Adult English Language Learner (ELL) Pathway to Literacy Initiative: Getting Learners to the Starting Line

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ABSTRACT

The article focuses on the development of a program in Indianapolis, the Adult English Language Learner (ELL) Pathway to Literacy, geared to adult English language learners with limited formal education and limited decoding skills. A large-scale immigrant research study was conducted on barriers to language learning that immigrants face. The research exposed gaps in services in the city, especially teacher training and classes for immigrants who are emergent readers, and provided the theoretical framework for program development. A team of educators collaborated on curriculum development, an alternative assessment tool, and a pilot program for beginning literacy-level learners. The article describes the process, the main program tenets, and the initial findings from the pilot program. The Adult ELL Pathway to Literacy Initiative is an attempt to provide access to vulnerable learners who have had limited access to educational opportunities.

Keywords: immigrant research, adult English language learners, limited formal education, emergent readers, alternative assessment, limited decoding skills, pathway to literacy, literacy-level learners

Background and Research Methods

"English is the key to life here."

"If you don't speak English, you can't reach a high place."

"I want this country. In this country I need English."

"Some people discriminate when we don't speak very good English."

"I feel sometimes really blocked."

These were a few of the responses to the question, "Why do you want to learn English?" in a survey posed to over 1,200 adult immigrants in Indianapolis through the Adult English Language Learner (ELL) Research Project which was conducted by the Immigrant Welcome Center (IWC) in 2018-2019. When the author began working at a refugee resettlement agency in Indianapolis, back in 2012, she met many learners from the Karen and Karenni ethnic minority groups of Burma who had had no previous access to formal education. While these learners were faithful in their attendance to English class and exhibited high motivation to learn, traditional ESL teaching methods, which build off of L1 proficiency, proved ineffective. The lack of available curriculum, inappropriate assessment methods, and assumption of native language literacy skills created barriers for the limited-literacy learners. Unfamiliar with Western classroom conventions and without the ability to transfer first-language literacy skills to their study of English, these students lacked access to the tools that many language learners draw upon to be successful in learning a new language. Class options for these learners were minimal beyond the refugee resettlement organization, leaving them few options for classes at their starting points. The current adult basic education (ABE) system offers only narrow support for certain groups of vulnerable learners, such as individuals with limited English and low levels of prior education. Moreover, the outcomes used to evaluate programs receiving funds available

under Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) have "little to do with the lived experience of newcomers," (Vanek et al., 2020, p. 47). As the author and her team worked to serve them, it became apparent that more collaboration and further training on working with learners without first language literacy were necessary.

The Adult ELL Pathway to Literacy Initiative is an attempt to provide access to vulnerable learners who have had limited access to educational opportunities. "Feeling blocked," as the immigrant mentioned above, implies barriers. When the Immigrant Welcome Center (IWC) led the Lilly Endowment-funded research project mentioned above, the main focus was to discover the main barriers to learning English that immigrants face, including what factors limited or prohibited class enrollment, and the connection between literacy/decoding skills and class enrollment.

The three-phase research study involved an advisory board, TESOL professionals, and a data collection team of 16 multilingual immigrants representing over 10 countries and 18 languages. Materials included a survey created on Survey Monkey, accessible to the data collectors from their electronic device, thus allowing flexibility and accessibility. The TESOL professionals conducted surveys at 48 different class sites around the city, while the multilingual team conducted surveys in their communities, at people's apartments and houses, as well as at places of worship, medical clinics, community centers, grocery stores, etc. Surveys were conducted mainly orally, in the participant's native language, with the intent to lessen intimidation, and allowing for immigrant voices which are often overlooked in written surveys.

Reading diagnostics tied to CASAS standards, in many different languages and English, were developed as an alternative assessment to diagnose decoding. Decoding, also referred to as word recognition, takes place when the written (graphical) form of a word is recognized by the

reader. The reader's success at decoding depends on phonological awareness (Sosinski, 2020, p. 31). While there are many literacy assessments available, the team desired a quick and portable way to assess reading levels. The design mirrored an eye test at the optometrist, with increasingly more difficult words and sentences as the reader proceeded down the card. Based on predetermined fluency guidelines, the team determined the lowest (i.e., most difficult) line a participant could read fluently. All data collectors received training to administer the reading diagnostic consistently and accurately.

