Implementing the Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm®:

Applications for Literacy-level through Academic ESL

by Nan Frydland

One of the toughest challenges for even experienced ESOL teachers can be adapting their instruction to the needs of adult learners with low literacy skills. Teacher education at the undergraduate level focuses almost exclusively on the K-12 environment and even graduate programs in TESOL rarely differentiate between highly-literate students and Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE). I was lucky to find one that did. How? After a few years of successful teaching as an adjunct in an Intensive English Program at a four-year college, I found myself delivering instruction at a community center serving a population of day laborers with an average of a fifth-grade education. In addition to having little formal education, most of these men had not attended school for ten or twenty years. Despite my independent learner skills, and deep readings of Paulo Freire and Bonny Norton, I struggled to reach and hold the interest of a burgeoning classroom, and I could not find the solution to this dilemma.

At the 2009 TESOL conference held in a Denver blizzard, I was introduced to Helaine Marshall, like me, a former student of John Fanselow, and a fierce advocate for the emancipation of classrooms that unsuccessfully serve adult learners. Dr. Marshall empathized with my conundrum at the community center and offered a solution: enroll in the teacher education master's program she ran, serendipitously, fifteen minutes from my home near New York City. Dr. Marshall had developed a framework for teaching low-literacy adults while working with Hmong refugees in Wisconsin in the 1980s. The Hmong, coming from an oral culture, had no formal written language and the instructors who first tried to teach them English had not prevailed. Dr. Marshall devised a way to connect to these learners who had brought with them, she would explain, very different priorities, beliefs, and expectations, from their teachers. The result was the Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm®, or MALP® (Marshall, 1998; Marshall & DeCapua, 2013). As a graduate student, I became trained in the MALP® model because it was aligned philosophically with the educational research I found most compelling: John Fanselow's belief in the power of observation; Paulo Freire's liberation pedagogy; Gay's Culturally Responsive Teaching (2010); Moll's "funds of knowledge," (Amanti, Gonzalez & Moll, 2005); and David Nunan's learner-centered curriculum.

The Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm (MALP®) (Marshall & DeCapua, 2013) is a model of instruction that addresses the needs of learners who come from collectivist cultures, especially those students with limited or interrupted education (SLIFE). These learners struggle

with Western-style formal education based on their different cultural perspectives and worldview, as well as their expectations, values, and beliefs (Hofstede, 2001; Lurhmann, 2014; Triandis, 1995; Watson, 2010). Rooted in Culturally Responsive Teaching (Gay, 2010), MALP® facilitates teachers' ability to (1) help learners overcome cultural dissonance; (2) utilize shared responsibility and oral transmission as students' familiar learning processes; and (3) focus on new activities for learning to transition to academic tasks while doing so through familiar topics and language (Marshall & DeCapua, 2013). What does this look like in real life?

Implementation: Three components of MALP®

(1) *Help learners overcome cultural dissonance by establishing interconnectedness and creating immediate relevance* (Marshall & DeCapua, 2013). In students' home countries, teachers are members of a web of relationships developed in the community, relied upon for many things outside the academic sphere. In order to create the kinds of relationships between students and teachers that will best serve learners, teachers need to accommodate this preference for close relationships. One way to begin establishing interconnectedness is for the teacher to model the task of showing a cellphone photo and sharing some personal information connected to the photo. The teacher elicits questions from the students and then invites students to follow suit with their own photos.

Another activity for the first class is for students and teacher to share basic information, such as their name, home country, the language(s) they speak, the work they did in their home countries and the work they do now, the size of their family, and the neighborhood in which they live. All of this data is provided by students who dictate to the teacher, who then writes the information on a white board or butcher paper in the form of a chart (see below for description of scroll and photo of chart). In this way, the content and language students provide is familiar and immediately relevant to students; and learners can connect the language they speak to the words they see, giving a meaningful connection to literacy.

In subsequent classes, students are invited to share their experience and knowledge about each topic before the teacher delivers a lesson. This is how the value of students' prior knowledge and lived experiences (Amanti, C., Gonzalez, N., and Moll, L., 2005; Gay, 2010) is recognized, while also facilitating their learning by reducing cultural dissonance.

(2) *Utilize shared responsibility and oral transmission as students' familiar learning processes* (Marshall & DeCapua, 2013).

Because students from collectivist cultures are accustomed to learning by speaking and listening, in the ESL classroom the focus is on oral transmission until students are comfortable transitioning to the written word. The environment within which students acquire knowledge in their home countries is usually in groups within their community, whether friends, relatives, or neighbors. Because they naturally rely on each other, rather than competing with each other, in the classroom it is important for tasks to be designed so that students share responsibility in addition to the individual accountability that the traditional classroom demands.

