Adult ESL Language and Literacy Instruction:

A Vision and Action Agenda
for the 21st Century

The National Literacy Summit 2000 was convened in Washington, DC, to develop a national vision and plan of action for adult literacy in the United States. Following that meeting of literacy professionals from across the country, a group of professionals working in adult ESL education and research came together at the Teachers of English to Speakers of Others Languages (TESOL) convention in Vancouver, British Columbia, in March, 2000, to ensure that the needs of the large and growing population of adult English language learners are addressed in this action agenda. TESOL is grateful to the individuals listed at the end of this report for participating in the development of this paper and responding to multiple drafts.

We are also grateful to the staff of the National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education (NCLE), who facilitated the development of this paper, and to the Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE), U.S. Department of Education, for supporting NCLE's work. We look forward to continuing to work with this strong and visionary group to carry out the priorities described here and to develop new visions and directions for the field.

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Dear Friend:

This discussion, which complements From the Margins to the Mainstream: The Action Agenda for Literacy (National Literacy Summit, 2000), focuses on the characteristics and needs of adults learning English as a second language, the programs that serve them, and the policies that affect them.

Teachers of English for Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) envisions a system for the education of adult English language learners that provides high quality language and literacy services for this linguistically and culturally diverse population. A strong system involves all stakeholders in the review, creation, and implementation of policies. With a national commitment, such a system could facilitate and support the ongoing development of new and creative approaches, technological innovations, and collaborations that prepare adults for the opportunities and challenges they face as contributing members of changing workplaces, growing families, and vibrant communities. It could be accessible to and effective for many more adults than it has been to date. It must have the levels of quality, recognition, and support comparable to those in place for the K–12 educational system.

If we do not achieve this vision, a large number of adults, who could make valuable contributions, will not be able to participate effectively in the economy and social fabric of this country. As a result, we can expect increased welfare and health care needs, a crisis in the health insurance system, and wasted human potential for generations to come.

With the achievement of this vision, we will have moved significantly closer to the possibility of living in a country in which productive citizens are employed and involved in family and public life, and educated and healthy family members are fully able to address issues of importance to themselves and other communities while the nation experiences increased productivity and economic growth.

We call on federal, state, and local policymakers; industry leaders; and funding agencies to make wise investments of public and private funds and to join with us to create and support this system.

Sincerely,

Charles S. Amorosino, Jr.
Executive Director
Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages

Call to Action

Access to and participation in high quality education is imperative for every individual living in the United States. This is poignantly true for adults, who must adapt to continuing changes in their workplaces and communities, while guiding the next generation to meet the challenges of this century.

The current adult education delivery system attempts to serve those who speak English as a first language and English language learners, although each group of learners has its own distinct learning needs and strengths. Both groups have been overlooked by and underserved in the U.S. educational system. Adequate funding must be provided for educational services for both of these populations, and substantive decisions must be made regarding integration and separation of services to these two groups in terms of policies, programs, and resources.

Nearly 50% of the learners enrolled in federally funded adult education programs are English language learners, and most adult education programs (70%) offer some ESL instruction. Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 1999.

Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) urges the United States to develop a system of high quality, appropriate language and literacy services specifically tailored to the needs of adults learning English as an additional language. This system should be no less in quality, recognition, and support than the system in place for K–12 and higher education.

The services developed within this system should support adults learning English, regardless of their language and cultural backgrounds and previous schooling, to accomplish their immediate and long-term educational goals and to make significant and discernible progress toward reaching their full potential in their roles in society.

Adult English Language Learners Are a Distinct Group With Specific Concerns

Who Are Adult English Language Learners?

A linguistically and culturally diverse group, adult English language learners differ from adults who speak English as a first language. Adult English language learners include immigrants, refugees, and migrants, each having particular experiences, strengths, and needs. Because of changing patterns of immigration, this population is continually changing in terms of country of origin and language background. Programs in many areas of the country currently serve predominantly Spanish speakers. However, many other language minority groups are served as well, such as those from Africa, Asia, and the former Soviet Republic.

