proper intake and orientation procedures. With proper intake procedures a teacher can make a personal connection with each learner, level his or her classes, gain important knowledge about the students, including age, language and educational backgrounds, years living in the US, other experiential information, the motivations of the student for learning, and the positive or negative forces that could affect the students’ participation in class. Most importantly, a good student goal setting conversation at orientation helps the teacher chose curricula elements important to the student. Understanding what each person is learning English for can help drive the direction of the program.

What is also nice about intake interviews is that before class even starts, I can get knowledge of what Richard-Amato calls the “Affective Domain” of my students. Namely, I can be aware of the “attitudes, motivations, the level of anxiety, the acculturation, or distance from the majority language society, and personalities of my students.” This information is crucial in

helping a teacher understand why the students are coming to class, helping prevent barriers to attending, for example: finding child care for the student. In an intake interview, I can determine a student's attitudes by seeing if the student is mandated (forced to take my class), or if they are doing it on their own volition. Then I can look at the student's intrinsic motivations as to why they are taking the class. I can also get some information about how acculturated they are to society and culture here. I can gather this information by questions like "Where do you speak English, and who with?", "Do you watch any American TV programs?", "Do you speak with any Americans?". The levels of a student's anxiety and an initial impression of a student's personality, and other affective information can also be noted.

Orientation procedures are just as important too, because together the teacher and students can set class rules, create expectations and responsibilities of each other, and start to create a positive classroom environment and learning community. It also gives a teacher a chance to explain the nature of the program to students, for example: why we have to use standardized testing.

Good intake and orientation proceedings help manage what researcher John Cummings describes as "stop outs", the adult students that come and go, and come back again to adult education programs. If we in adult education can help students define and set goals, help manage the negative forces that prevent students from attending, create self-efficacy by getting students to feel successful in their English skills, and build a positive classroom of student peers working in collaboration with each other, student persistence is likely to increase. Therefore, as an Adult Education ESOL teacher, I've been developing my intake and orientation procedures, in collaboration with my colleagues, to continually improve my classes. In addition, I have seen a dramatic increase in student persistence, attendance, and testing results over the last few years because of these changes.

Another important consideration that I've realized and addressed in my teaching is that the curricula, themes/units and lessons need to be student driven as much as possible. Despite standardized testing requirements, teachers such as myself have to balance teaching to these formulized assessments with giving the students what they want in class. The teaching/learning cycle has to be driven by the students' needs. Andy Nash, an ESL trainer who helped create *Equipped for the Future* (EFF) standards, always advocates that best way to inform your practice

is to have students participating and deciding in what to learn, and to gain feedback from your students on what you have been doing. I think this is true. If the students aren't connected to what they are learning, they will stop coming to class. If they feel class is helping them achieve their goals, they are more likely to persist. The best way to do that is by having students participate in deciding what they want they want to learn and how well they have learned.

Thus, over the last several years, through intake interviews and by doing a lot of classroom activities that help students identify goals, I have gained valuable student input into the curricula making process. With clear goals in mind, I can create proper materials and assessments. I can also more readily help students identify the progress they have made in their learning. With regard to materials, a teacher can utilize appropriate text books that are thematic, cover an appropriate number of new vocabulary words per unit, recycles core vocabulary, uses colors and visuals with limited amount of text on the page. Yet a good teacher needs to supplement any text book. That is why important I use visuals like pictures from [ESL-library.com](http://ESL-library.com), [Google.com](http://Google.com) images, realia like forms students will encounter in the real world, jazz chants, sentence strips students have to reassemble, student made stories, among other materials. By supplementing texts, I can cover topics, vocabulary, grammar in many different ways that address different learning styles, and make learning more interesting and fun by presenting information in a variety of instructional activities.

When classes start, I as a teacher try get students to feel successful right from the start of their learning, design activities to help students get to know one another, have all student opinions respected in class, and as classes go on, conduct more “affective activities” in class. As Richard-Amato states, these activities bring out student feelings and opinions that help students share beliefs and understandings and provide “motivating dialogue” that can serve as a way to bring individuals and groups closer together.”

A good ESOL program should always been open to former students too. I am a resource for students who have left the program. I've helped former students apply for citizenship, helped their relatives register for classes, direct them onto community services and help build a community of graduates that can help as resources for current students. Former students also act as advocates for our program. One way I have done this is organize end of the year parties for our Cranston Rhode Island Family Literacy Initiative (RIFLI) “graduates” each year. I invite

former students, current and former tutors, members of the local community, all to celebrate what we are as an organization. A good program is more than just a classroom but a way to connect people too and build community.

