

Grandma Needs English, Too

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Abstract

Immigrants in their later years can succeed at learning English and becoming citizens if they have access to instruction that considers their particular interests and stage of development, including their distinct cognitive, physical, and psychological profiles. *Step One*, a new age-friendly curriculum, helps older newcomers take the first steps in speaking and understanding English, learning civics facts, and becoming familiar with the community around them.

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When older immigrants arrive in the United States, it is a challenge for them to access beginning-level English language instruction that meets their needs. Instruction in federally-funded adult education programs and community colleges is designed for younger immigrants who are entering or attempting to improve their standing in the U.S. workforce. It tends to be fast-moving, academically (or vocationally) oriented, and heavily integrated with technology. Older learners are less likely to show rapid skill gains, earn workforce credentials, or demonstrate the career placements/advancements that programs must document in order to maintain continued funding, so they have little incentive to admit students who are retired or nearing the end of their working lives, and no rationale to adapt curriculum and classroom practices to make them accessible and effective for older learners.

Nevertheless, many older immigrants desire language instruction so that they can interact with their neighbors (and reduce the social isolation they often experience), understand health care practitioners, and participate in their new communities (Reder, 2020). Newcomers

often express a desire to become U.S. citizens in order to vote, travel freely, sponsor relatives, and qualify for federal benefits. But citizenship preparation classes typically screen out students who test below the National Reporting System proficiency level three. How can older beginners access instruction that will get them from a pre-beginning level to a high beginner level?

A New Age-Friendly Instructional Resource

In October of 2023, the adult literacy program I direct at Jones Library, Amherst, Massachusetts, was awarded an Innovations grant to address this challenge. This USCIS grant program funds projects aiming to help hard-to-reach immigrant populations integrate into their communities and ultimately attain citizenship. Over the course of a 2-year project, I have developed curriculum for pre-beginning older students, field tested it with my “older beginner” ESL class, and have started disseminating it to immigrant-serving programs

nationwide. Draft versions of the new *Step One* curriculum units, teachers' guide, and program tools are available as free downloads at joneslibrary.org/step-one. I encourage programs to try them out and provide feedback to help me refine the final version.

Step One curriculum introduces practical oral communication skills and reinforces them with related literacy exercises. Beyond this, it teaches a subset of civics concepts and questions on the U.S. citizenship test that are suitable for beginners. A third goal is to familiarize students with the community. An implicit goal of the curriculum is to reduce social and linguistic isolation by providing students with a supportive, low-stress way of learning about and interacting with one another and with friendly visitors to the classroom. Students gain confidence as they succeed in asking and answering personal information questions and use social phrases (e.g., *nice to meet you*, *congratulations*, *see you later*) in authentic contexts.

Each instructional unit consists of a detailed set of instructions for presenting an oral communication-based lesson, accompanying visuals, and literacy worksheets. Units in the "Speaking English" section focus on daily life topics such as daily routines, families, health and wellbeing. Civics units introduce national holidays, geography, and simple government topics. "Life in the US" features activities such as local field trips and ways to familiarize students with U.S. customs and traditions. An accompanying teachers' guide explains the needs of older learners and provides strategies for tailoring instruction to meet these needs. Upon completing the *Step One* curriculum (up to a 2-year process), students are better able to access standard citizenship/ESL instruction with a tutor or in a class setting, and communicate basic needs/ideas more independently.

The 11 pre-beginners in my "older beginner" class range in age from 55 to 83. They come from China, Vietnam, Tibet, Brazil, Cambodia, Bangladesh, and Russia, and all are retired. The class meets for 60 minutes 3 days a week, and students are offered one-to-one review sessions with volunteer tutors outside of class. Once students demonstrate proficiency in the *Step One* objectives, they transition into conventional ESL/citizenship curriculum with a tutor who has observed the class and can provide age-friendly instruction. However, students have been

reluctant to leave behind the connections and support of a group setting, so eventually I hope to set up a "Step Two" classroom option for them. I have offered a version of my "older beginner" class at the library since 2018, and over time I have observed and researched the particular challenges that older language learners face. In this article I will share what I have learned, and the strategies that have been most effective in making instruction accessible to these students – strategies that I've incorporated into the *Step One* curriculum.

