Instructional Practices Used in *English -- No Problem!*

English -- No Problem! (ENP) is a complete five-level theme-based series for adult English language learners from Literacy through high-intermediate levels. It provides a strongly communicative approach that fosters language development and use through integrated skills practice, task- and project-based lessons, and extensive opportunity for collaborative learning experiences and authentic interactions.

These pages outline key instructional practices embodied in ENP. They reflect current "best practices" and understanding of what is most effective with adult learners, research in second language acquisition, and the instructional standards currently most prominent in the field.

Pedagogical Approaches

The following descriptors characterize the pedagogical approaches of the series, designed to address the stated needs of learners, teachers, and administrators, and also supported by a rich body of research.

Interactive. Active learning provides opportunities for students to talk and listen, read, write, and reflect, as they approach course content through problem-solving exercises, informal small-group simulations, case studies, role-playing, and other activities, all of which require them to apply what they are learning (*Promoting Active Learning,* Meyers and Jones, 1993, p. xi). It is this interactivity that creates the learning environments of most ESL classrooms around the country.

Communicative. Diane Larsen-Freeman defines the communicative approach as one in which "the target language is a vehicle for classroom communication, not just the object of study. . . . Communicative interaction encourages cooperative relationships among students. It give students an opportunity to work on negotiating meaning." (*Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching,* Oxford University Press, 1983. pp. 128–130). In the words of Mary McGroarty, "Cooperative learning works by generating varied paths of access of language and academic knowledge based on students' interactions with each other and with the teacher. It is a way to empower them to deal with new information and forms of communication. Teachers, too, become empowered to build pedagogical skills that advance student capabilities. In classrooms whose linguistic and cultural diversity are common, cooperative learning promises some of the flexibility to help students and teachers make the process of instruction more varied and personally engaging, and thus, more effective." (Mary McGroarty, "Cooperative Learning and Second Language Acquisition," in *Cooperative Learning, A Response to Linguistic and Cultural Diversity*, ed. Daniel Holt, 1993, Center for Applied Linguistics, p. 45.)

Problem-posing and Problem-solving Learning in ENP is centered on issues that are interesting and meaningful to learners. Throughout, they are engaged in

actively exploring issues as presented in the units and relating those explorations to their own lives. In the teacher's guide for *ESL for Action,* Elsa Auerbach and Nina Wallerstein speak of the importance of "codes" – physical representations of critical issues. "Personal stories and pictures stories can be particularly effective codes, or stimuli, for the problem-posing process. The codes allow learners to deal with potentially loaded issues that may be too threatening, overwhelming or embarrassing to confront individually. Thus, a code can codify into one depersonalized representation a conflict or problem that carries emotional or social impact in people's lives.... Its purpose is to promote critical thinking and action." ENP provides such codes to stimulate engagement with interesting and important issues in the safe environment of the classroom, while helping learners develop tools -- not just language but cultural understanding and familiarity with community resources -- to function more effectively outside the classroom.

Encouraging cultural literacy. Diane Larsen-Freeman defines culture as "the everyday lifestyle of people who use the language naturally." *(Techniques and Principles of Language Teaching*, p. 134). Tom Scovel speaks of culture as "the social cement of all human relationships . . . the medium in which we move and breathe and have our being." *(The Role of Culture in Second Language Learning: The Individual in the Communicative Classroom,* Heinle & Heinle Publishers, 1992.) Learning about U.S. culture should be a major goal (see section on Content below), even at the lowest levels, where there might be an emphasis on learning the most rudimentary elements of small talk. To be able to fully participate in a culture, learners must be able to use the language to get their needs met and achieve their aims. Finally, the focus on cultural literacy in the series should be, whenever possible, topically appropriate for both adult and secondary learners (e.g., famous Americans, the environment, immigration). However, there will be little or no emphasis on specific figures or passing trends in pop culture, features that are often overemphasized in secondary ESL texts and tend to date them quickly.

