Adult ESLs and Community Project-Based Resources
by Mary Staub

When I first read of the NYS TESOL 2014 Conference theme, "Empowering ELLs: Equity, Engagement, Enrichment," a multi-part research and presentation project I had recently conducted in my adult ESL class in New York City immediately sprang to mind. Ever since John Dewey advocated the idea of learning by doing in *My Pedagogic Creed* (Dewey, 1897), project-based learning has formed a part of education theory. Since then, research has shown that project-based learning is particularly successful at engaging adult learners and enriching their lives because it allows learners to perform authentic tasks, for authentic purposes, using authentic language (Stoller, 2006). While projects such as mine, which involve research and presentations, are more typically thought of as relevant for the academic ESL classroom, they can similarly be integrated into community-based language-learning classrooms (Wrigley, 1998).

Motivation

The motivation for this multi-lesson project grew from observations I made both inside and outside the classroom. First, I was having difficulties equipping my intermediate- to high-intermediate-level adult ESL students—hailing from China, Mexico, Egypt, and beyond—with the confidence to truly attempt to communicate meaningfully in English outside the classroom. Fluency, accuracy, and comprehensibility were not the problem; confidence was. Second, while the ESL program I work for forms part of a larger community-based organization (University Settlement) that offers more than 20 additional community resources (from after-school to mental health counseling), my students had little to no knowledge of all these additional resources. My motivating questions thus included the following:

- How can we better lower the affective filter of adult ELLs to empower them to use English meaningfully beyond the classroom?
- How can we empower ELLs to learn about their community?
- How can we engage ELLs in their communities?

Hypothesis

Presentation projects that focused on distinct community resources seemed like an ideal way to overcome both hurdles. Through research, students would learn about community resources (engagement in the community, empowerment to take advantage of resources, enrichment through the use of resources); through collaboration on a meaningful project, learning would be placed in students' own hands; and through presentations, students would increase their confidence to communicate meaningfully. Through listening to peer presentation, resources would become more accessible.

Procedure

Because the steps of the project my students engaged in were generally specific to our organization and context, I have adapted them below to be implemented in a wider range of contexts.

- Students conduct guided multi-modal research to get an overview of available community resources. This research could include news articles, online research,

brochures, pamphlets, radio, and or YouTube clips related to the resources. In our case, students simply researched all of the resources available at University Settlement.
- Students work in pairs to develop informed interview questions for relevant staff members of community resources to learn more. Students watch and analyze a model interview for language, content, and form.
- Students interview staff, using appropriate socio-pragmatic skills as practiced in class. In our case, students interviewed the executive director.
- After getting an overview of "what's out there," students conduct focused research on one community service (of their choice). Students take notes and become experts.
- Students present their resource informally to a classmate, thereby building confidence and, through classmate feedback, getting a better understanding of what information is relevant regarding their resource.
- Students create posters for their resource and practice presenting one on one (round-robin style). Students first watch and analyze an appropriate sample presentation for presentation language, content, and form.
- Students present to the whole class so that all students learn about all resources.

Findings

Practice confirmed that research and presentation projects can be highly engaging, empowering, and enriching for adult English-language learners in community-based settings. This finding is true when the projects meet the following criteria:
- They engage ELLs by introducing them to services within their own community.
- They empower ELLs to use the Internet, experts, and one another to create a product.
- They enrich the lives of the presenting ELLs as well as the audience (a broader group of ELLs).

I hope that this example inspires others to similarly integrate research and presentation projects revolving around community resources into their adult ESL classrooms.

References

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