

# Supporting and Supervising Teachers Working With Adults Learning English

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## Background on Adult Learners

Adult education programs serve both native English speakers and learners whose first, or native, language is not English. Native English speakers attend adult basic education (ABE) classes to learn basic skills needed to improve their literacy levels and adult secondary education (ASE) classes to earn high school equivalency certificates. Both ABE and ASE instruction help learners achieve other goals related to job, family, or further education. English language learners attend English as a second language (ESL), ABE, or workforce preparation classes to improve their oral and literacy skills in English and to achieve goals similar to those of native English speakers.

## Audience for This Brief

This brief is written for program administrators who are working with teachers of English language learners in adult education programs.

## Introduction

Program administrators (also referred to as supervisors, managers, directors, or coordinators) wear a variety of hats in their capacity as leaders of adult basic education and ESL programs. Finding funding, conducting community outreach, coordinating logistics, overseeing student intake and assessment, and submitting reports and other paperwork are just a few of the many tasks that administrators may undertake (Christison & Stoller, 1997). Some administrators are responsible for teaching as well. Aside from these managerial, financial, and instructional tasks, many administrators are responsible for hiring, training, supervising, supporting, and developing adult ESL teachers in their programs, regardless of their own level of experience in the field of ESL education. Some administrators have recent or previous adult ESL instructional experience, while others may have a background in adult basic education with limited experience working with adult English language learners.

This brief provides an overview of the knowledge and skills that administrators need in order to support and supervise teachers of adult English language learners. It begins with a review of resources and literature related to teacher supervision in general and to adult ESL education. It continues with information on the background and characteristics that administrators should look for when hiring teachers of

adult English language learners. Once teachers are hired, the task of supporting and supervising them can be carried out through the model of collaborative supervision described in this brief. Finally, administrators are encouraged to provide professional development that supports teachers.

## Resources on Teacher Supervision

The literature on teacher support and supervision in adult ESL is minimal and has not kept pace with the research and literature on teacher supervision in Grades K–12 and higher education (Bailey, 2006b). However, a number of general resources are available to help administrators at any level supervise and support teachers. There is a considerable body of professional research and literature on classroom observation, teacher supervision, and instructional leadership, much of it focused on studies conducted in K–12 general education and higher education. For example, professional journals such as *Educational Leadership* ([www.ascd.org](http://www.ascd.org)), the *International Journal of Education Policy and Leadership* (<http://journals.sfu.ca/ijepl/index.php/ijepl/index>), and the *Journal of Teacher Education* (<http://jte.sagepub.com>) feature articles covering diverse topics related to education and teacher training. Books that provide guidance for K–12 principals and teacher supervisors on conducting classroom observations and supervising teachers may describe contexts that are familiar to adult ESL program administrators (e.g., Acheson & Gall, 1997; Pajak, 1993; Sergiovanni & Starratt, 2002; Waite, 1995). Some of the information from these sources can be applied or adapted to adult ESL instructional contexts, but the primary audience does not include adult ESL program administrators, and much of the information does not address their needs.

Resources do exist that focus specifically on the observation and supervision of language teachers (e.g., Bailey, 2006b; Gebhard & Oprandy, 1999; Li, Mahoney, & Richards, 1994; Richards & Nunan, 1990; Wajnryb, 1992), although the research has not focused on adult ESL teachers. Much of the research has focused on observation in preservice programs in TESOL (teaching English to speakers of other languages). Journals such as *TESOL Quarterly* ([www.tesol.org](http://www.tesol.org)), *Prospect: An Australian Journal of Teaching/TESOL* ([www.ameprc.mq.edu.au/resources/prospect](http://www.ameprc.mq.edu.au/resources/prospect)), *English Teacher Forum* (<http://exchanges.state.gov/english/teaching/forum-journal.html>), and *ELT Journal* (<http://eltj.oxfordjournals.org>) occasionally feature articles on ESL teacher supervision. Arcario (1994), for example, examined the phases of

post-observation conferences in a TESOL teacher education program and found that they tended to be prescriptive and evaluative rather than collaborative. Chamberlin (2000) investigated the role of trust in supervisor–teacher relationships. More recently, Vasquez and Reppen (2007) quantified the ratio of supervisor talk to teacher talk during post-observation conferences with teachers in an intensive English program who were simultaneously completing their master’s degree in TESOL.