The research findings revealed that while family needs, work, transportation, and day and time were all barriers to learning, one of the most significant barriers seemed to be limited reading ability in English. Thirty-one percent (31%) of the 1,254 adult immigrants surveyed had limited literacy in English, possibly a factor of interrupted schooling opportunities in their home countries (Table 1).

Table 1

Level of Schooling of Survey Respondents

2 years or less of formal education	7.25%	91 respondents
10 years or less of formal education	45.61%	572 respondents

Reading is a skill a person learns only once, no matter what language he or she learns to do it in (Genessee, 2008). If students haven't had the opportunity to gain literacy skills in their first language, the challenge is even greater in a new language. In Indianapolis there were very few programs geared toward these learners, who gave "too hard" as the third top reason for discontinuing classes. At city-wide and ABE professional development gatherings, teachers consistently expressed the need for more teacher training to work effectively with these learners.

Adult ELL Pathway to Literacy

Teachers generally feel ill-equipped to work with learners with limited literacy skills since many higher education TESOL certificate and degree programs do not provide specific training in this area. The funding systems, assessment methods, and lack of teacher training all combine to create a lack of classes geared to those learners with limited English literacy. The Pathway to Literacy program is a collaborative effort among educators in Indianapolis to meet that need. The program is born out of a conviction that these newcomers may be beginning learners, but they are not beginning thinkers or problem solvers (Brod, 1999).

Program Development

Program development began with a response to the expressed need for more teacher training. The authors looked to Literacy Minnesota and Hamline University's Study Circle materials to bring together 27 adult education practitioners, representing over 15 programs, to discuss topics like characteristics of emergent adult ESL readers, research findings, and components of reading development. The IWC hosted a 2-day TESOL training in March 2020 with an expert teacher/trainer from Literacy Minnesota. Sixty-five attendees from around the state learned how the mind and brain work in language learning, how best to approach the different skill areas in teaching literacy students, and many other strategies and resources to help us in our work. Once funding was secured for the next step, we created the Pathway to Literacy team, and began to develop curriculum in preparation for 10-week online pilot classes. The team relied heavily on the information, guidance, and structure found in Bow Valley College's "Learning for LIFE: An ESL Literacy Curriculum Framework" (Bow Valley College, 2011a), one of the few curricular framework guides for adult ESL literacy programs. Bow Valley advocates strongly for a separate literacy stream of classes, because mainstream ESL classes generally cater to people who have had access to basic education and have well-developed first

language literacy skills. Limited-literacy learners are still developing language, literacy, and strategies necessary to be able to thrive in a literate context.

The framework provided guidance for developing a program of excellence, which included conducting a needs analysis and determining a program focus. The goal of the program is to improve the language and literacy skills of the students, to help them develop the sociocultural competence to live and work in the U.S., and to guide them to the starting line for the Level 1 classes in other programs (especially the Adult Basic Education programs). Without foundational literacy skills, it is difficult for limited-literacy learners to thrive and succeed in Level 1 classes, because literacy skills are assumed. Per Bow Valley's recommendation, the development team decided upon four Foundation Levels (A, B, C, and D) that would mark the learners' progress along the literacy continuum.

The curriculum framework also gave guidance on deciding learning outcomes which are tied to program goals and outside standards (American Institute for Research, 2016; Council of Chief State School Officers, 2014; Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2012; Indiana Department of Education, 2020), and determining assessment methods. One assessment tool, which was also used for the research project, is the native language and English reading diagnostic, which provides a rapid way to diagnose decoding ability in the student's native language and English.

We know that literacy learners are at a different starting point than other learners. They have not had access to the basic education that we often take for granted. Standardized tests, such as the Test for Adult Basic English (TABE), are not designed with such learners in mind, because they assume some literacy skills in the native language and English. The dearth of assessments for literacy-level learners is not unique to North America. There are no tests to

measure the knowledge and skills of learners below the A1 level of the Common European

Framework of Reference (CEFR), and adult migrants with no native language literacy or

education have largely been overlooked in the standardized tests used in the U.K. (Young-

Scholten & Naeb, 2020). For this reason, the Pathway to Literacy team designed the Literacy

Pathway Marking Tool as an alternative assessment that measures growth along the literacy

pathway and demonstrates the successes experienced by literacy-level learners. The following

elements are included in the assessment tool: oral, reading, writing, pre-literacy, numeracy,

technology, and vocabulary. Each area is linked to specific outside standards, learning outcomes,

and corresponding tasks. The tasks are designed with adult learners in mind.

