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MEETING THE NEEDS OF ADULT LANGUAGE LEARNERS:  
A FOCUS ON COMMUNICATION AND LITERACY

by

Jessica M. Hercules

A portfolio submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Logan, Utah

2021

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## ABSTRACT

## MEETING THE NEEDS OF ADULT LANGUAGE LEARNERS:

A Focus on Communication and Literacy

by

Jessica M. Hercules: Master of Second Language Teaching  
Utah State University, 2021

Major Professor: Dr. Sarah Gordon

Department: World Languages and Cultures

This portfolio is a compilation of the author's perspectives and reflections about teaching and language acquisition during her time in the Master of Second Language Teaching (MSLT) program at Utah State University. The portfolio includes samples of writing on a variety of topics surrounding second language teaching and acquisition developed through study and teaching experience.

This collection of papers begins with the author's perspectives on teaching, including a description of her desired professional environment, a reflection on her experiences observing other language teachers, and the author's teaching philosophy statement. In the second section, the author presents two research papers and an annotated bibliography which demonstrate her research interests in the field of adult language learning.

(74 pages)

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Sincere thanks to Dr. Joshua Thoms for the many hours spent helping me develop a plan to return to and complete the MSLT program when I thought it would be impossible. I have appreciated your support in sending me resources relevant to my study interests and for taking the time to come observe my classes in-person.

My family has been my greatest strength throughout my time in the MSLT program. I would not have been able to complete the program without them. I am grateful to my parents who have shown me that work and joy can go hand-in-hand. Most of all, I am grateful to my husband, Pete, who has always kindly encouraged me to be my best self.

Lastly, I would not be where I am without the incredible people I have met from all over the world through teaching. You have shown me the beauty of human connection that makes my classroom a joyful place.

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

ALL= Adult Language Learner

CLT = Communicative Language Teaching

ELC-CV= English Language Center of Cache Valley

ELL = English Language Learner

FL= Formulaic Language

L1 = First Language / Native Language

L2 = Second Language

LESLLA= Low-Educated Second Language Learning Adult

LSP= Language for Specific Purposes

MSLT= Master of Second Language Teaching

TL= Target Language

TBA= Task-Based Activities

TBLT= Task-Based Language Teaching

SLA= Second Language Acquisition

## INTRODUCTION

The contents of this portfolio are a representation of the growth and development I have experienced throughout my time in the MSLT program and as a teacher of adult English language courses. Each piece of the portfolio reflects my beliefs about language learning and language teaching, developed through study and my own experience. Developing this portfolio is a culmination of years of self-searching and scholarship.

The portfolio is composed of three pieces: A teaching philosophy statement, research perspectives, and an annotated bibliography. The main piece of the portfolio is my teaching philosophy statement, in which I detail my beliefs about what good teaching looks like and what strategies and approaches I aim to implement in my classroom. The research perspectives section comprises two papers specific to language acquisition and adult language learners. The annotated bibliography is a compilation of major research about identity, motivation, and learner investment.

Completion of this portfolio is a major achievement for me; something I have hoped to accomplish over many years. What once felt to be an overwhelming task has come together in a way that I hadn't thought possible. Through this experience I have increased my knowledge about second language acquisition, teaching strategies, and academic writing. I am grateful for the opportunity to develop this portfolio and for the lasting impact it will have on my career as a language instructor.

## TEACHING PERSPECTIVES

## Teaching Environment

My first experience working with learners in a language classroom was as a volunteer in a community-based English language program for adults at the English Language Center of Cache Valley. This opportunity is what led me to the MSLT program and to the teaching experiences in a variety of learning contexts that followed. After a few years of teaching in an international exchange program, I returned to the community-based adult education classroom. It became apparent to me that this was not a short-term change of pace for me, but that this is where I always want to be.

For many of the learners I work with, life outside of the classroom can be chaotic, overwhelming, and unforgiving. They brave job interviews, talk to their children's teachers about how they're doing in class, and navigate new transit systems, grocery stores, and public spaces. Their language learning needs are immediate and necessary to their well-being. It is my goal as a teacher to honor the time learners dedicate to attending my classes by employing teaching strategies and approaches informed by research.

## Teaching Philosophy Statement

### **Introduction**

As a lifelong language learner, myself, I am passionate about language learning because it allows for new relationships to form between people and invites us to experience new ways of thinking. I believe strongly in the words of Flora Lewis when she said, “Learning another language is not only learning new words for the same things, but learning another way to think about things.” (as quoted in Helman, Ittner, & McMaster, 2019, p. 17). Language learning opens the world to us and allows us to broaden the way we perceive it. It opens our minds to new perspectives and makes us aware of different ways of thinking, communicating, and interacting with others. Being a language teacher allows me to help language learners open doors for themselves.

Traditionally, many who have studied languages begin their journey by merely memorizing printed verb conjugation charts, limited vocabulary lists, and a few key phrases. If the goal of language learning is to be able to communicate effectively with others that speak that language, and to better understand their perceptions and ways of thinking, there are many aspects of language that need to be considered beyond a list of rules and vocabulary. Memorizing lists of vocabulary and verb conjugations is typically not the goal for language learners (Ballman, Liskin-Gasparro, & Mandell, 2001). Although this is how I was first taught a new language, I believe that language learning requires the teacher to recognize the goals of their students and try to use those goals as a guide for their instruction. Al Amri (2010) describes the role of a teacher that I aspire to embody:

Teachers have become no longer perceived as a behaviorist, positivist, and top-down knowledge carrier, but a reflective, flexible facilitator who is sensitive to students' different needs and previous experiences which they have acquired in the homes and communities and which cannot be dismissed in the process of teaching the target language (p. 103).

Thus, as language teachers, it is essential to consider our students' goals and backgrounds and to be flexible and reflective as we work throughout our careers to improve our teaching.

In this teaching philosophy statement, I reflect on my beliefs about what good teaching looks like and how I intend to use what I have learned, through study and experience, in my classroom to help my students reach their language learning goals. I believe that the learning environment, curriculum, and instruction are all tied together, and that good teaching places equal emphasis on each of these domains. My goals as a teacher are threefold: to create a learning environment that supports learners in the process of language learning, to design and deliver curriculum that engages learners in task-based activities that focus on real-life scenarios, and to provide instruction centered around the idea that each learner is an individual with capacity to learn and grow.

### **Learning Environment**

I believe it is my responsibility to cultivate a learner-centered classroom. This is not just a feel-good idea or a buzzword for me. Moreover, it is important to me to provide students with dignity, accountability, responsibility, and autonomy throughout the learning process, allowing them to be “associating voluntarily and playing an active role in their own progress in a learner-

centered, egalitarian classroom.” (Long, 2015, p. 13). This requires me, as the instructor, to take a step back from being the center of each lesson and allow students to be the main actors of the classroom. This provides learners more opportunities to interact and communicate, increasing their agency and responsibility in learner the language. A former teaching mentor of mine, Ken Herbert, often referred to this analogy from Alison King (1993) of moving away from “being the *sage on the stage* to being the *guide on the side*.”

### *Collaboration*

When learners work and in pairs or small groups, they are able to develop interconnectedness and support each other. Working together has many benefits, including building classroom community and offering increased opportunities for interaction. Communication requires interaction, or “the expression and interpretation of meaning and how people negotiate meaning during a communicative event” (VanPatten, B., 2017, p. 51). As a teacher, it is my responsibility to plan lessons that foster these kinds of meaningful interactions that allow for negotiation of meaning. Collaboration and interaction that invites the negotiation of meaning is where language acquisition happens. Therefore, I encourage collaboration in pair and small group activities.

### *Culturally Responsive Teaching*

Additionally, I believe that by working to understand the cultural background of my students I will be able to better connect with them, better understand their communicative goals, and help them in the process of reaching those goals. According to Gay (2013), this approach of “using cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (pp. 49-50) will help create the positive environment for learning that I value. I value diversity in

my classroom, and strive to promote an inclusive environment. Adults come to the classroom with a wealth of different knowledge and experience (Addae, 2021; Atkinson, 2014; Ewert, 2014; Park & Valdez, 2018; Provenzo et al., 2014; Bigelow & Schwarz, 2010; Severinsen, Kennedy, & Mohamud, 2018). Helping learners recognize how their individualized life experiences are a foundation for learning is invaluable, and will help build their confidence as language learners. My teaching endeavors to be individualized and inclusive.

### *Honoring Funds of Knowledge*

A learner-centered classroom is one in which the instructor works to meet learners where they are and provide them with the tools, materials, and opportunities to grow and learn from that point. Though learners may come to class with a lack in certain areas of language proficiency, it is imperative to me to recognize and incorporate some of the rich knowledge learners have already accumulated in their lives leading up to learning the TL (target language). Tomlinson (1999) wrote that teachers should:

“Accept, embrace, and plan for the fact that learners bring many commonalities to school, but that learners also bring the essential differences that make them individuals. Teachers can allow for this reality in many ways to make classrooms a good fit for each individual.” (p. 2).

I believe that the role of the teacher is to help ensure that the classroom is a ‘good fit for each individual,’ which in turn allows learners to see a place for themselves in the classroom. González, Moll, and Amanti (2005) write that the “funds of knowledge” concept is based on the premise that “People are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences give them that knowledge” (p. ix). Drawing on these funds empowers students to learn. Not only

recognizing, but drawing on the strengths adult language learners (ALL) bring to the classroom, such as multilingualism, professional experience, and life experience, can help learners see how their funds of knowledge serve them in learning the TL.

