

Susanna Strube

Grappling with the oral skills

The learning and teaching of the low-literate adult second language learner

This study concerns adult L2 students who have had little or no education in their country of origin and, as a consequence, have never or only marginally learned to read and write in their L1. L2 literacy teachers have observed that the rate of learning of these students is slow, their attainment level is low, and their cognitive strategies are often inadequate. In this study learners in six adult L2 literacy classes were followed during the practice of the oral skills for eight months. The students were pre- and post-assessed. The results on these tests were analyzed on vocabulary, morphosyntactic features as well as aspects of relevance and coherence in discourse. From this analysis notable differences in class gains surfaced. To explain these differences the learning results were examined in relation to classroom observations focusing on classroom procedures, classroom interaction, and corrective feedback.

A modest progression in language proficiency was noted. This indicates how problematic L2 learning can be in an educational setting. Nevertheless important observations came to light – of which the use of CALL activities was especially remarkable. One class with a low number of classroom hours and a limited practice on grammar and dialogs used CALL activities and surfaced with relatively high gain scores, particularly for morphosyntax.

This study is of interest to researchers of L2 low-literate adult learners, but also for teachers and policy makers. Teachers gain insights into learning and teaching, while policy makers see that learning is a slow and complicated process for the low-literate L2 learner.

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