Technology Fast-Tracks Adult English Language Acquisition

By 2030, nearly one in five members of the workforce will be an immigrant.

Meanwhile, the number of Limited English Proficient adults in the US continues to increase dramatically. Between 1990 and 2013, the LEP population grew 80 percent—from nearly 14 million to 25.1 million.[1]

How can we ensure that this population, so vital to maintaining a strong competitive US workforce, will gain the English-language skills necessary for job success? Adult ELL programs in high school districts and community colleges offer the most effective learning paths for non-native English speakers seeking to level the playing field.

It's no surprise then that Adult ELL is the largest subgroup enrolled in US adult education programs, representing over 40% of the total Adult Ed population (and the figure continues to rise). This diverse group of learners represents many languages spoken, educational levels reached, first language literacy skills acquired, and varying levels of English proficiency.

Reasons why adults learn new English-language skills extend beyond becoming more productive and competitive on the job. Learners are also highly motivated to:

- Raise children with strong literacy skills needed to succeed
- Keep themselves and their families safe and healthy
- Increase their contribution to their communities
- Advocate for themselves and others, and avoid crime

Leveraging technology empowers learners

Adult Ed administrators face a challenge—how to meet the growing demand for ELL programs that serve a diverse population of learners needing both reliable access and learning flexibility.

Increasingly, programs turn to technology to complement classroom instruction, build capacity to match increasing enrollments, and accelerate learners' English-language acquisition.

In Chula Vista, CA, the Sweetwater Union High School District Division of Adult Education serves almost 21,000 learners. An online solution for its ESOL distance learning program was chosen to complement classroom instruction and allow learners to build language skills on their own. Learners gained the flexibility to learn from home or in designated computer labs at school, ensuring access to meet each learner's needs.

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> College of Western Idaho

At the College of Western Idaho (CWI) displaced workers used a technology-based English-language program to build key skills needed for possible employment, such as job applications and interview skills. "Some students were able to obtain jobs before they even completed the course," said Rebecca Sherman, CWI's director of technology and business solutions. "When the initial program ended, we had a of lot students asking for more English, more time on the computer, more time learning."

Adult ELL programs, and the learners they serve, both benefit from the use of technology.

- Learner engagement and motivation increases
- Practice opportunities are available outside class time
- Personalized instruction helps students work at their own pace
- Instructors gain instant access to student performance data
- Reporting and compliance requirements are easily facilitated

Identifying learner and workforce needs

Adult ELL program administrators realize that they must identify the ESL and workforce needs of their local communities by reaching out to existing and potential students. ESL experts say this helps ensure ESL programs stay relevant within the changing needs of their local communities.

"An English-language learning program that a community college creates on its own and then tries to sell to students is probably not going to look incredibly enticing," explains Teresita Wisell, an associate dean at Westchester Community College and executive director of the Community College Consortium for Immigrant Education (CCCIE). "Instead, we've found that the programs that work come out of many up-front conversations with individual students to get a real sense of what the needs really are."

Measuring program impact

To ensure Adult ELL programs provide the value administrators require, it's important that educators can determine a return on their investment.

In Orlando, FL, Orange County Public Schools' objectives for Adult ESOL learners were clear: improve reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills. Adding an online English-language solution enabled beginner and intermediate English Language Learners to work more effectively toward proficiency.

The result: Improved CASAS scores in relationship to online program usage.

One key metric for schools is the linkage between ESL classes and future enrollments. "There is a payoff for the college in that ESL can help foster continued enrollments," says Sonya Franeta, an ESL instructor at Laney College in Oakland, CA. "We have seen people participate in the contextualized classes and go on to take more classes at the college."

Focusing on learner success

Effective adult ELL programs combine important language skills acquisition with active workforce partnerships. These drive employment for students, fuel higher enrollments, and help programs forge lasting relationships with regional and local employers. Across the country, these collaborations produce impressive results.

At Westchester Community College in New York educators forge partnerships with local high-tech employers to increase employment opportunities for ESL students. The program provides students, many of whom studied the sciences in foreign countries, with the skills and knowledge to understand U.S. business culture and to communicate more effectively with scientists who are native English speakers.

For the ever-increasing Adult ELL population, accelerating language acquisition means accelerating the rate at which they improve their lives, integrate into the communities in which they live, and secure better employment.

With flexible scheduling and the ability to learn and practice anywhere, adult learners can access areas of study that align to key life and work skills. Leveraging technology gives busy learners needed flexibility to reinforce traditional lessons and improve competency and retention.

"Without a doubt, the innovative programs are using technology," Wisell says.

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1. http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/limited-english-proficient-population-united-states