Education: English as a Second Language

CONTEXT

Immigrants from more than 150 countries around the world have come to Santa Clara County to build--or rebuild--their lives. Sixty percent of our population is first generation and their children. They come to the Valley with great potential to contribute, but the lack of English prevents them from using their skills and talents. Fully competent adults lacking communication skills in English sometimes must even call on their children to take on the adult role and interpret for them.

Immigrants come to us with a wide range of educational experience from no formal studies at all to post-doctoral studies. They come from hugely varying circumstances. Many are grieving. Most need "survival English" at first for shopping, talking to medical personnel, using transportation and getting a job. Some need "fine tuning" in pronunciation or writing skills or other training to help them follow their professions or trades here.

In Santa Clara County, free English classes are provided by ten adult education programs offering classes at multiple sites in the county’s 15 cities, dozens of community based organizations, and church groups. Many provide work-related language classes as well as pre-job training. Seven community colleges in the four districts of San Jose-Evergreen, Foothill-De Anza, West Valley-Mission, and Gavilan provide a wide range of classes at little cost for students who have established residency.

However, many students need ESL and have to be on the waiting lists for lengthy periods of time. A 1998 Citizenship and Immigration Program survey of ESL providers conducted by the Office of Human Relations showed that 9-13% of immigrants couldn’t get language instruction when they needed it. On the other hand, many immigrants cannot find time for taking classes because they have to work long hours, and more than one job. "Distance learning" learning which takes place out of the traditional classroom setting often utilizing videos, radio, cassettes, or computers, is becoming more available as a solution for some.

Although many opportunities for classes are available, better coordination among service providers is essential so that they can effectively refer students to services or to agencies that have openings at particular levels or time slots. And learners need to be able to find out for themselves what appropriate options are open to them. In other words, current and complete information must be accessible to learners.
FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding 1: There is a lack of consistent coordination between different levels of ESL providers and no centralized updated information about ESL classes countywide.

Several focus groups documented the need for coordination and better information about ESL classes. The focus group with Iranian immigrants emphasized the need for information about ESL classes. Cambodian immigrants said in their focus group that they did not have enough information about classes in their neighborhood and did not know enough translators. The focus group with Russian immigrants showed that more information and literature was needed in Russian.

IBC groups emphasized similar issues. The Iranian IBC group said that informational flyers about ESL classes and job training were needed in native languages. The Somali IBC group needed classes to be in their neighborhoods but they did not know if there were some already available. The Bosnian IBC group proposed better community information and coordination of that information, in order to serve more students and use funds more rationally.

Gaps and best practices research also documented the need for coordination and complete information.

Recommendations for Finding 1:

- Establish countywide coordination of community college, adult education, and non-profit ESL programs to prevent overlapping curriculum, to share the most effective curriculum, and to organize regular meetings with ESL teachers and department chairs.
- As part of the coordination, create a list of updated ESL programs throughout the county with times, dates, locations, and the focus or level of each class. Update these lists regularly and post on a website.
- In addition, develop basic bilingual outreach materials for students of different nationalities at different locations throughout the county and have a referral system for immigrants based upon the student’s ESL capacities and needs. Organize educational fairs and attend others to disseminate ESL information, including information showing the huge advantages of English language acquisition.
Finding 2: There are insufficient beginning ESL class offerings, especially for seniors and immigrants with less formal education who wish to study at a slower pace with a bilingual teacher.

Several focus groups emphasized the difficulties seniors have in learning a second language. These included the Mexican seniors, Vietnamese women on CalWORKs, and Cambodian focus groups. Immigrants Building Community research recorded similar opinions. The Bosnian group was extremely concerned about seniors and their ability to learn a second language in a setting that was more oriented toward fast learning and younger people. Best practices research showed that there are a few programs that take into account people that might need more time and special attention while learning a second language.

