

Student-directed ESOL Family Literacy Program Design

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Abstract

ESOL Family Literacy programs for Hispanic immigrants have proliferated over past decades to serve the increasing population of ELs needing services. Several factors can disrupt or prevent participation in ESOL Family Literacy programs designed to enhance the academic success of Latin American adult and child immigrants. This qualitative case study set in the Deep South examined a student-directed design process to gain understanding of what would constitute an ideal program for the participating ELs, their families and their community. Emergent categories identified areas of design importance including site locations, time and frequency of class scheduling, curricular design, instructional materials, instructor training and program evaluation) that can determine successful family literacy programs.

Key words: family literacy, ESOL, program design

Introduction

Immigration rates to the United States have leveled off since 2016 however immigrants continue to represent 14.6 percent of the population in the U. S. with 33 percent of those immigrants coming from Mexico and Central America. Education level and English proficiency among immigrants is on the rise. Immigrants to the United States in 2017 were more educated and more proficient in English than those who came in 2007 (Passal & Cohn, 2019). College graduate percentage was the same as that of American born citizens, however lack of high school completion was far lower (27% vs. 9%). Mexicans and Central Americans were the least educated with high school graduation rates of 54% and 46% respectively. More than 52 percent of immigrants were proficient in English. Those with the least proficiency came from poorer economic circumstances. Mexican and northern triangle Central Americans, represent the largest percent of immigrants (33%) had the lowest proficiency (Radford, 2019). Over 60 percent of people speaking a language other than English at home speak Spanish (US Census Bureau, 2010). English proficiency and a minimum of a high school diploma increase employability and wage-earning potential (Pandya, 2012). This indicates an increasing need for both basic education and ESOL programs for Latin American immigrants. This article presents the results from an investigation regarding the factors that have commonly disrupted or prevented Hispanic immigrants from participating in Family Literacy programs and how these immigrants would design ESOL Family Literacy program to best fit their needs.

EL K-12 students also benefit from access to ESOL family literacy programs that help them their parents prepare for school success. A number of factors affect

the success of EL children in K-12 education. These include economic status, parent participation, and culturally and linguistically relevant pedagogy. Parent and guardian participation in a child's education is indisputably critical to student success. ELL parents are strongly concerned about their children's education (Arias & Campbell, 2009) and view education as their children's path to success, however language barriers can limit their involvement. Employment schedules, a lack of secondary education and prior negative experiences in school settings are also possible barriers. Further, linguistically relevant education may not be available. EL students, foreign and US born, are frequently linguistically isolated from native English speakers in their school experience. Hostility towards bilingualism and especially towards the use of languages other than English in public schooling has been augmented by anti-bilingual legislation (Arias & Campbell, 2009). Thus, EL K-12 students typically do not have access to bilingual literacy.

ESOL Family literacy programs have proliferated over past decades, yet there is no one model that exemplifies all the possible parent-child learning situations. Program collaborations between schools, churches, institutions of higher education and communities are common across the US. Successful family literacy programs do share several characteristics, these include: addressing parent's personal goals, valuing families' home languages, viewing families from a resource model rather from a deficit model as described by Caspe (2003), providing families access to information and resources that will encourage success for children, and encouraging shared literacy experiences in homes rather than imposing a school-like transfer of skills from parent to child (Mulhern, 1994). Since EL students have performed poorly on standardized tests, some family literacy programs are designed to specifically address the needs of these students and include a biliteracy approach (Collier and Auerbach, 2011). Other programs are more targeted to address adult needs including employability and focus exclusively on English (Illinois Community College Board, 2009). Non-traditional program approaches include cultural and linguistic scaffolding and help families/parents and guardians become empowered to advocate for their children and themselves (Arias and Campbell, 2008).

Program policy language including the definition used for *family* will affect access to services. If *family* is defined as including children then some adults will be denied access to services (Schlessman-Frost, 1994). Thus programs that require attending adults have a school-aged child (CBCC, 2019) leaving a gap in service for those whose children are either not present or have finished their secondary education. A variety of ESOL programs are offered in the U.S. including designs for various proficiency levels, informal conversation skills, formal oral and written communication, college preparation, work-based English for specific purposes, ESOL with life skills and/or civic education (NCFL and CAL, 2008) and as a means of involving EL parents in their children's education.