One example of honoring a learner's funds of knowledge is finding more opportunities to allow for translanguaging during selected activities. Park and Valdez (2018) found that ALL reported that restricting or disallowing use of the learners' L1 in class is viewed as "an additional impediment to successful engagement in language learning" (p. 50). This confirms my belief that "TL only" rules in class are unnecessarily restrictive and do not encourage learners to draw on their strengths to help them in TL learning activities. It is my goal to use the TL as much as possible, but recognize that some translanguaging will happen during learner interaction and negotiation of meaning.

Another example of a way in which instructors can honor learners' funds of knowledge is through incorporating storytelling and story-writing into class activities. In many cases, ALL come from cultures which value oracy skills (Wilkinson, 1965). In my classes, especially with learners who are less proficient in print literacy, I like to allow learners to write, engage in creative activity, and present their own stories using the vocabulary introduced in the unit. These kinds of activities have been successful and inclusive of the skills and capabilities of students in the class. I believe I can attribute the success in part to the learners' own prior experience and confidence in oracy.

## **Curriculum**

### *Relevance*

Language learners, more specifically ALLs, learn best when content is clearly relevant to

their everyday interactions (Benseman, 2014; DeCapua & Marshall, 2015; Nakutnyy & Starzuk, 2018; Severinsen, Kennedy, & Mohamud, 2018) and when they are motivated and engaged (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Therefore, my goal is to introduce content that not only helps students learn, but guides them to learn the language skills needed to be able to more fully participate in the community around them. For adult language learners, the level of proficiency in the TL can have a direct effect on their lives, their jobs, their health, and their ability to provide for their families. In my teaching context, ALL show interest in learning about topics such as how to make appointments over the phone, how to interact with a cashier at the grocery store, how to interact with healthcare providers, how to order food in a restaurant, and how to be successful in a job interview.

### *Task-Based Language Teaching*

A one-size-fits-all approach to learning will not help diverse learners reach those goals. It is my belief that task-based activities (TBA) provide the best opportunity for students to interact with the TL in meaningful ways that require them to negotiate meaning and hold the learners accountable for what they have learned. Task-based language teaching (TBLT) places emphasis on meaning within interaction, rather than focusing on linguistic structures. TBLT, then, supports a communicative approach with a focus on communicating with a purpose. According to Ellis, Skehan, Li, Shintani, and Lambert (2019), “tasks are activities which make meaning primary, which include some kind of gap which needs to be addressed and hopefully resolved, which require learners to rely on their own language resources and which have a clearly defined outcome” (p. 353). One goal of TBA, then, is for learner to work together to fill in the gap presented to them.

Long (2015) clarifies that tasks are not just classroom activities “used to practice

structures” (p. 6), but that tasks are realistic and a way to practice what a learner needs to be able to do with the TL. In order to support this, Long (2015) suggests target tasks be determined by needs analysis to discover what it is that learners will actually need to learn in the TL. For example, a teacher may plan a lesson on using modal verb “would” that culminates in learners ordering food from a menu. This would not fit the given definition of a task because it is dependent on the structure rather than on the learner’s desire to be able to make a polite request. Rather, the task should be ordering food from a menu, supported by whatever structures may be required to successfully complete the task. Therefore, the task must always come first.

Additionally, TBLT is learner-centered. This means that the attention to form is responsive to the needs of learners and “in harmony with the learner’s internal syllabus” (p. 13). The “learner’s internal syllabus” is set by their level of proficiency and individual processing ability (p. 27). A teaching mentor of mine referred to the teacher’s reaction to the learner’s needs as giving instruction “just in time” rather than “just in case.” In other words, providing learners with feedback in the moment they need it rather than at the beginning of a lesson in case they may need it is a better approach to creating a learner-centered classroom. Because language acquisition happens when students are engaged in meaningful communication (VanPatten, 2017), the learner’s goals should drive the tasks selected. The teacher’s feedback must be timely and related to the task and these goals. This, then, makes the activity centered around the learner’s needs rather than on a grammatical structure highlighted at the beginning of a textbook chapter.

## **Instruction**

The learning environment and curriculum are only as good as the instructional approach

of the teacher. Good instruction guides and focuses language learning in real time, responding to learners as they navigate learning activities in the TL.

Learning a language should build learners' capacity to make meaning beyond exploiting conventional uses to which they have been exposed. Instruction should empower learners with regards to what is, and to what could be in the expression of new meaning. (Larsen-Freeman, 2018, p. 313)

I believe that good instruction focuses on learners' communicative competence and offers ample time for opportunities to revisit tasks to work toward fluency and increased proficiency.

#### *Task Iteration in Support of Fluency*

In my own language learning experience, I have found myself frustrated in classes that move on too quickly from one topic to the next. I felt that I was merely introduced to the new vocabulary without the ability to do something with it. Repeated opportunities to engage in the same learning tasks helps learners to improve in fluency (Bulazik & Borgiages, 2020). Larsen-Freeman (2018) refers to this as "iteration," suggesting this term as a better description of repeated task practice than "repetition," because repetition does not allow for variation, which is inevitable in language production. Larsen-Freeman (2018) also asserts that the goal of instruction is to empower learners to develop fluency and proficiency with their own word selection. I agree with this, and believe that I should provide these opportunities for learners to revisit learning tasks in many different ways, recycling structures and vocabulary, allowing for variety and creativity in production. It is important to recognize that learners may each have a different pace in doing this.

To illustrate what this looks like in a real classroom, I will return to the example of ordering food from a menu used in previous examples of tasks. Task iteration would bring back

the task of ordering food from a menu, but learners may produce some variety in their responses. In the next iteration of the same task, learners may reuse some of the same patterns from previous activities, but will likely also include different structures as well requiring different negotiations with each iteration (here, due to different personal preferences, questions for or from the server, different menu selections). This flexibility focuses on the learners' fluency by leaving behind the expectations that learners are regurgitation memorized words or phrases.

### *Focus on Meaning*

In order to help learners to focus on meaning, I plan to focus instruction on developing communicative competence. Communicative competence refers to a speaker's abilities to navigate language use beyond just selecting appropriate grammar (Bennett, 1997, 2004). The target is not only being able to come up with the right words and grammar, but also knowing how and when and with whom they should be used.

Pragmatics are essential in language learning and I spend time on pragmatics in my classroom. For example, if a language learner does not understand the cultural rules of turn-taking in the TL, their interlocutor may perceive them as being rude or perhaps unengaged in the conversation. In general, when a language learner employs the correct use of pragmatic functions of the language, such as polite phrases or commonly used expressions, it may improve their sense of membership within the TL community (Bardovi-Harlig, 2012).

Sociolinguistic competence requires a speaker to know how to address their interlocutor based on the social structure. Being able to address another speaker appropriately, or knowing how to make a request to someone of a different social status are examples of sociolinguistic competence. Because there is so much more to learning the language, grammar cannot be the sole or even the main focus of instruction. Celce-Murcia (1991) argues that grammar instruction

should happen in *support* of communicative competence; the focus on form should be presented in context and should support the learners' development of sociocultural, discourse, strategic, and linguistic competence alike. Furthermore, communicative competence is best developed when a focus on form is integrated into a meaning-focused experience (Savignon, 2018).

## **Conclusion**

The goal of ALLs in my professional context is to be able to communicate in the TL. In order to develop communication skills, learners need to have opportunities to interact in meaningful ways that build on their communicative competence. I believe that when given the opportunity to have meaningful interactions in the TL, learners will be better prepared to reach their communicative goals. I will help language learners in my class reach their communicative goals by providing instruction that focuses on meaning, preparing task-based activities that are developed with their communicative needs in mind, getting to know my students and their background, and by cultivating an inclusive, learner-centered environment in which all students are the main actors in their own learning.

## Professional Development through Classroom Observation

Observing other classes is an opportunity to reflect on one's own teaching, but through a different lens. I believe observing allows a teacher to see what the classroom looks like from an outside perspective, allowing them to see what interactions look like more objectively. After an observation is finished, the observer has the opportunity to think about what their own teaching looks like, and most likely will have some ideas about things they might like to add or subtract from their teaching habits.

The current shift in teaching due to a global pandemic has brought out creativity in almost every teacher, working to figure out how to teach effectively under new rules with new technology and new constraints on how interaction can happen safely in a classroom setting. Though many of the effects of this pandemic have been negative, I have had the opportunity to observe colleagues as well as strangers teaching across the world. I have been able to watch in-person and live classes, virtual classes, and pre-recorded classes for students working in self-paced learning programs. This unique time has required adjustments from all of us, but has also allowed time to think about what we do, why we do it, and how we can improve going forward. Throughout the observations I have participated in, there were three main areas of importance stood out to me as factors in a teacher's success. The most successfully classes I observed provided a learner-centered environment, using curriculum that is relevant to the learners' goals, and instruction that allows learners the opportunity for repetition and mastery of the TL.

The learning environment a teacher creates is one of the most important factors for success I've observed in a classroom because it can dictate how well learners receive new information or how comfortable they feel interacting with their teacher or classmates. Learners

who feel supported and comfortable in their class are more likely to participate and engage in the activities and feel less concerned about mistakes they may make as they interact with their peers.

### **Classroom Observations**

Reflecting on one of the first classes I observed, I remember how impressed I was by the instructor's ability to act more as a facilitator of the class than as one imparting knowledge. Students in the class were doing the majority of talking. Not only were students doing the majority of talking, they were offering each other feedback on writing samples. This is a challenging task that I may never have attempted in a low-intermediate level class before my observation. I realized then that I could do much more to put learning in the hands of the learners and allow them to be the center of the classroom. The learning environment and the teacher's approach to instruction were very much intertwined.

I had a brief conversation with the instructor following class about how he was able to help his students get to a point where they were comfortable offering each other feedback on their writing samples and doing the majority of talking during class. He told me that it took several weeks of small steps to get students comfortable with his approach. He also mentioned that this approach has allowed for some students who initially did not participate willingly at the beginning of class to become more active participants. This instructor's ability to create a safe environment for collaborative learning was a powerful example of the importance of how intentional an instructor must be in their instruction to develop the learning environment they wish to teach in.