Professional associations provide another source of information and support for administrators. Adult ESL program administrators may belong to organizations such as the Commission on Adult Basic Education ([www.coabe.org](http://www.coabe.org)), Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages ([www.tesol.org](http://www.tesol.org)), the Association of Adult Literacy Professional Developers ([www.aalpd.org](http://www.aalpd.org)), or regional and state-level organizations.

## **General Considerations for Adult ESL Program Administrators**

Every adult ESL program has its own unique features, staff, students, strengths, and challenges. Program administrators have varying levels of experience and training related to teaching adults learning English and supervising adult ESL teachers. Administrators need to be aware of many factors when leading an adult ESL program, including the characteristics and needs of the learners and teachers, various models of supervision, and basic principles of second language learning and teaching.

### ***Characteristics of Adult English Language Learners***

Adult English language learners have a variety of characteristics and needs that affect their classroom experiences, interactions with program staff, and acquisition of English. For example, some learners’ native languages do not yet have a writing system. This is true of Somali Bantu refugees. Some learners have had limited access to education and literacy in their native countries because of political, social, economic, ethnic, and religious strife. Some learners were well educated in their home countries and have a solid mastery of basic skills, but they are enrolled in adult education programs because they need to learn English. Learners differ in terms of the length of time spent in the United States, exposure to English, personal experiences, goals for learning English, and socioeconomic status. Learners may be permanent residents, naturalized citizens, refugees or asylees, or undocumented immigrants. Their cultural expectations of education and schooling may affect their English language learning in a variety of ways. It is important that supervisors understand the variety of student characteristics present in their programs and how they might affect the instruction needed by students and the professional support needed by the teachers who provide that instruction.

### ***Characteristics of Adult ESL Teachers***

According to the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education (2006), as of program year 2004–2005 (the most recent year for which data are available), 49% of adult basic education teachers—which includes those working with adult English language learners—are part-time, 35% are volunteers, and only 15% are full-time, paid teachers. The typically part-time nature of adult ESL employment often presents challenges for administrators in recruiting qualified teachers, as well as in retaining, communicating with, and providing professional development for them (Smith & Gillespie, 2007). In any given program, the adult ESL teachers’ personal characteristics, such as educational background, experience and expertise in adult ESL instruction, knowledge of other languages and cultures, and commitment to the field, can vary greatly. Administrators can learn about teachers’ characteristics and needs and how these might affect their classroom experiences, interactions with other school staff, professional development preferences, and level of engagement in a variety of ways. These include asking teachers to complete and regularly update a background profile and needs assessment, engaging in informal conversations with teachers, and conducting classroom observations. The knowledge gained from these efforts can also help administrators connect struggling teachers with colleagues who can support them.

### ***Models of Supervision***

Understanding the characteristics of adult ESL teachers and the contexts in which they work can help administrators decide which model of supervision will be most effective for a particular program. A variety of models of supervision and roles for supervisors are described in the general education literature, such as Goldsberry’s (1988) *nominal*, *prescriptive*, and *reflective* models and Acheson and Gall’s (1997) *counselor*, *coach*, *consultant*, *inspector*, *mentor*, and *cooperating teacher* roles. Freeman (1989) has identified three options that supervisors may choose when observing and giving feedback to language teachers: the *supervisory approach*, the *alternatives approach*, and the *nondirective approach*. A supervisor can adapt any of these approaches to fit the program’s goals and philosophies (Geddes & Marks, 1997). However, it is important to distinguish between supervision for developmental purposes, which is often seen as a collaborative model, and supervision for evaluative purposes, which is often associated with a more prescriptive approach (Bailey, 2006b; Sullivan & Glanz, 2004). The collaborative model of supervision is highlighted in this brief.

