

## Preventing Pedagogically Induced Learning Problems (PILPS)

Robin Lovrien Schwarz

Why do adult ESOL learners fail to thrive? One major reason is from “pedagogically induced learning problems”—or PILPS. This term means not only that “toxic teaching” but also inappropriate pedagogy are contributing to problems in learning for English language learners.

Toxic teaching means that despite well-meant effort, the teaching is not helping the learners. Some of the most commonly observed practices that cause learning difficulty are underestimating the learners’ knowledge of English and ability to learn, and failure to use multisensory teaching practices, to teach to mastery and to individualize learning sufficiently to meet learner needs and interests. Pedagogical problems include using materials and techniques not intended for adults or for ESOL learners or both, and failure to acknowledge learners’ educational backgrounds, adult language learning differences and needs and insufficient use of concrete, achievable goals and means of seeing progress towards those goals.

Some programmatic policies that contribute to learning problems include lumping all learners together—the literate with the non-literate, the orally proficient with oral beginners. Even experienced teachers are often unprepared to meet these huge challenges. Also, rolling or open enrollment causes teachers much difficulty as they try to keep up with students already in the class while getting new ones up to speed. Many teachers—and their programs—unrealistically think they have to assure that late-enrolling learners arrive at the same end point as those enrolled from the beginning of the year. This causes undue stress on teachers and also contributes to unhelpful teaching techniques as teachers try to meet everyone’s needs.

Being mindful of the teaching and pedagogical problems can go a long way towards preventing learner failure and offsetting programmatic realities.

First, programs, and teachers, can make conscious efforts to use methods suitable for adult learners. This means structuring teaching environments that encourage learner-driven learning and avoiding teacher-centered instruction for most of the class. Learning stations or centers and multisensory activities such as sorting, games and other activities provide adult learners with choices and individualized learning which is relevant and in which learners can move at their own speed. Much learner discontent—and subsequent poor attendance and dropouts-- arises from classes that are aimed too low or at topics and skills learners do not feel they need. When used effectively, such a learning environment allows teachers much more individual time with needier learners and honors those who can learn effectively *without* a teacher.

To assure that learners use centers effectively, they need to have concrete, achievable, self-generated learning goals. One teacher who has used this approach successfully designed activities in response to several learners’ requests to know how to get a library

card. Another of her learners had tried to learn expressions for his construction job by copying them over and over. Finally, at his request, his teacher recorded ten expressions that he chose, and he learned them in two days while listening in his car. This is learner-driven instruction. This teacher has experienced so much increase in learner interest and attendance that she rarely has enough chairs for those who show up.

The learning center or station approach also guarantees multisensory learning, a MUST for adult ESOL learners. Part of the goal-setting process is assuring that learners employ many methods for learning something. For example, the learners wanting library cards learned vocabulary together in pairs, chose a dictation about the process on one of three levels of difficulty that was presented by the teacher, and was also available on a tape recording at the “listening center,” and then did role plays together. Centers or student-selected activities also guarantee that learners can revisit topics, vocabulary and language skills until they have mastered them, something almost *never* achieved in the average teacher-centered classroom and a weakness—failure to learn to mastery—that contributes heavily to later learning problems.

One way to think about managing such a classroom is to divide learning time roughly into thirds. One third or less of the time will be spent with the whole group. This may involve discussing a topic or a picture or responding to a specific request from a learner. Again, mindful teaching will assure that the teacher has ways of finding out what learners already know about a topic, what information they need for the discussion to be useful and honoring learners who are educated by acknowledging their knowledge on a topic (Yes, failure to do this is something I often observe...).

Bearing in mind the many learning needs of her learners, the teacher will write new words on the board, point out phonological features such as rhyming, syllables, or stress in words; she will help learners with morphological information such as what suffixes or prefixes mean or how a word relates to other words learners may know, and providing pronunciation guides—phonics—in simple language. She may use the topic or reading or activity to review a grammar point and then to build more knowledge about the grammar in the current topic or discussion—again, limited and clear, but acknowledging some learners’ need to know this.

During another third of the time, learners can choose activities as follow-up to the whole group activity that permit practice of such concepts as syllable or stress perception, basic to advanced phonics and spelling, comprehension, using words in sentences, or grammar. Though these activities are driven largely by the topic at hand, they can support learner goals such as improved spelling of three-letter words, learning to use the present perfect or writing complete sentences. Small groups and pairs are perfect for this type of learning.

The third piece of time is for the individual learning centers/student-chosen activities. These are effectively used at the beginning of class, as they permit learners to get right to work when they arrive. In fact, another teacher who used this approach found that for the

first time in her adult ESOL teaching, learners were lined up outside her door before class in order to have access to activities they liked very much.

With such mindful planning and teaching PILPS *can* be avoided and more learners supported through their attempts to succeed at learning English and improving literacy.