



# TESOL Connections

Keeping English language professionals connected

## Cohesive Instruction for Adult ELs Through Collaboration

by [Shawn Jensen](#) and [Carolyn Nason](#)

Shawn and I met several years ago at a Wisconsin Technical College System ESL Pro training initiative focusing on incorporating rigor into English language instruction. Naturally, as English language instructors do, we began sharing ideas about the needs of our learners and how we try to meet them. Shawn works with high-level English language learners and learners in Career Pathways Bridge Programming. I, on the other hand, work at the beginner levels where many are just learning to read. Even though we have very diverse groups of learners, we both saw opportunities where we could help each other.

## Academic Vocabulary and Higher Order Thinking at All Levels

One of the many things we learned from our ESL Pro facilitator, Jayme Adelson-Goldstein, ([Lightheartedlearning.com](http://Lightheartedlearning.com)), was that academic language is the language of text, academic success, and power. We quickly recognized that academic vocabulary, or lack of it, was one of the biggest challenges our learners faced. Shawn recalls, “In my upper-level classes, learners were doing a great job every day in the classroom and on assignments, but they just weren’t getting passing scores on standardized tests and certification exams.”

Shawn continues, “Knowing that academic language promotes higher order thinking and helps us to describe complex ideas, I knew I not only had an opportunity but an obligation to my students to develop intentional and authentic activities surrounding academic vocabulary.”

### What Shawn Did

Wanting to dig deeper as to why her students were struggling, Shawn looked at the tests and found key words like *analyze*, *contrast*, and *persuade*. She realized the problems her learners were having were caused more by the language in the directions than the material itself. To address this, Shawn designed an activity to help her learners acquire that vocabulary. She gave them a list of words from [The Top 10 Terms Students Need To Know To Be Successful on Standardized Tests](#) (Williams, n.d.). She asked them to find definitions for the terms and then use them in examples related to their fields of study.

Next, she extended the task to include critical thinking by asking her learners to tie the terms together. For example: *Analyze can be connected with compare because I need to analyze the*

*medical test results and compare them to normal levels.* By adding this additional layer of complexity, students not only used the terms in a contextualized manner but they also made a connection between the terms, thereby deepening the learning.

### **What Carolyn Did**

As Shawn shared her struggles and the work she was doing with her higher level learners, it became clear to me that there was a great need to begin teaching academic language in the lowest levels of English language instruction. Jayme Adelson-Goldstein had often talked about this in our training, but here it was clear as day in our classrooms. Shawn and I talked about the benefits of introducing this language at the beginner levels to give the learners time to acquire the skills needed to be successful.

Thinking about my Level 1 beginners, I started to look for opportunities to teach academic language. I was able to incorporate words like *foundation, summarize, success, habit, categorize, reason, priority, and strategy* with relative ease. Though none of these words were in our basic texts, introducing them opened up many opportunities for level-appropriate, academic discussions and sharing of cultural expectations. I quickly found that my adult learners understood these concepts in their own languages, they just didn't have the language to label or produce it in English. That's where I was able to step in and support them with the words they were looking for. Talk about invigorating!

### **What You Can Do**

Try reaching out to a colleague who teaches a different level. Find out what they are doing and what is and is not working for them. Really listen. You will be surprised at how quickly you come to an intersection. Keep brainstorming until you find a common theme. Keep in mind you only need to choose one area to focus on so that it is not too overwhelming. The key is baby steps. Communication is essential for continual improvements. Celebrate your small wins!

## **Learner Persistence: A Daily Commitment to Learning**

### **What Shawn Did**

Another area that Shawn and I found we could collaborate on was learner persistence. Shawn shares, "The level of commitment in my classes wasn't where it needed to be for success in the workplace and/or in postsecondary education." So, an intentional focus was placed on teaching employability skills (soft skills) in the classroom. A rubric was developed and students were given points in each class in areas such as being on time, showing up, being respectful, and communicating effectively. Shawn said,

After tracking the students with this rubric, we determined that attendance was the number one reason our students were not successful in their classes. The EL team developed a stricter attendance policy and then aligned it to the expectations of

attendance in the workplace. The attendance policy has academic language in it so it is another great opportunity to review and define more of that powerful language.

