

Sociocultural approaches toward English language acquisition for adult learners

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Summary: This paper provides a brief overview of sociocultural approaches toward English teaching and learning for migrant adult learners. It considers Washington state's vision for its Adult Basic Education programs and recent practice-oriented research in the field. The shared approaches include transparency in content and language objectives, translanguaging pedagogies, and an identity approach using the language of empowerment and reflection journaling.

Keywords: sociocultural theory, content objectives, language objectives, translanguaging pedagogy, identity approach, adult basic education.

Introduction

Our modern world is characterized by cross-border movements and/or displacement of people (Dao, 2019). Immigrants come to the U.S. for a variety of reasons. Some may come to reunite with their family members, some seeking refuge from unjust wars, others fleeing socioeconomic situations, as well as religious and political oppression in their home countries. In recent years, the state of Washington has welcomed thousands of immigrants, notably from Mexico, Central and South America, and Ukraine (U.S. Department of State-Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, 2022). For example, as of 2021, 17 community and technical colleges in Washington have achieved the status of Hispanic-Serving Institution or emerging Hispanic-Serving Institution (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, 2021). The immigrants' diverse backgrounds bring both challenges and opportunities for educational and professional training programs.

For instance, in the school year 2016-2017, approximately 48,000 adults needed basic education and training in Washington state. Fifty-three percent of these adults were identified as English language learners (ELLs), and those numbers tend to increase over time (Kerr et al., 2017). While migrant adult ELLs often face challenges in finding access to educational resources and other forms of

support, they bring a wide array of cultural backgrounds and linguistic experiences to the classroom. These *funds of knowledge* (Moll et al., 1992) are varied in terms of exposure to the English language, first-language (L1) literacy and educational level, socioeconomic-political situations, asylee status, exposure to discrimination, and mobility. These characteristics have important implications for curricular design and instructional practices, given that sociocultural-emotional and -economic factors have an impact on ELLs' educational achievement and motivation (Echevarría et al., 2017). Furthermore, Washington's Adult Basic Education (ABE) programs are geared toward the central idea of embracing students' cultural capital and voices by incorporating culturally responsive pedagogies (Washington State Board for Community & Technical Colleges, 2020).

In this spirit, this paper shares teaching tips informed by sociocultural theories and approaches toward teaching and learning languages. The following instructional strategies have been implemented across adult English Language Acquisition (ELA) courses in our ABE program—which is housed in an emerging Hispanic-Serving college in northwest Washington State and traditionally serves students across Skagit, Island, and San Juan counties. In the 2022-2023 school year, our ELA program serves approximately 500 ELLs, most of whom are of Hispanic and Slavic ancestry.

Transparency of content and language objectives

One equity-focused strategy ESOL practitioners should incorporate is being explicit in both content objectives and language objectives. By providing these two types of objectives, we can help ELLs get equal access to curricular content despite their lack of proficiency in the target language (c.f., Echevarría et al., 2017). In ABE contexts, *content objectives* refer to professional skills that are transferable to students' career paths and daily situations. Meanwhile, *language objectives* focus on the (academic) language skills needed to achieve the state content standards. Language objectives should augment the content knowledge and different language demands such as communicative functions (e.g., requesting information), grammar, writing and conventions, reading comprehension, vocabulary instruction, and word study (e.g., morphemes and phonemes) (Lindahl & Watkins, 2014).

Below are some examples of content and language objectives in an instructional unit (Tables 1 and 2), derived from both the state and the national College and Career Readiness Standards which foreground employability, translatable skills for further education, and self-advocacy (American Institute for Research, 2016;

Agenda

Language Objective:
Review Regular & Irregular Verbs in Simple Past Tense
Activity: Relay Race

Content Objective:
Review how to extract information for a summary using WH- questions
Activity: Murder Mystery (Part 2)




Figure 1: Example of content and language objectives with activities

Washington State Board for Community & Technical Colleges, 2020). As a recommended practice for all practitioners, the objectives should be communicated at the beginning of each lesson so that students have transparent directions and expectations. Furthermore, activities, or the means of achieving the content and language objectives, should be made explicit as well. See Figure 1, an actual slide used in one of Dao's ELA Level 5 lessons.

