The Transformation of Adult ESOL Learning

A Practice and Policy Brief

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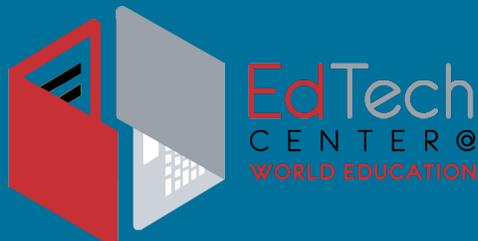
Executive Summary

Project Background. This Practice and Policy Brief is part of the Remote Adult ESOL[1] Project led by World Education, Inc. The goal of the work was to document and disseminate viable, remote models and practices for how adult ESOL instruction can be done at scale efficiently and effectively in varied settings. Its impetus was to uncover strategies for meeting the current unmet interest in and demand for ESOL instruction, as well as meeting potential demand prompted by English language requirements for U.S. citizenship under immigration reform. According to 2018 American Community Survey data, there are 11.4 million adults who speak English less than very well in the United States, and only a fraction of them are participating in ESOL classes.

The COVID-19 pandemic's effect on adult ESOL learning was disruptive, but it ultimately accelerated program innovation and transformation as providers stepped up to develop feasible education opportunities remotely. It created an opportunity to learn from these approaches toward the goal of improving and expanding them to meet growing demand. It also enabled us to reflect on what supports programs may still need to fully leverage the power of technology to increase the reach of those who can be trained and to accelerate learning through strategies such as personalization, differentiation, and embedding digital and other essential skills into ESOL instruction.

In response to our national call for participation in the Remote Adult ESOL Learning Project, we received 52 program nominations, reflecting different institutional settings, organizations, student populations, geographies, and approaches, with one program receiving two nominations. Of these, 35 programs were selected for interviews and an analytical review process. During the winter and spring of 2021, the project investigated selected ESOL programs' and learners' needs, experiences, and promising instructional and learner support practices that rely predominantly on technology-rich strategies and tools deployed remotely. These programs represent segments of the adult ESOL ecosystem both with and without WIOA (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act) Title II funding.

Each of the participant programs integrated some combination of key features identified as leading to ESOL learner success in a remote learning experience. These key features are:

- Student recruitment and onboarding

- Student access to digital skills, devices, Internet and data, and apps

- ESOL instructional approaches, curriculum and materials

- Student academic and persistence supports in remote learning

- Integrated remote support services to meet non-academic needs of students such as food, filing for unemployment or securing financial assistance, childcare

- Professional development and support for staff

- Tracking program performance and evidence of effectiveness; and

- Program leadership's support for the remote ESOL program design and implementation.

High-Level Findings. We learned that remote adult ESOL services solved to varying extents the design shortfalls and opportunity constraints of set schedules and in-person programming. Remote designs are conducive to more flexible, multi-faceted, and frequent learning opportunities. They can leverage technology for more differentiated/personalized instruction, facilitate higher levels of participation, promote persistence, increase intensity of instruction, and lead to achieving greater gains in shorter periods of time. Several programs showed it is possible to transition integrated support services to a remote environment by using various applications and strategies to communicate with students and refer them to services to help meet their non-academic needs.

All programs acknowledged and found ways to address the need to treat digital literacy not only as a key foundational skill to facilitate remote learning, but also to navigate daily life, support students' children's remote learning, and increase students' competitiveness in the labor market.

The transition to remote learning also prompted many programs to seek additional partnerships, resources, and revenue from both public and philanthropic sources, as well as their host institutions, to secure/supply devices and connectivity. Most programs were able to secure devices to loan out or give to support students' other technology needs. Some programs were successful at leveraging employer resources to support remote learning activities for incumbent workers.

Most programs provided teachers and staff with significant levels of professional development and other supports, such as additional paid time for professional development, curriculum development, materials development, and class prep. Some programs established new positions to support professional development and specific needs around digital inclusion and learning.

Policy Implications and Recommendations. The primary policy and funding implication of the Remote Adult ESOL Project findings is the need for policies and funding to facilitate the scaling up of innovative and effective practices illustrated in the case studies. It was clear from our research that the programs we interviewed that had leveraged broad-based collaboration and partnerships were better situated to scale and sustain the new technology-supported instruction and support service provision. We suggest that policies and funding should support the creation of a remote adult ESOL ecosystem (including ongoing capacity to study effective practices and associated outcomes, benefits, and costs) that would make it possible to leverage digital technologies to promote and provide equitable access to high-quality services at scale. In addition, policies and funding should create opportunities to experiment with and innovate purely asynchronous and remote models.

To build such an ecosystem, the involvement and collaboration of multiple constituents across various sectors and at different levels is needed to create a coherent, transparent, coordinated, efficient, and effective adult ESOL ecosystem. Providers from different contexts and settings need to be incentivized to come together and further build out existing services with remote learning complements. Adult learning providers, employers, labor unions, libraries, platform and application developers, public and private funders, and policy makers in the adult learning ecosystem all have a role to play in building a nationwide remote learning infrastructure.

We make policy recommendations to all these constituents. The following are our recommendations to the federal government, including the Departments of Education, Labor, Health and Human Services, and U.S. Citizenship Immigration Services:

- Ensure all remote learning expenditures are allowable uses of funds

- Modernize accountability expectations and revise reporting requirements to better facilitate remote learning arrangements and allow for useful national data on participation

- Invest in expansion of remote learning opportunities through community anchor organizations such as service providers, libraries, workplaces, unions, and other types of organizations and initiatives.

- Invest in publicly available information for prospective learners about where remote and in-person ESOL learning opportunities exist in their communities.

- Support leadership development and practitioner professional development to strengthen capacity of the field to deliver quality remote learning services.

- Require digital literacy as a new foundational skill to be offered through all programs and assessed as a measurable outcome, and reportable as a negotiated performance target.

- Invest in development of shared digital capability standards/competency statements at various levels that are viewed as relevant in ESOL programs nation-wide

- Fund the development of digital literacy and other content areas (e.g., citizenship, CCRS) OER and platforms to find, adapt, create, and curate reusable learning objects to facilitate personalized accelerated learning.

- Ensure that a portion of any authorized apprenticeship and work-based learning funds can be used to support remote ESOL and adult digital literacy skills development.

- Allow the use of federal student aid to support participation in tuition-based remote IET learning programs at the postsecondary level.

- Embed remote learning supports and provisions for immigrant and refugee foreign-trained professionals in the Professionals' Access to Health Workforce Integration Act or similar legislation.

- Ensure adult education is fully included and benefits from any federal Digital Equity Act type legislation.

- Fund research on comparative outcome studies of in-person and remote Adult ESOL learning opportunities using credible counterfactuals (IES).

This brief first sets the stage for understanding policy and practice recommendations by describing the context of adult ESOL delivery and providing a summary of the descriptive research project. The brief then highlights key findings and innovative practices and models, names and discusses facilitating conditions, identifies areas where more research is needed, and offers policy recommendations that can facilitate scaling up effective remote instructional models for English language learning. It is complemented by eight program profile case studies, as well as shorter profiles in the report *Creating Equitable Access to Remote Adult ESOL: Multiple Contexts, Distinct Populations, and Purposes,* and a *Promising ESOL Practices* document highlighting specific practices and innovations from the programs we interviewed.