The language and literacy development of adult English language learners is affected by many factors, some of which are especially important for this population. Among them are

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- language(s) spoken
- country of origin
- language in which initial schooling took place
- language and literacy proficiency in the first language and in English (proficiency can range from minimal to high in each language; an individual can be orally proficient and minimally literate; alternatively, an individual may have mastered reading, writing, and math in their native language and need to focus on the acquisition of oral and written English)

- writing system of the native language
- status of the native language in the home country and in the United States
- amount, levels, and nature of previous education (can range from no education to PhD and from memorization-oriented to creative or analytically oriented approaches)
- gender expectations of the country of origin and native culture (which may or may not transfer to this country)
- chronological age (which can range from 16 years old to elderly), age of arrival in the United States, and age of first exposure to English
- factors affecting ability to learn (which can include traumas from the native country or from immigration, learning disabilities, and physical factors)
- learning goals and motivations for learning (which may be influenced by voluntary or involuntary resettlement in this country)
- relationship with and support of family members, many of whom may have remained in the home country or may be in transition to the United States
- former occupations in the home country
- current level of economic independence and flexibility (the greatest barrier to education for many English language learners is lack of money)
- current level of work (which can range from no employment to fully employed or employed in multiple jobs)
- cultural orientations to learning and literacy and cultural implications of seeking education in the United States
- exposure to and uses of English and other languages outside the classroom

What Factors Affect Adult English Language Learners' Ability to Learn?

Factors external to learners and classrooms have a visible impact on language and literacy learning. International factors such as war, famine, and natural disasters directly affect immigration. Legislative issues within the United States, such as welfare reform, create pressures to learn English more quickly than ever before. In addition, an environment that fosters an anti-immigrant climate and legislative initiatives growing from such a climate can add urgency to the need for learning English language and literacy quickly, notwithstanding whether existing classes are appropriate, available, or accessible.

What Does It Mean to Be Literate?

Our conceptions of literacy shape our nation's thinking about the abilities of adult learners and the types of educational services that are provided. Some recent definitions and goals include

Using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential.

National Adult Literacy Survey, Kirsch et al., 1993, p. 2

An individual's ability to read, write, and speak in English, compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job, in the family of the individual, and in society.

Workforce Investment Act, 1998, originally from the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, 1991

Every American adult will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

National Education Goal for Adult Literacy and Lifelong Learning, National Goals Panel, 1990

Every adult will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to orient themselves in a rapidly changing world, to voice their ideas and be heard, and to act independently as a parent, citizen, and worker, for the good of family, community, and nation.

Stein, 1995, p. 4

To be responsive to the realities of the adult English language learner population in the United States, conceptions and definitions of literacy must include recognition that

- proficiency in other languages, in addition to English, is valuable
- like other adults in literacy programs, adults learning English engage with a range of language uses and reading and writing activities, which change and expand throughout their lives ("many literacies")
- literacy involves more than the ability to communicate effectively; it includes as well the ability to advocate on behalf of ourselves, our families, and our communities and to use technology effectively for education and work, in whatever languages are appropriate for the task and the purpose
- language and literacy development activities(in English and in other languages) are not fixed or remedial, but rather are an ever changing and integral part of the lives and work of every individual who lives in the United States

Action Agenda

Adult ESL education must take place within a system that is on a par with K–12 and higher education in terms of status, infrastructure, attention, and financial support. This system consists of five critical components, which must work together toward the common goal:

1. program delivery
2. collaborations
3. policies
4. resources
5. research

Priority 1: Program Delivery

Develop high quality programs that are responsive to the needs and goals of English language learners.