In order to maximize shared responsibility and oral transmission, I developed a scroll-based curriculum that replaces mainstream workbooks. These are typically overloaded with unfamiliar tasks, texts, and graphics that are simply bewildering to students. Instead, using large rolls of white butcher paper, I attach a six-foot long piece of paper to a wall or white board with painter's tape. When students are asked to share their experience and knowledge, they dictate answers that are written on the board. At times, students help each other by speaking in their native languages. In a class where my students were native speakers of French or Spanish, I sometimes scaffolded English text by using their native languages, and I have found that students are also interested in acquiring some words in their classmates' first languages!

The charts that students dictate are typed up in large-size fonts, accompanied by pictures if possible, and distributed to the class for review. Here is an example of a chart that students folded and put in their pockets to use as a study guide and reference tool, at home or on the job.

MALP® Pocket Guide

| Jobs/Occupations	Activities/Actions	Tools and Things	Materials and Stuff
landscaper	mow the lawn rake the leaves blow the leaves weed the garden	lawn mower rake leaf blower trowel shovel buckets bag wheelbarrow	gas rags oil mulch fertilizer water

painter
  outside/
  exterior
 	
painter
  inside/interior
	wash houses
	sand decks
	scrape old paint
	
	paint walls,
	ceilings, trim,
	doors
	sand and spackle
		power washer
		scraper
		brushes
		rollers
		buckets
		gloves
			paint
			spackle
			varnish
			primer
			paint thinner
			
			protective glasses

When students transition to writing, communicative activities are designed to encourage cooperative, rather than competitive, work.

(3) Engage learners at all levels of literacy with projects that will form the foundation for acquiring academic tasks (Marshall & DeCapua, 2013).

Projects that allow students to contribute and be involved even if they can't attend every class, are a positive way to encourage student attendance and commitment to learning. A project might be assembling instructions on how to get public transportation to the classroom; gathering information that newcomers need to adjust to living in a new city; or compiling a collection of photos of students and simple statements. Creating booklets from the information students gather then provides texts for current and future students. These "theme" booklets

connect older students to newcomers; they contribute to the creation of the learning community; and they further students' connection to meaningful literacy.

While working at a community center that served a population of Latin American day laborers, we created a project called "Coming to the U.S." A part of each class was devoted to compiling the information, first on a map drawn on white butcher paper, of the names of students, the year they came to the U.S., and how they came.
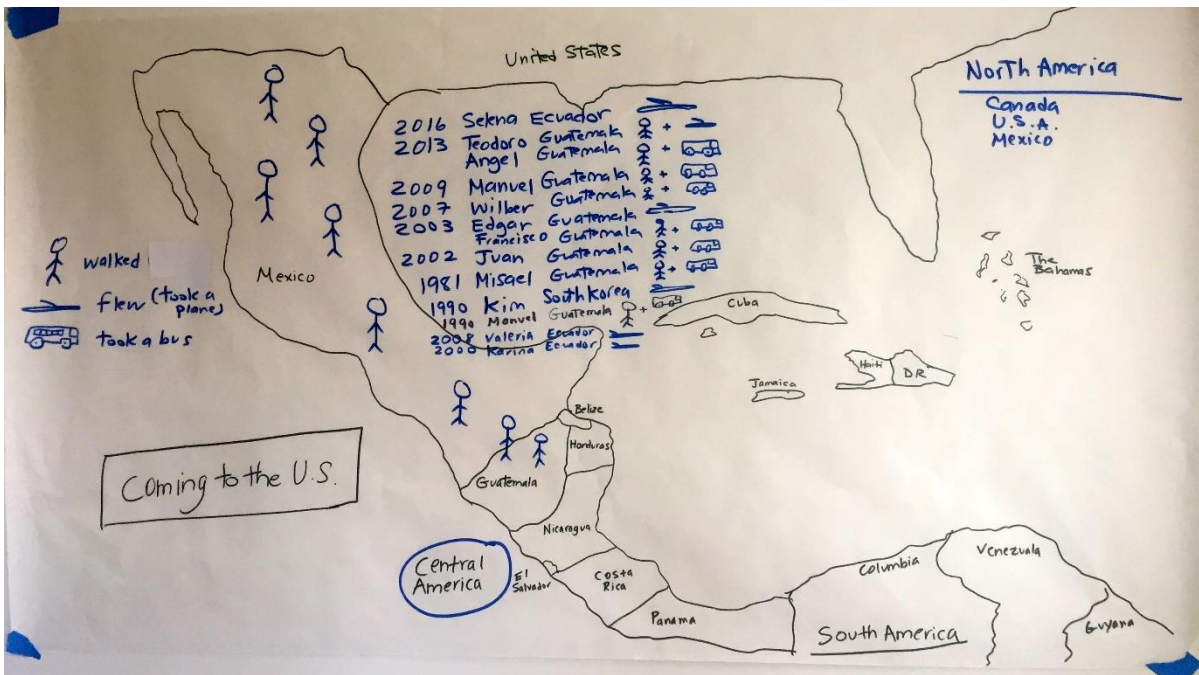
A map and data form the basis of a project called "Coming to the U.S."