Adult educators know that the lesson content and strategies that work best with children in preschool or elementary settings are not suitable for adults. Why? Because adults, of course, are at a distinct developmental stage, and they need instruction that is tailored to their particular needs, interests, and learning styles. As people age, changes in their physical, cognitive, psychological and social profiles lead to another distinct stage of development, and this includes a different set of strengths and challenges than those of younger adults. I find that seniors learn more effectively when they receive content and instructional strategies that are suited to their particular developmental stage, rather than being forced to "sink or swim" in fast-moving classes that focus on the needs of working-age adults (Weintraub, 2022). As I describe characteristics of older learners, keep in mind some important factors. First, not every student will exhibit the same characteristics, but the older the student is, the more likely it is that she/he will need modifications to optimize learning. Second, those with the lowest levels of formal education are likely to need more assistance in accessing instruction. Third, in addition to challenges, older learners bring a lifetime of experience and knowledge to the table, and many are proficient in several languages already. These strengths should be acknowledged and integrated into instruction (Weinstein-Shr, 1993). Finally, the strategies I describe can be effective in lowering barriers for students at any age and might be characterized simply as good teaching practice. My experience leads me to suggest a crucial distinction. Younger, more resilient students often manage to overcome barriers and make progress even when teachers fail to make these modifications. Older beginners (as well as pre-literate students, and those struggling with trauma/disabilities) may find it impossible to access instruction without them.

Cognitive, Physical, and Psycho-Social Challenges

The most significant characteristics that instructors will encounter are age-related aspects of cognitive processing. Older adults tend to process information at a slower pace and need additional review in order to retain it effectively. Delivering instruction at a measured pace and presenting new information in careful stages will greatly improve retention. A few extra seconds of “wait time” can make a big difference in students’ willingness to take risks, their ability to produce responses, and to develop confidence in speaking English. Since it can be difficult for older students to assimilate multiple pieces of information simultaneously, students need to practice each new skill or concept securely before they encounter the next one. I sometimes look back at a lesson to figure out why it failed to connect with students and realize that I had combined several new concepts into one activity. For example, I found that I could successfully teach the questions “Where are you from?” and “When did you come here?” but only if I introduced and rehearsed each question separately (generally on different days). Once I made this change, students could distinguish between the questions and respond appropriately.

Abstract information can be challenging for older learners (Speros, 2009), so the *Step One* curriculum is highly contextualized, centering on familiar topics: biographical information about the students themselves, their families, and their day-to-day lives (Kaceti & Klimava, 2021). New vocabulary is introduced primarily through visuals and body language. Civics topics are demonstrated using maps, calendars, and historical images. Older students can be easily thrown off by distractions (Speros, 2009), so I strive to eliminate any unnecessary teacher talk, interruptions, or background noise. Predictable routines seem to be more comfortable for students, so for example, when I go over homework, students can rely on me to call on them in the order in which they are seated.

A decline in working memory may develop with age, and this can present challenges for language learners (Kraiger, 2017). I provide more repetition and review in my older beginner class than I would in a typical ESL class. And I give students many chances to listen and indicate comprehension (with yes/no questions, “or” questions, or “show me the ---” commands) before I expect them to

produce new words and phrases from memory. In literacy worksheets, if I present a completion task, I provide a “word box” at the top so students can find the word they need without having to spell it.

Older students face other physical challenges (Becker, 2012). For example, joint pain and decreased dexterity may affect students’ handwriting, so when my lesson uses manipulatives I make sure they are easy to grasp, and my literacy activities/worksheets are not arduous in terms of handwriting. Occasionally I find that students need to update their eye glass prescriptions or be reminded to bring them to class. Classroom visuals are high contrast, often enlarged, and clear enough for everyone to see. My worksheets use 14-point black font, and incorporate plenty of white space, particularly between lines of text. Many older students experience a decline in auditory acuity and some use hearing aids. I make sure I am always facing students when I speak, and I enunciate clearly. When students are copying from the board, or looking down at their papers, I sometimes need to direct their attention to the person who is speaking. Aural messages are reinforced with visuals, gestures, and body language, and I encourage students to let me know when they cannot hear or understand something clearly. We practice ways to request that a speaker repeat, speak louder, or clarify a message.

