

Fundamental Principles of Effective Adult Language Education

These principles are informed by research on adult learning and supported by the evidence base on reading skills development, instruction for adult English learners, and adult second language acquisition.

Principle 1. Effective instruction builds on adult learners' existing assets.

Adult learners have reservoirs of experience that serve as resources for learning. Effective instruction begins with discovering, valuing, and building on the languages, experiences, knowledge, and interests of each learner as a bridge to new learning (Condelli, Wrigley, & Yoon, 2009; Gonzalez, Moll, & Armanti, 2005; Knowles, 1973; Marshall & DiCapua, 2013).

Principle 2. Effective instruction is clearly relevant to adult learners' needs.

Adults often need or prefer their learning to be immediately and obviously applicable to their life situations and contexts. Effective instruction incorporates ways of promoting and assessing learning that are built on the functions (such as giving and following instructions, working on a team, asking questions to obtain information) that learners carry out in their daily lives. It gives adult learners the tools they need to complete real-life tasks successfully by incorporating those tasks in classroom activities and requiring learners to communicate with one another to solve problems or complete tasks (Condelli, Wrigley, & Yoon, 2009; Miller, 2010; Peyton, Moore, & Young, 2010; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

Principle 3. Effective instruction connects its methods with adult learners' goals.

Adults usually want to know why something needs to be learned and how they are going to learn it. Effective instruction involves learners in setting learning objectives at the beginning of each lesson and determining to what degree the objectives have been met at the end. During the lesson, it includes modeling of the tasks learners are asked to perform and explanation of how those tasks will promote learning (Burt, Peyton, & Schaetzel, 2008; Johns & Price-Machado, 2001; Knowles, 1973; Miller, 2010; Peyton, Moore, & Young, 2010; Vella, Berardinelli, & Burrow, 1998).

Principle 4. Effective instruction integrates all communication modalities.

Authentic communication tasks often entail integration of the four modalities of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Effective instruction incorporates activities that promote the use of all four and encourage learners to use the ones in which they are stronger to support development of the others (Burt, Peyton, & Van Duzer, 2005; Center for Applied Linguistics, 2010; Vinogradov & Bigelow, 2010).

Principle 5. Effective instruction provides input that is just above the learner's current level.

Meaningful interaction and natural communication are necessary for successful language acquisition, and instruction promotes learning best when it provides input (listening and reading activities) that are targeted just above the level the learner can comprehend without assistance. Effective instruction uses modeling, examples, illustrations, and explanations to enable learners to comprehend such material (Krashen, 1985; McLeod, 2010).

Principle 6. Effective instruction includes direct teaching of specific features of the language.

Adult learners need and want to develop metacognitive awareness—understanding of the nature and structure of the language—as they are learning to use the language itself. Effective instruction responds to this need by providing direct instruction in vocabulary, grammar, and syntax as these relate to specific topic areas and task types (Burt, Peyton, & Schaetzel, 2008; Kruidenier, 2002; Larsen-Freeman, 2003).

Principle 7. Effective instruction creates and maintains a supportive learning environment.

Adults have affective filters created by a variety of factors such as motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety that can support or disrupt acquisition of language. In addition, the learning trajectory is not linear and errors are a natural part of language learning. Effective instruction continually observes learner performance to understand how each learner responds best, using the knowledge gained to inform teaching and to maintain a classroom environment in which learners feel comfortable taking risks, asking questions, and responding to challenges (Knowles, 1973; Lightbown & Spada, 2006).

Principle 8. Effective instruction encourages learners to take responsibility for their own ongoing learning.

In the 21st century world, adult learners need to be able to communicate in diverse situations with various people, using a variety of print and online resources to complete tasks or solve problems. Effective instruction gives learners opportunities to develop critical thinking skills and strategies for extending their learning outside of the classroom so that they can meet such challenges. These skills and strategies promote the establishment of learning as a habit that persists throughout the learner's lifetime (Leaver, Ehrman, & Shekhtman, 2005; Peyton, Moore, & Young, 2010; Wenden, 1991).

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