In contrast, I observed a class in which the teacher did the majority of talking at the beginning of the class, with most of the instruction happening in the learners' L1. While I believe that there is an appropriate use for the L1 in class, I believe that should mostly come in the form

of translanguaging by the students and for specific purposes. The time that students were collaborating and talking together in the TL was sandwiched in the middle of the lesson and only required one student to report out at the end of the activity. This did not allow students ample time for repetition and practice, and it was not clear at the end of the activity whether or not everyone in each group had gained something from or contributed to the group's task. This is an approach I have seen often in many classrooms which I believe stops short of being effective. I believe quality instruction involves the instructor holding learners accountable for their own learning, requiring the instructor to find ways for learner to be able demonstrate what they have learned.

Another instructor that I observed impressed me with her pacing and patience in her class. She modeled each activity's instructions extensively using the "I do, we do, you do" approach. This teacher's ability to clearly model each activity made it easy for learners to understand what it was that they were tasked with doing in each activity. Her activities were level-appropriate while still providing an opportunity for her students to stretch to be able to carry out the activities planned for the lesson. It has been my experience watching teachers that oftentimes the reading activity does not come with much instruction beyond asking students to read the passage and answer a few comprehension questions. This teacher had created steps for learners to follow to read something that they would have had difficulty reading on their own.

Additionally, the content of the selected reading was relevant to the learners' lives. The class was composed of immigrants and refugees to the United States. The reading passage was about the history of women's rights in the United States; something that seemed to be very interesting and engaging in this classroom made up in majority by women. I appreciated that this teacher was choosing to highlight features of the language through culturally relevant text, rather

than beginning the lesson by telling students, “Today we are going to practice verbs using the past perfect tense”, which was, indeed, one of the learning objectives for the lesson. Learners needed to attend to the grammar in the passage in order to understand the timeline of events in history. The teacher successfully led learners to discover the target grammatical features within the passage, which proved to be an effective approach that kept learners engaged, participating, and learning together.

### **Conclusion**

Looking into another teacher’s classroom has been a powerful experience that I will take with me into my future teaching. This opportunity has allowed me to see some new possibilities for myself as a teacher, as well as some practices I want to be careful not to bring into my own classroom. One of the teachers I observed referred to errors as “gifts”. As I have reflected on this idea, it has made me think about how observing other teachers, both good and bad, have been gifts to me as an observer. These kinds of opportunities for self-reflection are why professional development through observation is so important to me as a teacher.

## RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

LANGUAGE PAPER

Formulaic Language and Adult L2 Learners' Sense of Belonging

### Purpose and Reflection

In the fall of 2020, I had the opportunity to take Dr. Karin deJonge-Kannan's pragmatics course. In that class, I learned how essential it is that pragmatics be taught explicitly in language classes. This class made me think more critically about how the pragmatics fits in with language learning. After spending our class time immersed in discussions about the importance of how we say things and when and to whom they should be said, I had questions about what the social ramifications might be for a language learner who does not follow the rules of pragmatics in the target language. I began to look around and listen closely for the types of social interactions where formulaic language was frequently used. I elected to research that idea further, and to write about formulaic language and how appropriate or inappropriate use of formulaic language can affect a language learner's sense of belonging in the community.

The purpose of my paper is to help language instructors recognize how important it can be for the success of their learners in the community to be able to readily participate in everyday social interactions. I begin the paper by detailing some of the types of interactions in which one may find formulaic language used. The body of the paper is largely focused on the linguistic functions of formulaic language, followed by examples of its social function as well as some suggestions for future research about materials selection. This paper is relevant to one of the main themes in my teaching philosophy: adult language learners learn best when the content of their classes is pertinent to their everyday lives.

## **Introduction**

I first became interested in learning more about including formulaic instruction in my classes when I heard adult learners in my classes talk about struggles they had in everyday, common interactions with L1 speakers of English. According to some studies, formulaic language makes up more than 50% of spoken interactions (Erman & Warren, 2000). Because formulaic language makes up more than 50% of many verbal interactions, it is essential for adult learners to be aware of it.

Some of such interactions happen in low-stakes settings, such as at the grocery store, with neighbors, or in public gathering places. Other interactions such as job interviews, citizenship interviews, doctors' visits, and accessing social services or services at a bank come with much higher stakes, shining a light on the importance of being able to understand and be understood when communicating in the target language in a range of social settings. For the purposes of this paper, I will continue to use "formulaic language" as defined by Wray (2002) to be "a sequence, continuous or discontinuous, of words or other elements, which is, or appears to be, prefabricated: that is, stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use, rather than being subject to generation or analysis by the language grammar" (p.9). In addition to this definition, I also consider that it is made up of at least two words, and that it is favored by native speakers, following Erman and Warren, "combinations of at least two words favored by native speakers in preference to an alternative combination which could have been equivalent had there been no conventionalization" (2000, p. 31). In other words, formulaic language involves the use of the types of words and phrases that fit into a conversation almost instinctually for more fluent

speakers of the target language (TL). Formulaic language is used in greetings, farewells, making requests, and other types of interactions that happen with frequency.

Having the ability to navigate interactions in which formulaic language is commonly used can make all the difference for someone during their interview for citizenship in the United States, for example. The interviewer has a document with a full history of the applicant. The applicant may know all the information on the application, but if they do not appear to readily understand the questions being posed to them about that information, their application may be rejected and the applicant will be asked to improve their English language proficiency and try again after a few months. This is, therefore, a high-stakes interaction. According to Bardovi-Harlig (2012), regardless of a learner's goals, correct use of pragmatic functions has been shown to signal membership in particular speech communities (p. 223). Moreover, a language learner's ability to navigate various social interactions with members of the TL community may help balance some of the many social inequities that have been established in the community. Norton Peirce (1995) writes that "power relations play a crucial role in social interactions between language learners and target language speaker" (p. 12). If a language learner does not view themselves as part of the community, they may lose motivation to progress in their language learning. Understanding the pragmatic functions of the TL can help learners maintain motivation to continue to learn, participate, and "claim their right to speak outside the classroom" (p. 26). To generalize, pragmatics involves recognizing when and how to use language appropriately to communicate in social situations. There is a need for further study in the area of formulaic language, specifically about how learning formulaic language and participating in small talk can help language learners better integrate into the second language (L2) community, though it is

outside the scope of this paper to exhaust this topic. In this paper I will discuss what formulaic language is, what its role is in language acquisition and belonging in a speech community, and the implications this has for language teaching and materials development.

### **Formulaicity and Linguistic Function**

There has been a strong interest in studying formulaic language in the field of second language acquisition for many years. There have been many different terms used to talk about formulaic language, as well, such as lexical bundles, lexical phrases, multiword sequences, and more. Some of the earliest work in this area surfaced in the late 1800s, focusing on memorization of phrases and sequences (Gouin, 1896). In the 1980s, much of the related research focused on how language learners select words and phrases to sound more “nativelike” in terms of speaking fluency (Pawley & Syder, 1983). This focus on form is a departure from other popular schools of thought at that time in second language acquisition (SLA) in the 1970s and 1980s. Stephen Krashen (1989) posited that production of formulaic language is not “real” language production, because the user is not actually understanding the components of the utterance (p. 26), with his research beginning to focus on a more communicative approach to teaching languages. However insightful this may be, this assertion does not fully align with the greater body of research today about how formulaic language is used by language learners and fluent speakers.

Wray’s 2002 definition of formulaic language suggests that there is an element of automaticity to formulaic language and that it is stored and retrieved from the speaker’s memory in the moment that it is needed. The speaker does not think about the grammar or the structure of the utterance. They may not even know what individual words are in the phrase used, or even

what those words mean. Formulaic language is, essentially, automatic. Although the speaker may not initially understand the grammar or linguistic structure of the language they use, they may still be using the words or phrases properly and in a way that is understood by their interlocutors. This is supported by other studies that found L2 users often use grammatical forms that are above their grammatical proficiency (Myles, 2004; Norris, 2006).

According to Martinez and Schmitt (2012), individual formulaic sequences behave much the same as individual words in that they contain meaning as a single unit (p. 299). For instance, in a 2017 study, Allison Wray offered some examples of such sequences, such as “the day before yesterday” or “bullet point” (p. 572). Both examples have multiple words, but the phrases contain their own meaning and they are predictable or are frequently used together. These types of phrases, she states, are a function of repetition and are sustained through use by the language community (p. 571). These combinations are so automatic to L1 speakers that even though they may not have been explicitly told that two words go together, they would likely never mix up idiomatic combinations, whereas L2 speakers would probably not be able to identify which words went together colloquially unless explicitly taught (Siyanova-Chanturia & Spina, 2020; Wray, 2002). In more recent studies, Siyanova-Chanturia and Spina (2020) posit that this may be a challenge to L2 learners not only because of lack of exposure but also because much of L2 instruction is focused at the word level rather than at the phrase level.

### **Formulaic Language and Social Function**

Not only does formulaic serve a purpose in language use, there are also social uses that a speaker may employ in order to manage relationships with others and perceptions of themselves.