### **Expectations as an ESL Professional**

As an adult education teacher, we're expected to spend at least 5% of our paid time on professional development. Over the last few years I've used much of this time to do active research on persistence in adult education. I've attended a 4-month study circle on this topic and performed action research for a New England Literacy Resource Center project the last two years, investigating what happens to student persistence when high interest reading packets are introduced as non-classroom work. My research was included in their online publication of persistence, *Making it Worth Their Stay* (2009), and led to my published article in the *Adult Basic Education Journal* (Fall 2009). I've also reported on this research at a special Rhode Island adult education workshop on Persistence in October 2008, and again for the 2008 and 2009 Rhode Island Adult Education conferences.

For the 2008-09 year I've participated in a program wide pilot project for The US Department of Education's Office of Adult and Vocational Education (OAVE). I and my colleagues at RIFLI have been involved in this very structured project, meeting every week to look at how the Rhode Island standards can help inform our teaching, and giving OAVE feedback on the processes involved in the pilot project. In addition, I wrote an article reflecting on the SIA process for *MATSOL Currents* (Fall 2009).

In collaborations with colleagues and other professionals, I've also given other workshops over the last few years. At the 2007 RI Adult Education conference, colleagues and I showed ways to perform project based learning in class. I've presented ways of including vocabulary activities in communicative teaching at Rhode Island Teachers of English Language Learners (RITELL) Fall 2007 Conference and at two other ESOL shares in RI. I also co-presented at the Rhode Island Library Association's 2008 Conference, discussing how librarians can better locate appropriate reading materials for English Language Learners.

As to other professional development, I've been trained to administer the Best Plus and CASAS exams in Rhode Island, and I have been involved the last two years with the Professional Development Panel, researching other states' systems of professional development in Adult Education, and helping to inform the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) about what a professional development system could look like in the state.

I also contribute regularly monthly RIFLI teacher shares and bi-weekly staff meetings, which are great occasions to collaborate, share and learn, with my colleagues. I've also worked to constantly improve using technology in the classroom. For example, I've utilized and created online resources to use in class, including creating a free blog site where students can practice for the US Citizenship Test, both through reading and listening, and created another blog where students can post and share their written works and pictures.

I have also been a resource to other community agencies. I have actively recruited volunteers from URI's Mentor-Tutor Initiative (MTI) Program the last several years. These MTI students have proven invaluable help to our program, tutoring students studying for citizenship and helping provide native speaker conversation practice in class. In addition, I've supervised the teaching practicum of two RIC graduate students.

Another important part of my job involves advocating for students, many of whom may face discrimination in the workplace, in housing, social services, and who often get lost in the continuing reforms of Adult Education. To help advocate my adult learners and for teachers in Adult ESOL, I have joined the Rhode Island Teachers of English Language Learners, looking to help inspire teachers to join in professional development efforts, and to lobby for continued appropriations for adult education programs. At RIFLI, I have produced student publications, to get knowledge of our program out to potential funders, the library community and the public at large. I and the other teachers at RIFLI have also researched and explored other community educational and social agencies each year. In trying to become a much needed "hub" of information in the Adult Education community, we have developed an extensive knowledge of where to refer students for particular problems or concerns. Whether it is finding help for their heating bill, to navigating unemployment, to finding training programs, or start the Community College of Rhode Island (CCRI), I can better help my students with their futures. Also, I annually prepare my students and bring them to the Rhode Island Adult Education Fair, to give

students the opportunity to explore their “next step” in the educational/training process once they leave our program.

I know in the future I can’t stay still as an educator. Looking back on the last few decades of language teaching, it’s easy to see how methods and approaches develop, how technology changes, and how students change. I will stay on top of the field by continuing to attend and participate in collaborations with colleagues, reading new resources in the field, publishing articles in professional publications about my professional development activities and approaches. I also want to reflect on my teaching, adapt and change lessons, materials and curricula, in order to match the goals of my learners each year.

## Assessment Result

Criterion	Rating	Criterion Comments
Beliefs about Second Language Learning	5.0	
Beliefs about Second Language Teaching	6.0	
Beliefs about Second Language Programs and Curricula	6.0	
Discussion of Second Language Teaching as a Profession	6.0	
Logic and Clarity; Grammar and Spelling	5.0	