ESOL Family Literacy designs are typically top-down with well-intended academics or program personnel determining the schedule, services and curricular content. While these program designs may be based on research this does not mean they focus on the actual needs of the community of immigrants they serve. Student-

directed designs involve the EL students in decisions regarding scheduling, venue, curricular content, teacher characteristics and services. One goal of this study is to formulate an ESOL Family Literacy program design that will focus on the students and their self-identified needs.

ESOL Family Literacy programs are often structured as an avenue to EL parent involvement. Epstein's (1997) multidimensional framework of parental involvement identifies six types of involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. However, educators cannot assume these forms of parent involvement apply equally to EL and non-EL parents. ESOL Family Literacy programs offer an alternative route to EL parent involvement in which ELL parents can gain skills pertinent to their and their children's needs (Holt & Van Duzer, 2000).

Limitations to traditional ESOL family literacy include a top-down design, requirements that predetermined information and skills be taught (e.g. familiarity with specifics of school curriculum, expectations of schools for traditional parent involvement and how ELL parents can accomplish those expectations)

Since design possibilities for ESOL Family Literacy programs vary, program designers should know the needs of the population to select the most effective design and service the greatest number potential learners. Research has identified considerations designers can access for planning purposes. These include location, times and days sessions are offered, teacher characteristics, cultural factors of ELs, use of technology, curriculum content, proficiency levels and included services. For example, Kegan, Broderick, and Drago-Severson (2001) found that in addition to considering forms of diversity that teachers might already consider in teaching adult basic education students and adult ELLs (gender, ethnicity, national origin, age) it was important to also consider what the authors describe as "the differing meaning-systems or ways of knowing which adult learners bring into the room (pg. 1)." Vuong (1992) found that using technology improved adult EL and EL family literacy learning. Extensive research has demonstrated the importance of first language in the development of literacy for ELs (Cummins, 1986; Echevarria & Short, 2005; Gandara, 2005; Garcia & Beltran, 2005; Krashen, 1981). First language literacy and culture should therefore be a component of a family literacy program Perez & Torres-Guzman, 1992; Valdes, 2001). A bilingual approach to family literacy would be ideal (though not always feasible). It is also important to recognize the life experiences and cultural funds of knowledge adult learners bring to the program and incorporate these into the program design (or at least make these an important part of the curriculum) Larrota and Ramirez (2009). Most importantly is to ascertain the needs of the potential adult and youth students when designing an inter-generational literacy program (Quintero and Velarde 1990). While some programs choose a two-generation approach (He, Wilson, Scott, and Zhao, 2019), adult family learners may be from multiple generations and include grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins in addition to parents and their children. Several factors/elements/issues can disrupt or prevent Latin American immigrants from participating in ESOL Family Literacy programs designed to enhance the academic success of their children.

This study examines family literacy program adult student perceptions of what would constitute an ideal program for them and their community. Specific areas investigated included site locations, time and frequency of class scheduling, curricular design, instructional materials, teacher training, attendance and involvement, and program evaluation) that determine successful family literacy programs and appropriate planning for Hispanic immigrants in Alabama.

The Study

This study focused on the ESOL Family Literacy program needs of students in a deep-south church-sponsored ESOL Family Literacy Program. The program had several challenges that the personnel wanted to address, specifically: recruiting students, to maintaining enrolment, and staff recruitment and training.

The purpose of the study was to identify student needs in order to redesign the program to better fit those needs. The sponsoring church was where most program students attended weekly religious services. Program participants ranged in age from 4 to 82 years of age and Spanish speaking. English proficiency ranged from beginner to upper intermediate and the majority of program participants were adults. Classes were held two evenings per week with beginner, intermediate and advanced adult levels and two classes for children divided by age.

Methods

All currently enrolled adult students in program were invited to participate in this study with the goal of redesigning the program to better fit their needs. All potential participants were from Central America and Mexico. Potential participants were given written and oral explanations of their rights in both Spanish and English. Participants were given a written copy of the questions prior to the interview. Over 40 students currently enrolled in the adult ESOL program agreed to participate consisting of both males and female ranging from 19-50 years of age. They included all language ability levels with most being intermediate and had varying levels of formal education, most from four to twelve years of school.

