



Recruiting English Language Learners

Results of a Market Research Project in Adult Education - Phase II

Introduction

Adult education programs in the United States only serve approximately 10% of the population in need, and many have experienced declines in enrollment, particularly associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Unlike in many other sectors, adult education organizations are not primarily supported through payments of tuition from students. This may be a contributing factor as to why adult education providers don't typically engage in the same kind of market research-based customer acquisition strategies common in other industries. The heart of any good market research effort is to know what motivates and drives one's target audience, and evidence suggests significant upside potential for adult education providers that employ such strategies.

In an effort to gain some insights into how to reach and connect with adult English learners, the Florida Literacy Coalition (FLC) conducted a series of three student focus groups to explore key messages, terminology, and communication methods that may be more or less effective in recruiting students for adult education programs. All of the participants were enrolled in intermediate or above level English (ESOL/ESL) classes and represented a range of individuals in terms of age, gender, education level, and nation of origin. Ten countries and Puerto Rico were represented within the groups, eight of which are in Latin America. Eighty-three percent of participating students had studied English before enrolling in their current program.

Employing a customer service-based approach, FLC inquired about the motivations, concerns, and assumptions that factored into student decision-making, and sought students' advice on how to effectively reach others in need of adult education services. In 2019, FLC conducted a similar market research project with Adult Basic Education (ABE) and literacy students. Key findings from this project's white paper, [If You Build It, They Will Come. Think Again; Results of a Market Research Project on Student Recruitment in Adult Education and Literacy](#), are referenced in this article, with comparisons made when there were notable differences.

FLC started with the assumption that most adult education providers have less difficulty recruiting students for ESOL programs than they do for adult basic education and literacy. This is supported by longitudinal National Reporting System (NRS) student enrollment data at the state and national level. This circumstance may be attributed, in part, to the high percentage of students who hear about ESOL offerings via personal networking and word of mouth. Issues related to stigma, embarrassment, and fear of failure which were mentioned during FLC's ABE/literacy focus groups, were almost never cited by the ESOL groups.

It is important to note the tremendous diversity of students enrolled in ESOL programs, which attracts learners with a wide range of cultural, language, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Unlike students traditionally served by ABE/literacy programs, ESOL learners have a wide range of educational backgrounds. It's not uncommon for students with advanced degrees (including physicians, attorneys, and engineers) to be in class with learners who may not be literate in their native language. As one might expect, this range of backgrounds and experiences impacts how individuals search for and learn about ESOL programs, their goals and expectations during this process, and the degree to which they progress, once enrolled. While we were limited in our ability to explore these differences, we did structure the focus groups so that a majority of one group (90%) had college degrees, while the majority (59%) of the other two groups had less than a college/technical school education.

The focus groups were conducted prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, so there are no references to the changes, challenges, and disruptions that students and programs have experienced since March 2020.

Motivation

Participating students were asked what initially motivated them to enroll in their program. The responses ranged from wanting to visit the doctor without a translator to individuals pursuing specific college degrees and professions.

Students had the common goal of wanting and needing to learn English, and saw this as a significant benefit or necessity to effectively function in the U.S.

"I think I'm trying to improve my English to write, read and speak [fluently] to get a better job. To have a relationship. Everything really. You need to speak English."

- Orange County Library System student

"English. It's important not only for the United States—where it's the first language—it is important for all the world."

- Brevard Public Schools Adult Education student

Finding a job or improving one's employment situation was a primary motivator for many of the students. As one student shared: *"Most of the people here want to be here for speaking English for finding the best job. Here in the location is a career center. They help us for making resume, for finding job. It's good to come because the goal is to improve our English for making more money."*

While learning English for employment purposes was frequently mentioned, responses relating to pursuing post-secondary credentials were mentioned less often by the ABE/literacy focus groups. This may be attributed, in part, to the fact that a number of the ESOL group participants already hold post-secondary degrees and are experienced in their professions.