In Wray's 2017 study, she attempted to better understand the purpose of formulaic language and what determines how much of spoken language is formulaic. She identified three main uses of formulaic language, which are to communicate a physical need, to communicate an abstract idea, or to share or affect an emotion (p. 571). Her purpose in identifying the uses of formulaic forms is an attempt to understand how the type of utterance affects communication and how speakers use multi-word sequences to manage relationship and perception in conversations. In reference to the Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), speakers will use formulaic language to protect their "positive face" and the hearer's "negative face." For example, a person may use a phrase to indicate that there was no perceived imposition, when, in fact, there was a great imposition but it would be impolite to voice it. Wray's argument is that speakers use formulaic language in order to manipulate or influence the flow of the conversation and to preserve the relationship of speaker and hearer. She concluded that formulaic language can be both beneficial and damaging to L2 users. If managed well, formulaic language can support the speaker and help them successfully reach their communicative goal. If not managed well, formulaic language can add extreme social pressure on the speaker, potentially leaving the hearer confused or possibly offended by the speaker's attempts (p. 584). This suggests, then, that automaticity in producing formulaic forms can help L2 speakers better manage social relationships with communication that is perceived to be more semantically, pragmatically, and socio-culturally appropriate.

Formulaic language is used routinely in a variety of social settings. One situation in the United States in which formulaic language is perceived by L2 learners to happen most frequently is during "small talk." In a study by Yates and Major (2015), L2 learners reported socio-pragmatic issues (though they did not use that specific term) arising during small talk with

community members who were L1 users (p. 144). Learners interviewed in this study reported that oftentimes in these interactions they employed certain strategies to appear as though they understood (such as nodding or agreeing) and then asking someone else to clarify what the person had said after the conversation had closed (p. 145). This suggests that participation in the conversation and appearing to understand was more important to learners than ensuring they understood. Small talk is just one example of formulaic language that instructors in the US can use to help their ESL/EFL learners become more aware of and practice.

Small talk can be crucial in high-stakes interactions such as interviews or meetings, for example. Additionally, a perceived lack of necessary soft skills, such as the ability to participate in everyday interactions may not only be perceived by L1 users as rude behavior, but it can be a barrier to employment. For these reasons, it is clear that learning formulaic sequences and learning how to use them in everyday interactions ought to be an area of focus for L2 instructors. Not only for learners' language skills, but to help them have successful social interactions with L1 users in the language community, I suggest instructors must facilitate practice in formulaic language.

### **The Role of Instruction in L2 Formulaic Language Acquisition**

All societies have some formulaic language (Kuiper, 2004), and though different languages use different building blocks to form these sequences, multiword sequences play a role in first language (L1) and second language (L2) learning (McCauley & Christiansen, 2017). Language learners have already learned how to combine words in their first language in order to express a variety of functions and learners seem to see that learning these types of expressions is

important (Martinez, 2013), so it is logical to expect them to employ the same skills to learning an L2 (Myles, 2004). Because appropriate use of formulaic language and multi-word expressions can help an L2 user sound more native-like to L1 users (Arnon & Cohen, 2013; Ellis, 2012; Martinez & Schmitt, 2012; Pawley & Syder, 1983; Wray, 2017), it is to the L2 user's communicative and social advantage to employ the use of formulaic language. Teachers may thus help their students to better communicate if they are aware of these advantages.

Appropriate use of formulaic expressions has both linguistic and social benefits. Successful participation in using formulas to communicate is a signal of membership in the L1 language community (Bardovi-Harlig, 2012, p. 223). Kuiper (2004) also supports this idea, adding that subgroups also employ the use of specific formulaic expressions, such as workplaces, places of recreation, and even classrooms. Being able to participate linguistically in a language community is an important part of building a sense of belonging in the community.

According to Norton Pierce (1995), language learners may not have the same access to the linguistic codes of their new community as native-speakers of the community language have. It is the instructor's responsibility, then, to direct learners toward "collapsing the boundaries between their classrooms and their communities" (p. 26). Furthermore, Norton Pierce (1995) states that the language teacher needs to help their students "claim the right to speak outside the classroom" (p. 26). A language learner's ability to communicate effectively outside of the classroom is key to their identity and to their sense of belonging in the larger community. Instructors can help learners find their own voice by guiding them to language resources that help them.

Beginners are sensitive to the frequency of lexical combinations (Northbrook & Conklin, 2018; Siyanovia-Chanturi & Spina, 2020), which seems encouraging. This may be related, in part, to what Norris (2006) suggests about frequency; that frequency acts as a bias when the input is not sufficient. This means that learners note the frequency of words and phrases, even when they may not understand the meaning. The frequency signals that the word(s) used are important and should be attended to. Frequency of exposure to formulaic sequences in written form as well, especially as found in authentic texts that demonstrate the common features of the target sequence types, help to maximize learning of these features (Yeldham, 2018). The frequency that a learner may encounter in listening to songs can also be used to help along the process of learning target formulaic language (Tomczak & Lew, 2019). When the frequency of new words or phrases in a variety of written or audio authentic texts or interactions are paired with some explicit instruction, learners will be better equipped to retain and use what they have learned.

### **The Role of Texts and Authentic Materials**

One area of access for language learners may be through the textbooks and curricula their instructors select. Using texts that build vocabulary lists from a linguistic corpus could help ensure that the vocabulary introduced in class is relevant to the communicative goals of the student and that the use of the target language is authentic. A survey by Norberg and Norlund (2018) found that the majority of vocabulary lists in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbooks used in Sweden did not reflect words frequently used in authentic settings. The researchers suggest that textbook creators should find a balance between grouping vocabulary by theme and selecting vocabulary that is frequent and authentic in the target language.

One popular method of language learning comes in the form of language classes for specific purposes. These courses involve specific instruction about business, job seeking, or other focused areas. Just to give one salient example, Skorczynska Snajder (2009) found that a Business English textbook included idiomatic phrases that crossed over with war, sports, and health phrases. In this study, the author also found that the overlap between the textbook and actual written and spoken expressions in business-related media was not strong. The conclusion of the study suggested that optimum teaching materials should be created with a balance of corpus-based language samples and general language skills. Textbooks that do use a language corpus to create vocabulary lists and idiom practice have much higher rates of authentic language use (Miller, 2020).

Tomlinson (2012) suggests that while textbooks may be a helpful reference for teachers and students, teachers can be more effective when adapting materials and lessons to the needs of their students. Authentic texts is something we now define broadly in language teaching theory and practice. ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) strongly advocates for the use of authentic texts and provides extensive justification and examples for implementation (2021). Furthermore, Tomlinson (2012) defines an authentic text essentially to be any text that is created with the purpose of communicating rather than for the purpose of teaching. Masuhara, Mishan, & Tomlinson (2017) found that although many coursebooks do not meet the needs of teachers and learners on their own, some kind of core materials or sources are needed for effective language learning to happen. This suggests that textbooks may be one area for finding materials to aid in teaching formulaic language, but that there are other avenues for

language instructors that may better suit the needs of their students. One possible alternative is for instructors to build target phrase lists or activities for use in classes from a corpus.

Tremblay et al. (2011) suggest that the challenge in front of teachers is more complex than just whether or not formulaic language should be taught, but how to determine *what* to teach is a better question. According to a study carried out by Martinez and Murphy (2011), learners may attempt to understand a formulaic sequence by translating individual words, which leads to misunderstanding of the full meaning of the phrase. The authors suggest that some explicit instruction of formulaic phrases and their meaning would be a good use of teaching time (p. 9). It is important to note, in support of this claim, that learners across multiple studies who received direct instruction on formulaic expressions made improvements in their use of those expressions over time (for example, Alali & Schmitt, 2012; Assassi & Beynelles, 2016; Bardovi-Harlig, 2015; Northbrook & Conklin, 2019; Rose, 2005, Schmitt et al., 2004), among other studies. Furthermore, review and repeated exposure has been shown to help retention of formulaic sequences and learners' ability to reproduce phrases they have received instruction on (Bardovi-Harlig et al, 2015; Durrant & Schmidt, 2010; Szudarski, 2017). Wood (2015, p. 142) suggests that providing learners with more engagement and a need to remember formulaic sequences that require deeper processing should lead to greater retention. Instructors can help this process by guiding learners to recognize how the content of their classes is relevant to their lives (Benseman, 2014; DeCapua & Marshall, 2015, Nakutnyy & Sterzuk, 2018; Severinsen, Kennedy, & Mohamud, 2018).

## **Conclusions**

Formulaic language makes up a large portion of spoken language. Lexical bundles and frequently used phrases and idioms are used by people in the greater language community as well as by members of smaller subgroups. Learning the common words and phrases of a special interest area can signal membership in that subgroup. Consequently, not having the language skills or understanding of specific formulaic language may also exclude someone from a specific group. Being able to use formulaic language appropriately may contribute to an individual language learner's belonging in a community and, therefore, contribute to their ability to succeed in a community.

Studying formulaic phrases has processing advantages in reading (Martinez & Schmitt, 2012) and in communication and fluency (Martinez & Schmitt, 2012; Myles, 2004; Northbrook & Conklin, 2019; Wray, 2002; Wray, 2017; Yates & Major, 2015), as well as many social advantages related to perception from L1 users (Assassi & Beynelles, 2016; Martinez & Schmitt, 2012; Yates & Major, 2015).

Because proper use of formulaic language has semantic, pragmatic, and sociocultural consequences, language teachers should include direct instruction on appropriate use of formulaic language at every level of learning (Northbrook & Conklin, 2019; Siyanovia-Chanturi & Spina, 2020). Although learners may not have the grammatical proficiency to fully understand the formulaic phrases they employ, the frequent phrases used can be used as a database to further study the more advanced grammatical features (Cowie, 1992). Instructors may employ a variety of strategies to encourage retention and production of learned formulaic sequences, including using songs (Tomczak & Lew, 2019), formula-rich texts (Yeldham, 2017), and giving learners ample opportunity to review formulaic sequences in meaningful exchanges (Alali & Schmidt,

2012; Durrant & Schmidt, 2010; Ellis, 2012; Northbrook & Conklin, 2019; Szudarski, 2017; Wood, 2015). In addition to the suggested strategies, instructors should also recognize that they have a role in helping learners see how formulaic language is relevant to their everyday interactions in the target language. Instructors must also take care to seek out content that is commonly used in the target language in order to guide learners to the most relevant, frequent, and important words and phrases for their individual language goals.

