

Post High School ESL Literacy Research and Development Project

Phase II: Public Report

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

The Post High School ESL Literacy Research and Development Project was a literacy training initiative piloted at Bow Valley College and funded by Alberta Learning. The purpose of this research and development project was to investigate the educational needs and employment goals of young adult ESL literacy learners and to design and deliver a bridging program tailored to their needs.

Phase One of the project, undertaken in 2002-2003, involved investigations into the educational needs and interests of immigrants between the ages of 18-25 with ESL literacy difficulties who are no longer eligible to continue learning in a high school setting, but are unlikely to obtain a high school diploma because of their language barriers. Based on the research findings, a program was developed to help these learners improve their reading and writing skills and assist them in creating a concrete plan to reach their career goals.

Phase Two of the project ran from 2003-2004, and involved the delivery of the pilot program, development of career plans for each individual learner, and the revisions to the curriculum based on the pilot program results. Fifteen young adult learners with reading and writing Canadian Language Benchmarks literacy levels between Foundation and Phase III and listening and speaking proficiency levels between CLB 2 and 6 were accepted into the program. They attended part-time small group classes for a total of sixteen hours per week. Classes ran for two eighteen-week sessions from fall 2003 to summer 2004. Clients also met with a career advisor to discuss future education and career plans several times over the course of each session.

Program Objectives

The Post High School ESL Literacy Research and Development Project Phase Two proposed to:

- assist young adult ESL literacy learners in improving their reading and writing skills through small group instruction.
- develop further education and employment action plans in conjunction with the learners to map their educational / vocational journey towards their career goals.
- pilot, evaluate and revise the course guide developed in Phase One of the program to fine tune it to the needs of the learners.

SUMMARY OF PROJECT ACTIVITIES

Phase Two of the Post High School ESL Literacy Research and Development Project can be broken down into three parts. The principal activity undertaken in the project was the instructional element. Learners attended small group classes that focused on improving their reading and writing skills through age and interest-appropriate content. The second

element involved the development of an educational and employment action plan which mapped out each learner's educational journey towards their goals. The third project element was the piloting and revision of the course guide developed in Phase One.

Instructional Element:

In the instructional element of the project, young adult learners met with qualified ESL literacy instructors in small group classes for a total of sixteen hours per week for two eighteen week sessions. The content covered in the classes focused in particular on improving the clients' reading and writing skills. The materials used were age appropriate and addressed the Canadian Language Benchmarks 2000, ESL for Literacy Learners competencies as well as incorporating competencies from the English as a Second Language Senior High curriculum.

The instructional process was undertaken as follows:

- a) Learners were interviewed before the classes began in order to determine program suitability, previous education and literacy needs.
- b) Suitable learners' reading and writing levels were then assessed at the beginning of the program to place them in the appropriate class for their language level.
- c) Learners met in small group classes for a total of 16 hours per week, for two 18-week sessions.
- d) Classes focused on developing the learners' reading and writing skills, and preparing them for upgrading courses or training programs. Instructors piloted the course guide developed in Phase One
- e) Throughout the course, instructors monitored day-to-day learner progress using competencies checklists developed for the program. Instructors also kept track of progress through graded reading assessments and assignments in class.
- f) At the end of the second 18-week session, the reading and writing skills of the learners were assessed once again through assessments and competency checklist scores and compared to their entry level scores to determine progress.
- g) Once students had been evaluated and their scores were discussed with them, referrals were made for future studies

Action Plan Element:

As part of the program, learners met with a career advisor to determine further education and career goals and to map out a path to achieve these goals.

- a) At the beginning of the first session of classes, action plan interview sheets and action plan charts were designed for the program.

- b) Learners met with a career advisor early in the program to discuss their career goals and the necessary educational / training path.
- c) Learners met with the career advisor several times over the course of the program to discuss progress and any changes to their goals.
- d) An action plan was drawn up for each learner in the program to outline the steps towards each one's goals.
- e) At the end of the course, learners were assisted with registration and referrals for the next step in their educational journey

Course Guide Element:

- a) The course guide created in Phase One of the program was piloted in the classroom with the learners.
- b) Necessary changes and additions were noted throughout the program.
- c) The course guide was revised following the end of the instructional component of the program.

LEARNER PROGRESS

The Post High School ESL Literacy Program proved to be a very successful program. As seen below, all clients who completed the year in the program demonstrated progress in both reading and writing skills. The extra support that the learners received in the program and content tailored to their needs resulted in noticeable progress. Another major factor in the amount of progress made was determination and dedication to learning on the part of the clients.

