

Adult Non-Native English Speakers in the United States

The non-native English speaking adult population in the United States is large and diverse, and programs serve learners with very different backgrounds and needs. This section discusses the characteristics of non-native English speaking adults that program staff need to consider when planning or delivering instruction, the reasons these learners attend adult education and family literacy programs, the strengths they bring, and the challenges they face. The learner profiles in Figure I-1 give a glimpse of the diversity that is possible within a program or class.

Figure I-1. Diverse Adult Learner Profiles

Rosa is a young mother in an ESL class in a family literacy program. She has three small children, whom she brings to the child care program. Rosa has been in the country for one year. Her ESL class has been running for a month, and the students are progressing slowly. Rosa wants to learn, but she attends class infrequently. She does not drive and so depends on family members for a ride, and she often is not able to bring one or more of the children because of illness. She understands no English, and another student translates for her. She has mentioned several times that she has no time to do any of the exercises outside of class.

Mohammed is 17 years old and has been in the country for six months. He is not enrolled in high school, because he needs to help his mother support their family of five, and he has two jobs. He finished elementary school in Iraq and can read and write in his native Arabic. He is learning to understand and speak a little English on the job, but he can read next to nothing in English.

Ibrahim is 60 years old and has come to the United States from Somalia, where he was a businessman and a tribal leader. He can read and write in his native language and in Italian. His refugee benefits have run out, and he has to work to help support his family. He is embarrassed about being in a beginning-level class, and he does not like to work in groups with women. When he speaks, he wants the teacher to correct everything he says.

What are the Characteristics of the Population?

Age. Any person who is 16 years of age or older and no longer enrolled in the K-12 educational system may enroll in adult education classes. Therefore, adult learners may range in age from teens as young as 16 to adults in their 90s.

Immigration Status. The learner population in a program may include permanent residents, naturalized citizens, legal immigrants, refugees, and asylees.

Numbers. The population of adults learning English has become a significant part of adult education programs. More than 35 million adults in the United States are native speakers of a language other than English (U. S. Census Bureau, 2001). In program year 2002-2003, 43% of participants in state-administered adult education programs were enrolled in ESL classes (U.S Department of Education, 2004). This does not include those served within other segments of the educational system—in adult basic education (ABE) and adult

secondary education (ASE) classes, private language schools and academic institutions, as well as volunteer literacy services and other community-based programs.

Locations of residence. In 2000, 68 percent of the nation's foreign-born population lived in California, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, New York, and Texas (Capps, Fix, & Passel, 2002). At the same time, states that have not previously had significant numbers of immigrants have witnessed a rapid growth of their immigrant populations. Between 1990 and 2000, the immigrant population in 22 states grew twice as fast as it did in the six states mentioned above. The following states experienced more than 125% growth: Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Georgia, Kentucky, Nebraska, Nevada, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Utah (Capps, et al., 2002).

Countries of origin. The foreign-born population comes from all over the world, but most people come from Latin America or Mexico. In 2000, more than one-quarter of the foreign-born population came from Mexico, and over half from Latin America generally (primarily Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and El Salvador). Of the remaining immigrants from Latin America, 2.8 million were born in Caribbean countries, and 1.9 million in South America (Capps, Passel, Perez-Lopez, & Fix, 2004; U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). The next largest group of people came from Asia.

First language background. The majority of individuals who speak a language other than English at home speak Spanish (60%). The second most prevalent language is Chinese. The remaining eight of the top 10 languages spoken are (in descending order) French, German, Tagalog, Vietnamese, Italian, Korean, and Polish (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003).

Educational background. Adult English learners have a variety of educational backgrounds, ranging from no education at all to advanced degrees.

English speaking ability. The English speaking ability of adults learning English ranges from low beginning, with limited opportunities to use English outside of class, to high advanced (near native proficiency). Of the English language learners enrolled in state-administered adult education programs in program year 2001–2002, over half were enrolled in beginning literacy or beginning ESL classes (U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

English literacy. The increase in English language learners has been accompanied by an increase in adults with limited literacy in English. The National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) found that over half of the population studied had low English literacy skills and that a higher percentage of non-native English speakers than native English speakers read English at the lowest levels (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, & Kolstad, 1993).

