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E-Acquisition? The Intersection of the Research from the Fields of Adult Language Acquisition and Online Second Language Education

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Key words: Online language education, adult ESOL, adult ELL

Abstract: A review of the intersection between literature in adult English language learner education and online language acquisition can provide the necessary underpinnings to inform program directors, instructors, and researchers alike of trends and future online language program components.

Background and Purpose

Distance education technologies and online learning options are being considered a viable path for adult education centers to serve their adult populations better. As one of the major offerings from adult education centers, programs for English language learners (ELLs) pose particular challenges in providing this new modality in adult education. Petty, Johnston, and Shafer (2004) state that “distance concepts can, and should be, adapted to best meet the needs of the populations served by individual agencies and states” (p. 2). However, the push to provide adult learners more choices in their learning opportunities shines a glaring light on what little research has been done in the area of adult language e-learning and teaching (Askov, Johnston, Petty, & Young, 2003). As an alternative, an exploration of what is offered from the separate fields of adult English to speakers of other languages (ESOL) and online second language (L2) education provides an insight into parallel theoretical and empirically established themes.

Research in adult online education is primarily conducted in postsecondary institutions (Askov, Johnston, Petty, & Young, 2003). Additionally, much of the recent research that informs the field of adult second language (L2) acquisition in traditional and online settings comes from international researchers and communities. Petty, Johnston, and Shafer (2004) caution that distance instruction is not right for all learners. They further indicated that successful distance learners, including those who engage well with online instruction, are highly self-motivated and goal-focused. Although it is certain that cultural contexts, life experiences, and other personal attributes differ from student to student and country to country, with the lack of reference to online adult ESOL program components in the United States, we can give consideration to the quality research that is being done across the educational spectrum and the world.

This literature review encompasses the most recent studies (most of the studies were published between 2003 and the present) within the intersection of adult ESOL and online L2 education. I searched the EBSCO database for adult ESOL studies, focusing on state and national level programs and reports. I then chose two peer-reviewed journals dedicated to second and foreign language learning technologies: *Computer Assisted Language Learning* and *Language Learning and Technology* to provide insight into online ESOL trends. There are five reports and 18 empirical studies, 14 quantitative studies and four with qualitative designs, which make up the review.

Recent Research in Adult English Language Learner Education

Immigration trends in the U.S. have created great need for ELL language and literacy programs in many regions. And even those states that have established programs for ELLs are experiencing such large growth that their classes are often too large to be effective (Van Duzer & Florez, 2003). Van Duzer and Florez (2003) in their report for the National Center for ESL Literacy Education suggested instruction for adult ELLs in the 21st century must include practices and strategies that are in keeping with the principles of adult education, adult second language acquisition, and working with multicultural groups. They proposed programs acknowledge learner strengths, experience, and background, incorporate relevant and immediately usable content, involve learner input and shared control, and offer flexibility in duration, scheduling, and intensity of courses. Many programs create curricula and materials that are directed at a broad range of learners, but it is difficult for instructors then to fill the gap of individual learner need. They reported technology can be used to address the multiple instructional goals required to improve language proficiency and technology skills, critical thinking, and collaborative and interpersonal competence, while attending to different learning styles.

Buttaro's (2004) case study of eight Latinas' experiences in adult ESL programs in New York City provided the field with important cultural and socio-linguistic insights into learner diversity. She found that the Spanish-native participants valued English literacy and language and sought out opportunities to practice with native speakers. Their connection to family and community, need for flexible scheduling, and distaste for mixed-level classes influenced their acquisition of English. Ultimately, bi-cultural norms and academic involvement proved critical for their success. The implications of these findings draw attention to these relationships in instruction. Recommendations include the incorporation of user-friendly technologies, including bilingual computer software, to promote literacy among non-English background immigrants.

Additional insight to ELL diversity and literacy was provided by Burt and Peyton (2003). They suggested there are different native language literacy levels: Preliterate, nonliterate, semiliterate, non-alphabet literate, non-Roman-alphabet literate, and Roman alphabet literate. Each of these levels takes into account the learner's previous literacy experience as well as the specific writing systems the native language encompasses. Differentiated instruction, specific to each learner's cultural and linguistic background, is crucial for effective second language acquisition.

L2 Instruction Online: Differentiated Instruction and Learner Control

Recent research in the field of adult English to speakers of other languages in online settings has focused on the use of hypertext and hypermedia instructional methods to increase comprehension and acquisition of English reading. Researchers and practitioners alike believe that virtual learning environments can be used "to respond to students' educational needs and support mixed-ability learners" (Dolle & Enjelvin, 2003, p. 473). Additionally, in keeping with adult learning doctrine, computer mediated language instruction provides a space for students to engage in autonomous, self-paced learning (Dolle & Enjelvin, 2003). Indeed, computer assisted language learning presents students with maximized control and less dependency on the instructor (Jones, 2001) and can provide appropriate scaffolding for multi-ability learners (Roed, 2003; Shang, 2005; Simpson, 2005).