Volunteer participants were interviewed in focus groups using a structured oral questionnaire using open-ended questions (Appendix A) followed by focus group discussions for clarification and expansion of topics. Ad-hoc topics and discussions resulted from the focus groups generated new ideas not included in the surveys. Data was recorded on individual surveys and as field notes during focus group sessions and was sorted into emergent categories of needs. Both researchers for this study are fluent in Spanish and speak dialects of Mexico and Central American countries.

This qualitative case study approach utilized an open ended question set with follow-up questions. These were administered in small focus groups which provided participants opportunity to discuss question issues. New ideas were generated through ad hoc discussions.

Coding for emergent categories were performed along with member check.

Findings

Emergent categories included site locations, time and frequency of class scheduling, location, curricular design, instructional materials including texts and technology, teacher characteristics and training, student assessment (including a certificate of completion), program evaluation and an alternative design that would incorporate children into the classes with their parents. Participants provided specific characteristics they wanted to have included in the program design. Women and men identified differing types of locations, curriculum and times and days.

Emergent Categories

I. Schedule

Participants are highly motivated and want to learn English as quickly as possible.

- Time of day:
 - Women: mornings or afternoons
 - Men: evenings
- Frequency:
 - Classes need to be frequent, 3-7 days per week
 - Most wanted classes on weekdays
 - All year long
- Duration
 - 1-3 hours
 - 2 hour average (approximate)

II. Characteristics of Desirable Locations

- Safe and Quiet
- Convenience
 - Within walking distance of where many students live
 - Near town
 - Near stores or other locations where students can do other errands at the same time (shopping center/mall, church, Walmart, restaurant, General Dollar, Goodwill)
- Men: will go anywhere classes are offered since they have cars
- Women: near public transportation since they don't have cars
- Wherever classes were held students would find a way to get to them and go

III. Curriculum

- Reported from most to least frequently requested
- GED
- Computers
 - use of Internet
 - word processing programs
 - games/entertainment
 - resources)
- English grammar
 - Verbs and vocabulary, everything

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- Math
- Speaking and listening (conversation, social skills)
- Language for getting jobs...applications, forms
- Medical and health
- Stores and shopping
 - women wanted to know names of products, foods
- Pronunciation so people can understand
- Family issues
- School/education vocabulary (for discussions with teachers)
- Business language
- Automotive terms

IV. Instructor Characteristics

- Desirable characteristics regarding language varied by participant:
- Instructors should speak Spanish
- Instructors should only speak English
- Instructors should know some Spanish
- Instructors should be bilingual (English/Spanish)
- Other desirable teacher characteristics
 - Instructors should know how to use computers/software
 - Instructor knows how to keep class moving and not lose valuable time
 - Instructors who are willing to trade language tutoring
- Desirable characteristics generally agreed upon by most participants
 - Instructors should be very familiar with American culture
 - Instructors should be native speakers of American English
 - Instructors should be patient
 - Instructor gender is unimportant
 - Instructors should have some training in teaching ESL (or whatever they are teaching)

V. Desirable Materials and Equipment for Learning English

- Technology
 - Word to word translators
 - Computers with language programs
 - PowerPoint
 - Internet - You tube
 - Language programs (e.g. Rosetta Stone)
 - Videos - younger students/children
- Dictionaries
 - Regular hard copy at an appropriate level
 - Picture dictionaries
- English games
- Practice books they could keep for homework
- Program design and empowerment
 - A resource center

VI. Student Assessment

- All participants indicated they wanted assessments (including homework) on a scheduled basis though they did not agree on that schedule:
- Homework each class meeting
- Frequent tests to check levels
 - Tests every 2 weeks
 - Tests every 6 weeks
 - Monthly exams
- Certificate for completion

VII. Alternative design and persistence

- Programs can be delivered in a format that children and adults can all participate, a resource center
- Participation persistence will depend on usefulness to students and “well taught”

Discussion and Conclusions

This study examined how to redesign an ESOL family Literacy program to best fit the needs of the community. The program personnel realized that redesign would be necessary to overcome obstacles to participation and to better serve the target population in the community.

The process of data collection realized several issues that could have improved the process. The researchers should have defined terms (family literacy) for participants. All interviewers in such a study should be bilingual with women conducting interviews for female participants and males conducting interviews with males to insure the comfort of participants. Small batch focus groups work better than individual or large group interviews for this population. Ad hoc discussions promote consensus and fresh design ideas. When invited, adult ELs are willing to contribute to the successful designing of a family literacy program in their community. The resulting student-directed design approach can reveal program design and details instructors or program coordinators might not have considered such as content focused on practical communicative skills in areas such as work place and health care, technology use and American cultural issues. A design based on student preferences is likely to assist with retention and program success.