Employment and income. In the 1990s, half of all workers entering the workforce were immigrants. While many had strong academic credentials and skills, many did not (Capps, Fix, Passel, Ost, & Perez-Lopez, 2003). Limited English skills are associated with low-wage jobs; nearly two-thirds of low-wage immigrants have limited English proficiency. Some studies indicate that immigrants have a positive effect on the overall U.S. economy,

contributing more in taxes than they use in services over a lifetime (Smith & Edmonston, 1997).

Why do adults learning English participate in adult education programs?

Participants in adult ESL classes give a number of reasons for enrolling in programs. They want to

- Learn English to communicate in their everyday lives
- Get a job or pursue better employment
- Become a citizen of the United States
- Get a high school diploma or GED (General Educational Development) certificate
- Acquire skills needed to advance to higher education programs (e.g., vocational training, college, university)
- Acquire skills to help their children succeed in school

(National Center for Education Statistics, 1995; Skilton-Sylvester & Carlo, 1998; Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, 2003, p. 6)

What strengths do adult English language learners bring to educational programs?

Whatever their educational background, all adult learners bring to the classroom a great deal of life experience and background knowledge. They are generally highly motivated to learn, and they usually enroll voluntarily in programs. They often have attended school in their country of origin and have learned to read and write a language before learning English. Many have positive memories of school and are eager to continue their education (Burt, Peyton, & Adams, 2003; Fitzgerald, 1995; Skilton-Sylvester & Carlo, 1998). If they have had formal schooling in their native languages, they may have knowledge in subject matter areas like math, science, and social studies. Many adult learners also have strong and supportive families, who often help with child care. They may also have support networks within their language and culture groups that help them adjust to life in the United States and gain access to services.

What challenges do adults learning English face?

ESL learners are not only trying to acquire a new language and a new culture; they also are working, managing their households, and raising their children. These challenges often present significant obstacles to learning. The National Center for Education Statistics (1995) listed the following barriers to program participation: limited time, money, child care, and transportation, and lack of knowledge about appropriate programs in the local area. The National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL, 2004) surveyed community leaders and educators in communities with recent rapid growth in numbers of immigrant families, and respondents identified similar challenges.

Logistical challenges. By far the most frequently mentioned challenges in the NCFL survey were lack of transportation and child care, which seem to be problems in both rural and urban areas. Demanding work schedules also may make class attendance difficult.

Program availability challenges. Even when programs are accessible, potential ESL learners may have difficulty finding a program and class that meets their needs and goals, offers the right instructional intensity level, and allows them to make the transition to other levels of education.

Employment. Unemployment is a common problem, but even adults who are employed may have low-paying jobs or seasonal agricultural work that requires frequent moves. Many adults work at multiple jobs and accept irregular work shifts to earn the money they need to support their families.

Housing, language, and medical issues. The lack of adequate and affordable housing is a common challenge for immigrants to the United States. The language barrier in finding housing is another: Adults seeking assistance often find the service system complicated, confusing, and unresponsive and have difficulty communicating with service agency personnel. A third challenge is health care. Like others living in poverty, immigrant families may have physical and mental health issues that need to be addressed, and limited access to treatment and preventive care can result in even more illness. Lack of medical insurance, lack of transportation, and communication problems with medical personnel all make it difficult for families to get the care they need.

Psychological and social issues. The demands of juggling several jobs, family responsibilities, and education make daily life management extremely difficult. Added to this general stress are other emotional issues. Many immigrant adults feel embarrassed about their limited education. Some are living in fear about their legal status in this country. Even with supportive families and neighbors, on the job they may feel isolated and alone. Parents may be worried about their children's safety in this country and their success in school.

Conclusion

As described above, almost half of the adult education students served in federally funded programs are English language learners. Population trends and projections for the next 10 years indicate that the number of adult English language learners in the United States will continue to grow. Educators need to have information about these learners so they can serve them effectively.

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