Focus groups with Chinese, Korean, Russian, Central American and Vietnamese immigrants, as well as the Iranian and Vietnamese groups from IBC all stressed that there is a need for more bilingual instruction. The comfort level of elderly immigrants and immigrants who have very little education is quite low in an English-only classroom, and most of these learners will drop out. On the other hand, with an instructor who has the capacity to explain in the immigrants’ first language, the comfort is boosted enormously. This is so even if languages other than English are rarely used in the classroom. One immigrant explained: "For someone older than 45 years old, it's hard to say how long it will take them to learn English well."

Another example is that of Alberto, a middle-aged Nicaraguan man with a third grade education. "Another problem I see with ESL classes is that they have teachers who don't speak both English and Spanish but only in English. When the teacher is teaching only in English she doesn't stop and ask ‘Do you understand?’ or something similar. We’re adults. We don't grasp things as quickly as children. This makes it very difficult for us. There should be a teacher who speaks both English and Spanish. Because if they speak only in English they won't know what one is learning. That's what happened to me. I never understood the teacher very well. And the director there told me to wait until a bilingual teacher was available."

Silvia, a young woman from El Salvador, concurs: "The problem of the lack of bilingual education for children is also true for adults. Many adults have not had the opportunity to study English in their home countries, be it in Central America or wherever and they can't be required to speak only in English immediately."
WHAT IMMigrants SAY…
WAITING FOR LOWER LEVEL ESL CLASSES

Leslie, from Nicaragua: "There are problems in getting adult school classes. When a person goes to register they say there are only classes available in the morning, when we work. They say there aren't class openings in the evening, when we can study. This happened to me at Sacred Heart Church with adult education. They put you on a waiting list. I waited one year. They said ‘We'll call you.’ They give a better opportunity to those who speak more English. They put the ones who need the most English on waiting lists, because they say they don't have enough teachers. I insisted many times in order to finally get in a class after one year. I needed the ESL class because I'm a teacher's aide.

Ana, from El Salvador: "I applied to study English at DeAnza but after three days the teacher told me that my English wasn't good enough and that I should study in adult education. The truth is that the English there is very advanced. They told me to study in adult education, but I couldn't get in. I am still on the waiting list at Fremont Adult Education in Sunnyvale. I've been waiting for 7 or 8 months already."

The Focus groups with Iranian, Mexican, Somali, Russian and Taiwanese immigrants emphasized the need for newcomer orientations and the incorporation of citizenship issues in ESL classes.

Recommendations for Finding 2:

- Create special ESL classes for the elderly or 50 + years and for immigrants who are less literate in their native languages, with bilingual teachers.
- Augment entry-level ESL classes with more sections at reasonable class sizes.
- Increase the number of pre-literacy and basic skills classes already available at adult education centers. Encourage literacy in immigrants’ first languages first. Then the transition to English literacy can occur more easily.
- Increase the number of newcomer orientation classes, combining citizenship.

Finding 3: More distance learning programs, weekend and evening classes, and tutoring programs are needed for adults learning English.

In busy Silicon Valley, low wage immigrant workers with families have little time to study English, and yet there is a direct correlation between knowledge of English and earning capacity.

The Korean focus group thus documented that there is a need for more diversified learning strategies and learning time frames. Evening and night classes during the week.
is the best time to study for most. In the Immigrants Building Community, the Latino and Vietnamese groups affirmed that immigrants work long hours, different shifts, and more than one job, so that they have little time and opportunities to take ESL classes, even though they are interested. They directly proposed different schedules of classes and new ways of teaching that would take into account the harsh realities of work and transportation in Santa Clara County.

In looking at the gaps in ESL services county-wide and at best practices research, distance learning programs--both bilingual and English only--are one important solution for immigrants who cannot attend classes in conventional classroom settings.

One of parent tutoring programs offered at the East Side High School District, called Community Based English Tutoring (CBET) has also been evaluated positively in terms of helping both parents and children to learn English better and advance academically.

