

Bridges for Rural Immigrants

Phase 2

Public Report

ESL and Languages Department

Bow Valley College

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Bridges for Rural Immigrants was developed and delivered in partnership with Bow Valley College and the Hanna Learning Centre. It was a pilot project to test the development and delivery of English language speaking and listening programs to rural and remote areas using a videoconferencing platform and the SuperNet/Internet. The goal was to establish a community based partnership and a delivery model that was transferable to rural or remote areas with compatible technological supports. The project addressed local and regional needs related to access to learning and the lack of ESL expertise currently accessible in the remote site communities.

Bridges for Rural Immigrants was an innovative approach used to deliver ESL instruction to rural Albertan English language learners (ELL). This unique partnership has resulted in a successful model for the delivery of language classes to immigrants in rural regions of the province. It supports the regional stewardship mandate entrusted to comprehensive community colleges in Alberta by offering a modality and promising practices for other providers to undertake similar projects. The following brief narrative uncovers some of the findings from the project, learnings discovered along the way, and recommendations gleaned from the experience.

Recruitment

Although there continues to be an expressed need for language instruction for rural Albertan ELL, finding learners at the appropriate level, and available when classes were scheduled, proved to be a very challenging task in some of the rural communities that were partners in this project. Rural program coordinators in this project found recruitment to be the most challenging aspect overall.

One of the communities had a significant number of immigrant retirees and stay-at-home moms, which made it easier for learners to adapt to the scheduled time of the classes. One of the significant learnings which emerged from the recruitment process was the understanding of the immigrant demographic in the respective communities and for the urban partner; a further realization of the diverse nature of immigrant composition in rural Albertan communities.

Delivery

Originally, it was planned to take an existing listening and speaking course and offer the same course through this modality. The recruitment process resulted in a group of learners that were at a higher level of proficiency than planned. In order to be responsive to learner needs, and to test what worked best with the technology, an existing course was not used. The instructors, in cooperation with the VC controller, developed original lessons for each class. This resulted in current, thematic material which employed a variety of technological resources while offering enhanced learning opportunities for the learners. This also proved important for the remote site facilitators who left this experience with a package of teaching material to use in the future.

Retention

A retention rate of 95% over all was maintained in the delivery site classes, the remote site classes maintained a retention rate of approximately 95% in the first cohort, 93% in the second cohort and 75%

in the third cohort. Some contributing factors to lower retention rates in the remote sites were: learners in one of the remote sites did not reside in the community where the class was held, and the delivery time may have also impacted these rates and many of the learners were also working full-time. Weather was a factor in cohort three as some of the remote site learners were not able to commute on extremely snowy days.

Evaluation

Evaluation of the project was conducted through a variety of methods. The primary source of information about the project was elicited through feedback surveys which were administered both at mid and end points for each cohort. The surveys were sent to learners, facilitators and coordinators. A final survey was also sent to the technological support at our primary partner location the Hanna Learning Centre. These surveys were useful to the project coordinator in informing consequent iterations of the language classes. They also helped to inform the administrative practices employed throughout the project. In cohort three, the surveys were administered through our LMS, Blackboard.

Pre and post video interviews were conducted in the last cohort. Because these part-time classes do not allow for documented gains in CLB levels, we wanted to have evidence of language improvements. The interviews illustrate that learners improved their ability to communicate. All learners showed gains in confidence and used compensatory communication strategies in their second interviews. Instructors in our fulltime ESL classes who had learners participate in the VC project commented that their learners' oral/aural skills had drastically improved towards the end of the classes. It was noted that learners were better able to present to their peers and developed confidence in other listening and speaking situations.

This is an excellent opportunity for rural immigrants to glean the expertise of big city specialists; continuation and expansion into other rural communities would certainly increase the language levels in areas that typically don't have access to the same type of learning as immigrants in the city.

Coordinator Hanna Learning Centre

Successes

This project was successful on a variety of levels. There is now an assessed E-learning delivery model for rural Alberta including satisfaction surveys for instructors, learners and facilitators. This project served a total of 41 learners (including some learners in both the remote and delivery site who took the class more than once), trained six facilitators who worked in the program (an additional five participants attended the training but did not work in the program). This has directly increased capacity for local language instruction expertise in rural Alberta. There is also an increased awareness of required

language support for ELLs in rural regions, while the model has allowed a gateway for increased accessibility for language classes in rural Alberta.

Recommendations

Recommendations for similar projects have been broken up into five areas. They are not ranked in any particular order.

Dedicated space: It is recommended that the room be set up and dedicated to videoconferencing. Both the originating and the remote sites should be spaces dedicated for distance learning with the same or very similar high standard equipment. If it is not a dedicated room, factors such as the air conditioning systems, fans, boiler room noise, hall noise, and too much natural light should be considered.

Mixed delivery: It is recommended to enhance learning outside of class time as well as to support classroom instruction. Videoconferencing as a standalone tool is not recommended. Supporting technologies (whether synchronous or asynchronous) are necessary for providing access to learning, especially for remote learners. Some of the supporting technologies that we used with success were Blackboard and Skype.

Instructor: It is clear that the instructor plays a very important role in the ultimate success of this form of distance delivery. A dynamic combination of energy, enthusiasm, and patience is necessary to pace the class and keep students engaged. Videoconferencing requires a more focused audience than face-to-face instruction and, therefore, can be quite tiring, for the instructor and the learners. If the instructor has the ability to interact with energy and enthusiasm, to change the activities and the pace of the class to keep students engaged, and to have the patience with the technology, the experience will be that much more effective.

VC guidelines: For all participants to be comfortable using the technology effectively, set up videoconferencing etiquette guidelines around noise, voice level, turn-taking, body language, eye contact, and staying on task. Lessening these distractions contributes to a more focused learning environment. This is essential in a communicative ESL environment.

Adequate resources: Be aware that the planning, preparation, and execution of lessons using videoconferencing takes a considerable amount of time, more time than conventional lesson planning. For classes at lower level proficiency, this timeline will be stretched further. It is also essential to ensure that sites are both technologically compatible and adequately supported.

While challenges include the establishment of a high standard of technology, the comfort level and connectedness of the participants, and an adequate pace of instruction, the use of videoconferencing is a powerful tool whose potential must be explored further in language delivery. Our experience with Bridges for Rural Immigrants ESL videoconferencing classes left a very positive impression as to the effectiveness of the technology in supporting language instruction to remote learners.