### **Future Research**

There are some limitations and room for further research about what types of formulaic language should be taught and the extent to which individual learners' skills and needs affect the acquisition of formulaic phrases (Cowie, 1992; McCauley & Christiansen, 2017) as well as how corpus-based selection of formulaic phrases affects L2 learners' acquisition. In looking at a variety of language texts, it is often unclear whether vocabulary selection is tied to linguistic corpora of some type or not. One area of interest may be how careers and workplaces might develop their own corpus for language use on the job. As Kuiper (2004) points out, formulaic language is used in very specific settings. If learners had access to the necessary language to be successful in their current jobs, would they have better opportunities to improve their employment and find promotions within the same workplace? Future research could shine light on how such tools may help instructors better connect learning to students' lives and communicative goals.

Looking forward, I believe that further research on these topics would also reveal that learner discovery is an important step in acquiring formulaic language because learners attend to

input that is relevant to their goals and interests (Benseman, 2014; DeCapua & Marshall, 2015, Nakutnyy & Sterzuk, 2018; Severinsen, Kennedy, & Mohamud, 2018).

**CULTURE PAPER**

Meeting the Unique Needs of Low-Education Second Language Learning Adults

## Purpose and Reflection

In 2014, I began teaching a new class. The majority of learners in my class were new to the United States, new to learning the English language, and new to learning in a formal classroom setting. I learned quickly that the materials, approaches, and content that I was accustomed to using in a beginning-level classroom were not as effective in my new teaching context. I wanted to learn more about what the students in my class needed from me, and what I need to know about them in order to help them better reach their own language learning goals.

In the years since then, I have learned a lot through experience and through study circles with other instructors teaching in a similar context. In this paper, I wanted to explore the topic in more depth and better understand the relevant research. I elected to investigate who low-education second language learning adults are, how their needs may differ from other learners in other contexts, and what language instructors and program administrators can do to better meet their unique educational needs.

Writing about this topic has helped me better understand some of my observations about low-education second language learning adults, and offered me the opportunity to learn new things that I had not yet considered. The ideas discussed in this paper are particularly important to me and align with some of the perspectives in my teaching philosophy statement regarding creating an inclusive classroom.

## Introduction

This paper focuses on literacy and provides an overview of some approaches to better meet the needs of low-education second language learning adults (LESSLAs). According to scholars before 1970, the research concerning adult literacy and language learning was uncommon (Bigelow & Tarone, 2004; Bigelow & Schwarz, 2010; Lankshear, Colin, & Knobel, 2011; Marrapodi, 2013; Pettitt & Tarone, 2015; Young-Scholten, 2013). Prior to 1970, researchers and educators working in the field of literacy focused mainly on reading, interpreting, and decoding printed text. The popular understanding of the term “literacy” typically limits the idea to a person’s ability to read and write. The reality is that “literacy” encompasses more than just reading and writing, and in a larger sense refers to a person’s ability to navigate the world and community around them (Provenzo et al, 2014). According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), at least 773 million adults and youth lack basic literacy skills. UNESCO broadly defines literacy as “a means of identification, understanding, interpretation, creation, and communication in an increasingly digital, text-mediated, information-rich and fast-changing world.” This suggests that the field of literacy research should also be progressing to meet the needs of this fast-growing demographic.

While gaining a variety of literacy skills is important for the learner as an individual, literacy also benefits the greater community as it enables adults to become more informed, empowered to participate more actively, and ultimately make better decisions about their health, jobs, and finances. LESSLAs have their own rich experiences, backgrounds, and resources to contribute to and participate in the greater community around them (Addae, 2021; Atkinson, 2014; Ewert, 2014; Park & Valdez, 2018; Provenzo et al., 2014; Bigelow & Schwarz, 2010; Severinsen, Kennedy, and Mohamud, 2018). While LESSLAs bring with them a variety of

strengths, they may also be dealing with their own life challenges, contributing to the difficulties before them in language learning. In addition to needing to gain important functional language skills, they may also potentially be facing barriers such as the effects of poverty, trauma, family-related stressors, housing instability, food insecurity, and more.

While Skehan (1989) explored the idea that language learners have individual differences, the concept of how instruction should be adapted to meet the needs of individual learners was years behind. Young-Scholten (2013) suggests that this decades-long research gap may be attributed to the easy access academic researchers have to university-level language learners as subjects in their studies, reducing the focus on other demographics in the community, such as LESLLAs. On a similar note, Bigelow and Tarone (2004) warned that application of research about language learners that is not specifically about nonliterate learners is invalid, stating that “If accepted findings describe only literate and educated language learners, then theory has limited applicability and little value in guiding teachers who work with illiterate learners.” (p. 670).

In 2010, Bigelow and Schwarz reported that Literacy Education and Second Language Learning for Adults, the international organization which supports literacy learning adults worldwide, had produced just three published collections about LESLLAs and teaching practices. Although there has been an increase in research published about this population since then, the early shortage of relevant research has been reflected in the classroom, and has unfortunately taken a toll on the quality of instruction offered to LESLLAs. Further research is needed in this area.

## **Gaps in Training and Resources**

Many adult education instructors come to the profession with a background of working with young children, operating under the idea that what was effective in those classes will also be effective with their new group of students (Marrapodi, 2013). Additionally, many adult educators do not have access to the same wealth of professional development opportunities that K-12 teachers may benefit from. In many cases, funding may restrict programs' hiring budgets to allow only for hourly, part-time instructors with little time for planning and preparation (Vinogradov, 2008, 2013; Wagner, 2000). For example, in a case study on novice teachers in adult literacy classes, DeCapua, Marshall, and Frydland (2018) found that one of the largest obstacles in learning, beyond learners' language proficiency, is the teacher's inability to recognize how their own frames of reference regarding learning were holding back student learning. What the research shows, then, is that a gap exists between what LESLLAs need from their teachers in order to be successful in gaining literacy skills and the effectiveness of the training many instructors receive prior to working with this population.

In addition to a gap in training, there is also a gap in materials available to adult language educators. One of the contributing issues is that researching and accessing materials that are both level-appropriate and age-appropriate is a challenge. It is well accepted that language learners are successful in building language skills only when input is comprehensible to them (Krashen, 1985). The need for comprehensible input is also met with adult language learners' need for content to be immediately relevant to their lives (Benseman, 2014; DeCapua & Marshall, 2015; Nakutnyy, 2018; Severinsen, Kennedy, and Mohamud, 2018). This means that materials created for developing print literacy for children are likely not a good fit for teaching adults learning print literacy, and often do not take into account the diverse backgrounds and needs of adults.

Harrington-Bragg (2018) found that presenting LESLLAs with materials designed for children was demotivating and suggests that adults be presented with materials that are “tailored to their competence” (p. 13). In addition to being ineffective, a mismatch in materials and learner-goals can also be frustrating to learners. In one striking example, Marrapodi (2013) reports the discontentment of one learner in a class in which the instructor introduces a nonsensical phonics-focused book. The learner declared mid-lesson, “No cat wears a hat! I don’t care about him sitting on a mat. Why are we doing this?” (p. 11). Clearly, the learner in this situation recognized that this activity is in no way related to her learning goals. Finding textbooks for language learning that are level-appropriate, age-appropriate, and are relevant to adult learner goals is a challenge for many LESLLA professionals. This gap leaves teachers to use a compilation of resources to build teaching materials for their classes. Some teachers create their own while others repurpose other teaching materials to better fit their teaching context (Bigelow & Vinogradov, 2011; Colliander, Ahn, & Andersson, 2018).

### **Issues with Traditional Approaches**

Not only can children’s materials be problematic choices for materials in an adult language learning classroom, but other approaches commonly used in classes with literate adult language learners may also be inappropriate. There are various reasons why LESLLAs may struggle with conventional language teaching approaches and assessment measures. One of the reasons LESLLAs may struggle with conventional teaching approaches is due to a lack of familiarity with classroom routines. Ramírez-Esparza et al. (2011) state that adult learners may require additional support in ‘socio-interactive practices’, such as “starting tasks, asking classroom participants for help, giving help to other participants, assuming the expert role...” (p.

541). This suggests that language instructors in LESLLA classrooms must provide support in how to interact with their peers in class, must be clear about the structure of class activities, and must outline what the expectations are for those interactions.

LESLLAs may come to class with a need to be taught skills “...as basic as holding a pen, discerning between questions and answers, and learning to work cooperatively on set tasks with their fellow pupils.” (Benseman, 2014, pp 100-101). For these students, language instruction alone will not meet their educational needs, and traditional teaching methods may not have the same effect in the LESLLA classroom (Lukes, 2011). Altherr-Flores (2021) illustrates this with a brief vignette depicting an interaction with a LESLLA learner coming into class for the first time.

Sepideh is a 40-year old woman from Afghanistan. She was resettled in the United States in the fall of 2016 with her five children and her deceased husband’s mother... I asked her name, she shook my hand, told me “No English; Sepideh;” I introduced myself, and modeled for her that I would prefer her to sit facing the whiteboard instead of the side wall. Her new peers showed her which way to turn her folder and her papers, she picked up a pencil, and carefully started to write the symbols I had written on a large piece of paper folded into thirds and set in front of her, S E P I D E H. This was Sepideh’s first day ever of formal, school-based learning. It was in my classroom that Sepideh learned how to use a pencil, which side of the paper to write on, what the lines mean on notebook paper, and how to write the letters of the English language (p. 1) .