The random sample survey and public assistance recipient survey both confirmed that many potential and current students see schedules of classes and their work load as incompatible with taking ESL classes regularly in a conventional classroom setting. Almost 44% of the immigrant respondents who answered the question said that they had no time, 29% said that they had scheduling problem, 14% couldn’t leave the house because of lack of affordable child care, 4% of them couldn’t leave the house because a disabled or elderly person needed their care, and 8% said that they had no transportation. Almost 14% of the respondents suggested that longer classes would help them learn English more quickly. Approximately 25% of respondents suggested that better schedules from Monday to Friday would help, especially respondents from Mexico and Vietnam. For Mexican respondents weekend classes were an important option. Overall, more than 31% of immigrant respondents think that weekend classes would help them learn English faster and better.

**Top Five Ways of Improving English Skills by Country**

* (Random Sample)
Also, according to those who responded, having English classes by TV (50% of all immigrant respondents), by tape recorder (24%) and computer (23%) would help immigrants to learn English faster.

**Recommendations for Finding 3:**

Increase the number of evening and weekend ESL classes, distance learning programs, and parent tutoring programs.

Encourage English speakers to serve as tutors as part of community service and service learning programs.

Encourage schools K-12 schools to make to make their facilities available to teach adult immigrants learning ESL, VESL and citizenship.

**Finding 4: There is a lack of Functional Context Education, Vocational English as a Second Language (VESL), and professional adaptation classes incorporating ESL for occupational purposes.**

Immigrants want and need to learn English in the context of something useful and practical so that they find the curriculum applicable in their daily lives and in the work that they do. Immigrant professionals need classes specifically designed for them.

The Iranian and Vietnamese groups in Immigrant Building Community emphasized the need for more vocational ESL. The random sample survey showed that 1 in 4 immigrant adults wanted more ESL classes related to their jobs. In the Immigrants Building Community, the Iranian group said that ESL courses are needed to address real needs of newly arrived immigrants.

The focus groups with professionals not working in their profession and immigrants from Central America documented the need for special classes for immigrant professionals.

Best practices research also indicated that ESL classes for business people and immigrant professionals allow them to accelerate their careers at a faster pace.

The random sample survey documented the fact that immigrants need English more for employment and daily living situations than for other purposes. The graph demonstrates this. Most of the public assistance recipients survey respondents also needed English for employment and daily living situation more often than for other purposes.
Needs for Learning English (Random Sample)

Recommendations for Finding 4:

- Offer more functional context education classes that relate to immigrants’ work and daily lives.
- Create and fund more ESL and VESL classes for professionals, such as ESL for health care or legal professionals.
- Develop community service programs to expand the teaching and tutoring of ESL and vocational ESL.
Finding 5: Public transportation is not well organized to many sites that offer ESL classes.

The focus groups with Vietnamese immigrants, Iranian women on CalWORKs, and Russian and Taiwanese immigrants revealed that immigrants who do not drive rely on public transportation that makes their situations difficult. In the Immigrants Building Community discussions, especially within the Bosnian and Iranian groups, it was pointed out that many immigrants see transportation as a major reason preventing them from taking ESL classes. In looking at gaps in services, it became apparent that public transportation was not well organized to all sites where ESL classes were offered.

The random sample survey provided evidence that transportation was seen as a barrier to accessing services. For example, for 8.1% of immigrant respondents who answered the question about barriers, transportation was a major problem. About 13% of Mexican immigrant respondents emphasized this as a problem. When asked what would help them to learn English faster and better, about 11% of immigrants responding to the question emphasized that better organized public transportation would help.

The focus group with Vietnamese immigrants explained the importance of having classes close to home, since seniors who do not drive need accessible and transportation-friendly classes. Thanh, a 60-year-old Vietnamese female immigrant who doesn't drive and uses public transportation to get to work recommended, "I do not drive because of my old age and relying on public transportation. I need classes that are easier to access to and closer within my community."

Recommendations for Finding 5:

- Improve public transportation to ESL sites, e.g. creating more special bus lines like the De Anza College bus line.
- Make sure that buses and other public transportation run frequently at peak studying hours, not just peak working hours.

Finding 6: There is a lack of organized childcare at locations where ESL instruction is offered.

