

Study Shows that ESL Programs Can be Effective Partners to Advance Health Literacy in Immigrant Communities

The project had two phases from which the researchers drew data: 1) the needs analysis survey and 2) classroom pilot program. The results from a survey of 144 California adult ESL teachers revealed there was a need and an interest in integrating health information, specifically Type 2 diabetes prevention, within the regular content of ESL instruction.

Two thirds of the teachers reported they had students with diabetes or at-risk for diabetes and many stated they would like to collaborate with a health practitioner to develop lessons to integrate the health topic into their classrooms. In regards to social interactivity, the three most cited pedagogical practices that were described as “very important” included: students working in pairs or groups, inclusive “whole class” instruction, and having more advanced students tutor/mentor with less proficient students in the class. Another important finding from the survey was that the majority of teachers rated orienting activities to learner’s everyday lives (i.e. integrating real-life materials, such as health forms, and using student’s own experiences to design language learning activities) as very important.

Using the data from the survey, the project task force collaborated with five teachers at a large community college-based adult ESL program to design and test a specially formulated health literacy curriculum on Type 2 Diabetes. 116 students participated in a four month long ESL course, the majority of whom were Asian women. Nearly half reported having no health insurance or access to a regular doctor and over half reported either being diagnosed with some stage of diabetes or knew a family member or friend who had been diagnosed. Data from the pre and post test revealed that there was a strong positive effect of the lessons on learner’s health literacy skills and social practices. Nearly half the students (44.8%) stated they had plans to change their eating habits and 50% said they would change their exercise habits. In addition, there was evidence of a greater social effect of the lessons, with 89% reported the lessons gave them ideas to help prevent the onset of diabetes and 64% reported having shared health information they learned in class with others.

To read the full research article and learn more about social learning and the impact it can have on health literacy learning in the ESL classroom setting, [click here](#).