

Why EASY Works: The Research Behind EASY's Media, Methods, and Content

EASY was written and created by three experienced, secondary and post-secondary ESL instructors who have taught domestically and abroad. They developed the program based on their experiences as ESL teachers; extensive input from colleagues and peers in the field; and thorough, pedagogically sound research in the areas of second language acquisition and English language development. That research came from many sources. Two of the most renowned and respected researchers in this field are Stephen Krashen and Jim Cummins.

Krashen (1985) found, among other things, that language acquisition occurs most effectively, and most naturally, with comprehensible input.

“Comprehensible input is the most important element of any language-teaching program. Whatever helps that input to be understood is critical” (p. 55, 1985). That is why visual aids, interactive video, captioning, repetition, and contextualized instruction are so useful. EASY reflects much of the strengths of the Krashen approach in that it devotes more time to “transmitting messages” than to “explicitly teaching for conscious learning” (p. 55, 1985). Note that there are points in which certain information or skills are taught directly and in isolation, but the development of these concepts and skills is contextualized.

Cummins' (1979) research discovered that there are three components, and stages, of language acquisition. These stages are very much intertwined and

overlapping. The first is “conventional fluency” (p. 1, 2003). This is also known as basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS). Cummins defines this as “the ability to carry on a conversation in familiar face-to-face situations using high frequency words and simple grammatical constructions” (p. 1, 2003). This can be acquired simply by an extended period of immersion in everyday English conversations. Next come “discrete language skills” (p. 1, 2003). These are “specific phonological, literacy, and grammatical knowledge that students can acquire through direct instruction” (p. 1, 2003). This is the basic literacy instruction, such as alphabet, phonics, spelling, etc., that EASY introduces. It does so however, in large part, within conversations and interactions. The final stage that Cummins describes is “cognitive academic language proficiency” (CALP) (p. 2, 2003). This is an understanding of the less frequent conversational fluency and vocabulary. It’s the kind of language found in textbooks and academic instruction that cannot be acquired by simply engaging in common, everyday conversations. This type of language proficiency occurs through learning which builds upon the foundation created by the BICS and discrete language skills. EASY provides students with access to that solid foundation rapidly and thoroughly. It prepares students for CALP development and enables them to begin that journey.

A key component of EASY is the utilization of the total physical response (TPR) method of language instruction. Developed by Dr. James Asher (1961), TPR incorporates kinesthetic, auditory, and visual learning simultaneously as students physically act in response to directions in English. The teacher models a command and action as the students follow. For example, “Go to the door. Open the door. Turn off the light.” The

students then follow a command without the teacher modeling. Finally, the students give the commands to fellow classmates, thereby demonstrating their comprehension of the input. “Language and body movements are a beneficial combination for internalizing information” (p. 31, Asher, 1996). The results of the TPR method have been proven by longitudinal research (Asher, 1966; Asher & Price, 1967) to develop long-term retention through its multi-sensory approach. This language-body interaction involves, engages, and challenges the students, which is why it is a cornerstone method of the EASY program.

EASY utilizes video as its medium because it provides audio and visual stimuli, is accessible to those who have not yet learned to effectively read and write (in primary or new language), and provides context for learning (Fazey, 1999; Johnston, 1999). That study, as well as the following two, was cited by Miriam Burt (1999) in a meta-analysis she did on research on ESL instruction with video. For English language learners, video has the added benefit of providing real language and cultural information (Bello, 1999; Stempleski, 1992). Using videos in the classroom can provide opportunities for learners to experience authentic life skills through a medium that they use in their daily life (Stempleski, 1992). Beyond that, Neuman and Koskinen (1992) found that watching captioned television (nearly all of EASY is captioned) or video provides English language learners with comprehensible input in the written, oral, and visual form. That takes us back to our original point, which is that the objective of EASY is to do everything possible to make the appropriate, relevant content easily understood so that it is internalized and retained.

Miriam Burt (1999) identified nine criteria for effective ESL videos.