Translanguaging pedagogies

García and Li (2014) define *translanguaging* as "the deployment of a speaker's full linguistic and non-linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named (and usually national and state) languages" (p. 5). This perspective emphasizes the fluid and dynamic use of language and the idea that multilingual individuals draw on their entire linguistic and cultural repertoire when communicating. In this sense, a translanguaging lens breaks down language hierarchies and promotes greater equity and inclusivity in language education. In the context of migration, the field of applied linguistics/TESOL has entered the *post-multilingualism era* in which "boundaries between languages, between languages

ELA Level 2	
Content Objective	Language Objective
Students will be able to communicate their educational and/or career goals.	Students will be able to conjugate verbs in Simple Present Tense and use Adverbs of Frequency to describe their habits (what they do) to achieve their goals.

Table 1: Example of Content and Language Objectives in ELA Level 2

ELA Level 5	
Content Objective	Language Objective
Students will be able to compose a basic professional email.	Students will be able to apply basic rules of using punctuation and capitalization in English.

Table 2: Example of Content and Language Objectives in ELA Level 5


Instructions | Instrucciones | 指示 | инструкции | Інструкції:

1. **First, read, listen to, and repeat the greetings and farewells below.** ↗
2. **Next, write the greetings and farewells in your notebook.** ↗

Read, Listen, & Repeat | Leer, Escuchar, Repetir | 阅读、聆听和重复 | Читайте, слушайте и повторяйте | Читайте, слухайте та повторюйте:

Greetings ↗

1.



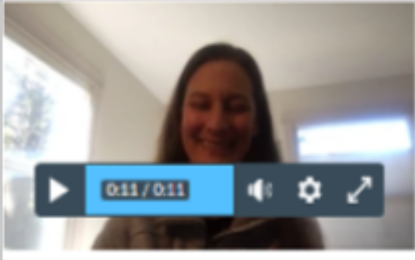


Figure 2: Example of Purposeful Translation

and other communicative means, and the relationship between language and the nation-state are being constantly reassessed, broken, or adjusted” (Li, 2018, p. 22). To address this shift, García (2017) suggests that translanguaging pedagogies—intentional and strategic teaching practices informed by the translanguaging theory—would benefit migrant adult learners in ways that give “agency to minoritized speakers, decolonizes linguistic knowledge, and engages all of us in the social transformations that the world so sorely needs today[...] Adult migrants are the best example of this living between and beyond borders—national, political, linguistic, social, ideological” (p. 24). Driven by these perspectives, below are some instructional approaches that have been implemented by incorporating our adult ELLs’ linguistic repertoire:

i. Purposeful translation

In this example, Boesiger, who is bilingual in Spanish and English, purposefully translates keywords into languages spoken by her students. She also includes links to Google-translated instructions and directives (texts in red) to work towards creating a more inclusive environment in which students feel included, learn new words, practice digital literacy, and are better able to complete tasks on Canvas learning platform (see Figure 2).

ii. Purposeful use of technology

In one ELA Level 1 class, Peña, who is bilingual in Spanish and English and well-versed in technology, makes use of his funds of knowledge and resources to explain concepts and/or give directives to his students, who mostly speak Spanish and Ukrainian.

In the excerpt below (see Table 3), Peña used Spanish to incorporate the Spanish-speaking students’ repertoire to directly connect with them and further explain the “to be” verb and its accompanying pronouns (lines 1 and 2). When using Google Translate to explain the concept, he strategically spoke in short sentences to ensure a higher precision of the translation and thereby create a meaningful moment for understanding (lines 3 and 4). The excerpt also demonstrates the ways in which Peña fluidly switched between English, Spanish, and Ukrainian (using technological support from Google) to make learning experiences relevant and inclusive for multilingual learners in his class.

iii. Purposeful use of “bridging” moment

In this last example, Dao, who is a Vietnamese-English bilingual and an emerging Spanish learner, has been intentional in his approach to teaching vocabulary. His strategies include (a) explicitly asking his Spanish-speaking students to establish a metalinguistic connection when it comes to cognates (e.g.,

responsible-*responsable*) and (b) crafting questions that allow translanguaging and thus invite inclusivity (e.g., “How do you say this in Ukrainian?”). In doing this, Dao strategically “bridges” students’ first language and the target language—English, thus creating a fluid and interactive space for students to make cross-linguistic connections and develop their multilingual competencies

