Research Briefs and Case Studies | Tutor-Facilitated Digital Literacy Acquisition in Hard-to-Serve Populations: A Research Project

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Language Learners: The Role of Online Materials

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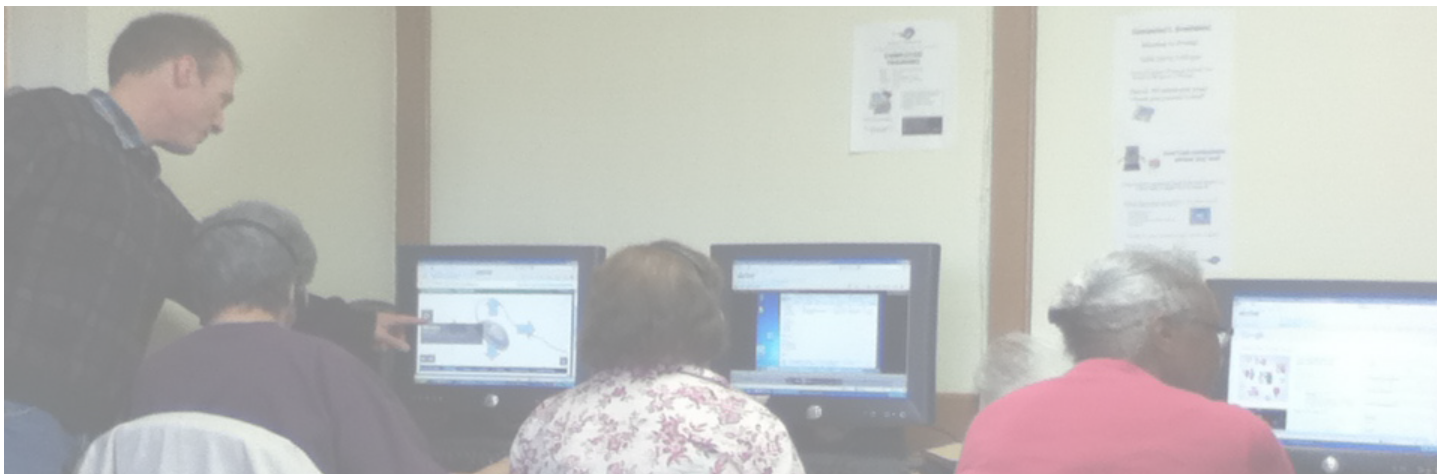
The Role of Online Materials

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*

Literacy Language & Technology Research

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Key Discoveries

- Multimedia content and games were a needed and valuable form of support. Listening to audio and watching videos helped learners understand the content and stay engaged. Games provided practice for important skills, especially mousing and typing. Additionally, the ability to choose between English or Spanish online materials (using a language toggle) allowed learners and tutors to select the material that best fit the needs of the learners. The tutors and learners used the language toggle flexibly depending on the needs of the learner.

- Out of 12,127 learners, 9,906 (81%) used the Learner Web in English, and 2,213 (18%) used the Spanish version (Figure 1). The percentages are rounded, and do not equal 100% because the data were not available from all of the participants.
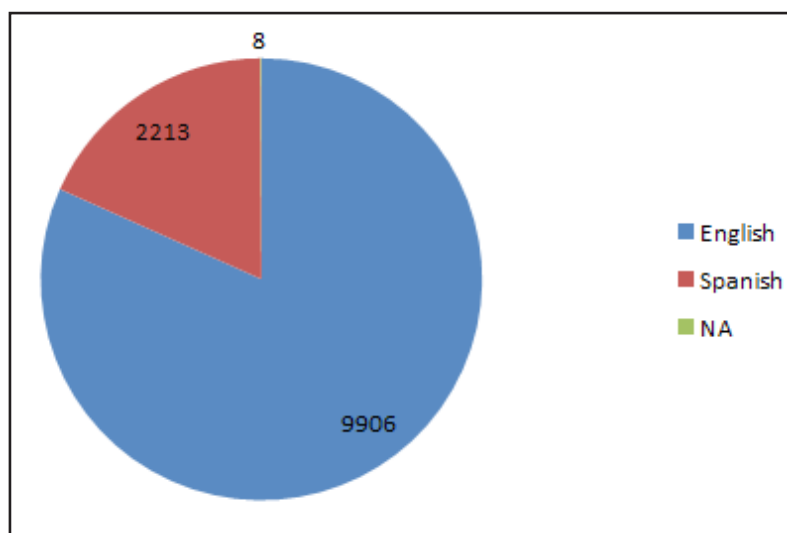

Figure 1. Comparison of the number of learners who used Learner Web in English or Spanish

- Among all users, 2051 (17%) used the language toggle at least once, and 220 (2%) used the toggle four or more times (Figure 2).