### ***Principles of Second Language Learning and Teaching***

Program administrators may not be experts in adult ESL instruction or second language acquisition, but they should be aware of underlying principles that lead to effec-

tive ESL instruction. (See Ellis, 2008, and Moss & Ross-Feldman, 2003, for practical overviews of second language acquisition.) Familiarity with the following principles will inform administrators' classroom observations and program decisions.

- Successful language instruction is a lengthy process. Supervisors need to have realistic expectations for learner progress.
- Language learning involves many different skills (e.g., speaking, listening, reading, writing) and language-specific content (e.g., vocabulary related to everyday life). Consequently, administrators need to look for carefully designed language learning objectives in their instructors' lesson planning and implementation.
- Specific language learning objectives and lesson plans are essential for adult ESL instruction. Adult ESL supervisors should understand how effective English language lesson plans are designed and implemented, and they should be familiar with evidence-based strategies for conducting student needs assessments, selecting and using instructional materials, and measuring students' progress in language learning.

(See, e.g., Burt, Peyton, & Adams, 2003, for a review of reading research on adult English language learners; Bell, 2004, and Mathews-Aydinli & Van Horne, 2006, for guidance on multilevel instruction; Bailey, 2006a, and McKay & Schaezel, 2008, for information about teaching speaking and listening; and National Center for Family Literacy and Center for Applied Linguistics, 2008, for an adult ESL practitioner toolkit of instructional and assessment resources.)

## **Recruiting, Interviewing, and Supporting New Adult ESL Teachers**

Program funding, student enrollment, the teacher candidate pool, teacher employment status (e.g., full-time vs. part-time, temporary vs. permanent), and the economy in general all affect teacher turnover and the rate at which program administrators must fill new positions. An increase in the number of students may require a program to add classes and teachers. A weak teacher candidate pool may result in the hiring of teachers who are not well prepared or who are not looking for long-term work. Conversely, if a program can offer well-paid, full-time employment in permanent positions, teacher turnover may be low, and hiring new teachers may be an infrequent task. In this case, administrators may be challenged with the task of supervising adult ESL teachers who have more experience and expertise with the learner population than they do.

### **Recruiting**

The size of the local adult ESL teacher candidate pool may affect the requirements and expectations included in job descriptions. The larger the candidate pool, the more stringent the requirements may be. Recommended standards for adult ESL teacher knowledge and skills include educa-

tion and experience in teaching English as a second language. Specific requirements vary considerably from state to state and even program to program. Many require a bachelor's or master's degree in TESOL or a related subject; others will accept a degree in any subject coupled with a certificate in TESOL. Others may require or accept an adult education teaching credential with an ESL endorsement. Some programs require a specified amount of experience teaching ESL to adults or volunteer or tutor experience with adult English language learners. Experience communicating with nonnative English speakers in the United States or abroad is another typical requirement (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, 2003). Program staff might also consider developing a list of minimum qualifications for new adult ESL teachers based on their own experiences in the local context. (See CAELA Network, 2008, and Moss & Terrill, n.d., for information on compiling a list of qualifications and required job knowledge for adult ESL teachers.)

Recruiting and advertising for adult ESL teachers may be done through universities with TESOL degree programs and certificate or adult education credentialing programs. Teachers may also be found through K–12 school districts, particularly among retired teachers seeking part-time work and subject-area teachers with training in bilingual education or sheltered instruction. The Teachers of English for Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) organization has an online career center where employers can post job listings (<http://careers.tesol.org>). Many state TESOL affiliate organizations also have online job postings and electronic discussion groups. (Search the worldwide TESOL affiliate directory at [www.tesol.org](http://www.tesol.org).) Posting on general job boards in the local area may not draw candidates with experience or credentials in adult ESL education, but young professionals, students, or career changers may have potential as adult ESL teachers provided they are given proper training and mentoring.