In later classes, students ask each other what year they came, how they came, and enter the information on a simple chart. The teacher collects the charts and enters the information on a master chart that is used in class for more challenging activities, to engage students in academic ways of thinking. The culminating activity was differentiated as the range of skills varied in the class. The most advanced students wrote short paragraphs about their experiences coming to the U.S. while the low literacy students asked each other simple questions and filled in a chart with the answers.

While MALP was originally developed in response to the needs of students from oral cultures, its principles are applicable across the spectrum of learners. I discovered this when I encountered a group of college students enrolled in an Intensive English Program with many strong skills and education but who were struggling with the Roman alphabet and not connecting to the curriculum. They had never experienced a classroom

setting in which their opinions or lives were valued, and it took a while for them to be able to express themselves freely. Using the scroll technology, I had them create a chart with their favorite music groups, apps, hobbies and movies. I asked learners to write about school in their home countries of China and South Korea. In this way, I established interconnectedness and created immediate relevance. From their weekly journal writing I discovered topics that would motivate them to deliver more than perfunctory responses. Their midterm and culminating projects were producing two collections of essays which they illustrated and compiled outside of class. Normally reserved young people, struggling with the English language, became excited writers and readers of English in the course of a semester.

In another instance, I was teaching beginners in an IEP who were from Saudi Arabia and South Korea. I was taken aback when a male Muslim student proclaimed that he would not allow his wife, a classmate, to speak to male students in the classroom. I rearranged the student desks in a circle. It altered the perception of direct face-to-face contact, and there were no objections to speech being exchanged in this setup. These students also benefitted from the scroll as a way to exchange personal information and become closer to each other. We relied heavily on oral exchanges before using written language, which was scaffolded with familiar content. Finally, students delivered a research-based project in which they identified the world's major religions and their basic components in a graphic chart.

Here are some simple techniques that you can use to implement Culturally Responsive Teaching using MALP®:

- replace textbooks or content typically provided by the instructor with texts created with students in the classroom;
- employ project-based teaching, focusing on theme booklets, illustrated dictionaries, and personal narratives;
- ask learners to share their experience and knowledge about each topic that is introduced in the classroom and recognize that this information is as valuable as the information presented by the teacher.
- create handouts that incorporate learners' experience and knowledge (and possibly photos taken in class);
- introduce a game such as Bingo into the normal classroom routines, so that leaners have an opportunity to review vocabulary and pronunciation in a low-stakes, fun atmosphere (consider pencils and erasers as prizes); and
- use oral transmission as the primary form of communication until learners are comfortable transitioning to the written word.

When teachers are willing to *mutually adapt* their ways of thinking and learning to those of their students, learners are more likely to overcome the cultural dissonance that results from learning in a radically different environment. Using the Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm, learners began to bridge the gap between their familiar ways of learning and formal education in the U.S., and to develop a meaningful context for their language acquisition.

References

Amanti, C., Gonzalez, N., and Moll, L., eds. (2005). *Funds of knowledge: theorizing practices in households, communities, and classrooms.* New York: Routledge.

Auerbach, E. (1996). *From the community to the community: A guidebook for participatory literacy training*. New York: Routledge.

Bigelow, M. (2010). *Mogadishu on the Mississippi: Language, racialized identity, and education in a new land.* New York: Wiley-Blackwell.

Dewey, J. (1938*). Democracy and Education*. New York: Simon and Brown.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed.* New York: Continuum.

Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally responsive teaching theory, research, and practice (2nd ed.)* New York: Teachers College Press.

Hofstede, G. (2001). *Cultures and organizations: Software of the mind.* New York: McGraw-Hill.

Lurhmann, T.M. (2014, December). Wheat people vs. rice people: Why are some cultures more individualistic than others? *The New York Times*, p. 31.

Marshall, H. W. (1998). A mutually adaptive learning paradigm for Hmong students. *Cultural Circles, 3*: 135–149.

Marshall, H. W. & DeCapua, A. (2013). *Making the transition: culturally responsive teaching for struggling language learners*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Triandis, H. (1995). *Individualism & collectivism*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Watson, J.A. (2010). *Interpreting across the abyss: A hermeneutic exploration of initial literacy development by high school English language learners with limited formal schooling.* Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota.

NAN FRYDLAND earned an M.S.Ed. TESOL (2014) and an M.F.A. in writing (2006) from Long Island University. She has presented the findings from her teaching at LESLLA and TESOL conferences around the world. <nanfrydland@gmail.com>

For more information on the Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm, please visit the sites below:

http://malpeducation.com   http://malp.pbworks.com