

Teaching Tips

Beginners and Computers

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Although low-level, sometimes low-literacy, adult ESL students increasingly have access to computers at school, at work, and sometimes even in the home, many of them do not. Taking students with little or no access to computers and low or no computer literacy skills to the lab only once or twice each term is usually not enough. What is learned in one visit is often forgotten before the next.

In response, three PCC sites piloted a computer-assisted language learning (CALL) project. This project incorporates one hour per week in the computer lab into the core nine-hour classes in Levels 1 to 3 of PCC's eight-level program. At all levels, the classes support and extend the language content of the core class while integrating computer literacy. Over time, we want students to become more self-sufficient as computer users and as language learners, and by the end of Level 3, we want them to be able to use email and register for classes on-line. To promote this, we give students handouts with step-by-step instructions which they can later use on their own.

In all three levels, we teach basic computer vocabulary, mouse skills, keyboarding, and some basic word processing. For Levels 2 and 3, we also usually teach other email and website navigation vocabulary. To help students become comfortable using a mouse, we teach them how to use the mouse and give them practice on a variety of Internet sites, depending on the students' level and experience. To teach keyboarding, we introduce important vocabulary and then have the students practice with a free Internet keyboarding site. We also introduce students to basic word-processing skills and the associated vocabulary.

In our labs, we use various software programs such as *Live Action English Interactive*, *Oxford Picture Dictionary Interactive*, and *Learn to Speak English*. These programs provide listening, speaking, reading, writing, pronunciation, and grammar practice that supports core class content. Furthermore, students in all three levels use the voice-recording program, Wimba, to post messages to a discussion board or send voice emails to their teacher.

In addition to using these software programs, we use the Internet both for skills practice and for content-based activities. Many websites, such as *manythings.org*, offer excellent skills practice for our students. Examples of activities that extend classroom content include looking up and comparing weather forecasts, researching local attractions and planning transportation to get there, finding information about wedding customs, and reading online job ads.

Obviously we could not have done any of this without access to well-maintained computer labs. It also helped that some of us were able to work together under a curriculum development grant to write objectives and generate resources.

Student response has been overwhelmingly appreciative, and anecdotes reveal that students are indeed using their new skills. In the end, we have learned that building computer literacy is like learning a language—consistent and repeated practice is the prerequisite to competence that extends beyond the classroom.

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