Outcome A

Programs deliver access to appropriate, high quality classes, with components such as ESL instruction (including newcomer programs that focus on beginning ESL and literacy instruction), native language services, bilingual services, vocational and prevocational ESL (VESL) training, workplace ESL training, English and Spanish GED preparation, academic content and skills preparation, functional or life skills preparation, citizenship and civics education, displaced workers training, and intergenerational (family) literacy preparation.

Action 1. Match the types of programs in a given geographical area and a given social and educational con text with the goals and needs of the English language learner population.

Action 2. Create and support structures that encourage programs to reach standards for quality such as those outlined by Program Standards for Adult Education ESOL Programs (TESOL, 2000a) and undergo a regular self-review process to evaluate effectiveness in each of the stamdards.

Action 3. Create a program evaluation and accountability system that takes into account the linguistic and cultural diversity of program staff and the learner population.

Action 4. Provide or facilitate access to noninstructional services such as child care; health care; transportation; social and legal counseling in human and civil rights; job counseling, placement, and employment services; immigration services; and mental health counseling.

Action 5. Put in place articulation mechanisms within and across programs to allow adult English language learners to move from beginning to intermediate to advanced language and literacy classes; to GED, academic, and workforce preparation classes; and to community college, the university, or the workforce.

Program Standards for Adult Education ESOL Programs, published by TESOL in 2000, gives a full description of program quality standards and how to reach them.

Outcome B

Needs assessments are available to states and programs so that they can determine how many adults in their education system or area need ESL services, what they need to learn, when and how instruction should be offered, and what financial assistance is needed to facilitate learner participation.

Action 1. Institute flexible program schedules that allow for learning when and where needed and appropriate. This might include class offerings in the mornings, afternoons, evenings, and weekends; classes on site (at the program center) and off site (in local neighborhoods or at the workplace); workshop options; distance-learning via video and other media; small-group sessions with a special focus (e.g., math, English conversation, pronunciation, test taking skills); work with instructional aides, tutors, or volunteers; and accommodations for students with disabilities and other special needs.

Action 2. Offer learners access to financial support for participation in programs (perhaps through scholarships, following the higher education model in this country).

Outcome C

Program staff are highly qualified and adequately compensated.

Action 1. Make teacher (and other program staff) salaries, benefits, and working conditions commensurate with education, credentials, experience, and responsibilities and on a par with those of professionals in K–12 education.

Action 2. Provide paid preparation and professional development time.

Outcome D

English language learners in communities and programs have input into program design and instructional approaches.

> **Action 1.** Establish program advisory boards that reflect the linguistic and cultural diversity of the local communities.

> **Action 2.** Give learners regular and systematic ways to offer input to program development and instruction, as well as to ensure that instruction takes into account their language and cultural backgrounds and is responsive to their goals and needs.

Outcome E

Curriculum, materials, and instruction are context-specific and aligned with what adult English language learners need to know and be able to do.

Use of non-English languages facilitates the learning of English and develops proficiency in those languages. In some cases (e.g., a predominantly Spanish-speaking area), Spanish/English bilingual education is possible and desirable, with the goal of developing high-level oral and reading proficiency in both languages. Research indicates that literacy proficiency in the primary language facilitates literacy acquisition in English.[END]

> **Action 1.** Align curricula with learners' goals and needs and include instruction in the following, as appropriate: language, culture, preparation for citizenship and civic participation, family education (including involvement with children and children's schools), workforce preparedness (movement into the workforce, through a number of work skill levels, and to advanced job placement), academic content, life skills, and immigrant rights.

> **Action 2.** Deliver instruction in English as well as in non-English languages, as appropriate.

> **Action 3.** Include bilingual and native language texts in instructional materials when possible and appropriate.

> **Action 4.** Build on learners' existing knowledge and skills, and recognize and develop the different learning styles and multiple intelligences that learners bring to the classroom.

> **Action 5.** Systematically involve learners in making decisions about instructional goals and strategies, choice and development of curricula, and the use of materials.

> **Action 6.** Present instruction in grammar and discrete skills within the context of meaningful language use.

