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# Language Learners: The Learner/Tutor Relationship

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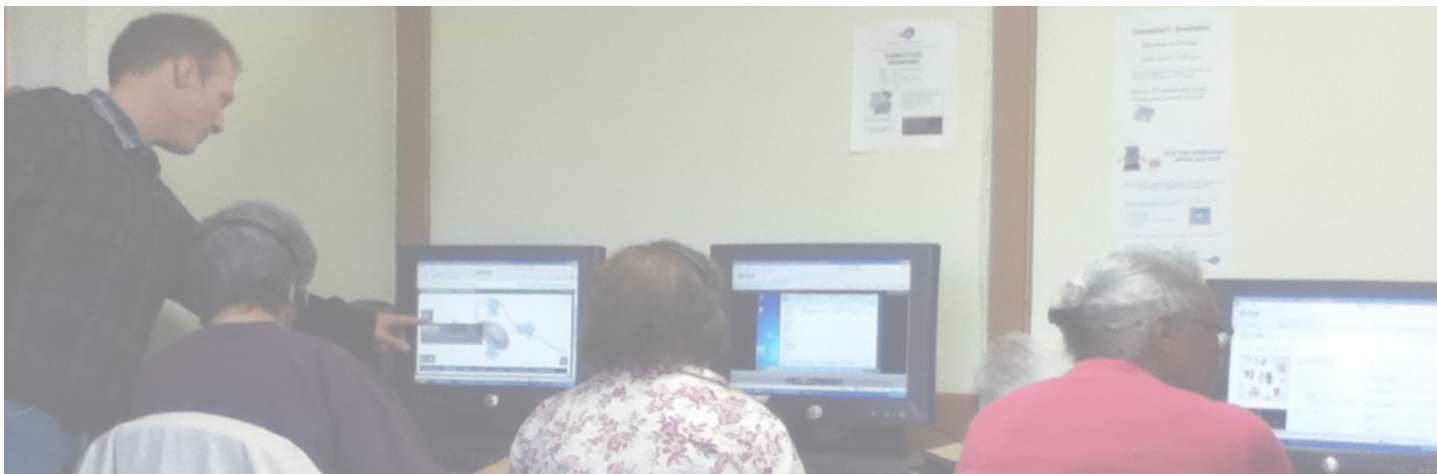
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# The Learner/Tutor Relationship

## Digital Literacy Acquisition in Brief:
## *What Research Tells Us about Language Learners*

## *Overview*

These findings are from an Institute of Museum and Library Services funded research project that interviewed more than 100 participants within a multi-state Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) Sustainable Broadband Adoption (SBA) project. The BTOP project included six lead partners who developed local networks of community organizations to provide adults with an opportunity to learn to use computers and the Internet.

While these networks created a variety of implementation strategies and ways to serve learners' needs, they shared these key features:
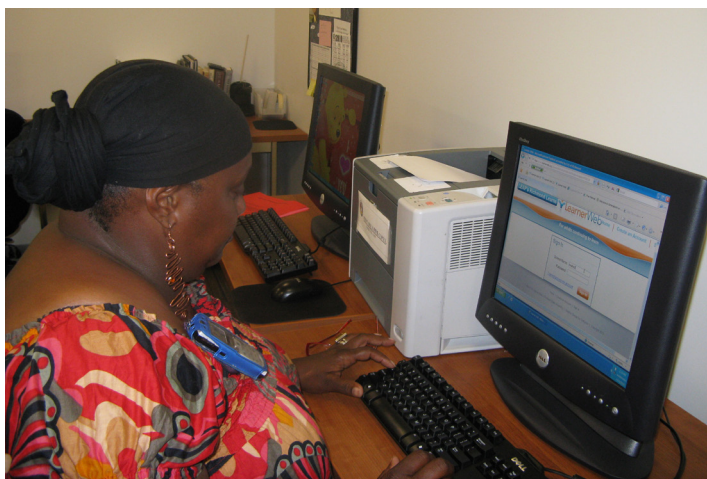


- *curriculum on the Learner Web, an online platform designed specifically for adult learners, which included digital literacy material in English and Spanish*
- *in-person tutor support*
- *the opportunity to work at their own pace and identify their own goals*



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# The Learner/Tutor Relationship

## Key Discoveries

Although tutors were well-meaning in directing learners to use the program in their native language, there were times when they had to make adjustments to accommodate the needs of the learners. Learners and tutors worked together to identify what was the best way for learning to occur.

