Announcer

In this episode Jayme is joined by Dr. Patsy Egan, Director of ATLAS at Hamline University, and a member of the expert panel for the creation of the English Language Proficiency Standards for Adult Education.

Jayme Adelson-Goldstein
Patsy, I’m so glad that you could be our inaugural conversation for Oxford Adult ESL Conversations. Welcome.

Patsy Egan
Thank you. It’s a pleasure to be here.

Jayme
I thought that we could maybe start our conversation talking about what’s been and what’s constant, because there’s so much flux.

Patsy
Yeah, a lot’s happened in recent years. For sure. I know just since I started my current position, the College and Career Readiness Standards have come out, and WIOA was passed, the GED changed hands—well it didn’t change hands, but a new version came out. And, just a lot has happened just in the last few years with Adult Education. As ESL educators, we’re in the thick of it for sure.

Jayme
So what can we look on that we know we do, and feel a sense of constancy about that?

Patsy
Well, I think, you know what we do is we help immigrants and refugees to find their voice in their new communities. So the big picture has not shifted. That’s what we do: we teach language and literacy and life skills to those students who are new to the country. We also put a high priority on social language. We know our students perhaps don’t get as much exposure to English outside of our classrooms, so they may or may not have opportunities for practice outside of our classroom. So we emphasize social language, oral language. We know that oral language is the basis for literacy, and we also know that generally out in their communities, particularly as newcomers, they need to speak and listen a lot. So that is what we do and what we do very well.

Jayme
I think that the teachers I’ve spoken with have been so anxious because they’re comparing what they know their learners need with what they’re hearing that they should be teaching. So we’re trying to create that balance between the skill sets every adult needs in the 21st century, and the life skill information beyond survival skills that in some cases aren’t the skills we’re talking about—the academic employability skills, certainly the critical thinking skills that our learners already have but don’t have the language to demonstrate necessarily—aren’t those life skills?
Patsy
Exactly. And I think it’s different if you’re working with folks that are very new to the country who do need some of that how to go the grocery store, how to open a bank account—those types of life skills—as opposed to those students who have figured some of those basic things out already. And they’re ready for more. They’re ready for more career pathways work. They’re ready for pre-academic work, in a sense that they’re headed for post-secondary opportunities of some kind of career training. Or they’ve, you know, maxed out their current job and are ready to become a leader in their position or are ready to branch out to something new. Many of our students come with highly transferable skills that simply kind of need the English and literacy to do that here. Other students come with skills that are difficult to transfer to today’s workforce in the US, and so they need to look into some training or other educational opportunities in order to access some new career, perhaps something that they can do that will be family-sustaining and meaningful to them. To do that of course requires not survival English, but something much, much more.

Jayme
Yeah, and I think that brings us really to what the changes are for our curriculum and in terms of the standards. How have you been able to comfort the instructors that come to you concerned that maybe the skills are too challenging for the learners or that the teachers don’t necessarily have the skills to impart the skills.

Patsy
Right. Yeah, it’s really challenging. And teacher who are concerned about that are rightly so. It’s quite a shift. I think part of it is just looking at how the field has shifted. One thing that—I have a thing for metaphors—a metaphor that has helped me is, Portland State has a wonderful professor, Steve Reder, who has this great metaphor for Adult Education. He once spoke at a conference and talked about how Adult Education really used to be kind of a parking lot. It’s a place where you go, you spend some time, it’s quiet, you get some stuff done, and then when you’re ready, you move on. So there’s sort of a parking lot approach to Adult Education. And he’s like ‘those days are over.’ It’s really an intersection, and it’s busy. And people are arriving from different destinations and headed to different places. They’re going at different paces with different skills sets. And we’re really in the thick of it. We’re in the middle directing traffic.

Jayme
Well can we have a bike lane?

Patsy
I know. And there’s so much happening. Some people are on a speed lane, and other folks are really going to hang out there for a while, and that’s okay. It’s dynamic. There have to be options for students to opt-out when it’s just not the right time for them to be in school, and easy ways for them to get back in, and things that work with a population that we work with that has so many differing needs and differing constraints in their daily lives. It’s just a really challenging, multifaceted world we live in, and intersection is not a bad metaphor for that.

Jayme
No, I think it’s a brilliant one. And I think that the College and Career Readiness Standards for Adult Education were problematic for all of us in the field initially because they were so clearly not written with the English language learner in mind. Once the English Language Proficiency Standards came out, that was a sigh of relief heard around the field. And I’m wondering, are you finding that people are
finding their way a little more easily in terms of developing lessons that help students achieve those standards?