The following resources provide detailed descriptions of adult ESL practice.

Auerbach, E. (1992). *Making meaning, making change: Participatory curriculum development for adult ESL literacy.* McHenry, IL/Washington, DC: Delta Systems & Center for Applied Linguistics.

Crandall, J. A., & Peyton, J. K., Eds. (1993). *Approaches to adult ESL literacy instruction.* Washington, DC / McHenry, IL: Center for Applied Linguistics & Delta Systems.

Gillespie, M. (1990). *Many literacies: Modules for training adult beginning readers and tutors.* Amherst, MA: Center for International Education, Massachusetts University at Amherst. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 324463)

Weinstein, G. (in press). Developing adult literacies. In M. Celce-Murcia (Ed.), *Teaching English as a Second/Foreign Language.* Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.

Wrigley, H. S., & Guth, G. J. A. (1992). *Bringing literacy to life: Issues and options in adult ESL literacy.* San Mateo, CA: Aguirre International.

Outcome F

Appropriate technologies (e.g., computers, audio, video, and on-line instruction) are an integral part of the instructional program and are used to prepare learners for the workforce while developing their English language and literacy skills.

Action 1. Maximize and extend learning time through use of computers.

Action 2. Build into program budgets sufficient resources to integrate innovative and appropriate technologies intoinstructional delivery and professional development   .

Action 3. Seek learner input into program design and feedback on program effectiveness.

Outcome G

Program staff take into account the realities of English language learners' lives.

Action 1. Communicate with learners (for program recruitment, intake, and orientation) in their native languages and through community-based organizations.

Action 2. Build flexibility into program to accommodate inevitable work and family responsibilities that constrain levels of participation and continuation.

Action 3. Deliver additional assistance with making transitions within and across programs and to postprogram opportunities.

Outcome H

Programs for English language learners have in place an assessment and accountability plan that is consistent with program goals and learner needs and that supports learning and teaching rather than driving them.

Action 1. Develop assessment systems and tools for learner placement, documentation of learner progress, and certification of program completion, describing the knowledge and skills learners have acquired.

Action 2. Match assessment systems and tools to learner goals and starting points, program design, instruction, and program length and intensity, and establish realistic expectations for progress.

Action 3. Ensure that assessment instruments can document learners' gains from beginning to highly developed language and literacy proficiencies.

Action 4. Develop assessments of both oral and literate skills, in learners' native languages as well as in English, targeted specifically for English language learners.

Action 5. Include options for the use of context-specific assessments and documentation of learner progress in all assessment mandates. This will allow for use of a variety of quantitative and qualitative assessment tools, including standardized and alternative assessments, learning portfolios, learning logs, and other methods.

Outcome I

National, state, and local standards are available for (optional) certification and credentialing of teachers and administrators. These standards recognize traditional and nontraditional qualifications, reflecting the special expertise of educators already working effectively in community-based organizations.

Action 1. Commit resources for full-time positions with salaries and benefits that are commensurate with those of K–12 education.

Action 2. Make available preservice preparation for teachers and administrators wishing to establish, manage, and work in adult ESL programs. Postsecondary preparation offerings should include 2-year and 4-year programs in which certificates in adult ESL instruction and advanced degrees can be pursued.

Action 3. Ensure that preservice preparation of teachers and administrators includes knowledge and skills for working with a linguistically and culturally diverse adult learner population and training in uses of technology for instruction and for professional development.

Action 4. Staff program with at least some qualified individuals from countries other than the United States, and with speakers of languages other than English.

Action 5. Make available ongoing paid professional development for program staff (full-time and part-time teachers, administrators, tutors, and volunteer staff) and include ways to work effectively with linguistically and culturally diverse learner populations.

Action 6. Create professional development formats that include workshops, teacher reflection and inquiry groups, and various distance learning opportunities (through the Web, video, and CD-ROM).

