

Creating Relevant Curricula for Low-Literacy Learners

by Nan Frydland

The Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm[®] (MALP) (Marshall & DeCapua, 2013) is a model of instruction that addresses the needs of learners who come from collectivist cultures, especially those with limited or interrupted education. These learners encounter obstacles with Western-style formal education based on their different cultural expectations, values, and beliefs (Hofstede, 2001; Lurhmann, 2014; Triandis, 1995; Watson, 2010). Rooted in culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010), MALP facilitates teachers' ability to (a) help learners overcome cultural dissonance, (b) utilize shared responsibility and oral transmission as students' familiar learning processes, and (c) focus on new activities for learning to transition to academic tasks (Marshall & DeCapua, 2013).

This article reports on the implementation of MALP in a community-based organization northeast of New York City, where the majority of learners are Latin American day laborers. During the course of this action research project, students created their own curriculum, developed a meaningful context for literacy (Auerbach, 1996; Freire, 1970; hooks, 2003), produced useful artifacts, and practiced decontextualized tasks.

Differences in Learning Paradigms

The differences between the learning paradigms of Western-style education and that of students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) from collectivist cultures create cognitive dissonance for millions of immigrants in ESL classrooms (Auerbach 1996; Bigelow, 2010; Hofstede 2001; Marshall & DeCapua, 2013; Triandis, 1995; Watson, 2010). In collectivist cultures, learning is typically orally based, immediately relevant, conducted in informal contexts, shared among participants, and concerned with pragmatic tasks (Triandis, 1995; Watson, 2010). By contrast, in individualist countries such as the United States, learners are expected to be ready to engage in academic thinking and decontextualized tasks; they are being trained for future rewards (such as careers); and they will compete with each other in a print-based, formal classroom (Marshall & DeCapua, 2013; Triandis, 1995). MALP bridges the gap between low-literacy collectivist learners and traditional instruction in U.S. classrooms by (a) accepting students' conditions for learning, (b) combining individualist and collectivist processes for learning, and (c) engaging in tasks using familiar language and content.

As a graduate student, I chose to train in the MALP model because it incorporates Gay's culturally responsive teaching (2010), Moll's "funds of knowledge" (Amanti, Gonzalez & Moll, 2005), and Freire's concept that learners must create the context for learning (1970). My professor (Helaine Marshall) and I decided to approach a new community center in my neighborhood with a proposal for a research project, and it was accepted.

Case Study Setting

The setting for this research was a local community-based organization (CBO) that provides ESL instruction and support services to immigrants primarily from Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Peru. Staff and volunteers provide open entry/open exit ESL classes mornings and evenings.

The study was conducted for 12 weeks, with classes meeting once a week for two hours. Between four and 12 students attended each session, the majority Latin American day laborers. These participants had lived in the United States between one and 16 years, and ranged in age from 17 to 70. They typically had one to three years of formal education in their home countries and had intermittently attended ESL classes in the United States. A brief assessment administered by a staff member of the CBO identified each student as an ESL beginner.

Posters announcing the class “English for Workers,” were distributed in the neighborhood and email notices sent to potential students. Sessions were conducted in a makeshift classroom created out of movable room dividers, plastic tables and chairs.

Implementation: Three Components of MALP

(1) *Help learners overcome cultural dissonance by establishing interconnectedness and creating immediate relevance* (Marshall & DeCapua, 2013).

Class started with Component 1, as I drew a chart with the headings “Name,” “Home Country,” “Languages,” “Job,” and “Family” on a section of butcher paper taped to a whiteboard. I read the text as I wrote, and modeled how to fill in the data by using my own. Students were invited to ask questions; then, each learner contributed personal information by dictating or writing on the scroll, and everyone asked and answered questions. In this way, a student-centered curriculum was born, and immediate relevancy, interconnectedness, and a meaningful context for literacy were established, as the learners and teacher supplied all the data. Below is an example of a scroll.

Workers Scroll

<u>Name</u>	<u>Job in U.S.</u>	<u>Activities/Actions</u>
Sara Juan	waitress waiter	take orders give orders to the cook set the tables serve food refill water glasses
Jose Hiro Edwin Jose Luis	landscapers	mow the lawn rake the leaves blow the leaves weed the garden
Tony Oscar Santos	painter - outside painter - inside	wash hoses sand decks scrape old paint spackle, sand, prime paint walls, ceilings, doors, trim

(2) *Utilize shared responsibility and oral transmission as students' familiar learning processes* (Marshall & DeCapua, 2013).

The scroll-based curriculum of Component 2 of MALP satisfies the requirement of incorporating individual contributions and collaboration among students. Encouraging students to dictate to the teacher allows the oral transmission to scaffold the written word.

(3) *Engage learners at all levels of literacy with projects that will form the foundation for acquiring academic tasks* (Marshall & DeCapua, 2013).

Component 3 focuses on making decontextualized tasks accessible using student-supplied language and content. As can be seen below, the MALP Pocket Guide for Work provides potential for many academically oriented activities, based on language and content familiar to the participants. Some students made lists of tools belonging to different workers' toolboxes, while other students practiced copying words from the scrolls.

MALP Pocket Guide for Work

Jobs/Occupations	Activities/Actions	Tools and Things	Materials and Stuff
landscaper	mow the lawn rake the leaves blow the leaves weed the garden	lawn mower rake leaf blower trowel shovel buckets bag wheelbarrow	gas rags oil mulch fertilizer water
painter outside/ exterior	wash houses sand decks scrape old paint	power washer scraper brushes rollers	paint spackle varnish primer
painter inside/interior	paint walls, ceilings, trim, doors sand and spackle	buckets gloves	paint thinner protective glasses

Conclusion

The participants in this study demonstrated their ability to create their own curriculum as they developed a meaningful context for literacy. They produced a MALP Pocket Guide for Work, a useful artifact, and they gained experience in academic tasks. During the course, they began to bridge the gap between their familiar ways of learning and formal education in the United States, beginning their transition to successful learning in a new context.

References

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