Figure 1

Example of Oral Assessment

For example, the learning outcome for Foundation A Oral Assessment Task 1 is "identify

common symbols, objects, one shape in a group of 3, a limited number of familiar pictures,"

which comes from the Canadian Language Benchmarks: Foundation Level (Centre for Canadian

Language Benchmarks, 2012). The task is: Point to 5 familiar pictures from the theme in

response to the teacher prompt, "Where is...?" or "Show me…" (Figure 1). To perform the

assessment, the teacher selects the theme she has been teaching (from a list of 12) and is taken to

a slide that uses vocabulary from the related theme to assess the student's ability to complete the task.

Though still under development, the Literacy Pathway Marking Tool currently contains 18-22 tasks for each of the four foundation levels. Teachers may use the tool at their own discretion as a way to track student gains and measure foundational literacy skills. Use of the tool can also help teachers to know when a student is ready to advance to the next foundation level or graduate from literacy-level classes into a Level 1 ESL class.

Theoretical and Pedagogical Underpinnings of the Pilot Program

Respect for the learners is one of the foundational tenets of the program. Viewing the learners holistically, valuing their knowledge, talents and interests, and creating a safe environment for their learning is of prime importance. This translates to the classroom as creating a classroom routine which allows time for sharing about their lives and fostering a positive environment. Lesson plans for pilot classes were based on a systematic and intentional approach. By maintaining consistency in the daily flow of the lessons, learner confidence can be bolstered. Vinogradov (2008) claims that, "a sense of predictability goes a long way when nurturing learners' confidence." Lowering the students' affective filter - that is, lowering anxiety levels - encourages them to "try to get more input, to interact with speakers of the target language with confidence, and to be more receptive to the input they get," (Krashen & Terrell, 2000, p. 38). The learners' feelings of fragility, defensiveness, and raised inhibitions in the new language (otherwise known as language ego) are taken into consideration in the pilot classes.

A focus on oral language is another key approach, as oral skills are the basis for literacy development. "It is not possible to learn to read and write in a new language without some morphosyntactic competence and knowledge of vocabulary in the language," (Suni & Tammelin-

Laine, 2020, p. 18). Effective ESL literacy programs emphasize and integrate oral skill development throughout their curricula, and literacy development must be preceded by oral language development (Condelli, 2002; Wrigley, 2003). Developing comprehension before production (using teaching approaches such as Krashen's Total Physical Response) builds learners' confidence and helps them engage in language learning as a social activity. Moreover, a strategic introduction of letter sounds, based on Literacy Minnesota's instructional order (Frank & Perry, 2015) allows for a slow, steady pace. Recycling, spiraling, and scaffolding learning were also vital approaches in the pilot program.

Making learning relevant is another philosophical underpinning to the program. Meaningful and relevant learning is key to the language acquisition process. Effective learning occurs when useful topics, which are relevant and meaningful for the students, serve as the backdrop for all other language learning (Vinogradov, 2008). In practice, this means instruction will be thematic, as themes provide a context for language and literacy development. "A distinct advantage of using themes to teach outcomes is that the same outcome can be addressed in several different themes (recycled) over time. This allows for multiple opportunities to practice the same skill," (Bow Valley College, 2011a, p. 17). Theme-based teaching "contextualizes language learning and addresses the need for learner engagement," (Faux & Watson, 2020, p. 131). The themes for the Pathway to Literacy pilot classes developed thus far are health, food, community, and employment. Picture theme banks, a collection of free and team-created pictures and stories, are meant to be used as a source that teachers can access as they create lessons. Since learning always occurs best in the context of the familiar and the meaningful, the pilot classes attempted to connect to the learners' lives by using pictures of grocery stores where students shop, or having students create stories based on their experiences, such as things they cook.

Among the benefits of this online curriculum bank are flexibility, the recycling of skills, ease of use, and a focus on filling in gaps for literacy learners that other curricula may not address.

Phonics instruction is contextualized within the theme, beginning with a review of phonemes and graphemes, and incorporating various drills (i.e. visual, auditory, blending, deletion, etc.). Incorporating phonics and phonemic awareness in a systematic way to strengthen sound-symbol correspondence is a key component of the Pathway to Literacy program. Phonics instruction has been shown to help ELLs develop stronger foundational reading skills when it is part of a comprehensive reading program (Denton et al., 2004).