Unlike for ABE/literacy focus groups, there was a consensus among ESOL students that they generally did not need to be convinced that it's important to learn English. They expressed that most immigrants understand and believe that knowing English is important to get ahead, especially for those who intend to live in the U.S. long term.

Concerns, Barriers, and Apprehensions

Students were asked if they had concerns or apprehensions before enrolling in the program. While many of them did express concerns, there were significant differences among those conveyed by the ABE/literacy students.

In the ABE/literacy focus groups, it was fairly common for students to express anxieties related to their own ability to perform and succeed in adult education. Questions such as - have I been out of school too long, what are the required qualifications, am I too old, what are the expectations, and will I be able to keep up, were almost never raised by the ESOL students.

While learning a new language can be difficult and daunting, the issues that ESOL students raised tended to focus more on access and cost. The scheduled time, frequency, and location of classes were cited as important factors. Limited transportation and child care was also mentioned as crucial factors for some.

Cost

Cost was frequently mentioned as a concern when people were first seeking classes, but all the students were pleased with the programs' tuition/fees and felt they were getting a good bargain. The two school district-based programs charge fees in accordance with state guidelines. As one student put it, "At \$30, *It's basically free!*" Orange County Library's classes are free of charge and their students clearly appreciated this.

Unlike the case in adult basic and literacy education, some communities have private schools that offer English classes at a comparatively high cost. Most of these cater primarily to foreign nationals who are visiting the U.S. and studying on a temporary basis. Some the students in the Orlando area focus groups had looked at these schools and said they felt fortunate to have found their current program. No one indicated that they had enrolled in one of these private schools.

ESOL program providers should keep in mind that it's not uncommon for prospective students to have experienced high fees to learn English in their native country and that they may assume that the situation is similar in the U.S. As one student put it, "*The problem is that [in] my country learning English in the programs are very expensive. And sometimes we don't have the money to go to school and learn English. Up here it's free. Thirty dollars is nothing, because it's the language of the country.*" There was a consensus that it's important for those seeking English classes to be aware of the less expensive opportunities to study, such as the programs in which they were enrolled.

Several students indicated that they were somewhat skeptical when they first learned how inexpensive the classes were. "*Cost [is] important. But some people think if it's cheaper, it's no good. Poor quality. People need to know the government pays,*" said one student. Another shared, "*I think that people can think that when you say low cost it means low quality, but I think that it's good that you have testimonials in the videos or in the presentation, because based on that people are going to say, 'Oh, [if] that person, with their accent and their background can do it, I can.'*" Concerns regarding quality as it relates to cost were never expressed in the ABE/literacy focus groups and is something the ESOL programs should consider when planning their marketing efforts.

Eligibility

A number of students indicated that it's important for programs to be clear on what documents need to be provided for enrollment. *"They [are] afraid to come here. Some of them ask me why - what needs to [be] shown in the front office,"* stated one group member.

When FLC delved more into this area, it became clear that this is a significant concern for some potential students. It is common for people to look to the organization's website for a listing of what is required for enrollment. We recommend that programs be clear and transparent regarding how to enroll, program eligibility criteria, and which, if any, personal and/or residency documents are required.

Learning About the Program

Adult learners were asked how they heard about their programs and for recommendations on how to recruit prospective students. Word of mouth was most often referenced by all three groups. It was common that participants had friends or family members who attended or knew about the program.

The following tools and methods were recommended by students:

- **Social Media** – A common suggestion, especially among younger students. Facebook and Instagram were mentioned the most, followed by Twitter.
- **YouTube** – Very popular with all groups and was mentioned much more often than with the ABE/literacy groups.
- **Signs, posters, flyers,** buses, Latin restaurants, churches, mosques, places where people speak the same language.
- **Newspapers/TV/Radio** – No one mentioned newspapers. A few mentioned TV and radio.