Action 7. Address professional development and overall support needs of English-speaking and other-language speaking teachers and administrators.

Priority 2: Collaborations

Create collaborations with organizations and institutions outside the instructional program.

Outcome A

Program resources are enhanced to include referrals to health, mental health, and other support and social service agencies.

Action 1. Provide support and incentives for programs to engage in collaborations.

Action 2. Establish collaborations with the following types of organizations and institutions:

- community-based and volunteer organizations (mutual assistance associations, ethnic and mainstream associations)
- service organizations (e.g., Kiwanis, Lions, and Rotary Clubs; United Way; Urban League)
- foundations
- workforce investment boards
- labor unions
- health care organizations
- social service organizations
- businesses
- public schools (pre-K–12)
- community colleges and local universities
- professional organizations and associations that provide information about linguistically and culturally diverse learner populations (e.g., NCLE, TESOL)
- immigrant advocacy organizations and coalitions

Outcome B

Learner involvement in programs is increased, and low income learners are connected to programs and services.

Action1. Encourage collaborating organizations to take an active role in promoting involvement of their clients in educational programs, providing affordable support services, and offering scholarships to facilitate involvement when needed.

Action 2. Involve learners in decisions about curricula and classroom instruction.

Action 3. Involve learners on program advisory boards and other decision-making bodies.

Outcome C

Learners make effective transitions among programs, as well as beyond, into the workforce, community participation, and other areas of life.

Action 1. Map the system to identify levels of existing programs and gaps in services.

Action 2. Create comparable program types to allow seamless transitions from one program to another.

Action 3. Work with collaborating organizations to create structures that facilitate such transitions.

Community-based organizations (including local clinics and churches and linguistic and ethnic minority organizations) are often the first and major point of contact for services for immigrant and refugee groups. Therefore, these organizations are critical partners in the educational system.

Priority 3: Policies

Make policies at national (foreign and domestic), state, and local levels responsive to the current (and changing) population of adult English language learners, formulating and implementing them with involvement of all stakeholders.

Outcome A

Policies at the local, state, and national levels reflect the adult English language learner population and ensure successful program delivery.

Action 1. Establish policies that provide access to appropriate citizenship education for affected individuals so that benefits are not lost. This issue is particularly acute for refugees who are invited into the country and to whom benefits, such as social security, were promised.

Action 2. Create and disseminate information to federal policymakers to ensure that they understand and react accordingly to the characteristics of this population (which includes individuals who may be highly educated but not yet proficient in English) so that education and training programs can be designed or adapted to meet their needs; the importance of the acquisitiion of oral communication skills (along with literacy) so that adult literacy programs do not focus exclusively on reading and writing and shortchange English language learners; and the time needed for English language learners to learn not only the English language but also the ways in which the U.S. educational system and other service systems work

Outcome B

All stakeholders are involved in policymaking and implementation.

Action 1. Establish adult ESL policy advisory boards at the national and state levels, with representatives of all stakeholders in adult ESL education--learners, teachers, program administrators, policymakers, and professional development providers. These boards should review and modify all state and national policy initiatives (including those related to citizenship, welfare, and social security) prior to implementation.

Action 2. Work with all federal, state, and local policymakers to ensure that mandates are accompanied by sufficient funding and support to implement them.

Action 3. Work with all federal, state, and local policymakers to ensure that federal and state policies are congruent with each other. State policymakers, education agencies, and adult ESL policy advisory boards need to participate in the development of federal policies.

For example, federal grants to states for English Literacy and Civics Education programs require state policies and practices that promote second language acquisition through contextual learning. These monies are designed to support the integration of language minority groups into communities and to foster civic participation. State policymakers need a better understanding of what it takes to achieve these goals so that they can make sound decisions regarding the funding and administration of these programs.