Reading is also contextualized within the theme. Choosing texts for adult learners is challenging, especially because there are few published textbooks designed for literacy-level learners (Burt et al., 2005; Huang, 2013). The sources for reading texts used in the Pathway to Literacy program include Bow Valley Readers, Literacy Minnesota stories, teacher-created stories, and student-generated stories, otherwise known as Language Experience Approach (LEA) stories. In an LEA story, the learner provides the text by using the language they know to "tell a story." The main principle of the Language Experience Approach is to make reading a meaningful and enjoyable process by using the students' own vocabulary, language patterns, and experiences (Nessel & Dixon, 2008). The teacher elicits statements, information, or experiences from the students by asking prompting questions. The teacher writes what the student says, asking clarifying questions along the way. The text then becomes the basis for reading and phonics practice. Students in the Pathway to Literacy program produced LEA stories on both health and food themes, including pictures of their cooking exploits. The Language Experience Approach has many benefits, because "it capitalizes and builds upon learners' experiences, knowledge, and skills, and it allows both meaning-focused and skill-focused learning," (Huang,

2013, p.11). Reading becomes more meaningful and relevant to the learners because the stories reflect their own words and experiences. The advantages include increased student motivation, personalization and relevance in learning, and building classroom community.
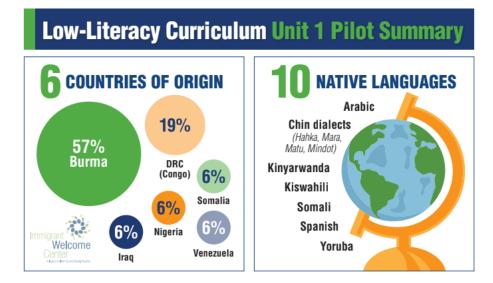
Focusing on learning outcomes is another foundational principle. A learning outcome is a statement of what a learner can do as a result of a learning experience, and should be specific, measurable, observable, and achievable (Stiehl & Lewchuk, 2002). Effective programs set a manageable number of outcomes, so that teachers and students don't "become overwhelmed by expectations" (Bow Valley College, 2011a, p. 111). In order to ensure ample time for recycling and spiraling learning, "less is more" regarding determining learning outcomes (p. 111). With learning outcomes built into the assessment tool, the learners can see their progress, which in turn may build their confidence.
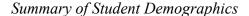
The intake for the pilot classes included a few tasks from the assessment tool in order to measure students' starting points. Assessment tools for limited literacy learners often don't measure skills that are assumed (ability to hold a pencil, create smooth lines that flow from left to right, turn pages of a book with left to right directionality, etc.). As Bow Valley reminds us, "learning to read and write is a slow journey. Without the right measurement tools, progress may seem non-existent" (Bow Valley College, 2011b, p. 3). With the more detailed picture of student starting points provided by the Literacy Pathway Marking Tool, it is easier to note any movement or "gains" along the literacy continuum, to calibrate teaching goals, and to measure small, incremental steps.

Pilot Classes and Findings

The online pilot classes began in August and were taught by three different teachers. Classes met three times per week for at least ninety minutes. The target population was the 31%

of learners from the research project who demonstrated limited literacy skills in English. Only immigrants with ten years or less of formal schooling and limited English decoding ability were qualified to participate in the pilot program. Student demographics included six countries and ten languages (Figure 2). The students in the pilot were motivated mainly to improve their ability to navigate daily life in the U.S., and secondarily to improve work and citizenship opportunities. Over half of the pilot students (57%) could access online classes only through smart phones. This number would have been higher, except that the pilot students at the Adult Basic Education (ABE) program were provided laptops for English class. This speaks to the need for outside funding to provide laptops or tablets for these learners. The Zoom screen on a phone is very small, making it difficult for students to effectively engage with many online learning activities.