Almost all students indicated that they use the Internet and most said that they visited their program's website before enrolling. Smartphones, tablets, and computers were all referenced and a high majority of students indicated that they had at least one device.

Students expressed that they routinely conduct internet searches in both English and their native language and regularly use Google Translate. The group with the highest level of education was most likely to have found their ESOL program on the Internet and also to have studied online via subscription-based English programs. Pronunciator, Rocket Language, Mango, and Duolingo were all mentioned. YouTube videos were the most cited source of online study.

As compared to their ABE/literacy student counterparts, ESOL students were more likely to mention actively seeking out a program with qualified, high quality teachers/staff. *"I found the program looking online, searching online for schools... I looked and they had 100% of people speaking very good about the course, the progress,"* said one student. Another expressed, *"If I find a place that the teachers are really good, I go. Even if it's an hour away."*

All participants said that they preferred in-person classes. The reasons provided included the ability to ask questions, to stay focused, and have a teacher correct pronunciation or other errors. One student

shared her experience with online classes: *“I tried once but it’s – it’s not personal. I prefer to go to school and interact.”*

Since these focus groups were convened pre-COVID, it would be interesting to see if students’ attitudes and experiences have changed on this subject. While we didn’t probe this topic in depth, most responses implied that participants had engaged in independent online self-study. No one mentioned participating in a live/synchronous online English class.

It should be a goal of all adult ESOL programs to show up as a listing on the first page of local internet searches, particularly on Google. When asked for common search terms that may be used, participants shared the following:

- Free English class
- English courses near me
- Orange County English courses
- Learn English near me
- Beginner English
- English for Latin people
- English conversation class
- English pronunciation
- English from zero
- English cheaper and close to home

It is worth noting that all these responses included the word English and no one referenced ESOL or ESL.

ESOL programs located in larger institutions, such as school districts and state/community colleges, often have challenges finding ways to make it easy for people to navigate to their program web pages from the larger organization’s home page. One way to address this is to work with your website manager to engage in search engine optimization strategies that allow people to link directly to your program information when doing keyword searches on Google or other search engines.

Terminology - Finding the Right Words

Focus group participants were asked for their reactions to some specific terms often used in adult education and ESOL programs.

1. **ESL and ESOL.** A key takeaway from this project is that very few students were familiar with the terms ESL or ESOL before arriving in the United States. While students knew that they were now enrolled in a program identified as such, many weren’t clear what words the letters represented. Several students mentioned that they were one and the same and ESL is simply pronounced as “ESOL.” When the wording for the acronyms was shared, there was a split as to which was favored, with a slight overall preference for ESOL over ESL. That said, there was

uniform agreement that both ESL and ESOL should be spelled out on websites and in promotional materials, i.e. English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL).

2. **Literacy.** Few students were familiar with this word and no one connected the word “literacy” with learning English. This may be especially relevant for literacy organizations that list their ESOL program as a component of their literacy program services.

3. **Adult Education and Adult Basic Education.** All groups preferred Adult Education over Adult Basic Education. Unlike the ABE/literacy groups, no one associated the word “basic “with low quality. However, a number did equate this word with education level and felt that more advanced level students may get the wrong impression. *“For me basic education is basic—the beginning. Adult education, I think, is [for] all—it’s more complete,”* shared one student.

In testing preferred terms related to offering English language instruction, students were asked to select their two favorite options and the one they liked least. Students clearly preferred options that included the word “English.” It’s interesting that “English as a Second Language (ESL)” tested the best and “ESL Classes” received the poorest reviews.

Terms	Like	Dislike
Learn English	6	1
English for Speakers of Other Languages	7	4
English as a Second Language (ESL)	11	2
English Language Services	4	2
ESL Classes	0	5
English Classes	7	1
Study English	4	2
English Language Learning	6	0
Educational Opportunities for Adults	4	3
Learn English (ESL)	4	2
Adult Education	3	6

Videos and Student Testimonials

Participants had a very positive reaction to the use of student stories and testimonials. This was true as both a concept, as well as in reaction to a [video](#) they were shown that featured Aliana, an adult learner from DePorres Place.

