

Promoting agency and active citizenship in an integrated adult education program (CILIA-T) in the U.S.

Promuovere l'agentività e la cittadinanza attiva nell'educazione degli adulti in un programma integrato CILIA-T negli Stati Uniti

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Abstract

For immigrants and refugees to adapt and become active participants in their new country, in addition to language and digital skills, they need to understand the history, systems and rules. In this article, we describe a new curriculum we have developed for adult learners in the United States, called CILIA-T (Content Integrated Language Instruction for Adults with Technology Support). It integrates academic English, digital literacy, civics and U.S. History knowledge, while encouraging critical thought and building awareness of how learners can contribute their voices to their adopted communities. We also discuss its key approaches for possible implementations in other communities.

Keywords: agency, active citizenship adult education.

Affinché immigrati e rifugiati possano adattarsi e diventare partecipanti attivi nel loro nuovo Paese, oltre alle competenze linguistiche e digitali, è necessario comprenderne la storia, i sistemi e le regole. In questo articolo, descriviamo un nuovo curriculum che abbiamo sviluppato per studenti adulti negli Stati Uniti, chiamato CILIA-T (Content Integrated Language Instruction for Adults with Technology Support). Integra inglese accademico, alfabetizzazione digitale, educazione civica e conoscenze della storia degli Stati Uniti, incoraggiando al contempo il pensiero critico e sviluppando la consapevolezza di come gli studenti possano contribuire con la propria voce alle comunità di adozione. Discuteremo anche i suoi approcci chiave per possibili implementazioni in altre comunità.

Parole chiave: agentività, cittadinanza attiva, educazione degli adulti.

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Across the globe, immigrants and refugees share a common goal: to take the steps needed to improve their lives and become productive, contributing members of their new communities. Successfully adapting to life in a new country requires more than just language and digital skills—it also calls for an understanding of the country's history, systems, and civic rules. In this article, we introduce CILIA-T (Content Integrated Language Instruction for Adults with Technology Support), a new curriculum we developed for adult learners in the United States. CILIA-T integrates civics, history, academic language, and digital skills in an efficient and cohesive way to support learners' full participation in their communities.

In this paper, we will first describe this new curriculum and then demonstrate how we address the two important questions posed in this special issue of the journal: (1) How do we move from competence to agency; that is, how do we move beyond only delivering content and, instead, support the adult learners to navigate complex and uncertain systems, by fostering their self-efficacy, critical analysis and self-direction? (2) How do we design a curriculum that acknowledges education and lifelong learning as a basic human right and encourages active citizenship? Our goal is to illustrate how we addressed these two relatively abstract and difficult topics, namely agency and active citizenship, in the messy, complex real-world contexts of adult education.

Although addressing these two topics is essential for any adult education setting, they pose a special challenge for programs working with refugees and immigrants for two reasons. First of all, refugees and immigrants may not have completed their education due to war, conflict and difficult circumstances that led them to leave their homes and seek refuge and opportunity in other parts of the world. This implies that they may need additional support in restarting their educational journey. Also, the emerging second language skills of refugees and immigrants may pose a challenge to performing higher order thinking tasks and critical analyses on complex civics, history and technology topics. Hence, conscious effort is needed to overcome these challenges and to build enough linguistic and multimedia support to encourage student resilience in employing this advanced critical engagement, despite limited proficiencies in their new language.

1. Education as a basic human right

The first part of the Article 26 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has a right to education, with technical and professional education made generally available (for adults) with the understanding that education is necessary for the autonomy, dignity and full citizenship of adults (Gadotti, 2011). Developing adults' capabilities enables individuals to choose and accomplish their own goals (agency).



The second part of the article states that “Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.” This implies that education is not only a right but also a vehicle for helping people grow, understand human rights and respect others. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

2. How is adult education related to individual and societal development, including active citizenship?

Adult education, especially literacy development, leads to greater access to many other rights of life to which humans are entitled. At the level of the individual, as their comprehension and expression skills improve, individuals can now perform certain daily tasks (such as shopping, going to a hospital) independently (Durgunoglu et al., 2003). Such steps lead to increases in self-esteem and self-efficacy (Öztan et al., 2021). Several global surveys indicate that higher literacy levels are associated with higher subjective well-being reported by the individuals (Post, 2016). As individuals engage more fully in society, this increased autonomy may influence their involvement in decision-making processes at home and within the community, potentially leading to higher levels of civic participation.

Adult education also matters at the societal level. A well-educated population has physical, social and political advantages. There is now growing evidence that parental, especially maternal literacy proficiencies are a strong predictor of children’s educational outcomes, indicating intergenerational patterns in educational attainment (Sastry, Pebley, 2010; UNESCO, 2006). As maternal literacy levels increase, child mortality rates become significantly lower (Balaj et al., 2021). Global survey results indicate that as literacy levels increase in a society, pluralistic views and openness to new experiences also increase, implying greater understanding of the value of different ideas, beliefs and cultures and their right to exist together. Higher literacy levels are accompanied by higher levels of political efficacy, that is, the belief that political actions by citizens can have an impact. Such a sense of efficacy is a precursor of active citizenship, which is essential for democracies to function and thrive (Post, 2016).