### **Interviewing**

Administrators who are new to supervising adult ESL teachers will find it helpful to include experienced ESL teachers on the interview panel to get their opinions about whether a candidate would be a good fit. A standard interview protocol tailored to the characteristics and needs of the program and learner population will aid in making fair, informed decisions about candidate selection. The interview may include the following types of questions (Gabriel, 2005; Geddes & Marks, 1997):

- Experiential (e.g., How have you used technology to facilitate language learning?)
- Content knowledge (e.g., How does second language learning theory relate to the work you do in the classroom?)
- Situational or hypothetical (e.g., How would you handle a particular culturally sensitive issue among students?)

Candidates should be encouraged to bring to the interview a lesson plan appropriate for adult English language learners. Even if the candidate is new to adult ESL instruction, a sample lesson plan will allow the administrator to see the candidate's potential as an adult ESL teacher. Inexperienced candidates who seem to have potential and good instincts may be hired, but the administrator must be committed and prepared to provide them with critical on-the-job orientation and training. For highly competitive positions with a pool of experienced candidates, the interview may require candidates to give a one-hour teaching demonstration.

### **Supporting New Teachers**

Program administrators should dedicate time and funds to providing new teachers with preservice and inservice professional development, as this investment is expected to pay off in improved student achievement and outcomes. Preservice training might include having newly hired teachers observe classes taught by an experienced teacher or team-teach with a mentor prior to teaching their own classes. Following the peer observations and team teaching, peer mentoring and ongoing communication will help complete the new teachers' orientation and adjustment to the program. (See Marshall & Young, 2009, for more resources on observing and providing feedback to new teachers.)

### **Collaborative and Reflective Supervision and Support**

Traditional models of supervision often place supervisors in the position of judging and evaluating teacher performance by observing a lesson, noting "deficiencies," and prescribing corrective actions to improve the teacher's performance (Bailey, 2006b). The teacher is seen as having a problem that must be fixed, and the program administrator's role as teacher supervisor is that of an instructional expert with solutions to fix the problem (Waite, 1995). Analyses of transcribed or recorded post-observation conferences between supervisors and teachers have shown this traditional approach to be widespread in both general and language education (Acheson & Gall, 1997; Arcario, 1994; Vasquez & Reppen, 2007; Waite, 1995; Wajnryb, 1994).

On the other hand, administrators may adopt a hands-off approach because they don't believe they have knowledge and support to offer. They may not have experience in all of the content areas that they supervise, or there may be specific areas or levels of instruction with which they are not familiar. They also may have to supervise classes in which they do not have instructional expertise or have not worked recently. However, a hands-off approach can contribute to teachers feeling isolated and without the support and professional development that they need.

The National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy's Professional Development Study, conducted between 1998 and 2000, surveyed adult basic education and ESL teachers on their instructional and professional develop-

ment experiences and on their relationships with supervisors and colleagues (Smith & Hofer, 2003). In this small, regional sample of 106 teachers, researchers found that teachers were rarely observed or given feedback by their supervisors unless there was a specific concern to be addressed. Thirty-three percent of the teachers cited "support from program administration" as one of their top three concerns. One adult ESL teacher commented,

There's a lot of freedom in adult education ... In the beginning, that freedom was absolutely frightening ... What am I going to do, and in what order? I remember going to my supervisor. I always got that, "Yes, it's all right, it's fine," but I always had the question in the back of my mind, "Is it good?" No one was watching. (Smith & Hofer, 2003, pp. 121-122)

In a collaborative model of supervision (Sullivan & Glanz, 2004), the administrator doesn't need to develop in-depth instructional expertise in every content and skill area in order to be effective and doesn't need to focus on deficiencies. An effective supervisor and manager can focus on developing clear program and student performance goals and nurturing best practices from teachers through a process of reflective questioning. "The role of the supervisor in reflective supervision is not to evaluate but to help teachers think about their previous experiences, articulate their motivations for decision making, and recognize the contextual variables that influence their work" (Chamberlin, 2000, p. 666).