In this scenario, the student, Sepideh, had not experienced any kind of formal education before joining her new English language class. Sepideh required support outside of the learning objectives that would likely be included in a language learning textbook. This is due to the fact that typical language learning textbooks make assumptions about the skills of the users of the book. Likewise, instructors may make assumptions about the classroom skills learners bring with them. Marrapodi (2013) analyzes tasks required to successfully participate in language learning activities that are commonly used in classes. Marrapodi (2013) makes a useful broken-down list of the specific tasks required to complete a matching activity on a worksheet:

1. Orient the paper so words are right side up.
2. Identify each picture:
  - a. Possess visual literacy skills to recognize clip art and identify the item represented.
  - b. Form a mental model. Is it a similar concept?
3. Remember the English name for the picture.
4. Correctly read the five words on the right.
5. Understand that the words and pictures are in different orders.
6. Understand the goal is to connect the picture and word.
7. Associate the picture with the correct word.
8. Use a writing implement to draw a line.
9. Draw a line connecting the picture with the correct word.
10. Understand that crossing lines are acceptable.
11. Recognize the one-to-one correspondence of the words to pictures.
12. Work the task until all words and pictures are matched.

LESLLAs may face other similar challenges in a classroom setting. While the use of images is common in language-learning activities, LESLLAs may struggle with recognizing abstract images, such as clip-art or cartoon drawings (Bruski, 2012; Whiteside, 2007). For them, some symbols may not hold the same meaning as for other students, due to the background knowledge required to interpret them as they are intended to be interpreted. This may hinder the negotiation of meaning rather than acting as a helpful visual aid. Allemano (2013) and Altherr

Flores (2021) studied LESLLAs and assessment. They both found that the validity of tests with LESLLAs is affected by the learners' unfamiliarity with taking tests, creating an issue where learners may not be able to demonstrate what they know. Assessment formats are a considerable hurdle for many learners. Allemano (2013) writes that student performance on tests "may be affected by the need for skills unrelated to the intended construct" and that the test results could "be marred by a lack of background knowledge, unfamiliarity with the testing method, or failure to understand the language of the rubric." (p. 72). This suggests that there is more to test-taking than simply providing a correct response to a question. There has been much research done on the limitations of standardized testing and the need for further inclusivity, but that is outside the scope of this paper.

Altherr Flores (2021) found that learners may have difficulty understanding what is expected of them on an assessment and will therefore lose opportunities for points or gains. For example, a learner may not recognize the blank lines on an assessment to represent how long the response is expected to be. Images may also be a challenge for learners to interpret, leading test-takers to offer a response that is not accepted as being correct due to being wholly off-topic. Bruski, (2012) found that LESLLAs had difficulty interpreting images that are less-concrete than photographs, such as cartoons or clipart. This can pose issues in an assessment or in regular classroom tasks, leading to frustration for learners and instructors.

While the list of traditional approaches not suggested for use in the LESLLA learning context may seem overwhelming, there is opportunity within the LESLLA teaching context for instructors to identify and change less-effective approaches to better equip themselves to meet the needs of L1 non-literate learners. DeCapua (2016) urges that a paradigm shift is needed in order to be more inclusive of learners' background knowledge and to reach learners in different

ways than instructors may be accustomed to doing in traditional teaching contexts. Below are a few examples of how teachers may better fill these gaps and promote inclusivity in their classrooms.

### **Suggestions for LESLLA Teachers and Program Administrators**

In light of these documented challenges, LESLLA educators and program administrators should consider several adjustments that will help better support learners in their classrooms. The suggested adjustments range from general awareness that the above-mentioned differences exist to some practical pedagogical tips.

#### *Focus on Strengths*

Adult language learners come to class with a wealth of knowledge beyond print literacy (Altherr Flores, 2021; DeCapua & Marshall, 2015; Provenzo et al., 2014; Nakutnyy & Sterzuk, 2018; Park & Valdez, 2018; Pettitt & Tarone, 2015). Adults have gained many skills in their lives and are not novice learners. Many LESLLAs are fluent in multiple languages, have navigated complex immigration processes, have raised children, and have worked in various careers before. Other academic skills that are not as valued in a traditional language learning classroom include memory and oracy skills and the ability to co-construct knowledge (Nakutnyy & Sterzuk, 2018). Teacher and learners may draw on this prior knowledge and other skill sets to support language learning.

#### *Task Awareness*

Marrapodi (2013) suggests that teachers should be mindful of their own assumptions regarding the elements of tasks within learning activities, warning that students may not be prepared to focus on the learning objective. The reasoning is that the learner may be “diverted to

yet-to-be learned skills.” (p. 21). Learners will have more success in meeting learning objectives and demonstrating learned skills if they are provided necessary scaffolding to perform the tasks. For instance, building up to a matching worksheet by first introducing the activity using word strips and picture cards would help learners extend the concept to a paper version. In addition to providing scaffolding, research supports direct instruction on how to perform regular classroom tasks as part of the learning curriculum (Benseman, 2014; Ramirez-Esparza et al, 2011).

### *Phonemic Awareness*

Just as LESLLAs benefit from explicit instruction in classroom tasks, phonemic awareness should also be explicitly taught in addition to the alphabet (Benseman, 2014; Bigelow & Schwarz, 2010). Some educators may avoid explicit phonemic awareness practice while introducing the alphabet. LESLLAs benefit from instruction that is “explicit and systematic, focusing on phonemic awareness, phonics, and word recognition” (Bigelow & Vinogradov, 2011, p. 123). Phonemic awareness does not develop alongside alphabet instruction unless it is directly taught, and should, therefore, be a regular part of instruction for those who need support in this area.

### *Repetition*

It is widely accepted that learning happens through repeated practice. LESLLAs are not an exception in this, and may require more repetition than is expected in other learning contexts (Benseman, 2014; Colliander, Ahn, & Andersson, 2018). Repetition can help in making some basic literacy skills more rote, but also can support learners in being prepared to succeed in classroom tasks. Recycling tasks can also help learners feel more confident with the language skills they aim to master in the TL (Benseman, 2014), and help provide learners with an opportunity to see their improvements in proficiency in real-time.

### *Strategic Grouping*

Not only is it important to provide LESLLAs with the skills for academic success, but it is also necessary to provide a classroom environment that is safe for that learning to take place. Many language programs for adults do not provide separate classes for learners who are not print-literate. In order to better support different instructional needs, learners who are not print-literate should be placed in separate classes from their literate peers (Benseman, 2014; Bigelow & Schwarz, 2010). This allows LESLLAs the space and time needed to build academic skills alongside learning the language without threat of losing face in front of their peers.

Many LESLLAs come from cultural backgrounds which value collaborative learning (Ewert, 2014; Severinsen, Kennedy, & Mohamud, 2018; Nakutnyy & Starzuk, 2018). Teachers can bolster learning by incorporating more opportunities for co-construction of meaning, storytelling (Provenzo et al., 2014), and pair work. Park and Valdez (2018) assert that teachers can reach adult language learners by attempting to learn more about the learners' language, culture, and customs.

### *Relevant Learning Topics*

One of the most important factors in adult language learning is the relevance of class content to their daily lives (Benseman, 2014; DeCapua & Marshall, 2015; Nakutnyy, 2018; Severinsen, Kennedy, and Mohamud, 2018). Adult language learners have busy lives, and the content of their language classes should help them better navigate the world outside of class. Condelli and Wrigley (2008) call this "bringing the outside in." This can be achieved by using realia, taking classes out on field trips, and bringing in speakers who are professionals in their field. A needs assessment is also suggested to identify specific areas of interest for LESLAA (Long, 2015).

### *Assessment*

The need for task awareness carries over to assessment, as well. Assessments should be carefully designed so that the tasks in the assessment do not cause unnecessary confusion for the student. This may require development of new assessments that are specifically designed for nonliterate learners (Bigelow & Schwarz, 2010). Improvements made to testing format may include redesigned materials, images, and text to be more inclusive. Other formats not traditionally used in assessments may also be explored. More inclusive assessments can build the confidence of learners in their own abilities as it also builds confidence that the assessment is a reflection of the learner's skills and abilities in the L2. As an example, tests for LESLLAs could include scaffolding which prepares a learner for the task of the assessment without priming them for the content.

### *Professional Development*

Building awareness of the needs of LESLLAs is vital at the administrative level. Teachers may require extra support from program administrators in accessing appropriate professional development opportunities. This may require administrators to seek out conferences, speakers, and training resources that are not part of the traditional training offered in the program. As some adult education programs are hosted by school districts, teachers may only be made aware of training developed specifically for K-12 educators. LESLLA teachers may not know that there are professional resources available to support them in their unique classes.

Classroom materials may also be difficult for teachers to find. Colliander et al. (2018) found that most LESLLA instructors do not have set classroom materials, and that the materials they do use are modified to better suit the needs of learners. Administrators can help instructors find more suitable and appropriate materials to use in class. This may be through securing funds

to access already created materials or helping direct teachers to Open Education Resources (OER) that may exist. This may be especially necessary for community-based programs or volunteer-led LESLLA classes.

### *Study Circles*

Finally, one of the easiest suggested practice for LESLLA professionals to implement is to spend time on self-reflection and talking through teaching experiences with other practitioners. Farrelly (2017) urges LESLLA teachers to support and strengthen each other by sharing stories and experiences with each other, and suggests that this practice leads to more “responsive and responsible educators” who “lean on and learn from each other.” (p. 57).

Whether through structured learning circles or casual interactions between instructors occurring in hallways about what works well and what can be improved upon in the classroom, reflection and collaboration with colleagues often leads to positive changes in the classroom.

