
In this episode Jayme is joined by Carolyn Nason, Instructional Chair for the Department of ESL at Milwaukee Area Technical College, to discuss the benefits of rigor-infused activities in the Adult ESL classroom.

Jayme Adelson-Goldstein
Well it’s a pleasure to welcome you to our Oxford Adult ESL Conversation Carolyn.

Carolyn Nason
Why thank you Jayme. It’s great to be here.

Jayme
I think it’s worth noting that you and I first met as part of the LINCS ESL Pro project that went across ten states. And in Wisconsin, we were working specifically on increasing rigor: preparing English language learners for their work in academic, post-secondary career settings, enabling them to work with complex texts, manage academic language, and demonstrate their critical thinking. These were the main tenants of the work that we were doing together. Did I leave anything out?

Carolyn
Nope, you got them all.

Jayme
Good thing since I was part of the delivery system. It’s good that I managed to do that. I remember in particular that you had quite a response initially to the term ‘rigor.’ You and I met first virtually, in the community of practice that was online, and we were discussing people’s response to rigor, and I thought yours was particularly pithy.

Carolyn
I was just confused. It was the first time I’d ever heard the term ‘rigor’ used in connection with education. I had a vague idea, I knew rigor was difficulty, or challenging, or, I don’t know, more work, but I didn’t know how we could possibly do this in the classroom. And then I kind of consoled myself and figured, well this has got to be for the upper levels. This just can’t be for my low beginners. Learning English is challenging enough for them. How would I possibly add rigor to what they’re already doing? So, yeah, I was pretty skeptical. But we went through the training, and little by little I came around, and I actually tried a couple of the activities in my class. The results were absolutely astounding. The energy levels were high. We were feeding off each other. It was exciting. And this pervasive feeling of accomplishment. It was just fantastic.

Jayme
Oh well we gotta get the details on that. I’m not going to let you get away with all of those great adjectives. Everyone is probably thinking “How? How?”

Carolyn
Well it’s really hard to describe. You know. I would say to the listeners that it would be really great for you to try it and experience it for yourself.
Jayme
Let’s take an example of something that you did, and then we can talk about the benefits and challenges of it. So what was something that you brought into the classroom that you “rigorized”?

Carolyn
Okay, well. In our book we had an activity on daily routines and chores. And I added categorizing to it in order to add rigor to the activity.

Jayme
So it was originally labelling if I remember correctly? They were labelling pictures?

Carolyn
Right, it was just a memorizing kind of thing. And by having the students put things into categories, they really had to think a little bit deeper about each of the items.

Jayme
So how many categories did you give them?

Carolyn
I’ve done it a couple of different ways. It depends on the group. Sometimes I will give them the categories and ask them to put the items in. Sometimes if the group is a little higher, I’ll let them come up with their own categories. With the example of the daily routines and chores, we had all kinds of interesting categories come up: things I do, things my wife does, things the children do, things we do daily, weekly, and monthly, that kind of thing. The first time I did it the group, they struggled with it. They were challenged by it. One group finally got it, they finally got it, and they were like “Oh, yeah!” They started writing down the categories and working away. Well the other groups heard them and they were listening really hard, and they copied exactly what the first group did. So, it was ten minutes left of class and I thought this was such a failure, it was just awful. What can I do for the next ten minutes? This was just terrible. And I said, “Turn the paper over, and do it again.” And that turned out to be fantastic. That was just really amazing because they all came up with different categories. Then they were really cooking. It was just really great.

Jayme
Ah, so they kind of needed a model probably. But how cool that the students were their own model.

Carolyn
Yeah, it took us a little while to get going, but it worked.

Jayme
But you saw the struggle, right? I mean, that’s part of it. It’s very hard to let our learners struggle.

Carolyn
I did. Yeah. You have to step back and you just have to let them go and work through it. I think it was my colleague, Kristi Weisenburger, who said “I have to be comfortable when my students are uncomfortable.”

Jayme
What a great line.

Carolyn
I love that. Yeah, you just kind of have to let go. And, you know, they give you those big puppy dog eyes and say “Please help me teacher,” and you just have to step back and let them struggle through it. As Betsy said, that’s where the learning happens.
Jayme
Betsy Parish, right, right. So you’ve hit on one of the challenges: watching the struggle and the learners’ own sense of frustration in the struggle. Have you had opportunities to make that struggle more manageable for them, less frustrating?

Carolyn
Sure. Well, that’s the thing that’s so interesting about, well categorization, that’s my favorite thing. But, we can scaffold for the learners, and that helps them to be successful. You can differentiate in one classroom. So if you’ve got a group that’s really high level, don’t scaffold for them. And the other group, maybe they’re just really struggling, you can help them out by, like I said before, putting the names of the categories in for them, or even making it fill in the blank for them.

Jayme
That would especially be valuable for the beginning literacy level learner.

Carolyn
Right, and then they feel like they’re still part of the group, that they’re still doing the same activity, but they’re being successful at their own level too.

Jayme
Well, I really like that it can combine all three of the elements of rigor. So you’ve got an element of complexity, depending on the level, their either getting it through a complex set of vocabulary, or they’re getting the complexity in their thinking about the vocabulary, certainly the critical thinking. Do you ever have them have a big discussion about what goes in one category or the other?