The data showed that parents and other adults were able and eager to offer suggestions though some were skeptical that these would be implemented due to their experiences with negative attitudes toward the local Hispanics in the community. Previous to this study there were assumptions made about location and content though some students were consulted about content topics. Design was, to some extent based on the availability of volunteer personnel, dependent on the church venue availability without investigating and content was mostly chosen by instructors. Since most of the original personnel were not trained in teaching ESOL content was based on “folk knowledge” and personal experience with L1 acquisition (alphabet, greetings, pre-set day-to-day use dialogues, vocabulary lists).

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Prins, Esther and Schafft, Kai. (2009) found that family literacy practitioners (instructors) viewed ELL parents and guardians through a lens of a *culture of poverty*, assuming that the parents and guardians did not value education, that they lacked motivation and that their poverty was perpetuated by a cycle of poverty perpetuated by traits and habits of poor people. Although this attitude was not generally expressed by program personnel there was an attitude that academically trained personnel were better equipped to make decisions about program design than were the participants. Participants in the family literacy programs viewed themselves as valuing education, persistent and possessing a desire to better themselves and the lives of their children.

Research indicates that there are obstacles to recruiting students, to maintaining enrolment, and to staff recruitment and training (Holt & Van Duzer, 2000). Solutions to some obstacles may seem obvious as did our study participants who indicated that some of the listed obstacles are easily overcome: instead of flyers in English, flyers can be produced in the target population's first language, or recruitment can be through oral invitation at community institutions the target population trusts (e.g. churches). Some obstacles, such as child care must be planned into the program design. Family literacy includes children in the learning process, so child care provisions are needed only for children too young to participate in program activities. Cultural barriers, such as women needing permission to attend or accompaniment of a male family member can also be incorporated into the program design. Program design can take into account variable attendance (for example: using short units that take no more than one or two class meetings). Programs must be delivered at locations convenient for the target population and where they feel safe.

We contend that many obstacles can be attended to prior to the start of the program if members of the target population are surveyed in order to identify what obstacles do exist. A needs assessment conducted with the target population and then used in curriculum design will ensure that the curriculum is pertinent to the student needs and interests. Gender differences must be considered in program planning. Women and men have different needs in terms of availability, transportation resources, content and desirable locations. Women indicated a need to multitask so programs need to locate, when possible, near places they frequent. Trained instructors are more likely to know how to adapt content to the needs of the learners, to use effective delivery methods and to "keep the class moving". Training also should include strategies for flexibility in assigning work and designing and delivering assessments. Access to technology, purchase of dictionaries and consumable texts and the creation of a resource center typically require funding which indicates the need for grant-writing skills. Finally, programs need to seek out sufficient staff needed to maintain a regular schedule offered at times and places learners indicate. We realize that this is the ideal and that limitations of funding and staff will also limit how closely program design can mirror all the needs of the learners.

Unlike the family literacy practitioner views prevalent in Prins and Schafft's research in which perceptions of family literacy students centered on neo-deficit and culture of poverty conceptual frameworks, we assume potential students value

education and are motivated to learn English and other skills. Top-down designs that do not involve potential learners in program designing may not be perceived as useful by students. We believe that the structural factors that maintain poverty can be overcome by people who have become empowered to advocate for themselves and their families/children. Our data contradicts the neo-deficit-culture of poverty posit that it is individual deficits and dispositions rather than structural factors (including family literacy program design) that leads to unsuccessful program outcomes. We contend that it is vital for family literacy practitioners to disregard myths that the poor, immigrants, and Latinos do not value education (Valencia & Black, 2002).

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Appendix A: Survey and Focus Group Questions

- 1) Where would be the best location for a family literacy program? Why?
- 2) What is the best time to offer a family literacy program?
- 3) How often would you want to meet for English classes?
- 4) What would you like to learn in a family literacy program?
- 5) What materials would you like to use to learn English?
- 6) What qualifications do you want your English teacher to have? What characteristics do you want your English teacher to have?
- 7) How would you like your English progress to be evaluated?