### **Conclusion**

This is a call to action, urging adult educators and administrators to recognize that there are opportunities for improvement in instruction and that more research needs to be done in order to continue doing better for these learners. Much remains to be done, both in theory and in practice. Above is just an overview of what is at stake with some suggestions, based on recent research, on how teachers and administrators can become aware and better meet the needs of LESLLAs.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

## Adult Language Learners and Task-Based Language Teaching:

### An Annotated Bibliography

As a language instructor, I spend much of my time learning about each of my students' individual needs and how to best meet their learning goals. Often working with adult language learners from diverse backgrounds, I strive to get to know their goals, motivate them, encourage them to participate, and build community in my classroom. I work toward planning lessons, selecting and developing materials, and choosing activities to support language learning in a learner-centered environment. In this kind of environment, learners are able to take responsibility for their own learning, they are held accountable, and there is often a high level of engagement. One of the most prevalent ideas in the literature about teaching adult language learners (ALLs) is that they are motivated to learn things that are relevant to their needs and interests (Benseman, 2014; Decapua & Marshall, 2015; Long, 2015, 2016; Nakutnyy & Sterzuk, 2018; Severinsen, Kennedy, & Mohamud, 2018). In the time I have spent in ALL classrooms, I have heard this point reiterated by students as well. The draw for many ALLs to language classes is, oftentimes, seeking better access to the community around them. They are striving to find new work or improve their current employment, increase their academic language skills to pursue higher education, gain a driver license, participate in civic activities, access health care, find ways to be more involved in their children's education, and more. Furthermore, some ALLs are learning languages for specific purposes (LSP), such as those working in medical, hospitality, or legal fields and focusing on learning language for their work in those areas.

While there seems to be a consensus surrounding the idea that ALLs are motivated to learn things that are relevant to their lives, there are varying schools of thought about how to identify what to teach and in turn how it should be taught. This annotated bibliography will

provide a brief overview of just a few of the many sources in this area that I have found particularly useful in the ALL context in which I teach. During my studies, I came across a quote that led me to think differently about the purpose of classroom activities in general. **Tomlinson (1999)** writes that many teachers have “entered the profession with a vague sense that students should read, listen to, or watch something. Then they should do “some sort of activity” based on it.” (p. 37). As I read that, I recognized something I had seen in many classrooms, including my own. It seems as though many teachers plan lessons with this idea that there should be activities and that the planned activities should follow some kind of theme or topic or focus on practicing a specific grammatical feature. While this notion that lessons should include activities and that those activities should be tied together in some way is generally true, it is very generalized and this approach does not hold learners accountable for learning. They are merely participants in exercises that may or may not lead to learning. If an activity or lesson plan does not have goals and learning outcomes in mind, if it is just a vague ‘some sort of activity,’ then teaching is not effective and learning likely suffers:

“When a teacher lacks clarity about what a student should know, understand, and be able to do as a result of a lesson, the learning tasks she creates may or may not be engaging and we can almost be certain the tasks won’t help students understand essential ideas or principles. A fuzzy sense of the essentials results in fuzzy activities, which, in turn, results in fuzzy student understanding. That’s a barrier to high-quality teaching and learning.” (p. 37).

Watching videos and reading passages can be interesting and engaging - and authentic texts are certainly useful as a starting point for lessons that involve interpretive analytical, and critical thinking skills - but the critical point is to identify the sorts of activities that will best help learners meet their goals and build on what they can do in the target language (TL). Instructors and learners need to be accountable for learning throughout the process and be given tasks that allow learners to demonstrate what they have learned and how the new knowledge and skills can be applied in everyday interactions.

One approach that is in support of teaching language in a way that aligns with learners' goals is task-based language teaching (TBLT). TBLT has been used effectively for decades in communicative classrooms, but it is important now more than ever, particularly in the context in which I teach where many ALLs are immigrants and refugees learning ESL/EFL. Long (2015, 2016) advocates specifically for TBLT in language programs for refugees and immigrants, due to its focus on learner goals and practical application. It is generally accepted that TBLT is an approach that views language as a tool for communication rather than as something to be studied, and that interaction is the means to improve communication skills in the TL (Ellis, 2012; Faez & Tavakoli, 2019). Before delving into the nuances of TBLT, it is important to understand first from where TBLT emerged from and what was being discussed by scholars in second language acquisition (SLA) at the time it began to rise in popularity. Some of the first articles about TBLT came out in the height of the conversation about communicative language teaching (CLT), which, in very basic terms, emphasizes the need for interaction in language learning and embraces a focus on meaning over form (Littlewood, 1981; Nunan, 1987; Savignon, 1991) **Nunan (2004)** writes that CLT and TBLT are terms that are sometimes used interchangeably, but argues that there are distinctions that should be made:

“CLT is a broad, philosophical approach to the language curriculum that draws on theory and research in linguistics, anthropology, psychology and sociology. Task-based language teaching represents a realization of this philosophy at the levels of syllabus design and methodology.” (p. 10).

Thus, to make a simple mathematical analogy, TBLT is more of a subset of CLT. Or, to make another analogy, CLT is more like a strategy while TBLT is one tactic within the overall strategy.

Nunan (2004) adds that TBLT is one method of realizing a communicative classroom, and that content-based instruction, text-based syllabuses, and others also fit under the umbrella of CLT. While related to TBLT, CLT and other methods listed above that are in support of CLT are outside the scope of this paper. The important takeaway from Nunan (2004) is the idea that TBLT (in support of CLT) is about process and syllabus design, which is central to other definitions of TBLT (Breen, 1984, 1987; Candlin, 1987; Ellis, 2003; Ellis et al., 2019; Long, 1985, 2015; Willis, 1996). The scope of this bibliography does not permit an exhaustive review of the countless studies on TBLT from its beginnings to today. I will, however, review some of the foundational pieces on the topic and how the authors of those pieces have conceived of TBLT in theory and in practice.

Although there are some disagreements within the research about the details of TBLT, such as the definition of ‘task’ and how those tasks are performed in the classroom, the general premise is of interest to me and is something that I wanted to learn more about in order to support ALLs in my class. While the research and commentary about TBLT is vast, there are a few pieces I have read that have fundamentally changed my way of thinking about program

design and lesson planning in the ALL classroom. The remainder of this bibliography is an outline of some of the theory surrounding TBLT and how it has evolved over the years.

Michael Long is one of the most recognized names in the research about TBLT, providing his first definition of task in 1985. **Long (1985)** first defines ‘task’ as “the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play and in between.” (p. 89). Long’s definition is broad and defines tasks as touching nearly every aspect of everyday life. This foundational article is focused on task selection, advocating for a needs analysis to identify target tasks to help learners “function adequately in a particular target domain.” (p. 91). From this point, the research about TBLT gained momentum as one of the most popular topics in SLA. Long has continued to focus his work on TBLT since 1985, but has not changed much in his stance about what a task is and how to identify appropriate tasks for learners to meet their goals.

In 2015, **Long (2015)** wrote a book that gives a clear definition of what tasks are as well as some ideas for how to implement TBLT in the classroom. He advocates for TBLT, writing that “new knowledge is better integrated into long-term memory if tied to real-world events and activities.” (p. 69). In other words, content in class must not only be relevant to learners’ lives, but the learning should be developed from the real-world communication needs they have. Task-based learning, then, is a learner-centered approach to teaching. TBLT uses carefully selected tasks for language teaching. Long (2015) defines a task as “the real-world activities people think of when planning, conducting, or recalling their day” (p. 6). He also includes a detailed list, not dissimilar to the list from Long (1985), of everyday activities that one may encounter in a day:

That can mean things like brushing their teeth, preparing breakfast, reading a newspaper, taking a child to school, responding to e-mail messages, making a sales call, attending a lecture or a business meeting, having lunch with a colleague from work, helping a child

with homework, coaching a soccer team, and watching a tv program. Some tasks are mundane, some complex. (p. 6).

This kind of list may be helpful for planning curriculum. Teachers must also take into account the specific goals and activities of individual learners. This list does not apply to everyone, nor is it exhaustive or specific. For adult learners, particularly, it is vital for an instructor to discover which everyday activities or work-related activities would be most important to reflect in classroom tasks.

Identifying these tasks, according to Long, requires a needs analysis. From that needs analysis, a *task syllabus* can be formed. The task syllabus is made up of *pedagogic tasks* which are what the teacher and students do in the classroom. These pedagogic tasks are simpler versions of the target task. For example, if the class participants identify that they would like to be able to fill out a job application in the needs assessment, that would become the target task. The pedagogic tasks, or the simplified tasks to be done in class intended to build up to the target task, would involve working through personal information practice activities that one would need in order to fill out a job application. From that basic point, pedagogic tasks increase in complexity until learners are able to complete the task on their own, according to Long. In this example, the learners would be able to fill out a job application on their own to complete the target task. The pace of working through tasks should be determined by the learners' own progress. This point about individual pacing seemed especially relevant to the context in which I teach, with ALLs with different levels of proficiency in different skills areas (reading, writing, speaking, listening) in the same class, and who have different language learning goals, and different amounts of time to devote to language learning.

In this book, Long clarifies what he perceives to be a common misconception about TBLT and what constitutes a “task.” He writes that some who claim to be proponents of TBLT in practice are missing the mark, employing “counterfeit tasks” that are set up in order to practice structures. For example, a counterfeit task may involve asking students to order food from a menu in order to practice using a specific structure. Long argues that this is not learner-centered because the language is the focus of the activities, rather than the ability to carry out the task regardless of specific forms of the language being used or not used by the learners. Rather than approaching an activity by pre-teaching key vocabulary, Long suggests that the best opportunity for learning form is when a communication problem arises during a task, and the learner is attending to the correct form needed to successfully communicate their intended meaning. Correction and feedback, then, is provided from the instructor or peer learners within the pedagogic tasks and should be reactive or responsive, depending on the need for support from the learners.

