

## LESLLA Proceedings 2024



20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Symposium | October 19, 2024

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## **LESLLA in the United States: A Dynamic Patchwork**

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### **Abstract**

This paper offers a snapshot of Literacy Education and Second Language Learning for Adults (LESLLA) in the United States as of Spring 2025. It describes how the complex and varied landscape of instructional services is shaped by federal policy and funding and state-level policy and implementation. The paper highlights teacher professional development practices, the range of instructional modalities that leverage technology, and recent progress in addressing systemic challenges. The paper discusses the impact of recent political shifts—including federal funding cuts, the funding cuts of the U.S. Department of Education, and the suspension of refugee arrivals—on the stability and future of LESLLA service provision.

**Keywords:** United States, policy, professional development, instruction, research

## Introduction

Literacy Education and Second Language Learning for Adults (LESLLA) in the United States has always been a dynamic and diverse field, with learners representing a widely varied population. Some coordination exists at the federal level (i.e., the legal system and structures that supersede state legal systems and structures). These shape the provision of services in federally funded programs. However, instructional services for LESLLA learners are implemented differently across U.S. states, particularly among institutions that do not receive federal funding. Not all teachers have formal pre-service training; they develop their skills through abundant professional development (PD) opportunities (Harrison & Patterson, 2023). As a result of the pandemic, teachers now offer instruction through various technology-rich modalities (e.g., in-class instruction, online synchronous instruction, hybrid approaches, independent online learning), with varying degrees of success (Belzer et al., 2022; Vanek et al., 2024).

After an incredibly dynamic recent history, progress has been made to address the complexities that hinder LESLLA instruction in the United States. However, we currently face a period of political uncertainty that may stall progress and threaten the continuity of service provision in certain areas due to federal funding cuts for the U.S. Department of Education in March 2025. This includes a nearly certain elimination of funding for Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education (IELCE), a dedicated funding stream to support English literacy, civics education, and workforce preparation for multilingual adult learners. Furthermore, the Trump administration has suspended refugee arrivals from almost all countries, creating significant uncertainty at the federal level regarding education and immigration. We can describe the existing systems and trends as we write, but we cannot be certain how long they will persist in the future. Here is a snapshot of the LESLLA field in the U.S. as of Spring 2025, including a description of LESSA learners in the United States, teacher preparation trends, policy, instructional approaches, and research.