Task-based. As Rebecca Oxford states, "Tasks encourage communicative interaction, both with learners and native speakers. In addition, they have real-world relevance, that is, they require students to do in the classroom what they must do outside the classroom." (*The Tapestry of Language Learning: The Individual in the Communicative Classroom,* (Heinle & Heinle Publishers, 1992, p. 7). Oxford continues, "The linguistic interaction must push the students to use their linguistic capabilities to maximum. This means that the linguistic demands of the task should neither be too difficult nor too easy. If the demands are too high, the students may fail to interact meaningfully at all. On the other hand, the linguistic demands of the task should not be too low. Tasks that do not challenge students result in the students' boredom or their failure to learn." (p. 34) The phrase "real-world relevance" is particularly important here. Abstract and/or frivolous tasks would do learners no service. ENP engages learners throughout in tasks and projects that will not only interest learners but will provide them with useful information as well as transferable skills.

<u>Accommodating and flexible.</u> Jill Bell and Barbara Burnaby comment that "As well as the obvious factor of the degree of competence in the English language, [teachers] find that students' progress is affected by their length of time in the country, their native language, their age, and their previous experience with education." (*A Handbook for ESL Literacy,* OISE Press, 1986, p. 3.) While no series can foresee the combination of abilities, interests, and backgrounds that make up any particular class, ENP pays attention throughout, in both student texts and teacher's editions, to the span of backgrounds and abilities likely to be found and accommodates them with the wide range of lesson topics to meet varied interests and needs, as well as with activity expansions (or, in the Teacher's Edition, adaptation ideas) to address multiple proficiency levels. That same variety of backgrounds and abilities also makes it crucial for any series to seriously address multiple learning styles. ENP effectively meets the challenge of multiple needs arising from different learner backgrounds and different learning styles through the varied approaches to both presentation and practice found throughout the series, including explicit explanations and implicit presentation through models; carefully structured practice and open-ended activities; individual, pair, and group activities; work that engages all language modalities (listening, speaking, reading, writing), and tasks that actively engage learners in creation of products that can be used in their everyday lives.

<u>Integrating SCANS and SCANS-like competencies into ESL classrooms using cooperative-learning</u> <u>techniques.</u> For several years now, the State of California has officially promoted this approach, which represents a systemic change in the way ESL instruction is offered. The SCANS competencies, created by the U.S. Department of Labor, are based on employers' assessment of what employees need to succeed in their workplaces; at the same time, they provide a framework for success in all aspects of adult life through critical thinking and effective interaction with others. With these goals, the adult ESL classroom provides an environment in which students accept maximum responsibility for their own learning. This implies that the learning taking place will be active, with students involved in all aspects of their own progress. In establishing the expectation that students accept responsibility for making learning happen in the classroom, programs are preparing them for the behavioral expectations they encounter in other domains of their lives – family, community, and the workplace. The goal is to facilitate the development of learners who are competent at organizing their own work, determining what materials they need, and working effectively with available resources. ENP provides a framework for instruction that fosters this active learning and gives both students and teachers the tools to make that happen. Learners take responsibility for their own learning and work cooperatively in pairs or teams on meaningful, realistic tasks, just as they will in the world of work and throughout their lives.

<u>Providing accountability.</u> Adult educators feel the impact of the new accountability and assessment obligations required by the federal government. A main obligation of all adult programs that receive federal funding is to collect and

report data that demonstrates significant student gains in literacy skills using approved testing instruments. Subsequent funding is then tied to demonstrated gains. Because testing plays such a significant role in funding decisions, programs are making testing a more routine part of instruction in order to minimize test anxiety. ENP provides a wide variety of tools to support teachers and programs in these efforts, by providing a strong framework of assessment measures designed for the series, as well as learning activities that incorporate physical features of standardized assessments so that students learn to handle the mechanics of those assessments in a non-threatening environment.

Standards-based. ENP was from the earliest stages of development designed to account for and correlate to the following sets of standards, which provide the organizing principles and the key accountability measures in Adult ESL.

- SCANS (Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills). Created by the US Department of Labor, these skills provide a framework that guides development of skills needed for all domains of adult life, not just the workplace, and represent the critical-thinking skills of choice for most adult programs.

- EFF (Equipped for the Future). The EFF content standards have much in common with SCANS in that both emphasize critical thinking and interaction with others. EFF organizes learning into three domains – those of learner as family member, community member, and worker.