Many states are having difficulty implementing assessments that meet the federal accountability requirements of the National Reporting System. Some standardized tests in use do not adequately measure gains made by beginning English language learners with minimal literacy proficiency, or those made by English language learners at more advanced proficiency levels. Some tests in use do not measure gains in the acquisition and use of oral communication skills (the primary goal of many learners) and progress in nonlinguistic understandings and skills necessary to make these gains. Unless these issues are explicitly addressed, programs serving learners with these needs may either lose funding or decide to not serve this population at all.

Action 4. Involve local organizations, governments, school boards, and universities in setting local policies for adult ESL instruction that are congruent with state and federal policies.

Action 5. Give English language learners opportunities to participate in policymaking activities.

Outcome C

Accountability systems and assessment tools are compatible with the goals of programs and the needs of learners.

Action 1. Identify assessment tools needed for the populations being served.

Action 2. Include in policy directives funding and incentives for developing assessment tools that are relevant for the populations being served.

Priority 4: Resources

Ensure that resources are available to implement high quality, effective programs and to conduct needed research.

The diversity report of the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) demonstrates that oral profi - ciency in English is the key to initial employment for immigrants and refugees and that literacy in English is needed for promotion and advanced levels of work

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Outcome A

Mandated policies are accompanied by adequate funding so that they can be carried out.

Action 1. Coordinate federal, state, and local resources so that ESL providers know what resources are avail able and how those resources are allocated.

Action 2. Make federal support available to states with emerging immigrant and English language learner populations (e.g., Nebraska, North Carolina).

Action 3. Ensure that future Workforce Investment Act funding include a separate line for ESL funding, at a level of at least $300 million, which will go to states through a formula that recognizes the adult ESL population. "Proportion of learners that did not finish high school" is not an adequate formula for this population.

Action 4. Make funding available for implementation of accountability requirements (e.g., Workforce Investment Act); pilot testing of innovations that involve development of new program designs, models, and curricula; identification and documentation of effective programs; and development of new assessments needed for the adult ESL learner population.

Outcome B

Financial and institutional support is commensurate with support available to K–12 and higher education programs.

Action 1. Ensure that state education departments dramatically increase their support (cash investment, not in-kind) for ESL services, to the level of 50% of federal funds received.

Action 2. Enable programs to have adequate resources to provide the salaries, benefits, working conditions, and paid professional development for their staff; financial assistance for learners (as appropriate); and appropriate and innovative technology for instruction.

Priority 5: Research

Establish research priorities related to adult ESL populations and earmark funding for adult ESL research in all national adult literacy initiatives. Ensure that the results of this research are clear, easily accessible, useful to practi-

tioners, and clearly linked to the realities of practice.

Outcome A

Research is conducted by professionals knowledgeable about the adult English learner population on the relationship between adult oral language proficiency and literacy development, and the extent and manner in which adult knowledge and learning in one language contribute to and enhance learning of a second language.

Action 1. Research the characteristics and needs of the adult English learner population; characteristics of specially defined populations (e.g., English language learners with learning disabilities and other special needs); and learner variables affecting learning outcomes.

Action 2. Research the extent to which research on children and on adults whose native language is English informs research on adult English language learners.

Action 3. Research the ways in which low-literate adult English language learners learn to read and write.

Action 4. Research the ways in which cultural influences and practices affect language and literacy development.

Outcome B

Professionals working with adult English language learners have a clear understanding, based on solid data, of the features of successful programs and instructional strategies.

Action 1. Research program designs, instructional content, and instructional practices that are effective with adult English language learners.

Action 2. Conduct research to determine desired educational outcomes and how they are best assessed.

Action 3. Research the experiences, values, knowledge, and skills needed by effective adult ESL teachers and how these are best developed.

Action 4. Research the most effective uses of technology for increasing access to educational opportunities and educational and workplace success of adult English language learners.

Action 5. Determine the impact of participation in adult education programs on adult English language learners' involvement and success in U.S. society.

Action 6. Support the mechanisms available for making research clear, available, and useful to adult ESL practitioners.

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