## Serving LESLLA Learners in the United States

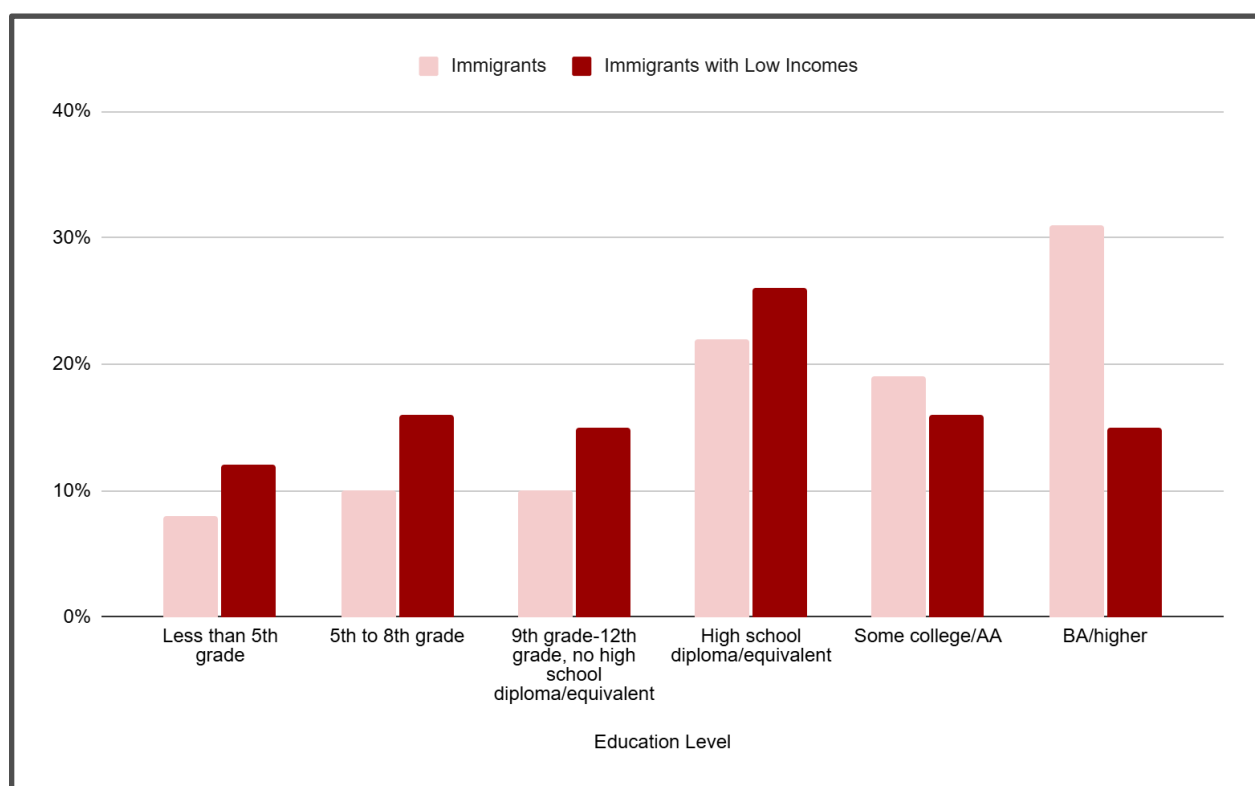
“LESLLA” in the United States refers to the development of English literacy for those adult English learners who have little or no alphabetic print literacy in any language. The terms English as a Second Language (ESL) and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) are commonly used to identify these learners. The term English learner (EL) is found in Title II of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act (WIOA) and the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA), which is the federal legislation defining permissible publicly funded adult education. According to the legislation, an “English Learner” is an adult “(A) whose primary language is a language other than English; or (B) who lives in a family or community environment where a language other than English is the dominant language” (WIOA, 2014).

Given the diversity of LESLLA learners and the programs that serve them, it is difficult to determine the exact number of multilingual learners of English with emerging literacy. In 2023-24, the working age population of the U.S. contained 7,104,168 adults without a high school credential and that did not self-report speaking English very well or at all (National Association of State Directors of Adult Education, 2025). As reported by the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) from 2015-2019 American Community Survey data, 18% of immigrants reported less than a 9th grade education and 8% reported less than a 5th grade education (Hofstetter & McHugh, 2023).

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As highlighted in Figure 1 and taken from the same Migration Policy Institute data set referenced above (Hofstetter & McHugh, 2023), there are larger shares of immigrants with limited formal schooling that have lower incomes as compared to immigrants with higher education. Though these numbers may also include adults who have literacy in their primary languages, it points to the substantial population of adults who have limited formal schooling in their countries of origin and therefore may benefit from additional literacy development in English and in their primary languages.

**Figure 1. Comparison of Education Levels for All Immigrants and Immigrants with Low Incomes**



A key characteristic of instructional opportunities for LESLLA learners in the United States is their wide variation, with pockets of better-resourced programs and services existing in an overall under-resourced field (adult education). Much depends on state and program contexts, as state policies and local practices have a significantly greater impact than national trends. Instruction occurs in a variety of settings, including community-based organizations (CBOs), libraries, correctional facilities (i.e., institutions designed to house individuals who have been convicted of crimes or are awaiting trial), faith-based organizations, and educational institutions. Many CBOs tailor their instructional programming to meet the specific needs of immigrants and refugees, focusing on community integration, providing essential social services, and enhancing social connections that help learners navigate their new communities (Kallenbach & Nash, 2021;

Kisiara, 2020; McHugh & Doxsee, 2018). Faith-based organizations operate similarly, with classes led by volunteers who foster a supportive community known for encouraging persistence (Durham & Kim, 2018).

Most LESLLA learners attend classes in formal educational settings, such as community colleges and adult schools, which provide structured programs leading to certifications like a secondary education diploma, commonly referred to as high school equivalency. These programs enhance general English skills and encompass a range of practical language uses for navigating the community, including health literacy (Más et al., 2012; Santos et al., 2023), financial literacy, civic education (McHugh & Doxsee, 2018), digital literacy (Vanek & Harris, 2020), and workplace communication (Finn, 2022).