Several Focus groups provided evidence that good options regarding childcare were necessary for parents to be able to take English and job training classes. Vietnamese, Latino, and Moslem women on CalWORKs all declared that they found it necessary to have well-organized and affordable childcare in order for them to continue learning English and keep their jobs. They also said that night and evening time childcare was necessary.
Other evidence leads to the same conclusion. The Somali group of the IBC project emphasized the need for childcare. Gaps in services research showed that there were not many sites with well-organized childcare options. The random sample survey documented that Mexican (32%) and Chinese (13%) groups expressed the need for on-site childcare the most often of those who responded to the question.

Where there is a shortage of childcare family ESL should be seriously considered. One Salvadoran mother offered: “There should be a system to allow English to be taken as a nuclear family unit, so that the family doesn't fall apart, because I think the nuclear family is the most important for learning and progressing.”

**Recommendations for Finding 6:**

- Increase the number of childcare centers at as many ESL sites as possible.
- Expand the hours of childcare to include some evening and weekend hours.
- Find ways to organize childcare during ESL classes.
- Make the childcare setting feel as if you’re taking your child to a friend’s house, incorporating language and cultural competency.
- In the absence of childcare, promote family-oriented ESL.

**Finding 7: There is a need for ESL teachers to learn more about the background and cultures of immigrants.**

In the IBC Iranian group discussion participants pointed out that ESL teachers need to be educated in cultural competency. The Vietnamese IBC group also emphasized that ESL curriculum was not culturally appropriate. The focus group with Laotian immigrants documented that these immigrants proposed more cultural awareness classes for everybody. It is a best practice to incorporate the history and culture of immigrants into existing curriculum, but actual practices in Santa Clara County show that there are huge gaps in application. Students typically do not feel reflected in the curriculum.

**Recommendations for Finding 7:**

- Develop materials that allow knowledge of immigrant cultures in a readily accessible manner. Organize staff development classes and more meaningful interaction with immigrants from different countries.
- The county ESL coordinator and TESOL and CATESOL—professional ESL training organization—should sponsor local trainings.
- Develop more community college certificate courses that are accessible to LEP immigrants, including a certificate program for bilingual/biliterate teachers’ aids that can teach or tutor elementary school children.
ESL JOINT RECOMMENDATIONS WITH THE
EMPLOYMENT TRAINING WORK GROUP:

- Approve policies that permit more time for CalWORKs LEPs to learn English and receive needed skill training.
- More ESL classes are needed at workplaces.

WHAT IMMIGRANTS SAY HAPPENS TO THEM
BECAUSE THEY DON’T KNOW ENOUGH ENGLISH

“After 12 months of ESL, I think I can find a job that pays very low. But if I want a better paying job, I don't think my English will be good enough after 12 months.”
Vietnamese CalWORKs participant

“Mexican elderly suffer a lot. They don't know English. They work at the worst paying jobs. They can't go to a doctor not only because they don't have money but also because there's nobody to interpret for them. The lack of English at the bank is also a problem. Mexican seniors don't know how to defend themselves because of English.” Maria, Mexican senior

“The lack of English means that we Mexican seniors are discriminated against frequently.” Cleo, Mexican senior

“Many people make fun of others because they do not speak English well or have a heavy accent. They do it to become popular and attract other people to join them. This is what many do here in the school, and not only in the school.” Mexican youth

“Neither Pacific Bell, nor Pacific Gas and Electric Company have interpreters or Russian speaking employees. When I call somewhere, I always get voice mail, but I don't understand what they advise. Once when my MediCal stopped functioning, I called everywhere until I cried out for help and hung up.” Tatanya, a 65 year-old refugee from Belarus

“There is a discrimination on a language basis. We need more literature on services in Russian.” Sofya, a 68 year-old Russian parolee

“One of the things that has made me suffer a lot is the abuse that they commit at clinics, in the Police Department, etc…when we need help and they see us as less important and they make us wait longer, and since we don't speak English clearly they make us wait a long time for an interpreter and the interpreter comes an hour or an hour and a half later. Discrimination always exists because of the lack of English, because we can't communicate well with them.” Leslie, woman from Nicaragua