11 clients completed the course. When their pre-test and post-test scores are compared, of these 11 clients, 100% moved up at least one literacy benchmark phase in reading.

9% (1) moved up three literacy benchmark phases

45% (5) moved up two literacy benchmark phases

45% (5) moved up one literacy benchmark phase

Similar results can be seen in writing. When the pre-test and post-test results were compared, 100% of the clients who completed the one-year course moved up at least one literacy benchmark phase.

9% (1) moved up three literacy benchmark phases

64% (7) moved up two literacy benchmark phases

27% (3) moved up one literacy benchmark phase

When competency checklist results are compared, progress is also apparent in all learners.

All participants that completed the program demonstrated progress. 70% of the learners who completed the program demonstrated an average increase of 25.5% in reading competencies. The overall average increase for all participants in reading competencies was 21%. When writing competencies are compared, the results are also consistent, with 70% of the learners who completed the program demonstrating an average increase of 26%. The overall average increase in writing for all participants that completed the program was 21%.

Overall, learners were quite dedicated to improving their English skills, but life factors and outside influences did affect results. Those who were more determined to advance and get on track to their goal showed marked improvement over those who were not quite as focused, or who had multiple outside pressures interfering with their learning. With some learners, attendance was an issue, and this was reflected in their progress. Over the course of the term, however, as learners began to see the improvement in their skills and recognize that they were moving closer to their goals, they tended to work even harder.

Instructors kept track of learner comments and notable progress. Some of their anecdotal comments regarding student progress are included below:

- (He) often mentioned that he wanted to be an electrician. In February, he mentioned that he would be interested in doing some extra reading about science and electricity. A few months later, he was reading an electronics textbook that he had taken out of the public library.
- (She) said that members of her family were noticing how much better her English was. She was very happy to tell us that her family was proud of her and how hard she was working.
- (She) said that she feels she has already improved a lot, and she is so proud that she can write an essay. She said that at the beginning of the year, she didn't even know what an essay was.
- In the winter, (he) brought a job application form in to tutorial class. We worked on it together and helped him put together a cover letter. He got a job as a translator for the School Board.
- She said that her reading and vocabulary had really improved...she was happy because she had several experiences where she could do things that she couldn't do before.
- After Christmas, (her) attendance, attitude, and class work improved...Her confidence steadily improved. These changes were reflected in her scores on the midpoint test.
- (He) worked especially hard on writing...he used relatively complex structure when he wrote. He hopes to return to the program in the fall of 2004. If we can get him to come to class regularly, he'll do well.

LEARNER EDUCATIONAL AND CAREER GOALS

Learners in the Post High School ESL Research and Development Project had varying goals for the future, but all needed to improve their literacy skills and then attend upgrading programs as the initial steps. Short term goals among the learners included the following: take upgrading courses; get a high school diploma; become a health care aide; or become a community interpreter.

Long term or career goals included the following: become a health care aide; become a social worker; get certified as an electrician; become a mechanic; train to be a nurse (LPN); become a doctor; become a chef.

When the participants' future goals were analyzed, the following educational needs were apparent:

- 100% of the clients who enrolled in the Post High School ESL Literacy Program will require at least some high school equivalency courses to reach their short term and or long-term goals.
- 33.3% will also need to enroll in a community college certificate program to reach their long-term goal.
- 33.3% will also need to enroll in a technical college certificate program to reach their long-term goal.
- 20% will also need to enroll in a university degree or college diploma program to reach their long-term goal.

In September, 2004, follow-up was done with learners from the 2003-2004 program. 93%, or 14 of the 15 clients who had enrolled in classes in the Post High School ESL Literacy and Development Program in the fall of 2003 were continuing along their learning path and had registered for education programs for the 2004/2005 year:
6, or 40% went on to Basic Education / Upgrading programs
6, or 40% enrolled in a second year of literacy focused education
2, or 13% enrolled both in Basic Upgrading Programs and in further literacy training.
1, or 7% of the learners had withdrawn from the program due to pregnancy and was not enrolled in a training program at the time of the follow up.

CONCLUSION

There are young adults with ESL literacy needs who are slipping through the cracks due to lack of appropriate post high school programming. The learners who attended classes in the Post High School ESL Literacy Research and Development Project would have been stuck at dead end jobs had they not been given the opportunity to improve their language skills. All learners in the program showed noticeable improvement in their English skills and, as a result, their self-confidence. They all had goals and dreams for the future to become active members of the work force. With a focused language training program and specialized ESL support, these learners were able to get themselves on track to begin the journey towards reaching their goals. These youth are the workforce and society builders of the future, and it is vital that we give them the educational foundation from which to begin, thus encouraging future success.