- The 17% of those who used the language toggle at least once is closely proportional to the number of those who used the Learner Web in Spanish. Having the toggle between languages may have encouraged Spanish speakers to at least try some element of the program in English.

- The language toggle allowed the learners to use the resources in English, if the tutor felt the learner had a good understanding of spoken English. However, the tutors would have some learners take the quizzes in Spanish. Other times, the tutors would have the learners use the English version of the online materials, but then verbally repeat the content in Spanish as a way to check for understanding.

Voices from the Field

A learner described how using the online materials felt fun and unthreatening, so much so that at first she didn't see herself as using her time productively. Eventually, she realized that by playing, she was learning.

"[At first,] some times I thought I was wasting my time here. This is kinda nonsense because you have to play with a mouse… No I didn't come for this. But once you continue those little games, sometimes it's part of the learning… and it takes your fear. I don't know, all of a sudden, I realized that I was playing with the computer. I was doing things on the computer, and I was looking for, searching for, certain answers, looking for things."

~ Learner

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On the Ground

One tutor described how a learner started learning in Spanish, did a number of the plans, then asked the tutor to reset her Learner Web account so she could redo the lessons in English. Another tutor described how using the program in English while sitting next to another learner who was using it in Spanish allowed the learner to master content while also gaining confidence in English. As the tutor noted,

"She has started to talk to me in English all the time. When I met her, she would have brought me a note written… She wrote things down for me and had someone read, but now she actually speaks off the cuff."

The availability of learning material in English and Spanish, combined with the ability to switch language at any time in the learning process, can be used creatively to support learner needs.

Key Discoveries

- Although it was possible to toggle between languages in the middle of a lesson, most learners stayed in one language for the duration of the lesson. Once they completed the lesson, they would use the language toggle to repeat the lesson in the second language. This repetition served as a review of the material while building language skills.

- Even though Spanish might have been the primary language of a learner, at times the tutor or the learner would want to use the English resources. In some cases, this was when the tutor felt the English resource was better than the Spanish resource. Other times, the learner felt the Spanish material was too difficult, and the English version was easier to understand. This was especially true for information presented in videos. Spanish speaking learners may not have been able to read the material in English, but were able to understand a video in English.

- The multimodal nature of the material supported the English Language Learners. Audio, videos, and the use of graphics lessened dependence on reading in either language and allowed the learners to grasp content regardless of literacy and language skills.

- The addition of voiceover reading of content was added later to further support learners with limited English literacy. Although learners might not have the skills to read English fluently, adding the voiceover to reading material helped the learners by allowing them to hear the pronunciation of words. This can be especially helpful for learning computer and Internet specific vocabulary.
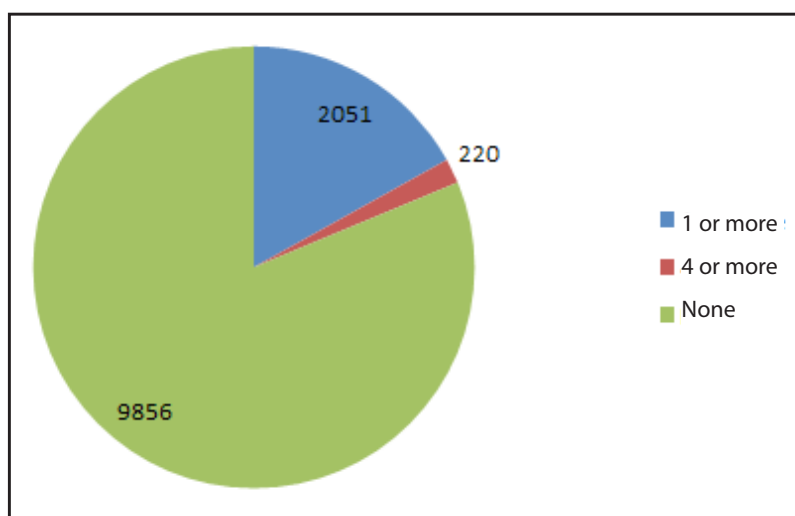

Figure 2. Number of learners who switched between English and Spanish content 1 or more, 4 or more, or zero times

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What Do These Findings Mean For Your Work?

With almost 2/3 of our participants being English Language Learners, we soon realized that having good resources in both English and Spanish is imperative to the successful completion of a plan. As we work on creating new learning plans in Spanish and English, we are noticing how often times websites do not have good resources in Spanish. We are trying to either create our own, or find good English resources that are easy to listen to or watch. We now look for learning plans that have an abundance of video and voiceover rather than all text.

~ 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/

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

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- Learners' Perspectives

Program Design

- Tutor-facilitated Digital Literacy Acquisition
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Tutors

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Learners

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

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