The optimal classroom space for older students is one that is easy to find, near bathrooms and an elevator (if necessary), is well lit, has consistent temperature controls, and space to maneuver wheelchairs and walkers. If students have issues with vision or manual dexterity, a large white board is a necessity. I frequently look over my classroom space (and the path that students will take to get to it) to ensure there is nothing on the ground that students might slip on or stumble over. In terms of scheduling, several short sessions are generally better than one long one, because older students may find stamina a problem and have difficulty with prolonged concentration. Energy levels tend to be higher in the morning, so that is a good time to schedule class sessions. And in the event of inclement weather, my policy is to cancel a class rather than expose students to icy sidewalks or severe thunderstorms.

The social and linguistic isolation that older immigrants often face has implications for their physical as well as psychological wellbeing. Social isolation is associated with

increased risk of heart disease, stroke, and dementia, and loneliness is associated with higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.). An age-friendly ESL classroom can serve as a remedy for social isolation and the feelings of helplessness and depression that may accompany it. It can offer a warm, low-stress environment for students to make connections with one another, form a community of learners, and cheer one another on. I promote a supportive learning environment by fostering cooperation and enabling classmates to share simple aspects of one another's lives as part of the language-learning process. When students experience difficulty in class, I encourage their classmates to respond with assistance, and I ask veteran class members to mentor new arrivals, helping them to learn classroom routines and catch up with the group. Confidence-building is a key part of this effort. Students may start off convinced that they are too old to make much progress as language learners, and negative experiences with education in their home countries can magnify this belief. I offer a lot of praise, and encourage applause for each gain that students make, large or small. I make it clear that I believe in them, and I provide many opportunities to succeed in each class.

Homesickness, the death of one's contemporaries, health problems, and loss of personal/financial independence are demoralizing facts of life for many older immigrants, and depression is not uncommon in this demographic. At times, this may affect students' outlook and ability to concentrate. I do not gloss over these realities, but I try to make the classroom an environment where students feel safe to share events in their lives and respond to one another appropriately. For example, I teach simple phrases to express sympathy/condolences, and help the class generate get-well cards for classmates who are unable to participate due to illness or injury. Step One lessons provide students with language to describe how they feel from day to day and why. But we also turn our attention to topics that give us joy and distract from troubles for a few hours a week. For example, some units center on activities that students enjoy and skills that they take pride in. Many

culminate in the teacher pulling out collected photos of students' children and grandchildren, and having students practice the new content by answering questions about them. For example, students who have just learned vocabulary related to life skills such as cooking, riding a bike, and using a computer talk about which of these things their younger family members can do. They are also encouraged to show off their particular talents, by bringing in items or photos of something they have cooked, sewn, created or repaired.

Technology is not always a strong point for seniors, but I've seen many students using it to enjoy media and connect with loved ones in their home language. If students have smart phones, I encourage them to use translation apps to help them understand new vocabulary, and to convey important information to me (for example, why they will miss a class). To maximize time spent on listening activities, I discourage laborious copying from the board, and instead have students take a photo to review when they get home. There are times when I need to convey information to students (and vice versa) that is time sensitive and/or too complicated to teach in a lesson. Since I don't speak the home languages of my students, I stay in contact with a bilingual family member or friend of each one who can convey messages about things like weather cancellations or provide information that I can incorporate into lessons (for example when I teach vocabulary for occupations, I may include students' own former occupations and current occupations of their children.)

There's no question that instruction for older beginners can be time-consuming to prepare, and results take some time to achieve, but all of my students make gains (an average 128 points BEST Plus gain over 6 months) and two of my former "absolute beginners" have recently passed their US citizenship tests. It is rewarding to watch older newcomers become enthusiastic language learners, while enjoying one another's company, and making steady progress toward citizenship. By making the *Step One* curriculum available freely to interested immigrant-serving providers, I hope to extend this the opportunity to older learners far and wide.

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