Carolyn
Oh sure, yeah. They’re talking amongst themselves. It’s really fun. The focus totally gets off of me, and they’re working very hard on it.

Jayme
I think categorizing is a brilliant way to increase rigor in the classroom. Especially the way that you did it with the secondary set of categories, because that really shifts the learners’ perspective. For people that are wondering about other ways to increase rigor, let’s talk about the kinds of questions that we can ask in the classroom. What kind of question are you asking most frequently of your learners at this low level?

Carolyn
At the very, very low level, I ask them “Why do you think this?” or “How do you know?”, and to show me the evidence of the answer rather than relying on their memory so much.

Jayme
So they can go back and point to something in the picture, or they can circle something in the text.

Carolyn
Sure. Sometimes we point. Sometimes we highlight. Sometimes I have them come up to the board. We do it all different ways. I’m trying to get them away from that memorizing thing so they’re actually showing me the evidence of why to support their answer.

Jayme
So that puts them really at the analysis place in terms of their thinking, they’re analyzing. I’m thinking too that maybe in terms of role-plays or dialogues that we’re doing all the time with our learners, a way to add rigor could be to have them add an extra line to the conversation. You know, “What comes next?” kind of thing.
Carolyn
Oh, I like that. I’m going to use that.

Jayme
I think that the addition of rigor is a very creative part of our teaching process. Because we don’t have to invent the wheel; the materials are there. We have great teaching materials. But, we just need to figure out how to take learners to that next thinking level.

Carolyn
Yeah.

Jayme
How have your students responded to this?

Carolyn
Oh my gosh, they absolutely love it.

Jayme
Do they? That’s terrific.

Carolyn
It’s just amazing, and like I said, you know that energy level where you’ll get energy from them and it’s reciprocal? It’s just phenomenal. They love it. You know this whole rigor thing has changed the way I look at my students too. I tended too—well I wanted them to be successful. So I don’t know if I made things easier for them, but I tried to make them have successful moments. But this whole rigor thing is challenging, and is, like I said, their learning in that struggle. It’s changed my classroom. It’s made me look at the learners and see all of the complex tasks that they do every day. They just don’t have the language yet to make it visible—for me to see all of the things that they do. But, I had a student bring in a picture of a sign that we had in our school—Student Success—and she asked me what that meant. I thought “Well, I’ll give it a try.” It’s not something that I normally would have attempted to teach at level one, but I thought okay. So I gave them a couple of examples, and then they started to give some examples back to me. So we got it, we understood. And that was something that we were able to use the rest of the semester and refer back to. Yeah, that was success. That got excited about that.

Jayme
That’s wonderful.

Carolyn
And that made me feel a little more brave to even take on words like responsibility and choice, and respect, and literacy, and knowledge. I mean these are all things that as parents they’re hearing their kids’ teachers talking about, and they need to know these words as they move through higher levels of English language learning. They’re not necessarily concrete words that I would have tried before, but they’re exciting. It’s really fun.

Jayme
And one of the things that I’ve been talking about with a number of colleagues is that, just because a learner has a low level of education, or certainly, as you say, in the case of language, doesn’t mean that they aren’t operating at an adult level in their lives. And those words are adult words, and mature words that are part of their lives, so I’m sure they resonate more. So what challenges do you see for a teacher? If someone were to come to you and say, “I really want to do this but…” , how would you prepare them for the challenges?
Carolyn
Adding rigor can be messy. It seems like the first couple of times I did this categorization thing, it got messy. You have to kind of, as a teacher, I like to be in control of things, and you just kind of have to let things go. Give yourself permission that it’s not going to be perfect, that you can try it again and it will get better. We’re trying new things. I don’t think it’s that rigor is messy in itself; I think it’s just that we’re trying new things, and when you try new things it doesn’t always go as planned. But I’ve always found that there’s still tons of learning going on. The students are learning and they’re excited, and it’s generating this energy. It’s okay to be messy.

Jayme
Yeah, I think that’s really hard for those of us who plan down to the minute to let go of that. Well, I’m wondering if there’s one thing that you’d like listeners to take away from our conversation today?

Carolyn
Well, I hope they feel the excitement that I’ve been talking about. It’s certainly completely changed my teaching and my classroom. I hope that they would be open to the idea of adding rigor to their classroom. You know, I used to think the lightbulb moment, you know the ah-ha moment when the students go “Oh yeah, I get it,” that was what I loved and craved. But now it’s more seeing them working through a rigorous task. It’s changed. I like to see them working together, focusing on their task that they’re doing. So yeah, I definitely have been looking at my students in a different light. And the fact that they come halfway across the world, and start their lives over again, they put their children in school, they find apartments, they navigate all of the governmental systems that they need to navigate, that’s not easy stuff to do.

Jayme
No

Carolyn
My thinking now is that teaching them about these little narratives just isn’t going to cut it. It’s just not. They need more.

Jayme
Beautifully said.

Carolyn
Oh, thank you.

Jayme
Carolyn, thank you so much for making the time to have a rigorous conversation with me.

Carolyn
Oh my gosh, it was my pleasure. Thank you so much.

Announcer
We love what you do and want to support you in it every step of the way. For more useful resources to support your teaching, including sample lessons and a blog article from this episode’s guest Carolyn Nason, visit the Love Adult ESL webpage at oup.com/elt/LoveAdultESL. That’s oup.com/elt/LoveAdultESL, link in the description.