Academic Literacy as Developmental Pedagogy: Supporting the Learning and Growth of Adult ELLs in Adult Basic Education and Developmental College Education

Academic reading and writing skills are increasingly important for adult English Language Learners (ELLs) in both Adult Basic Education (ABE) and college developmental education programs. ABE ELLs aiming to pass the Graduate Equivalency Diploma (GED) test, as of 2014, need to be able to make logical, cohesive arguments with claims supported by evidence. The College and Career Readiness Standards now guiding United States adult education programming emphasize not “life skill” English such as language needed for renting an apartment, but academic English skills, such as identifying an author’s purpose, main idea, intent, and line of reasoning. To succeed in most of the associate degree programs that developmental college learners aspire to, learners need to be able to perform tasks like summarizing texts and writing essays. However, many adult ELLs struggle to succeed with developing academic literacy skills. Not only do many adult ELLs face significant financial and educational barriers to developing academic literacy skills, but these skills, distinguished as Cognitive Academic Language Proficiencies (CALP), can take significantly more time to attain than Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS), even among the most well-resourced ELLs, in part because CALP make both complex linguistic and cognitive demands.

Despite these challenges, the application of constructive-developmental psychology to adult ELL reading and writing pedagogy offers two important opportunities to support academic literacy learning. First, by understanding developmental diversity, and how learners with different developmental perspectives can make qualitatively different sense of literacy learning, educators can better situate academic literacy learning to respond to the distinct affective and cognitive needs of developmentally diverse adult ELLs, including developmentally scaffolding cognitively complex literacy skills for adults making meaning from earlier, more “concrete” stages of development, and supporting more complex meaning-makers in connecting learning to more abstract and self-defined learning goals. In addition, while “constructive-developmental pedagogy,” or supporting not only learning but developmental growth within the classroom, has been applied mainly to university students, a large-scale study conducted by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) found that by implementing developmentally intentional programming and pedagogy, adult literacy programs contributed to measurable developmental growth among ABE ELLs within the relatively short period of only ten months. By attending to developmental diversity, ABE and developmental college education programs can scaffold academic literacy learning to be accessible and meaningful for developmentally diverse adult ELLs. Furthermore, by providing developmentally intentional learning environments, programs can support the developmental growth helpful in attaining more complex academic literacy skills.

This chapter will first review academic reading and skills relevant to ABE and developmental college learners, such as summarizing, focusing on the cognitive dimensions that are framed in the constructive developmental theory of adult development as developmental capacities, such as distinguishing key ideas from supporting or unimportant ideas, and constructing logical connections between ideas. It then provides an overview of
developmental growth and stages in adulthood, focusing on cognitive and interpersonal characteristics of each stage as relevant to academic literacy learning, such as the lack of abstract reasoning at the earliest stage of adult development, and the importance of connecting learning to the self-defined learning goals of more complex meaning-makers. It will also address potential risks of applying a Western psychological model to culturally diverse and often marginalized learners, as well as research-based benefits of such a model for better understanding learners’ unique needs. It then synthesizes literature on how development mediates literacy learning, including research findings on how learners constructing meaning from distinct developmental stages make sense of literacy learning in qualitatively different ways. Finally, it synthesizes the literature related to how ABE and developmental college education programs can support literacy and academic literacy learning, as well as developmental growth, among adult ELLs.

Bio
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