

All Things Considered in Adult ESL Materials

Discussion facilitated / Article prepared by Marilyn McLaughlin

More than thirty enthusiastic educators joined me at the TESOL convention to share ideas and opinions and questions during a 45-minute discussion session on Adult ESL teaching/learning materials. Some suggestions were shared verbally during the discussion; others appeared on written lists that were collected at the end of the session. Some surfaced both ways, of course.

Perhaps because my opening remarks were recommendations on classroom materials to promote listening and inspire speaking, our group conversation veered in that direction with ideas on more traditional print materials appearing mainly on the written lists. After first mentioning Impact Issues from the Impact Series (Longman), a book/CD of 30 varied discussion topics with stimulating questions asking for personal opinions (no right answers!), I recommended Cathy's Cards – Instant Conversation in the Classroom, a boxed set of 270 cue cards. "Play Bingo!" said several teachers. Pre-printed or student-created, Bingo can be used to review numbers (cardinal and ordinal), irregular verb forms, holiday and other vocabulary. Check The Great Big Bingo Book (Pro Lingua) for lots of possibilities; my favorite right now is Gestures Bingo – played in silence! "Google 'Crossword Puzzles' to find hundreds of them," suggested another educator.

Several instructors listed among their favorite Adult ESL resources the realia that they like to use with their classes, for example: fake telephones for such activities as making appointments and leaving messages, play money for number/counting practice and opening a "store" with pictured objects, and advertising flyers for shopping activities. One teacher uses clips from TV and movies to illustrate lessons and vocabulary; her students often bring them in. Realia-like materials are even published, e.g., the survival indoor and outdoor signs – with activities – published by PCT Education Publications.

The film that I recommended was "Spellbound," the Oscar-winning documentary on the 1999 National Spelling Bee Competition. Highlighting eight middle-school-age children and their families – immigrant, native, rich, middle-class, poor, Caucasian, Black, Asian, Hispanic - the film is not only very engaging in itself but also leads to discussion and writing on il/legal immigration, child-rearing, competition, plus, of course, lessons on vocabulary and spelling. End the unit with a class spelling bee! Other recommended films were: "Mr. Bean" (good for beginning students with its slapstick visuals), "Spanglish," "Tortilla Soup" (on family cultures), "Sarah Plain and Tall," "To Kill a Mockingbird," and "An Inconvenient Truth" (though the language can be difficult, it is on a timely and universal theme with many graphics.)

The written lists contained many more suggestions, especially in the area of traditional print materials. The list of recommended readers included: Picture Stories and More Picture Stories (Alta) and Easy True Stories (Pearson) (check other books in the True Story series by Sandra Heyer) for students beginning to read in English (and possibly in

any language at all); the series on 16 Extraordinary American Women, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, etc. (Walch) as well as the three levels of the What a Life! series of readers (Pearson/Longman) for better readers; and Reader's Choice (Michigan), "a great upper intermediate reading skills text." One discussion attendee said that "I love and use my own textbooks, intermediate-advanced cultural readers," entitled Open Sesame, Eureka!, Achieving Competency in English (Michigan) and Realistically Speaking (custom published). She also noted that she has built a great library of Scholastic Books to build "a real love of reading with my students."

To combine reading with listening to voices from outside the classroom, another teacher said that she uses Smart Readers, books with tapes/CDs that she checks out at the public library. Also, the Distance Learning Project of the California Adult Education website – www.cdlep.org - has many readings, accompanied by audio, arranged by topics with a variety of exercises. To combine reading and writing, Weaving It Together, Books 1 and 2 (and look at 3 and 4, also) (Thomson) came well-recommended.

Three multi-level basal or core series came recommended. Perhaps most inclusive and traditional in teaching the basic skill areas is the Stand Out – Standards-Based English series (Thomson/Heinle) to help adults gain confidence in their English as workers, parents, and citizens. Each of the five levels has three levels of pacing for each book with accompanying workbooks and on-line activities. Also from Thomson/Heinle, the four-level English in Action series includes workbooks and CDs and is suitable for secondary as well as adult students with many class cooperative tasks. American Streamline (Oxford), its three levels probably best for younger adults, emphasizes oral communication, including CDs with a variety of voices, but workbooks provide written practice.

For those wanting or needing to concentrate on grammar, more than one participant recommended Grammar in Use, both Basic and Intermediate, by Murphy (Cambridge). Another teacher said that her "favorite resource is the activity book that is a supplement to the Azar series – full of fun games, etc." (This book - for teachers - can be used with all levels of Betty Azar's grammar series – and is a great resource even for teachers who are not using the Azar student books.)

To teach pronunciation it is hard to avoid mentioning Judy Gilbert's Clear Speech (Cambridge). For more basic instruction, use her Clear Speech from the Start and for real beginners, look at two books from Pro Lingua, Pronunciation Card Games and From Sound to Sentence.

Buy a book on basic drawing "so that you can draw things recognizably," urged one participant. (In my classes, I find that guessing what in the world the teacher is trying to draw on the board this time produces laughs and comments, i.e., lowers the affective filter and stimulates verbal communication! – or that is how I rationalize it!) The same teacher also suggested 5-Minute Activities, one of the Cambridge Handbooks for Language Teachers, and, for use at the end of the year/term/week/class, Recipes for Tired Teachers (Alta)!