Murdoch (1998) developed a list of 10 features that are characteristic of effective, collaborative supervision in English instruction and that do not require adult ESL expertise on the part of the supervisor. These include observing and collecting data on a specific component of a lesson that the teacher has identified for feedback, encouraging the teacher to explore areas of his or her practice, using the lesson as the basis for a conversation with the teacher about classroom practice, and cooperatively setting a postconference observation agenda to meet the teacher's needs.

### **Professional Development for Adult ESL Teachers**

In addition to recruiting, hiring, supervising, and observing adult ESL teachers, program administrators may also be responsible for designing, planning, and providing professional development that meets the teachers' needs. Professional development is a complex process that is discussed in depth in other publications (see, e.g., Center for Adult English Language Acquisition, 2007) and is described only briefly here. Professional development might take the form of peer observation or mentoring, curriculum and materials development, special projects, workshops, study circles, or online learning.

Administrators might build a professional development system that focuses on teachers' individual professional development plans, articulated in teacher journals and

self-assessments (Farrell, 2008), and on supervisors' collaborative observations and discussions with the teachers. Alternatively, teaching staff and administrators might form a professional learning community to collectively identify a specific professional development issue to explore together. (For more information, see the *Ask CAELA* archive at [www.cal.org/caela/ask\\_caela/archive.html](http://www.cal.org/caela/ask_caela/archive.html).)

A professional learning community is a group of teachers and administrators who "continuously seek and share learning, and act on their learning. The goal of their actions is to enhance their effectiveness as professionals for the students' benefit" (Hord, 1997, p. 6). These communities are more than opportunities to have teachers and administrators sit together and study. After study, teachers help each other implement what they have learned through peer observation, conferencing, and other methods of giving and receiving feedback.

Professional learning communities can be organized by cohorts of teachers or by topics and can take different forms. Administrative support is extremely important, but administrators need to be seen as members, not directors, of the group (Hord, 1997). Hord reports that results for teachers include a reduced sense of isolation, an increased commitment to the mission and goals of the program, and a sense of shared responsibility for the development of students.

Determining a professional development focus and expected outcomes is a collaborative process that teachers and administrators should engage in together. Data related to the program, student enrollment, teacher backgrounds and needs, classroom observations, teacher reflection, student achievement, and other sources should inform professional development planning. Young and Peyton (2008) offer guidance on using program, student, and teacher data to plan professional development. Schaetzel, Peyton, and Burt (2007) provide detail on planning, implementing, and evaluating quality professional development that meets teachers' needs.

## Conclusion

Effective supervision and support of teachers are essential to the success of an adult ESL program. Differences in teacher backgrounds and characteristics, the nature of part-time and temporary employment in the field of adult ESL, and the challenges of working with many different learner populations can affect instruction and professional development. Without adequate supervision and support, teachers may not be able to access the professional development that they need to deliver effective instruction.

Although some program administrators have experience teaching adult English language learners, others may still be learning about this learner population and may feel unprepared to take on a supervisory role with adult ESL instructional staff. Administrators with minimal adult ESL background can be effective supervisors by enlisting and engaging teachers in a reflective and collaborative process

of examining their own practice. Providing support to adult ESL teachers in their efforts to improve student learning is a skill that administrators can develop by identifying teachers' backgrounds and needs, understanding the basic principles of second language learning and teaching, and creating a collaborative atmosphere to work with teachers on their instructional practice.

A companion brief, *Observing and Providing Feedback to Adult ESL Teachers* (Marshall & Young, 2009), describes and discusses various observation tasks and collaborative feedback models that supervisors can use in communicating with adult ESL teachers to improve instructional practice.

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