Language of empowerment: An identity approach

From a sociocultural perspective, Norton (2013) conducted extensive research on language and identity and provided an overview of current research on language learner identity formation while exploring the relationship between identity and language learning. In her view, “every time language learners speak, read, or write the target language, they are not only exchanging information with members of the target language community, but they are also organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world. As such, they are engaged in identity construction and negotiation” (p. 4). In other words, *language identity*

refers to how individuals see themselves and are seen by others in relation to their language use across sociocultural contexts. In the context of migration, adult ELLs often feel estranged, excluded, and inferior as they tend to perceive their L1 as of little value during the resettlement process (Norton, 2013). Therefore, it is imperative that teachers of adult ELLs create meaningful moments and opportunities for students to *invest* (Norton, 2013) in their bilingual and/or multilingual identities.

For example, informed by an identity approach to language acquisition, Dao has been using the *language of empowerment* to explicitly value bilingualism (e.g., “Being bilingual is a superpower”) and show appreciation for his students’ background of immigration (see Figure 3).

In another example, to instill a sense of empowerment and identity in English, Boesiger often uses *reflection journaling* (c.f. Tang, 2023) in more advanced ELA classes. On the first day of class, students are asked to answer the question “Who are you?” in writing. She

Line	Speaker	Speech
1	Peña	Okay, class, I’m going to explain the following part in Spanish first and then in Ukrainian. Okay?
2	Peña (directing himself to the Spanish speakers)	<i>Como pueden notar, el “I am” en español es “yo soy”. Pero ahora tenemos “you are, we are, they are” y noten que todas usan el mismo verbo “are”. Y no es tan complicado como en español, lo cual sería: tu eres, nosotros somos, y ellos son.</i> (As you can see, the “I am” in Spanish is “yo soy”. But now we have “you are, we are, they are” and notice that they all use the same verb “are”. And it’s not as complicated as in Spanish, which it would be: <i>tu eres, nosotros somos, y ellos son.</i>)
3	Peña (speaking out loud to Google Translate application in short sentences)	The ‘to be’ verb is like a Transformer. Some transformers can be a car, a plane, and a robot. It’s the same with the ‘to be’ verb. It can be ‘am.’ It can be “are.” It can be ‘is.’ But all three represent the same “to be” verb.
4	Google’s voice	<i>“Дієслово «бути» схоже на трансформер”. “Деякі трансформери можуть бути машиною, літаком і роботом”. “Те саме з дієсловом «бути»”. “Це може бути «я».” “Це може бути «є».” “Це може бути «є».” “Але всі три представляють одне і те ж дієслово «бути».”</i>

Table 3: Excerpt—Example of purposeful use of technology

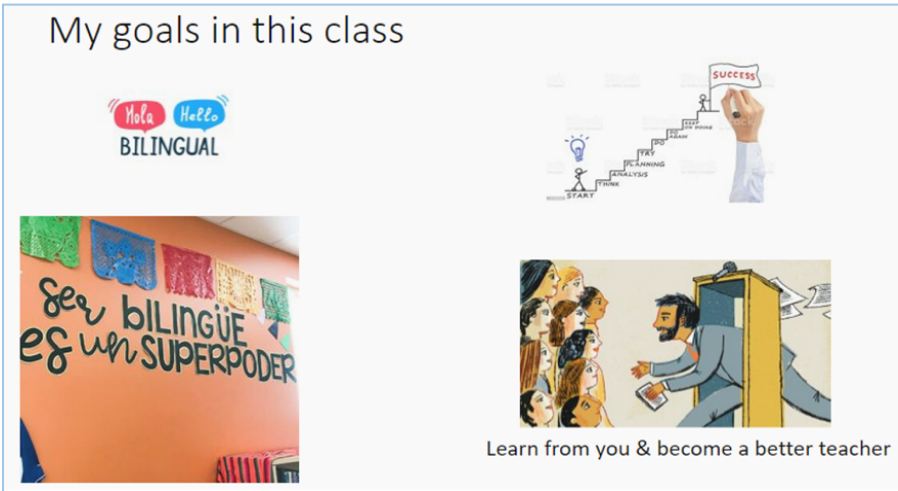


Figure 3: Example of the language of empowerment

communicates with students that there is no specific answer or length of response. She further explains that she and each student are their own audience. She reads the journals to learn from the students’ responses, which in turn inform her teaching throughout the quarter and then puts them in a safe place. At the end of the quarter, students respond to the same prompt. This time after students have finished journaling, Boesiger returns students their journals which they crafted at the

