

Cyber-ESL Model for Adult Education

Dr. Ricardo A. Estrada 24 April 2017

SUMMARY

Adult education programs are currently addressing only a small percentage of the estimated need for English as a Second Language (ESL) services, and yet the investment in such resources is crucial and only increasing in the United States. Instituto's Cyber-ESL program has completed a successful pilot program that demonstrates a new model of delivering quality ESL instruction to adult learners through a blended learning approach. The initial results of the program evaluation demonstrate an increase in retention and learning outcomes, demonstrating a viable method to expand ESL services.

UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGE

Research in Adult Education has indicated there is an estimated 25.9 million Limited English Proficient (LEP) adults in the United States. In Illinois alone, 558,000 Adult English Language Learners were identified in 2009. However, according to research in 2015, programs funded by the Illinois Community College Board provided space for only 40,263 learners in the classroom, representing a significant gap in resources that exists across the country.

At the same time, English proficiency is a crucial tool for adults and young adults to find a well-paid position, to navigate the country's social system, and to enhance their education. Instituto's Cyber-ESL model was developed to provide an opportunity for those adults who have been unable to take classes in a traditional classroom setting due to their circumstances. Often this population includes parents who are working at the time classes are scheduled, or their working hours change so often that they cannot attend regularly scheduled class, parents of children who can't afford childcare services and must stay at home after work to care for their children, or any adult who simply cannot attend class due to high number of applicants and limited number of seats available in their community.

CYBER-ESL MODEL

To address these challenges, Instituto created and piloted the Cyber-ESL program, an Adult Education model that combines online software for ESL learning with other existing technologies. The model is designed to enhance the learning of adults and young adults efficiently and effectively to increase their economic potential. Cyber-ESL students use laptops and WiFi Hot Spots to study with USA Learns program (intermediate level) online. The Instituto instructor provides additional assignments which students complete using Microsoft Word, email, phone, and Skype. Students have the support of their instructor

in weekly phone and Skype sessions which provide practice in listening and pronunciation, as well as with the use of the respective technology. Activities to enhance reading and writing are assigned using email and Microsoft Word. Written work is submitted online to the PB Works classroom forum web site. Face-to-face sessions are held twice a month, and instructors have students practice the skills and behaviors that are needed at home (such as logging on and completing lessons from USA Learns, submitting assignments to PB Works, and logging on to Skype) as well as additional speaking and writing practice with peers in the classroom. Students attend testing and orientation sessions during a two-week initial period and complete program instructional activities for 18 weeks thereafter.

The Cyber-ESL program has been funded from 2014 to date by the MacArthur Foundation, and has served 194 students during that time. Cyber ESL students use digital skills and digital devices for 85 percent of their learning time. The other 15 percent is comprised of the biweekly face-to-face sessions with an instructor, the Case Manager/Academic Advisor, and classmates.

KEY COMPONENTS OF THE MODEL

A) Computers - Instituto lends out lap top computers with a built-in web-cam to each participant. The laptops have wireless internet capability and a Microsoft Office package. Some students, approximately 10 percent,

prefer to use their own lap and/or desk tops. About 60 percent of students have no other access to computing resources other than the laptop provided by the program.

B) Hot Spots - Instituto provides a Verizon Jetpack WiFi device to each student. Popularly known as portable Hot Spots, this is a 4G LTE device that connects wirelessly to the student's laptop, and allows access to connect to the internet at home, or wherever the student chooses to practice English. The device battery charges by USB or wall plug adapter.

C) Instructor – The instructor provides continuous support in the form of weekly Skype calls, email contact, weekly phone conversation, and writing assignments submitted online. The instructor also provides direct instruction during two face-to-face class sessions per month held at Instituto. During weekly Skype and phone sessions, the instructor extends, reviews, and reinforces content from USA Learns and the additional assignments and exercises provided. The calls, Skype sessions, and face-to-face contacts provide additional speaking practice. The regular contact helps to solve technical issues quickly, and encourages regular and systematic participation in the online component, reinforcing USA Learns indirectly. Student questions receive a quick response, although not always in real time.

D) Skype, phone calls, and email – Instructors work with students to set up a regular schedule for the calls and

video chats (Skype). Each Cyber-ESL student participates in a weekly Skype session facilitated by the instructor, plus a phone call. Usually, a small group of two to four students participate in a Skype session together as well. The instructor may email the students with information for role play or questions to discuss during a session. Email is also a tool for students' submission of assignments.

E) USA Learns – USA Learns is a free website that helps adults learn English online and is the “textbook” used for the Cyber-ESL course. Students were expected to spend eight hours per week to complete lessons and speaking practice on USA Learns. The website allows students to register in a class section so that Instituto’s Cyber-ESL instructor may monitor student progress. USA Learns is divided into three courses or levels and Cyber-ESL students work in the second English course.