- NRS (National Reporting System). The NRS is an outcome-based reporting system for Federally funded adult education programs. It provides guidelines for states to follow in establishing standards and levels for instruction and using standardized methods of collecting and reporting learner outcome data. The NRS requires that programs use valid and reliable instruments for assessing educational levels. For English language learners, the NRS provides descriptors of "educational functioning levels" for speaking and listening, reading and writing, and functional and workplace skills. The levels correspond to Student Performance Levels, a system of level descriptors developed to identify adult ESL language performance levels. For each NRS level, test benchmarks are correlated to scores on the BEST and the CASAS tests, although states can use other appropriate measures of achievement.

- BEST (Basic English Skills Test). The BEST is an assessment tool designed for adult ESL learners at the survival and pre-employment skills level. It assesses listening, speaking, reading, and writing in lifeskills contexts and simulated lifeskills tasks. It can serve as both a placement instrument and a progress test. There are two parts to the traditional BEST, an individually administered oral interview and a reading and

writing assessment that can be administered to individuals or groups. A performance-based, computer-assisted oral assessment instrument, BEST Plus, is also available.

- CASAS (Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System). CASAS serves two purposes: it provides a framework of lifeskills competencies for curriculum development and a testing system that assesses learner progress in acquisition of language organized around those lifeskills. CASAS currently represents the most comprehensive assessment system for accountability purposes. Along with BEST, CASAS is widely used in many states. The ESL levels of the NRS (see above) are correlated to scores on BEST or CASAS.

- California Model Standards for Adult ESL. These provide a fully articulated framework of topics, language skills, and communication functions for the largest ESL population and most extensive system of adult ESL instruction in the country. A revision of the standards is now underway. When completed, they will integrate CASAS and SCANS standards into the current document and flesh out the rather sketchy grammar specifications of the current version. English-- No Problem! has accounted for much of that planned integration through separate attention to SCANS and EFF throughout development, so that those frameworks are fully integrated into the series.

- Florida Standards for Adult ESOL. The Florida Standards, which were developed in the early 1990s, set guidelines for the various ESL levels in both ESOL and VESOL (vocational ESL) classes around the state. Under these standards, even regular ESL classes strongly emphasize work skills and work content. The Florida and the California standards are the most carefully articulated and detailed of all state standards.

Development also included some attention to these standards:

- MELT (Mainstream English Language Training) Standards. These older standards are still the primary measure for some states, of which Illinois is the most significant example.

- New York and Texas state documents for adult ESL Currently, Texas standards are largely based on the Florida Standards for Adult ESOL.

- TESOL Adult ESOL Program Standards

Accountability-driven. Self- and teacher evaluation, including portfolio assessment, must be a routine part of instruction, especially given the insistence

on accountability discussed above. As suggested there, even the experience of routinely completing exercises in a test format such as that of CASAS can empower learners and raise their scores on the real standardized tests. ENP provides a full range of assessment tools for both teachers and students, including unit tests, goal-setting activities, self-evaluation checklists that relate to both unit content and the goals set for each unit, guidelines and suggested activities for portfolio assessment, checklists for self- or teacher-evaluation of specific tasks and projects, and peer-evaluation forms.

<u>Grammar integrated inductively and reinforced explicitly.</u> Athough critical-thinking skills rather than grammar are the motor driving the units, there is a logical and developmental grammar sequence in the series as a whole, and clearly articulated grammar presentations with explicit but contextualized practice are prominent in each unit.

Instructional Design: A Summary of Key Features that Reflect these Pedagogical Approaches

- High-interest, engaging, and affective content
- Plentiful lively, interactive, learner-centered activities
- Emphasis on broad-based skills for success in the workplace, the family, and the community (e.g., team approach; organizing skills; prioritizing tasks; communicating effectively; interviews and applications; work ethics; balancing work, family, and community responsibilities)
- Mix of traditional and innovative elements to inspire user comfort and user excitement
- Stand-alone units/lessons to address the challenges of open-entry/open-exit programs
- Structured presentation and practice activities
- Sequential development of skills
- Fully integrated SCANS competencies
- Examines context-based language through the lens of EFF roles
- Engages learners through participatory and problem-solving features
- Fosters learner reflection on their language learning processes through goal-setting, self-assessment
- Explicit focus on learning and practice strategies.
- Visible bridging at intermediate levels to more academic study and/or Pre-GED/GED topics
- At the intermediate levels, increased emphasis on process writing
- Longer readings and even greater emphasis on logic and higher-level thinking at the intermediate levels