### **Teacher Preparation and Professional Development**

LESLLA teachers and their preparation for this work vary significantly, reflecting the theme of inconsistency in LESLLA education across the United States. Some are trained to teach young learners, which equips them to teach reading explicitly, including metalanguage, phonics, fluency, and basic reading strategies suited for children. Language teacher education programs focused on adult learners often aim to prepare teachers for work outside of the United States or for teaching more advanced learners who have already developed literacy skills in their home languages (Vinogradov & Liden, 2009). Even teachers trained and licensed in adult education frequently remain uncertain about how to address the specific learning needs of LESLLA learners (see the LESLLA teacher knowledge base outlined by Vinogradov, 2013). Compounding the challenge of maintaining a highly qualified workforce, most adult educators work only part-time (Harrison, 2021), limiting their opportunities for professional learning. An additional complication arises when well-intentioned ESL instructors misdiagnose and treat LESLLA learners as having learning disabilities, despite their progress being typical for an adult emergent reader (PANDA: Minnesota Adult Basic Education Physical And Nonapparent Disability Assistance, n.d.).

Throughout LESLLA teaching in the United States, pockets of extraordinary skill and expertise exist alongside significant gaps in essential knowledge for high-quality LESLLA instruction. Policies regarding minimum certification and training for teachers vary from state to state. There has been much discussion and some recent efforts to further professionalize the field (Akwuole & Cacicio, 2024); however, a pervasive current of under-preparation persists (Smith, 2016). As Egan and Echelberger have pointed out, “Many adult educators enter the classroom by first volunteering, with no prior training in teaching or knowledge of adult learning. Given these truths, there is a tremendous need for continuous professional development” (p. 305). Professional development is the primary method through which LESLLA educators enhance their skills for this complex work.

Since the first symposium for LESLLA 20 years ago, LESLLA educators have collaborated across the globe to share research and professional wisdom. Through the annual symposia, the proceedings publication, webinars, and the extraordinary website, those working with LESLLA learners have accessible tools, teaching tips, materials, and opportunities to network. While teachers preparation for LESLLA contexts may be inconsistent across the U.S., access to the high-quality contributions of LESLLA members are available to all.

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**PD Content & Delivery**

When teachers engage in professional development, what are they learning and how? In recent years, a few common trends in focus areas for LESLLA-related PD have emerged, as illustrated in Table 1 below.

**Table 1. Areas of Focus for Professional Learning for LESLLA Educators**

<i>Literacy Development</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>emphasizing contextualized phonics and meaning-based instruction for emergent adult readers</i></li> </ul>	Egan and Echelberger (2023), Vinogradov (2012a) Vinogradov (2010)
<i>Trauma-Informed, Healing-Centered Practices</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>focusing on ways to better approach the needs of the whole student with compassion</i></li> </ul>	Kostouros et al. (2023)
<i>Digital Literacy</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>embedding teaching of digital literacy skills into instruction</i></li> </ul>	U.S. Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (2022), Vanek (2019)
<i>Integrated &amp; Contextualized Instruction</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>integrating language instruction and workforce skills (e.g., financial literacy, career exploration)</i></li> <li>- <i>IELCE: integrating English literacy and civics education (e.g., navigating community services, obtaining citizenship)</i></li> </ul>	Durgunoglu & Cary (2024), Stadd et al. (n.d.), Stadd and Mortrude, (n.d.), U.S. Department of Education (n.d.)

How are LESLLA teachers trained to address the topics mentioned above? A variety of professional learning activities can enhance and enrich the expertise of LESLLA teachers, including study circles, peer observation, and more, as outlined below.

***Study Circles***

Study Circles are structured, small-group PD opportunities where teachers meet across multiple sessions to explore research-based strategies, culturally responsive practices, and effective classroom approaches (see an example of a LESLLA study circle [here](#)). Study circles promote sustained reflection, dialogue, and collaboration among peers, often centered around shared readings and real classroom challenges. For LESLLA teachers, the benefits are especially powerful: participants gain practical tools for supporting emergent readers, deepen their understanding of adult second language acquisition, and build a robust professional community that enhances both teacher confidence and learner outcomes (Vinogradov, 2012b). This approach aligns with the key features of effective PD identified by Darling-Hammond et al. (2017), including a focus on content, active learning, coherence with teachers' goals, sustained duration, and collective participation.