F) Additional Writing Assignments - Assignments are from in-depth reading and writing lessons introduced in the face-to-face sessions. Students post answers and texts on PB Works. Examples include writing sentences describing their work abilities or completing a mock job application and attaching it to an email. Assignments are intermediate steps toward the completion of a writing portfolio for each student that includes a formal letter and a five-paragraph essay.

G) Face-to-Face Sessions– In-person sessions occur on campus biweekly and are three hours in length in

classroom and computer lab settings. The Case Manager/Academic Advisor joins the instructor at the face-to-face sessions. The instructor provides direct instruction, grammar and pronunciation practice, and active listening activities. Students participate in a variety of group projects and presentations. A consistent routine towards the end of the 18-week cycle is known as the mirroring project in which a student prepares a passage from a movie or famous speech and presents to the class.

H) Academic Advising – Each student’s progress is monitored by a Case Manager/Academic Advisor. The advisor meets students at orientations, attends the face-to-face sessions, and calls students at the beginning of the course cycle to see if any technical support is needed. Thereafter, the advisor checks in regularly with students, meets face-to-face with each one, and provides any extra tutoring and practice to help build ESL skills. Students receive a monthly phone call from the advisor for ongoing support. The academic advisor also assists each student in identifying transitions, or next steps, for continuing their education after the end of Cyber-ESL. Finally, the advisor provides referrals for resources and services such as income support, financial education, employment, and mental and behavioral issues to best support the student’s comprehensive wellbeing and mitigate barriers to success.

EVALUATION AND RESULTS

In addition to the MacArthur Foundation's grant to design and implement the program, a grant was provided for the independent evaluation of the program. Dr. Malcolm Bush led the evaluation team in collaboration with the Center for Urban Research and Learning at Loyola University. The evaluation team adopted an approach in which the outcomes as well as the process were evaluated. The evaluation process consisted of regular interviews with Cyber-ESL staff at fixed intervals over the two-year grant period, as well as evaluating standardized tests and evidence-based research principles the program's effectiveness in supporting greater gains in English proficiency, computer skills, and higher percentage of students enrolling in and completing the program compared to traditional classroom programs. The outcomes evaluations also used rigorous criteria on age, income, education, and other demographic variables to assess the general applicability of the program in relation to the target population.

Cyber-ESL Initial Findings

194 students served to date in the Cyber-ESL program:

- 166 Students Retained – 86%
- 169 Students post-tested – 87%
- 109 Students with increased Reading Scores – 56%

- 74 Students with a minimum of 1 Grade Level Reading Score Gain - 38%
- 41 (same as the 74 above mentioned) Students with Two or More Grade Level Reading Gains – 21%

Other Transitions:

- 29 Students are pursuing further English Language learning at City Colleges and nearby schools.
- 32 Students entered Bridge Programming at Instituto.
- 3 students entered Career ESL pre-bridge at Instituto.
- 4 Students have opened their own business.
- 13 Students have found employment.
- 9 Students are attending GED classes.

Summary Statistics on Students Served Using the Test of Adult Basic Education, Reading Survey, Forms 9 and 10 in a pre-and post sequence.

These initial results indicate that Cyber-ESL is a promising model to reach a broader number of adults in need of quality English learning programming, and in turn support their economic mobility. The program will conclude with a final comprehensive report from evaluators in summer 2017.

ABOUT INSTITUTO DEL PROGRESO LATINO

Throughout Instituto del Progreso Latino's (Instituto)

40-year history, the organization has championed bold approaches to create education programming that meet the unique needs of Chicago's Latino and immigrant community. Thanks to its innovative ideas, rigorous research and evaluation, and above all, commitment to students' success, Instituto has made substantial gains in becoming a trusted, career-focused education institution while establishing preeminent models in adult education, youth education, and workforce development that enable community members to reach their full potential.

Dr. Ricardo A. Estrada is the Vice President for Education and Programs at Institute for the Latin Progress

REFERENCES AND RELATED ARTICLES

Batalova, Jeanne and Jie Zong. "Language Diversity and English Proficiency in the United States," <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/language-diversity-and-english-proficiency-united-states>, Migration Policy Institute, 2016.

Paral, Rob. "Meeting the Need? English Language Learners and Immigrant Adult Learners in the Illinois Adult Education System," Chicago: Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, 2009.

Illinois Community College Board. "FY 2016 Adult

Education and Literacy Report to the Governor and General Assembly," https://www.iccb.org/iccb/wp-content/pdfs/adulted/publications_reports/FY16_Report_To_Gov_and_GA.pdf, State of Illinois, 2017.

Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights. "Empty Promises: The Unmet Need for English Instruction Across Illinois." 2010

Kennedy, Sean and John Walters. "Repairing the Nation's Education System for Adult English Learners," <http://lexingtoninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/AdultELLpaperJuly13.pdf>, Arlington, VA: Lexington Institute, 2013.