TBLT, in Long’s definition, should be supported by adherence to the following ten research-based methodological principles:

1. Use task, not text, as the unit of analysis
2. Promote learning by doing
3. Elaborate input
4. Provide rich input
5. Encourage inductive “chunk” learning
6. Focus on form
7. Provide negative feedback
8. Respect learner syllabi and developmental processes

9. Promote cooperative collaborative learning

10. Individualize instruction

These best practices are something I plan to keep in mind in my own classroom going forward, as I recognize how they will help me to structure lessons in a way that will support learners in multiple aspects of their learning, even beyond the language.

Long states that he compiled this list in order to “focus the debate as to just what do constitute relevant methodological principles in TBLT...” (p. 305). The debate Long is referencing in this quote is the debate amongst researchers regarding the swing between “an emphasis on form and on meaning, and between the linguistic code and the learning process.” (p. 16). Long’s definition of TBLT is in support of an analytic focus on form and meaning rather than a focus on the linguistic code. His case for a focus on form is that it better suits learners’ goals rather than on grammatical features. He argues that the focus on the linguistic code supported by others in the field misses the mark, as it does not account for or allow for learner differences and abilities. A focus on the linguistic code, therefore, is not a learner-centered approach to teaching.

One of the challenges in this approach is the time commitment required for implementation. Not only is a needs assessment required, but the instructor will also need to develop materials for pedagogic tasks. Long suggests that locally produced materials are preferable in TBLT, stating that “it is local program designers and teachers who know their students and their needs best, as well as whatever constraints may be imposed by limited human or financial resources and other dimensions of the teaching context.” (p. 259). Commercially produced materials will not fit the learners’ task syllabus, requiring more work from the local program developers. This may be a barrier to applying TBLT, as it places a heavy burden on

language instructors who likely already have limited time, resources, and funding. This is a challenge that I have seen in my own classes. Carrying out a TBLT approach to program design and lesson planning as proposed by Long (2015) would further weigh on the constraints already experienced by teachers, making a TBLT approach difficult.

Another leading name in TBLT research is Rod Ellis. Although Ellis has been writing about TBLT for several decades, I wanted to read some of his more recent work. **Ellis (2012)** is a position piece that zeros in on the main similarities and differences between his own view of TBLT and his peers in the TBLT field. One concept that ties together his work along with the work of Long (1985) and Skehan (1998) is that they each see TBLT as a focused approach, meaning that they believe a focus on form is essential to TBLT. They disagree, however, about where in the process the focus should occur. Skehan (1998) writes that the focus on form in TBLT should come before the task or through the ‘pre-task’ activity. Long (1985) believes the time for focus on form is in the time of need. Ellis (2003) views a focus on form as being necessary throughout all phases of TBLT. A focus on form is indeed helpful in ensuring that the language learned in class will contribute to learners’ increased fluency and proficiency in the TL.

Essentially, Ellis does not view TBLT in the same way his peers do. Long and Skehan, says Ellis, view TBLT as being a strong departure from more traditional approaches to language teaching. Ellis (2012) argues that TBLT “can be used alongside more traditional approaches” (p. 5). The traditional approaches referenced here are those that follow a *present-practice-produce* (PPP) methodology, and that tasks fit into the ‘production’ phase. I agree with Ellis on this point, that it is possible to mix TBLT with other pedagogical approaches, both old and new.

Ellis’s second point of emphasis focuses on the importance of distinguishing between input-based tasks and output-based tasks. Input-based tasks require learners to engage with

listening or reading activities, but do not depend on production from the learners. Conversely, output-based tasks do require production from learners who must “speak or write to achieve the task outcome” (p. 6). Ellis’s stress on the difference between the two stems from a common critique of TBLT, which is that it is not suited for beginning-level learners because of its reliance on output. Ellis claims that this is a misconception, and that input-based tasks work well for beginning-level learners. I often teach in a beginning-level classroom, so I appreciated this reminder that input-based activities work well for this level because the burden to produce is taken from learners while still giving them an opportunity to attend to language used in context of real-life tasks. Tasks in the classroom may be adapted to suit any proficiency level, or even different proficiency levels within the same class, as is often prevalent in ALL classes.

I wanted to learn more about the basis for criticisms of Long’s and Ellis’s views of TBLT, so I decided to read some of the more recent work from Peter Skehan. **Skehan (2016)** takes a different stance on the role of tasks in the classroom. In this article, the author focuses on the conditions created by task selection rather than on the characteristics of tasks. Skehan states that his colleagues in TBLT focus on task design, while he argues that there is merit in focusing on performance conditions. Skehan criticizes task design because there is not a clear way of identifying and categorizing the complexity of tasks or an empirical process for sequencing tasks. Focusing on performance conditions, he argues, allows the planner to avoid some of the unpredictability that may arise in a typical task by planning each phase (pre-task planning, task repetition, post-task activities). In other words, there is a certain amount of manipulation needed by the planner to allow learners to practice and produce the desired features of the TL. To me, Skehan’s shift in focus from task characteristics to task conditions is not particularly helpful.

Focusing on task conditions does not eliminate the need for understanding or thinking critically about task characteristics.

Something that has been interesting to me throughout studying TBLT is to see how researchers have written and responded to each other (sometimes directly, sometime indirectly) regarding their agreements and disagreements surrounding the details of TBLT. Because of this, I was especially interested to see some of Rod Ellis's most recent work (**Ellis et al., 2019**) to be written in collaboration with one of his peers, Peter Skehan, with whom he directly disagreed with in his prior work (Ellis, 2012). In this book, the authors delve into the background and scholarly debate surrounding TBLT and how it has evolved over the years. They are reluctant to give a narrow definition of 'task' because giving such a definition "originates in the failure to distinguish task-as-workplan and task-as-process." (p. 10). Ellis et al. (2019) write that understanding the difference between task-as-workplan and task-as-process is essential in being able to discuss TBLT. The authors define task-as-workplan as being what learners *do* in class. This includes in-class activities as well as the materials used to complete the tasks. The authors provide four criteria for task-as-workplan:

1. The focus must be on meaning
2. There must be a gap in information that needs to be filled
3. Learners should rely on their own linguistic and non-linguistic resources
4. There must be a communicative outcome

The focus on meaning is helpful, as we all learn through the negotiation of meaning. In addition, the authors reiterate the importance of having a communicative outcome in mind for the task.

Task-as-process refers to the language use precipitated from learners completing the tasks or activities. Investigating the language used by learners will indicate whether or not the task-as-

workplan has achieved the desired results of the design. The results of the focus on form through the task-as-workplan is the process referred to in *task-as-process*. Ellis et al. (2019) suggest that a focus on form during classroom tasks may take place before, during, or after the activity and may be explicit or implicit. They write that focus on form

“can take place preemptively (e.g. when a teacher or student anticipates the need for a specific linguistic item as they perform the task) and reactively in response to students’ comprehension or production problems. It can also be very implicit, as when the teacher quickly recasts a learner utterance, or very explicit, as when the teacher points out an error and corrects it.” (p. 16)

This difference in approach to providing corrective feedback and a focus on form is one of the greatest points of disagreement amongst TBLT researchers. This approach to providing feedback with some variety in how it is applied from Ellis et al. (2019) is in contrast to Long (2015), who proposes that feedback should be given in the moment it is needed by the learner.

**Bygate (2016)** wrote an article that creates space for different conceptions of a task to both exist within TBLT. Bygate (2016) defines tasks as “classroom activities in which learners use language ‘pragmatically’, that is, ‘to do things’, with the overriding aim of learning language” (p. 381). This definition leaves room for interpretation surrounding *how* the language is used as well as *what* is done with the language. Ellis (2003, 2012) writes that tasks may be related to real-life, but are designed for classroom use and learning. Long (1985, 2015) says that tasks come directly from the real-world, and are designed for success outside of the classroom. Bygate (2016) says that both of these definitions work within the scope of TBLT because they both promote communication and bring authenticity into classroom learning, whether through

‘situational authenticity,’ which refers to a task’s correlation with real-world tasks, or ‘interactional authenticity,’ which refers to the way in which the task reinforces specific features of the TL. Both definitions are helpful to teachers designing tasks that value authenticity and real-world applications for ALLs.

## **Conclusion**

After reading extensively about TBLT, I have been able to see how different interpretations affect how teachers may design tasks for different language-learning purposes. One thing that clearly ties together the varying views of TBLT is a focus on meaning within the frame of real-world situations. Working within the framework of real-world situations is necessary for ALLs, who learn best when content is related to their everyday activities and language needs.

Within the different interpretations of TBLT, a focus on form may come before the task, in the moment it is needed, or all throughout the process. I believe this is an opportunity for language program planners (both teachers and administrators) to select the approach that best suits the learners in their program, which is, after all, the main premise of TBLT itself.

## LOOKING FORWARD

There was a time in which looking to complete the MSLT program after a long break away from it felt like looking backward. I was several years into a teaching career and I wondered if I would really need to go through the formal process of completing a portfolio. While I am grateful for the teaching and other professional experience I gained during my break from the program, I've come to realize that this look backward has actually been the long road to being able to focus on what is to come and the many experiences I have in front of me. The MSLT program has guided me to build a better foundation in SLA methodologies and teaching strategies necessary for me to continue learning and growing as a language instructor.

Looking forward, I plan to continue teaching in the adult education classroom, working with immigrants and refugees in the United States. In addition to teaching, I would like to contribute to the teaching world in other ways. I plan to continue participating in local, national, and international teaching conferences to further my own professional development. I also hope to find ways to contribute to the growing body of research regarding LESLLAs and bring more visibility to that field.

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