To summarize, it is essential for individuals to understand the characteristics, systems and history of their society, in order to engage and function effectively in their communities, leading to both individual, societal and economic development. For refugees and immigrants, this is accompanied by an additional challenge: having enough language skills to understand their new communities to improve their lives and to contribute to society. Our curriculum addresses this challenge with an integrated approach.



3. CILIA-T (Content-Integrated Language Instruction for Adults with Technology Support)

Although increasing literacy levels are associated with many desirable outcomes, adult education programs can vary in quality and effectiveness (UNESCO, 2022). Therefore, it is useful to design curricula that not only deliver a specific history, civics, language and digital skills content, but also invite critical thinking, analysis and action for refugees and immigrants (and other adult students) to foster their knowledge and full participation in their communities.

CILIA-T, developed by experienced adult educators in the United States, is such a curriculum (<https://sites.google.com/d.umn.edu/cilia-t>). As the name implies, it teaches academic English, U.S. History, Civics and digital skills in an integrated fashion, thus addressing three main needs of adult language learners in the United States: (a) English proficiency; (b) understanding U.S. history, culture and systems; and (c) digital skills.

CILIA-T is in the form of an e-book that is free and open-access. There are also six videos and educator resources to build digital skills. It is mostly intended for intermediate/advanced-level adult English learners but can also be used with native speakers who are working towards completing their secondary education credentials. Each module can be covered within 6-8 hours of class instruction. It can be used in online, in-person or hybrid classrooms. The curriculum has been tried out in six pilot classrooms, and revised based on the class observations, and from teacher and student feedback.

The 16 modules of CILIA-T cover civics topics such as the following: Immigration and Global Human Movement; Forms of Government, Branches and Powers of Government, Civics and Community. Some examples of history topics are: U.S. Civil War and Reconstruction; Industrialization and Labor; U.S. International Relations; Civil Rights and Beyond.

Each module has the following basic structure with separate sections:

1. Warmup and Introduction: Usually through some type of media source such as a photograph or video, learners complete some exercises as a class to activate what they already know about the topic to be studied. The theoretical, guiding questions of each module are briefly introduced. Learners are also shown the historical timeline to situate when the relevant events of the module took place. Each module has an anchor text that is written at a simpler level of English but discusses complex historical and civics topics such as the Industrial Revolution or rights covered in the U.S. Constitution. The crucial vocabulary to understand this anchor text is introduced here as well.
2. Getting the gist: The anchor text is read several times to accomplish different goals. During the first exposure to the reading, the goal is to get a sense of the topic. Here, learners listen to a recording as they follow the written text,



- either on paper or on the computer. Then they summarize the main points they noticed and ask any questions.
3. Deep comprehension and vocabulary: The second reading of the text occurs in a more intense fashion. Each paragraph is read aloud by the learners, followed by answering text-based questions and studying the new vocabulary within the context of the topic. The text includes visuals (maps, photos, paintings, graphs) to support readers' comprehension.
 4. Building fluency: The goal of the third reading of the text is to build fluency. As students take turns reading the text with a partner or in small groups, they interact with the text as a whole. After this activity, learners review new vocabulary using digital tools such as electronic flashcards. This is followed by a dictation task. Since language development is reinforced by speaking and listening, students listen to sentence(s) from the text and write what they exactly hear.
 5. Think and Apply 1: The first "Think and Apply" activity encourages the students to think deeply about the topic they have studied. The goal is to build connections between text, related themes and their own experiences. For example, in the history module about the U.S. Civil War, slavery and race relations, the Think and Apply activity is about critically examining the U.S. Census survey and how people are expected to self-identify their ethnicity and race on these government documents. In addition, other activities in this section give students real world connections by having them find their representatives in government, while others have them practice determining the credibility of a source.
 6. Digital practice: Next learners practice transferable digital skills in context, especially to facilitate community access and participation. For example, they practice accessing information on the internet, distinguishing between reliable and unreliable information, and practicing good digital citizenship by protecting both themselves and others.
 7. Word workshop: In this section, there is explicit study of word structures such as morphemes (e.g. *-ion* elect/election). Morphemes provide a generative tool to figure out the meanings of unfamiliar words using these parts as a guide. There is also the study of connectors that are useful in expressing critical analyses (e.g. *similar to*, *instead of*). These constructs are also practiced within the context of the module topics. Here students also do another digital flashcard task to review vocabulary from the past modules.
 8. Fourth reading: The whole class reads and listens to the text once more to remember the content and to get ready to answer the critical thinking questions and summarize the main ideas. For example, in one module that focuses on industrialization and labor, critical thinking questions ask the students to think about the positives and negatives of producing something by hand versus by a machine. In another module about international relations, students



are asked to discuss how diplomatic relations between nations changed after both world wars.