- Inspiration/motivation/interest
 - Will the video appeal to my students? Will it make them want to learn?
- Content
 - Does the content match the instructional goals?
- Clarity of message
 - Is the instructional method clear to my students?
- Pacing
 - Is the rate of the language or instruction too fast for my students?
- Graphics
 - What graphics are used to explain a concept?
 - Do they clarify it?
 - Do they appear on the screen long enough to be understood?
- Length of sequence
 - Is the sequence to be shown short enough?
 - A two- to three-minute segment can easily furnish enough material for a one-hour lesson (Stempleski, 1992).
- Independence of sequence
 - Can this segment be understood without lengthy explanations of the segments preceding and following it?
- Availability and quality of related materials
 - What print materials accompany the videos?
 - They must be instructionally appropriate
- Use of videos
 - How will they be used?

1. EASY appeals to students on three levels. First, it provides an engaging, high-interest storyline with which students identify. Second, it is interactive, promoting active rather than passive participation. Third, EASY challenges students moving them past their current level resulting in measurable progress.

2. EASY matches the instructional goals of ESL classes. Its content correlates strongly to nationally recognized K-12 standards, CASAS competencies, Florida ESOL learning objectives, TEXAS ESL learning objectives, California ELD standards and EL Civics learning objectives.

3. The message is clear and coherent. As stated before, comprehensible input is the driving force behind EASY.
4. EASY moves at a calculated pace. It is deliberately designed to allow for all students to learn, follow, and progress at a challenging, natural rate.
5. EASY makes extensive use of graphics. With motion picture video as its medium, it is all visual. Those visual aids are purposely left on screen for five to ten seconds. If students need longer, they control the video in order to be able to pause or rewind the video. This allows for multiple repetition when necessary.
6. Most sequences in EASY are between three and ten minutes long. This is a manageable segment of video and, as Stempleski (1992) suggests, with EASY's rich and concentrated content, this is sufficient for a one-hour lesson.
7. The EASY lessons build on themselves progressively, but any of them can be delivered in isolation assuming the students have the skills or knowledge necessary to understand the content of that particular lesson.
8. EASY is accompanied by a student workbook with 194 worksheets, quizzes, and tests, along with answer keys. This amounts to more than 500 pages of student exercises. Progress and competency of the individual students is monitored through carefully designed control sheets which correlate back to the standards and learning objectives. It is also supported by a teacher's guide full of lesson plans and learning objectives. These

materials supplement and complement the content of the video, providing the active writing component, which is so essential to long-term retention and skill development.

9. The videos are used as the mode of delivery. They contain the instructional content. They are meant to assist teachers in their instruction or provide comprehensible input to distance learning students.

The greatest gains in distance learning ESL students' performance in both reading and listening skills is found in students with a CASAS score of 200 or less (CASAS, 2001). EASY is aimed at these very students. It is designed to take them from 180 to 235. Raising this pool of students at the lowest end of the learning spectrum to the level where they can become self-sufficient in their learning will allow them to access more advanced material and develop sophisticated academic, intellectual, and workforce skills.

Targeting this group should generate the greatest rate of gain per dollar spent due to the rapid progression and the exponential growth.

Summary:

The preceding research validates the methods, media, content, and philosophy of EASY. Using the experience of the authors and contributors along with Krashen's theories of language acquisition and Cummins findings on the stages of development, EASY was initiated. It was further developed by embedding the proven methods of TPR, comprehensible input, and multi-sensory instruction. The EASY video content is stimulating and engaging and provides a context for learning. It correlates to several sets of nationally recognized standards and learning objectives. EASY meets all of

the criteria found to be essential in quality ESL video materials, including: clarity of content, graphics, independence of sequence, pacing, and availability and quality of related materials. In addition, it targets the pool of students at the lowest end of the learning spectrum who have been shown to demonstrate the greatest performance gains on CASAS scores.

References:

References marked with an asterisk indicate studies included in the meta-analysis.

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