- Learners preferred working with tutors who were bilingual, even if the tutor didn't know the learner's native language. Because bilingual tutors have had a language learning experience, they appeared to be specially suited for working with language learners.

- Tutors recognized that the language skills of the learner were not the problem. Instead, the tutors recognized that it was their job to find the resources that were most effective. They did this by working with the learners to understand the linguistic strengths of the learner and chose the most appropriate resources.

- To understand the needs of the learners, tutors had to listen to what the learners wanted. Being a Spanish speaker did not always mean that a learner was comfortable learning in Spanish. For some, the English resources were more easily understood than the Spanish resources.

- Tutors also had to be knowledgeable about the content available so they could direct the learners to the resource that would be the best match for their language skills.

- Tutors used the learners' language skills (for example, being able to read Spanish, learn in English, and speak Spanglish) as a way to build knowledge rather than seeing learners as being English deficient.

## Voices from the Field

When asked about working with learners for whom English is a second language, one bilingual tutor explained how he responds to the learners' needs.

*"Some can't speak it, read it, or write it, but they understand it. And there are some that can speak it, but they can't write it. There are some that can read it, they can't write. It's just differences, and you just, you gotta find what makes them comfortable."*

~ Tutor

## On the Ground

Raul was a bilingual tutor in a lab that had a large number of learners who identified Spanish as their preferred language. Although he preferred that learners used the program in their first language, he understood that the learners wanted to improve their English skills as well as their digital literacy skills. By building a relationship that is respectful of the learners' needs and skills and being flexible in his use of language, Raul was able to make sure the learners were grasping the content regardless of the language they were learning in.

*"I'll explain it in one language, then the other. That way they hear it both English and Spanish. And then I've had some tell me their program is in Spanish, their main way of learning is in Spanish, but they understand English. but they don't know how to speak it or write it, or even read it. But they can understand the words and what it means….So I'll sometimes tell them in English, and they understand. And then they themselves translate it right into Spanish, and they know exactly what they're doing."*

~ Tutor

# The Learner/Tutor Relationship

## *What Do These Findings Mean For Your Work?*

This is really important information for those of us working with English language learners who are also learning digital literacy skills. I was struck that tutors who have themselves learned another language are the best teachers, whether or not they speak the same first language as the learner. The shared experience of being a language learner allows them to know how to adapt their approach to find what works. This has important implications for tutor recruitment and training.

~ Program Administrator



## *Acknowledgements & Further Information*

These research efforts were informed and supported by a National Advisory Committee and a Research Applications Committee made up of professionals who support adult learners.

More information about the project, research findings, publications, and project data can be found in PDX Scholar at:
http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/digital_literacy_acquisition/

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## *Digital Literacy Acquisition in Brief: What Research Tells Us about...*

### *Language Learners*

- Tutors' Perspectives
- The Role of Online Materials
- The Learner/Tutor Relationship
- Learners' Perspectives

### *Program Design*

- Tutor-facilitated Digital Literacy Acquisition
- The Learner Path
- Volunteering in a Digital Literacy Program
- Learning Digital Skills in a Time-limited Program
- Learning Digital Skills in a Corrections Setting

### *Tutors*

- Personal Qualities of Tutors
- Tutoring Strategies and Organizing Learning
- The Tutor/Learner Relationship

### *Learners*

- Development of Self-confidence
- Measuring Success
- Impact
- Learners Who Become Tutors
- Self-paced Learning