Figure 2

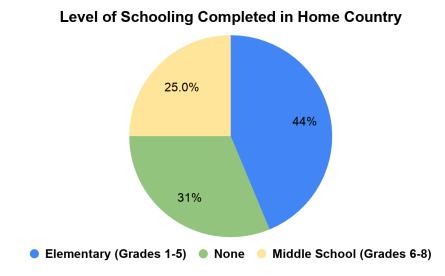*Summary of Student Demographics*

Note. Image provided courtesy of the Immigrant Welcome Center, Indianapolis

As Figure 3 indicates, about 75% of the students in the pilot classes had completed 5th grade or less in their home countries. These learners are characteristic of limited-literacy learners, who

generally have fewer than six years of schooling in their home countries and who, by definition, don't have strong literacy skills in their home language nor do they generally have strong skills in English (Wrigley, 2003). The main countries represented, Myanmar (also known as Burma) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, have been plagued with internal strife and war, causing displacement and unrest and resulting in interrupted or limited access to schooling. Of the 17 learners who began the pilot classes, 81% were semi-literate (minimal literacy in native language), 13% were non-Roman alphabet literate (literate in an alphabetic language other than Roman, such as Burmese and Arabic), and 6% were Roman-alphabet literate (literate in a language that is written in the Roman alphabet, such as Spanish). None of the pilot students were technically pre-literate (from a native language without a writing system), or non-literate (no literacy skills in their native language), (Florez & Terrill, 2003).

Figure 3

Schooling Levels of Pilot Students

Level of Schooling Completed in Home Country

Legend: ● Elementary (Grades 1-5) ● None ● Middle School (Grades 6-8)

After the 10-week pilot classes finished, teachers conducted one-on-one assessments with each learner. This included qualitative feedback, which was communicated with the help of an interpreter, and quantitative feedback using the same measurements that were conducted at intake. To ensure test non-bias, the teachers of the pilot did not do the post-testing with their own students, but rather with the other teachers' students. Because the alternative assessment is administered by humans and is not standardized, there will be subjectivity in test results. What one hears as "fluency" on the reading diagnostic may vary from teacher to teacher. To standardize as much as possible, all teachers received training on administering the reading diagnostic test. The following data reveals the post-pilot 1 outcomes of the learners.

Eighty-two percent (82%) of pilot students who began completed, and 100% of students who completed the pilot program said they wanted to continue learning. By this measure, the pilot program succeeded in its goals. The program design stated that because so many of the literacy-level learners have no experience or comfort in school settings, and often give up, citing reasons such as "too hard" or "can't learn", if they decide to continue learning after the 10 weeks, the program has accomplished its goal. Retention indicates the learners are being met and helped along at their starting places. The fact that all of the pilot students said the class was the "right level" for them is noteworthy, given the previous research findings.

In comparing the pre- and post-pilot student comments regarding how they feel about learning English, a few observations can be made. The post-pilot comments were more robust, expressive, and wordy (77% had increased words in the response). The post-pilot comments reveal deeper and more serious motivation, as seen in such comments as, "am starting to learn and understand, but there are still things I want to learn," and "she loves to learn English, so she wants to learn more." In the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research, intrinsic

motivation is one of the key principles for learning. As Brown (2007) states, "the most powerful rewards are those that are intrinsically motivated within the learner. Because the behavior stems from needs, wants, or desires within oneself, the behavior itself is self-rewarding..." (p. 68). The increase in positive statements from pre- to post-pilot comments speaks to the "students' long-term goals, their deepest level of feeling and thinking, and their global assessment of their potential to be self-actualized..." (Brown, 2007, p. 95). In post-pilot feedback, students said they improved communication at doctor's appointments and were glad to be able to communicate about food and shopping.

The post-pilot comments also revealed an observable decrease in negative feeling words. Pre-pilot comments included five instances of negative feeling words (nervous, nervous, sad, difficult, scared). Post-pilot comments had only one instance of a negative feeling word (challenging), which could even be perceived as neutral, given that it is followed by the contrast word but. There were no words connected to fear in the post-pilot comments.

Finally, we see a sense of self-improvement and growing self-confidence in the post-pilot comments (Figure 4). Growing self-confidence as a language learner can lead to further language development. As Brown (2007) explains, "Successful language learners generally believe in themselves and in their capacity to accomplish communicative tasks, and are therefore willing risk takers in their attempts to produce and interpret language that is a bit beyond their absolute certainty," (p. 73). Growing learner confidence, therefore, bodes well for their future learning.