### ***Peer Observation and Feedback***

Peer observation and feedback are integral components of LESLLA teacher PD. Site visits for observing each other during PD activities, such as study circles, provide educators with opportunities to reflect on effective teaching strategies within a different LESLLA context. These peer observations foster conversations about effective classroom routines and resources, encouraging reflective practice while reducing the isolation many LESLLA teachers experience (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2005). When LESLLA teachers have opportunities to engage in discussions, see one another's classrooms and students, and regroup within a larger study circle to process their experiences, substantial teacher change can occur. Observations of remote synchronous instruction are essential and became increasingly common during the pandemic.

### ***Hybrid And Online Opportunities***

LESLLA educators are innovators. During the pandemic, the amount of PD delivered digitally helped sustain the system during the months when in-person teaching and learning were not possible (Belzer et al., 2022). Before the pandemic, accessing targeted PD was often challenging for LESLLA teachers. Teachers are dispersed across wide geographical areas, making it expensive and time-consuming to offer LESLLA-specific training, which was not viewed as a priority. However, multiple states are now utilizing online PD to invite trainers from other states and gather LESLLA teachers from wide areas. In Minnesota and other states, study circles are currently available online via Zoom, while webinar series on various relevant topics, such as trauma-informed instruction and evidence-based reading, have emerged. Professional networking platforms like Mighty Networks are actively used to share ideas and resources (ATLAS, n.d.).

Teacher educators are also using technology to make PD more flexible and potentially more personalized. For example, Rhode Island's state adult education leadership is leveraging short videos created through Tech Tuesday PD webinars as the focus of asynchronous discussions and learning activities posted in their online community of practice (personal communication with Christopher Bourret, Adult Education Program Specialist, Rhode Island Department of Education, March 3, 2025).

### ***Service Learning for Teachers***

World Education creates, leads, and mentors others in leading service learning experiences known as EdTech Maker Spaces. Groups of educators meet periodically for up to two months to learn how to, for example, use GenAI to support ESOL teaching and learning (Cacicio & Riggs, 2023) or to integrate digital literacy vocabulary into English language instruction. This effort resulted in the BRIDGES Digital Skills Glossary (<https://digitalskillslibrary.org/glossary>). As the teachers learn to use technology to enhance their instruction, they collaborate to create open educational resources that they share with one another and the wider field (Vanek et al., 2024).

These content and delivery trends respond to the federal, state, and local policies discussed in the following section.

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**Policy**

Language policies in the United States have historically reflected a broad spectrum of goals, ranging from promoting bilingualism and embracing linguistic diversity to explicitly seeking to diminish that same diversity (Wiley & García, 2016). When examining the impact of language policies on LESLLA learners, it is important to differentiate between whether policies are explicit or implicit and at what level they are implemented (e.g., federal, state, local, family). Until 2025, much of the federal policy influencing LESLLA learners, particularly those related to adult education, remained implicit, neither designating English as an official language nor actively promoting the use or development of other languages (Christian, 1999).

During this time, state governments and adult education agencies have implemented their own policies, ranging from the removal of English-only policies in Minnesota (Vanek et al., 2018) to the establishment of English-only policies for educational contexts in Arizona and the development of more promotion-oriented or expediency-oriented accommodation policies. For instance, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's Adult and Community Learning Services adult education policies emphasize the importance of multilingualism in the classroom, specifically to support LESLLA learners. This policy even describes first language literacy instruction as having the goal “to support students who speak other languages in developing foundational literacy skills in their first language, including reading, writing, speaking, and listening, and mathematics for students who need it” (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Adult and Community Learning Services, 2025, p. 7).