Students described Aliana as real, truthful, refreshing, and inspirational. Several participants shared that Aliana's experiences were similar to their own. As one student commented, *"She says, 'More opportunity, open doors.' You need to – when you move to this country, she says, you need interaction with other people."* There was general agreement that hearing from successful students, in their own words, can be very motivating, and that short videos featured on program websites and YouTube can be an effective tool in recruiting prospective students.

Students were also shown videos from two organizations that provided an introduction to their respective ESOL programs. The majority of participants preferred the video from the Rhode Island-based [Genesis Center](#), which unlike the other, included student interviews. Generally, high marks were given because of the authentic, relatable, and informative nature of the video. As one student said, *"I like this more than [the] last video because the information is more friendly. It is more simple, it's more dedication, more singing, more enjoying, more friends like that."*

While students endorsed the use of videos for recruiting purposes, there was broad consensus that videos should be kept relatively short, generally in the 1-4 minute range. A number of participants also expressed concerns that it may be difficult for beginners to understand English videos and suggested that either subtitles be added or that they also be made available in other languages.

Website Design and Navigation

Several different websites were reviewed and students were asked for feedback and recommendations on what works well and should be included in an effective website. There was a high degree of similarity between the ESOL students and ABE/literacy students with regard to general design preferences.

1. Websites should have a clean design and be easy to read, understand, and navigate. Students generally agreed, *"If people see too many letters, they don't want to read it."*
2. Share cost, program location, class times, and levels offered.
3. Clearly state registration requirements, including required documents.
4. When possible, information should be no more than two or three "clicks" down.
5. Students like photos and tend to prefer authentic images of real classes and students over stock images.
6. The students reacted favorably to a website that included a step-by-step guide to registration, enrollment, and starting in the program.
7. Consider including student testimonials, program ratings, and reviews.
8. Students liked the option to read website content translated into their native language. Complete translation of all relevant content was preferred. Participants critiqued a website that provided the ability to translate its content through Google Translate. Students liked the idea of having over 100 language options available for translation. That said, it should be noted that while this free tool is widely used, it does make mistakes, particularly with grammar, structure, and context.

9. Consider including a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section, and an introductory video about the program, featuring teachers and students.
10. Identify and address potentially confusing website menu terminology. For example, group participants had some difficulty navigating a school district website which contained the menu option “English Language Learners” under “Departments & Program.” This section contained content for K-12 ESOL services only. Information for the Adult ESOL Program was located under the “Adult Education” subsection.
11. Telephone was the preferred mode of initial contact followed by the option to walk in and ask questions. Students generally disliked sending emails or filling out an online interest form.

Closing Thoughts

While this pilot project was limited in scope, we hope this white paper has provided useful insights and made the case that adult education providers can employ a data-driven approach to student recruitment and marketing. Conduct your own focus groups. Engage students in developing and implementing a recruitment plan. Task them with serving as ambassadors for the program and seek out their advice and help in reaching other English language learners—they are the experts. One good example of this is Orange County Library’s practice of periodically hosting “Bring a Friend to Class” opportunities. This simple idea has boosted enrollment in this fast growing program.

With the use of relatively simple market research strategies, ESOL providers can effectively target resources to meet learner expectations and help ensure that all those in need are aware of your programs and services.

FLC would like to acknowledge and thank the following organizations for making their students and facilities available to do focus groups:

- **Adult Learning Center Osceola (ALCO), School District of Osceola County**
- **Brevard Adult Education, Brevard Public Schools**
- **Orange County Library System ESOL Program**

Thanks to several students from the **Adult Literacy League** (Orlando) for their participation, and to our project consultant **Vincent Bailey** of Aperture Market Research, Inc.

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This project was made possible through the generous support of the Florida Department of Education, Division of Career and Adult Education.