Figure 4

Feedback on Pilot Program

From a student: *"I can read a little bit better now too...The person like me who don't know anything it feels good to learn English...it's very challenging but learning English helps me understand a little more... we are learning at a very steady, slow pace..."*

From an instructor: *"This program gave us an immense opportunity to have our lowest performing students, especially the ones that have very little education in their home country, to build a pathway to literacy. Our program offers a few low English level classes, but for some of them it is still too difficult as it starts to focus on building academic language skills rather than language proficiency. Without a program like this, we have small groups of students who repeat that lowest class again and again, trying to build their skills. Now, we have a place for them to go and get the help they need at their level."*

90% of students showed improvement in native language decoding ability.

92% of students improved English decoding ability.

92% of students showed skill gains.

Ninety percent (90%) of students showed improvement in their native language (NL) decoding ability. While there may not be a direct connection between improved NL decoding ability and participation in literacy-level English classes, by intentionally focusing on oral language and phonics in the context of a theme, it's possible that practicing sound-symbol correspondence skills in English transferred back to their NL and helped improve decoding in a language which they speak fluently.

Twelve of the 13 students (92%) showed improvement in their English decoding ability, and some patterns are noticeable. The students who improved the most (3 or 4 levels) entered the pilot with some developed NL literacy skills (ranging from grades 5-12). In addition, this group had limited but slightly developed English language decoding skills (pre-K to Grade 1). In other words, they had developed NL decoding skills before entering the pilot, and could already read at a Pre-K or Grade 1 English level. This seemed to be the "sweet spot" for investment and improvement in the pilot, as measured by progress in their English decoding ability. However,

even students with limited NL literacy skills (level 1 or 2 - could read only letters, or 1 word) showed improvement in their English decoding ability. In sum, while all but one student improved English decoding ability, those who improved the most shared the characteristics of developed NL literacy skills, and slight English decoding ability. Given the small sample size, and the short-term nature of the pilot, these conclusions cannot be generalized.

One hundred percent of the pilot students said the class was the right level for them, and helped their English improve. In the Adult ELL Research Project (2019), "too hard" was the third most common reason why learners with limited literacy discontinued attending mainstream ESL classes in Indianapolis. "In comparing the reasons why those with limited literacy in English stopped attending classes, 'too hard' moved up from seventh position (all respondents), to third position, after Family and Work . . . 62% of them said 'too hard' when asked their opinion about class level, compared with 28% of total respondents," (Kosobucki, 2019). This finding is significant given the previous research findings indicating that many students felt their classes were not at the right level.

According to Florez & Terrell (2003), it takes from 500-1,000 hours of instruction for adults who are literate in their native language but with no prior English instruction to reach a level where they can satisfy their basic needs, survive on the job, and have limited social interaction in English. How much more time is necessary for adults without strong literacy skills in their native language. Realistic expectations are essential for teachers, students, students' families, and stakeholders.

Conclusion

The Pathway to Literacy initiative is ongoing. Professional development, teacher training, and forging partnerships with ENL and ESOL educators across the city are essential to the

program's success. The second session of 10-week pilot classes was completed in April 2021, and findings will be available in June 2021. Compared to the 17 students and 3 participating teachers in pilot 1, there were 41 students and 5 participating teachers in pilot 2. As Peyton & Young-Scholten (2020) explain, there is a dearth of research on adults with limited formal education and literacy, including a lack of systematic observation on these learners' acquisition of linguistic competence. Researchers and organizations "focus overwhelmingly on first-time readers in their native language and not on those learning a second language with no or limited literacy in their native language" (Young-Scholten & Peyton, 2020, p. 4). The "What Works Study for Adult ESL Literacy Students" (Condelli et al., 2003), which observed 495 students over the course of nine months, is one of the few studies to look to for guidance. The study's main goal was to relate instructional strategies to student learning, and the findings showed that connecting literacy teaching to everyday life (i.e. the familiar outside world of the learners), as well as focusing on oral language development, made a significant difference in reading basic skills development. Similar to our study's findings thus far, the *What Works* study revealed that students with more prior schooling in their native language and some knowledge of basic reading were able to transfer those skills to English, enabling them to learn faster than those students with less schooling and native language literacy.

The Adult ELL Pathway to Literacy program's goal is to give greater access to the most vulnerable immigrants in our city. "They should have access to instruction that values and builds on their experiences, and that systematically teaches them basic literacy skills," (Vinogradov & Bigelow, 2010, p. 7). By coordinating our efforts and seeking to serve those marginalized by limited literacy and language barriers, we hope to make Indianapolis a more welcoming city to all.

Adult ELL Pathway to Literacy

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