For federally funded adult education programs under the WIOA/AEFLA, LESLLA learners are largely overlooked in policy. Federal leveling systems and the English Language Proficiency standards do not incorporate developmental milestones suitable for LESLLA learners (i.e., the minimum levels of proficiency are set too high). This leads to a complete absence of national content standards for all students within this initial level, which includes those with emergent literacy (Gonzalves, 2021, p. 283). Furthermore, AEFLA requires providers to choose from a limited selection of validated, standardized assessments in federally funded programs, such as the commonly used CASAS Steps and Best Plus exams. Reading comprehension tests are predominantly utilized for class placement and to track progress, even though the most basic levels require some familiarity with print literacy (Gonzalves, 2021). Despite the availability of approved listening and speaking assessments in certain states, limited resources such as time and staff expertise may decrease the likelihood of implementing these assessments (Cherewka & Prins, 2024). Even with the challenges posed by federal policies, some local program providers establish their own implicit policies to better align instruction and assessment, including the use of interviews as part of their assessment practices (Condelli et al., 2002).

Federal policies have created significant challenges for LESLLA learners by implicitly or explicitly restricting multilingualism and excluding their language learning experiences from evaluations of language proficiency and growth. However, state and local policies - whether explicit, like Massachusetts state adult education policy that allows instruction in the first language, or implicit, such as the addition of informal interviews to local assessment practices - still have the potential to influence how LESLLA learners engage with adult education activities.

### **Instructional Approaches**

LESLLA classrooms in the United States showcase a wide range of teaching practices. Due to the variety of programs, the training of teachers, program delivery models, and the funding available for classroom materials and technology, LESLLA instructors across the nation demonstrate exceptional creativity and resourcefulness to support their learners. In spite of this diversity, a few notable trends remain.

#### **Contextualized Phonics Instruction**

Extensive research on children's language development has shown that systematic phonics instruction effectively produces skilled readers (Castles et al., 2018). However, materials and resources specifically designed for systematic phonics instruction aimed at adult emergent readers remain scarce. A notable exception is ABC English, an online, research-based subscription site where adult language teachers can access hundreds of slides intended to teach phonological awareness, phonics, and reading fluency to LESLLA learners (ABC English, n.d.). The creator of the site recommends using ABC English materials as part of a balanced literacy instruction approach, incorporating decontextualized word lists to systematically introduce spelling patterns in bite-sized instructional chunks, while teaching vocabulary and language within relevant and authentic contexts (Christenson, 2025; Vinogradov, 2010). LESLLA teachers can then direct learners' attention to the phonics patterns taught when they naturally emerge in contextualized instruction.

#### **Modalities of Instruction**

LESLLA learners, by definition, are students in transition. They are new to their communities, new to English in the U.S. context, and new to alphabetic print literacy. Their lives are complex as they navigate resettlement, employment, and parenting. In recent years, much has changed in instruction, catalyzed by the pandemic. LESLLA educators are developing exceptional skills in reaching students, even when they do not attend class in person or when their only computer is a mobile device.

Increasingly, adult education programs are offering online options to meet the diverse needs of adult learners (Vanek et al., 2024). These offerings take various forms, including fully online classes, hybrid classes that combine online and in-person instruction, and Hyflex classes where instruction is delivered simultaneously to learners attending in person and those participating virtually, as well as asynchronous options for those who cannot attend either mode (Rosen et al., 2022). It is common for LESLLA learners to attend virtual classes on their phones and have limited familiarity with technology. Therefore, to effectively reach LESLLA learners, teachers must engage families and communities, enlisting family members and learners who are more tech-savvy to support and guide new learners in using their devices during class. Learners can engage more effectively when teachers use familiar technologies (e.g., WhatsApp) as a bridge to new ones. For LESLLA learners to successfully participate in online offerings, it is essential to develop technology skills alongside verbal language and literacy skills (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education, 2022; Vanek, 2019).

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**Multilevel Instruction**

LESLLA learners are often placed in classrooms or instructional settings where they are in the minority. Typically, programs collaborating with refugee resettlement agencies offer instruction tailored to LESLLA learners who have recently arrived in the U.S. However, in many instances, LESLLA learners are placed in beginning ESL classes, where numerous students are literate in a home language. This situation can put LESLLA learners at a distinct disadvantage and create a complex instructional environment (Marderness, 2020). As a result, successful LESLLA teachers use various instructional methods, such as small group and one-on-one pull-out time for focused phonics instruction, extensive scaffolding through repetition, visuals, multimodal activities, and translanguaging to help LESLLA learners develop their foundational literacy skills. Teachers often use text sets that present a single story written at different levels to maintain a common theme while teaching appropriate literacy levels (Pathway to Literacy Program, 2023). Effective teacher preparation and PD should explicitly address classroom strategies to support LESLLA learners in larger, multilevel class settings. As noted in the subsequent section, research on instructional strategies to support LESLLA learners remains limited but is often connected to practitioner experience.