Hypertext and hypermedia can be used with digital texts to promote understanding and increase learner control (Ariew & Ercetin, 2004). Hypertext refers to nodes and links to other

nodes. Nodes are the non-linear texts provided the interactive reader, while links are embedded associations to other related texts (nodes). Hypermedia refers to the same kind of linking system, but provides the user opportunities to jump to different types of information in a variety of formats including text, video, audio, and graphic files. These informational files, also known as annotations or glosses, are for use at the discretion of the learners. Glosses have been incorporated into non-digital texts for ELLs in order to clarify or highlight important points or to provide structural aids in conjunction with textual features that may be outside the proficiency of the reader (Ercetin, 2003). They can be incorporated into the text, to the side of it, or even provided before the reading is introduced. Previous studies in student preference for hypermedia glosses and annotations found that they preferred computer dictionaries to paper dictionaries (Roby, 1999), and many found computerized glosses helpful, easy, and time-efficient (Davis & Lyman-Hager, 1997). For ELLs, a wide variety of hypermedia can be used based on individual need and control to enhance comprehension of online texts including pronunciation audio files, definitions in English and the native language, illustrations and other graphic symbols, contextual annotations (providing topical background information), animation, and video files.

Airew and Ercetin (2004) studied different types of hypermedia annotations with 103 intermediate and advanced adult ESL learners. They questioned with which learners hypertext and hypermedia affected reading comprehension. They used noninvasive tracking tools to find that the learners showed an inverse correlation of the use of video annotations and reading comprehension, suggesting that it is possible that intermediate learners relied too heavily on the video to comprehend the content, rather than the text itself. An analysis of advanced readers annotation use showed that the frequency of use did not significantly correlate with their ability to comprehend. Prior knowledge of the topic, however, was confirmed as a predictor of reading comprehension for both groups of readers. They recommended that practitioners be cautious in using video annotations with intermediate learners as they might be more distracting than useful. However, non-video annotations were indicated as useful to the learners. Accordingly, Nicholas, Debski, and Lagerberg (2004) reported the benefits of an online orthography teaching tool to differentiate writing and spelling instruction with adult language learners from bilingual backgrounds. The tool which can adapt spelling practice based on individual learner performance counts the number of times the learner has successfully and unsuccessfully identified each rule. Although the program was originally designed for Polish and Russian language learners, future plans for additional languages are in place.

Corpus linguistics is a newer tool with which to teach language. Corpus, Latin for “body,” within the concept of linguistics is the product of gathering a large compilation of naturally occurring spoken and written texts in order to break the language down word by word to get a better understanding of how language is used (Rosenthal, 2003). Different English corpora, including corpora in business English, Academic English, professional English and conversational English can be used in a variety of online settings. Analyses of English corpora, either in general or for specific purposes, can shape the sequence of language teaching as well as the importance placed on certain linguistic structures and forms.

Corpora are also the basis for concordancers, tools for learners to investigate linguistic features and patterns that occur in authentic speech or written communication (Kaur and Hegelheimer, 2005). Concordancers are being used in conjunction with a variety of native and non-native speaker corpora in online settings. This tool allows learners to access new vocabulary words as they are used in authentic texts and contexts. The use of online concordancers and dictionaries has been touted as allowing the learner more autonomy and encourages the role of

student as researcher (Kaur & Hegelheimer, 2005; Rosenthal, 2003). Kaur and Hegleheimer (2005) studied the use of concordancing with intermediated undergraduate ESOL students and its affect on academic vocabulary acquisition in writing. Although the study had a very small sample (N=18), the group that had online access to both a concordancer and dictionary were found to have used the target vocabulary more often and with more success on a writing task than did the control group. The use of hypermedia, corpora, concordancers, and online dictionaries in second language acquisition seems viable for instruction and possible learner autonomy; however, more research with lower proficiency students and learners in programs not associated with higher education is needed.