9. Think and Apply II: In this second critical thinking exercise, usually additional sources and viewpoints are explored. For example, in the history module that is about the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, the Think and Apply activity includes analysis of a recent news story about children who were in a plane crash in a Colombian jungle and the kinds of indigenous knowledge that they had used to survive. Another skill that students work on in these Think and Apply activities is the analysis of visual information such as charts, graphs, and even paintings.
10. Module project: In every module the final activity is a culminating project that requires reflection and open-ended/creative application of the issues discussed in the module. For example, in the civics module about the U.S. Constitution, the students learn about the original constitution and the amendments that were added in light of changing conditions in the U.S. The project is to collaborate on writing an additional amendment that should be added to the Constitution, and to provide an argument as to why it's necessary in today's society. In addition, the final project of the last module asks students, after they have conducted some research, to determine a way that they can increase their civic participation in society. This goal is expressed in a structured writing assignment, and students present it to the whole class, partner or small group.
11. Self-check: Students end the module by taking a self-assessment online. The multiple-choice questions ask about the history and civics topics in the module. The learners can do the test on their own, retry questions if their response is incorrect and get their final score at the end.

In all of critical thinking activities (such as imagining an ideal government, finding the names and writing to decision-makers, considering how government prioritizes spending, forecasting the impact of today's decisions for seven generations) are examples of "problem-posing" (cf. Freire, 1970/2000) in which learners are prompted with inductive discussion, questions and images to analyze social and political structures and pose solutions within their reach (Spener, 1993).

4. How does CILIA-T foster agency and active citizenship?

As Shaull wrote in the Introduction to the 30th anniversary edition of Freire's book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, "[Education] becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world" [Freire, 1970/2000, p.34]. In this final section, we highlight the main practices in our



curriculum designed to accomplish the goals of agency and active citizenship summarized in this quote. We hope that this list of practices can be useful for other educators designing programs with similar goals.

4.1 Provide relevant content as the starting point in order to build a foundation for deeper thinking

- Integrate language instruction and content area(s) such as civics and history. Two reasons for this: (a) Adults have limited time and resources, so accomplish multiple goals with each activity (b) provide content within a setting, rather than in a decontextualized manner (e.g. learn email etiquette as a digital skill, but do it within a civic participation example, i.e. an email to the mayor's office advocating a local need);
- Beyond just conversational skills, teach academic language to enable comprehension and expression of critical analyses, learning about connectors to facilitate critical comparisons and contextualization;
- Teach language in a generative fashion, learning to learn. e.g. Learn about morphemes to be able to figure out unfamiliar words that the learners encounter;
- Use AI responsibly to build agency e.g. edit one's written text to correct linguistic errors and to match the intended audience;
- Synthesize information from multiple sources and in multiple modalities (videos, graphs, maps, pictures). Today's society requires evaluation, comprehension and integration of multiple sources in multiple formats, hence digital skills play an integral part in interacting with complex topics. Enhance critical literacy, the ability to analyze and differentiate between valid and invalid sources from these multiple modalities.

4.2 Treat adult learners with respect, build agency

- Treat adults as the knowledgeable individuals that they are, build on their existing experiences and knowledge;
- Encourage adults to reflect on their own growth, self-determine and self-regulate their understanding of the world and develop healthy communicative norms that transfer to other contexts (Kellenberg, et al., 2018);
- Understand adults can do critical analyses, deep thinking even with limited language skills. In an experimental study we showed that adults are certainly capable of deep analyses, and higher order inferences despite expressing these ideas with limited vocabulary and grammar (Jarrard, et al., 2026);
- Encourage group work, and for the students to learn from each other



4.3 Go beyond content delivery, facilitate critical thinking, application, action, active citizenship

- In the learners, encourage critical perspectives, understanding of the main ideas, comparing/contrasting, evaluating;
- Develop academic language skills beyond conversational skills by inviting deep discussions on civics and history topics, by answering big thematic questions informed by content knowledge developed during the lessons;
- Apply information in different contexts for flexible understanding and application of content;
- Use authentic and primary materials as much as possible, by providing some support, such as also including a simplified version of complex texts, using digital, multimodal support to make the content more accessible;
- Connect the past and present with the realization that certain topics, themes, events are not occurring for the first time;
- Emphasize that history does not happen in a "vacuum" and there are many causes/effects for events;
- Discuss that a past/present event is not isolated and that social, political, economic events etc. are happening simultaneously on a global scale. Those interconnections may have ramifications for both the present and the future;
- Recognize that historical events and topics deserve to be interpreted through a diverse and multiperspective lens, necessitating questions such as: Whose voice is missing from the story? Would a certain individual or group interpret this event the same or differently? What can a student do with the new information and interpretations;
- Realize that history is complex and events and issues are constantly evolving and may not be "solved." Instead, it is necessary to critically examine and re-examine them in a way to provide a catalyst for positive change to current problems or questions. Stress that understanding the history and civics of a society provides a context to one's "place" in that society. This can help answer questions such as
 - What rights/responsibilities do I have now?
 - What rights/responsibilities would I not have if I lived here a certain number of years ago?
 - How can I use my "voice" and/or what tools are available to me to be an "active citizen" and potentially use those tools to affect awareness/change to societal issues in my community, nation and the world?



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