**Research**

LESLLA in the United States is under-researched and primarily qualitative. While these studies often yield rich, context-specific observations (e.g., Daley et al., 2018; Gonzalves, 2022; Kidwell, 2022), they frequently lack replicability or generalizability—qualities that make them less convincing to policymakers who typically prioritize large-scale, quantitative findings. Such randomized controlled trials (RCTs)—often regarded as the gold standard in educational research in the United States—are rarely feasible due to their high costs, methodological complexities, and difficulties in securing adequate funding. As a result, large-scale, generalizable studies specifically focusing on LESLLA learners are limited. For instance, the most recent large-scale evaluation of the federally funded adult education system (Cronen et al., 2023) did not address the progress of LESLLA learners. The only large-scale study centered on learners with emerging literacy was conducted in 2002 and provided critical findings indicating that instructional strategies, such as using the native language, led to improved oral proficiency and reading comprehension for LESLLA learners in federally funded WIOA/AEFLA classes (Condelli et al., 2002).

There is a growing body of qualitative and descriptive research providing insight into LESLLA instruction. Much of this research does not mention “LESLLA,” even though the learner participants can be characterized as such. Notable studies include those focused on leveraging technologies to support remote instruction (Vanek et al., 2021), family literacy practices (Cun, 2022), navigating daily tasks (Cun et al., 2019), integrating “equity literacy” (Shufflebarger, 2022), and promoting intercultural competence (Snell, 2019). A review of recent LESLLA conference proceedings highlights several U.S.-based studies that demonstrate how specific instructional strategies supporting reading and writing have been implemented in particular programs or classrooms (Gonzalves, 2021; 2022; Rosalia, 2021). Although none of these studies deliver generalizable conclusions, they offer valuable models of practice that educators can adapt to their own contexts.

Due to the limited research specific to LESLLA, adult educators often rely on evidence from related fields—such as studies on low-literate native English speakers or K–12 newcomers—to inform their instruction. Although these sources provide valuable insights, their relevance to LESLLA learners can be imperfect, necessitating careful adaptation and critical reflection. Additionally, much of what we know about effective LESLLA instruction stems from practitioners’ wisdom and professional experience, which, while not formally "evidence-based," is deeply valuable and rooted in real-world contexts. Ultimately, the field would benefit from more focused research and greater acknowledgment of the expertise already possessed by LESLLA educators and communities. Both empirical evidence and practitioner wisdom are essential for promoting high-quality instruction for this unique and underserved population.

That said, promising research investments are emerging. In 2020, researchers launched the largest federal research investment ever made to explore innovative adult foundational education programming—the CREATE Adult Skills Network (World Education, 2020). While the studies under CREATE are not limited to LESLLA learners, the findings are expected to inform how technology-enhanced instruction is designed and delivered in adult ESOL classrooms across the U.S. These studies are described here: <https://createadultskills.org>.

### **Conclusion: Gaps, Challenges, and the Way Forward**

Educators working with LESLLA learners continue to demonstrate remarkable insight and adaptability. The field is rich with practitioner knowledge, an expanding body of research, and innovative instructional approaches. New initiatives—such as those within the CREATE Adult Skills Network—offer valuable insights into how technology and task-based learning can support adult ESOL learners, including those with disrupted or limited formal education. This work enhances and builds on what experienced educators already comprehend: that responsive, learner-centered instruction must be grounded in respect, flexibility, and cultural relevance.

At the same time, the broader policy landscape remains uncertain. Shifting federal priorities have led to the abrupt termination of some initiatives and a lack of clear guidance for programs. Yet, despite this uncertainty, adult education programs continue to serve learners with dedication, and teachers persist in seeking a variety of professional learning opportunities that emphasize high-quality, adaptable, and equity-driven instruction. Looking ahead, the path forward requires ongoing investment in research that reflects the real-world complexity of adult teaching and learning. By embracing both evidence and practitioner wisdom, we can ensure that LESLLA education remains a space for dignity, possibility, and justice—even in times of transition.

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