Socially-Constructed and Negotiated Meaning in Communicative Competence

Socially-constructed and negotiated meaning making, toward the ultimate goal of communicative competence, are currently hot topics in adult L2 acquisition. Through pair and small group work with fellow learners and with native speakers, students have the opportunity to practice new and recently acquired forms of the L2, use conversational adjustments to get at comprehension, and negotiate meaning in ways which are individualized to the needs of each learner (Harris, 2005; Hellerman, 2005; Tudini, 2003). It is further believed authentic cultural interaction will lead to a wider range of linguistic and pragmatic competence of the target language (Belz, 2003). These genuine linguistic cultural experiences provide opportunities to wrestle with the possibilities of miscommunications, differing opinions, and new styles of communication with which to construct knowledge of the target language (Ware, 2005). Harris' (2005) research analyzed 40 beginner student pairings over 20 days to reveal that negotiation is a necessary part of acquiring a second language and can be facilitated in pair work. Hellerman (2005) also found that appropriate turn-taking in social discourse must be learned and managed, and can be negotiated through learner-learner interactions. He studied five learners in 100 classroom exchanges and found that language development is furthered with a focus on social skills in classroom interactions which include interpersonal talk, pragmatics, and asking for clarification for all levels of learners.

L2 Instruction Online: Computer Mediated Communication

Computer mediated communication (CMC), including email and online chat, is considered an amalgamation of written and oral discourse, providing learners support in improving their communicative competence and confidence (Roed, 2003; Shang, 2005; Simpson, 2005). Additionally, CMC provides a certain anonymity, allows for less concern about accent and time pressures, and provides a scaffold from writing to speech (Roed, 2003; Simpson, 2005). In her preliminary qualitative study of online behavior of 13 beginning and intermediate Dutch language learners, Roed (2003) found that some students who were shy and less-participative in class were more likely to contribute in online discussion settings. However, lag time and online "netiquette" (online social skills) posed group dynamics issues that Roed recommended instructors discuss with the class beforehand. Simpson (2005) contends that synchronous CMC in informal virtual language environments provides learners opportunities to interact with native speakers and other learners to build discourse competence and technical literacy skills. Ultimately, because both of these studies analyzed a relatively small amount of online data, further research should be done to corroborate the findings.

Weininger and Shield (2003) investigated ELLs and CMC by using discourse analysis of text interactions in MOO (Multi-User Domain Object Oriented) environments. Although the

sample was small, important indications for new directions online were established. They found in the comparison between non-native speaker corpora and native speaker corpora, MOO environments approximated oral production situations more than written environments for the L2 learners and can be “considered an appropriate rehearsal arena for face-to-face interaction” (p. 329). Additionally, when the instructor was not online, there was no linguistic regression or L1 use, although the discourse tended to be less-formal when the instructor was not present.

Tudini (2003) studied nine English-native adults learning Italian who engaged in online “chat” with native-Italian speakers over two semesters. She found that the students negotiated for meaning and adjusted their linguistic form, structure, and/or message content until an acceptable level of understanding was achieved. Additional research with a larger corpus of online chat text and larger samples of participants of language learners and native speakers would further inform the field of the benefits of this mode of CMC.

E-mail has also been used in online L2 settings to provide opportunities for learners to engage in authentic communication with native speakers (O’Dowd, 2003; Ware, 2005). O’Dowd’s (2003) ethnographic, action research involved 50 second year Spanish and English learners engaged in activities designed to facilitate learning about the connection between language and culture. By the end of the course, several students were able to engage in communicative competent discourse with the ability to recognize culturally semantic nuances, practice different communicative styles and use socio-pragmatic structures appropriate for intercommunication. However some students’ exchanges in this study, as well as in Ware’s (2005) research of a similar nature, failed to function well, which lead to a few of the learners’ stereotypes and negative attitudes about the target culture to be reinforced. More research in this kind of learning exchange, with the addition of a longitudinal approach to long-term learning effects, would inform the field further of the success of e-mail in intercultural language learning.

Conclusion

The importance of socio-cultural factors is highlighted at the intersection of current literature from the fields of adult ELL instruction and online second/foreign language acquisition. The two fields meet at two main junctures: (1) individual, differentiated language learning, and (2) socially-constructed and negotiated meaning to improve communicative competence. These current trends and connections help lay an important foundation for adult education program directors and instructors when preparing for or continuing online instruction and curricula for their English language learners. Askov, Johnston, Petty, and Young (2003) also suggest that careful consideration to planning, training of instructors, and specific answers to how the students will gain access to materials, how much support is needed for student success, and how feedback will be given to students must be given. Furthermore, implementation of an online component to ELL instruction is expensive, and finding the right mode and method for a program’s individual learners is an experimental process. Petty, Johnston, and Shafer (2004) recommend starting small and finding out what works and what does not, leaving room for trial and error for instructors and students. Finally, the adult ELL educational community anxiously awaits future research specifically devoted to adult ESOL in online settings. Particular attention to this population, with their diverse learning needs, is certainly warranted.

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