beginning of the quarter. With her guidance and support, students read and compare their two journals. Students are then encouraged to discuss their observations in small groups and/or with her and the class. This journaling activity allows students to critically reflect on the formation of their multilingual identity as well as their language acquisition journey.

Conclusion

To conclude, we would like to emphasize that every migrant learner comes to the classroom with “linguistic assets and other funds of knowledge we ought to acknowledge” (Echevarría et al., 2017, p. 4). We also hope that the provided teaching tips and examples help our fellow ESOL practitioners become more aware of how to make meaningful connections with students’ lived experiences and cultural capital and turn theory into practice. In this way, we can incorporate socially just and equity-focused pedagogies for effective instruction, as well as ensure ELLs’ academic success and social well-being.

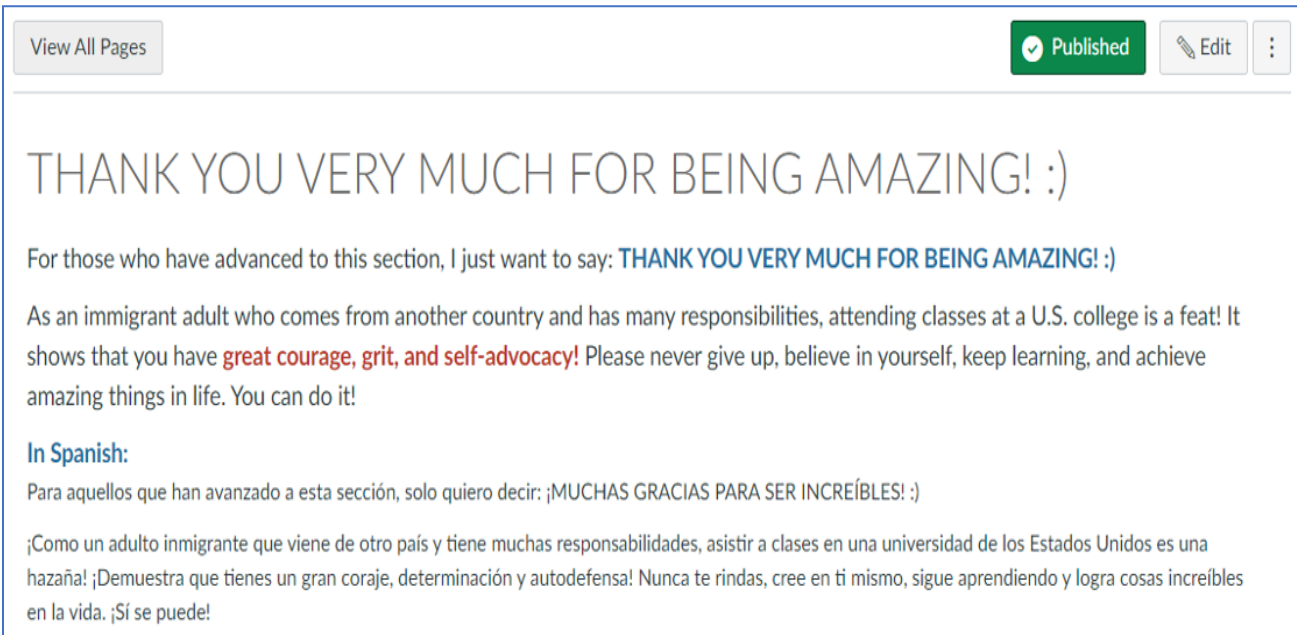


Figure 4: Example of appreciation of students’ background on a Canvas page

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