**Patsy**
I do. I think we got responses that are mixed, as they will be. But one thing is – you’re absolutely right is—the CCRS, or the College and Career Readiness Standards, where not written specifically with Adult ESL students in mind; they were written for all of Adult Education. And so I think that’s part of this, kind of recognizing the ESL teachers’ place in this larger field, and really thinking of us as being one point on a trajectory our students are on to do whatever is next, whether it is career training, or post-secondary options, or high school credentials, or a promotion, or simply being able to have deeper community ties and be better parents and citizens. All of those things are worthy goals that we can help our students with. So the question then has become how do we help our non-native speakers to get there? The ELP Standards, or the English Language Proficiency Standards when they just came out in the fall of 2016, I think there was a sigh of relief, but also ‘Oh gosh, another set of standards I have to learn.’ Right? So that’s why I feel like it’s a bit of a mixed reaction, understandably so. It’s hard now, it will not always be this hard. But learning these and figuring how these connect with CCRS actually makes our jobs much, much easier. For me, the way that I think about the English Language Proficiency Standards is the language lift. CCRS has defined the skills students need to do well in post-secondary career training, and community involvement, etc. We know that that’s what’s there. It does not however define the language demand. And that’s what the ELP Standards do—is really define okay, what does that mean as far as language? And it does so across five levels of proficiency, so it’s complicated, there’s a lot there, but it’s really rich. It’s really, I think, a terrific resource for English educators who are looking at their state’s adopted standards and thinking ‘Okay, what does that mean for me as a language teacher?’ Well, here’s what it means in the big red book.

**Jayme**
I do think it’s brilliant and I’ve enjoyed the intellectually chewy activity of diving into it. One of the things that I’ve been able to show teachers that’s made them so happy is the chart on scaffolds for instruction.

**Patsy**
Yeah, I kind of wish that was, like, 17 pages long. There’s so much we could say about the scaffolds. There’s one page, I’m glad it’s there, there’s great stuff, but there’s just so much more to say. And I think as English educators, that’s what we bring, right? That’s our superpower, are these scaffolds and supports. I think that’s the really interesting part for people who define themselves as English teachers to really dig into, is definitely how do I make this accessible to my learners, and all of the great stuff that we as English teachers know how to do is where we can really help our students to reach those really rigorous CCR Standards. And there is good reason to do that, because that’s what the film has defined as necessary for them to succeed, and it’s not really up to us to decide whether or not our students are going to college or not. It’s up to us to make them ready so that that’s an option.

**Jayme**
Absolutely. And whether it’s college, or workplace training, or advocating for your child in school, advocating for yourself, all of the same skills cross over. So, I think it’s a really brilliant document with ten standards to work from.

**Patsy**
Ten standards. It’s not that many, right?
Jayme
Right. It’s totally manageable. Ten standards, ten guiding principles, and a whole page of scaffolds—what more could you want?

Patsy
Exactly, it’s great stuff.

Jayme
I really appreciate all of the time you’ve given. I’m wondering if there’s one thing that you could leave the listeners with, that you would like them to take away, what would that be?

Patsy
I think one thing is, one, it’s all going to be okay. I think there’s a lot of pressure and urgency around it, and people feel overwhelmed, and that’s a really easy place to go to. But, this is change that best happens in baby steps. Just one little thing at a time. When I hear teachers say, “I can’t get this in my head. It’s too much. There aren’t materials. My students aren’t ready for these kinds of complex texts. I can’t. I can’t.” there’s a real…. They want to do well, right? We love what we do and want to do well for our learners. So there’s a sense of, “I’m not sure this is what’s best.” But I think, just reminding ourselves that we’re already doing it, you’re already there. You’re already doing the work by simply considering these shifts, and by considering this common language that’s been put out to the field. And by getting to know the ABE teacher down the hall, or thinking about incorporating more information-rich, content-rich texts. You’re already doing it, so just keep doing it. There’s a lot to internalize, and it’s not going to happen overnight. When we talk to teachers here in Minnesota, we’re saying think of it as a five year process. This is not going to happen overnight. But do something consciously and purposefully every month or two, and watch your learners. Our learners are still what makes us show up every day. If we can start observing positive change and impact on our learners, that’s what’s going to drive us to keep with this really difficult change.

Jayme
I couldn’t agree more. And I do think that deep breathing and laughing is also very useful.

Patsy
Absolutely.

Jayme
And that kind of goes to your it’s all going to be okay.

Patsy
Because it really will. Ten years from now we’ll look back and say “Oh, wow. Really? We’ve done a lot haven’t we? And it’s so much better now.” That’s my prediction. We’ll look back and say that was really hard and that was a lot of work, and we’re still learning, but it’s better now and our students are better served today because we did this work.

Jayme
What a great take-away. Thank you Patsy. It’s been a pleasure having an Oxford Adult ESL Conversation with you.
Patsy
My pleasure. Thank you Jayme.

Announcer
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