### **What Carolyn Did**

Shawn's struggles with learner persistence helped me to recognize that I needed to emphasize cultural expectations about attendance in education and in the workplace starting with my beginner learners. Making a commitment to learn a little every day and how we handle barriers seemed like a good place for me to start.

I've always encouraged my beginners to come to school "every day, every day" and told them that we learn best "little by little," but I wanted them to actually experience and then recognize it for themselves. I decided to introduce an activity that I've used for a few years. Every morning, I put the alphabet on the overhead, and we go through the long vowels and consonant sounds one by one. At first, it takes nearly the entire hour, but with practice it takes less and less time. Then, I start incorporating a new sound (e.g., short vowels or digraphs) each day. By the end of the semester, my students had both listening and pronunciation of most of the sounds of English down pat and were quite proud of their progress. I asked them to think about what and how they learned. One said (and I am paraphrasing) that it was like when a farmer plants seeds. It takes daily work before you see results. Others agreed. It was exciting to be their facilitator as they learned about learning.

Managing barriers is also something I felt needed to be addressed with my low level learners. It just so happened that the weather report presented itself as the perfect opportunity this past semester. The meteorologists were predicting that an icy snowstorm was on its way and was most likely to hit during the next morning's rush hour. My beginners and I brainstormed ways to get to school during bad weather (Plan A = I drive; Plan B = I take the bus; Plan C = I call a friend), later labeling our list items *contingency plans*. That next snowy morning? We had 100% attendance and a palpable sense of pride. Since then, when the weather threatens, I now often hear "Well, this is Wisconsin." I am hoping that we planted a seed of resiliency and that it becomes ingrained so that when they do reach classes like Shawn's, their persistence will have simply become a habit.

### **What You Can Do**

Again, reach out to a colleague who teaches a different level. Discuss learner persistence and brainstorm employability skills for beginners through advanced levels. Build a rubric that could be used to assess those skills throughout all levels. Keep in mind, it is important to have discussions about consistent reinforcement and how to hold the teachers accountable. Students appreciate consistency whether they are beginning or advanced level.

## **ESL Teacher Collaboration for Improving Practice**

The experience of working together has helped us to see the challenges at both ends of the language learning spectrum. In addition to our day-to-day collaboration, together we presented "Connecting Adult ELLs to Their Goals Through Increased Rigor" at the 2018 TESOL

Convention in Atlanta, Georgia, USA. Our collaboration has allowed us to work creatively together, sharing ideas to address the needs of our learners as they work toward reaching their goals of college, career and/or community. So why not give it a try? Pick a partner and discover the amazing success you and your learners can have.

## Reference

Williams, K. (n.d.). *Top 10 terms students need to know to be successful on standardized tests*. Scholastic. <https://www.scholastic.com/teachers/articles/teaching-content/top-10-terms-students-need-know-be-successful-standardized-tests/>

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**Shawn Jensen** is an English language learner and Career Pathways Bridge instructor at Northeast Wisconsin Technical College. She teaches upper level English language learner classes and Career Pathways Bridge. She has been instrumental in developing the Career Pathways Bridge programming and team teaching training for the state of Wisconsin. She has presented on various English language learner topics at local, state, and national conferences.

**Carolyn Nason** joined Milwaukee Area Technical College in 2005 as part-time faculty, moving to full time in 2014 and instructional chair in 2017. She received her MA from the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee in 2006, where she later taught (2009–2013) in the intensive English program. At Milwaukee Area Technical College, Carolyn's current interests include integrating the EL program into Guided Pathways, incorporating rigor, and contextualizing instruction especially at the beginning levels.