



# Virginia Adult Education Research Network

Practitioner Research Briefs, 1998-1999 Report Series

## *Why They Come: An Exploration into Retention and Motivation in an Adult ESL Program*

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### **Background:**

My ESL program in Southwestern Virginia has seen record enrollment for the 1998-1999 school year. A low-intermediate class and an advanced class make up our small program, and combined enrollment in these two classes has soared to 194 students. Though the large classes are sometimes difficult to manage for a single teacher, they speak of the effectiveness of my classes.

High enrollment tells only part of the story, however. Nine advanced students make up 44% of the total attendance hours for that class. While average attendance is 18 hours, 3 of those 9 students attended over 100 hours. Six of the same students who attended the advanced class do the same for the lower intermediate class, making up 30% of the total student attendance hours for that class. In short, many of the same students show up regularly in both classes. Of the 194 students enrolled for this year, 9 regulars in the advanced class and 6 in the low-intermediate class made up the bulk of attendance. As the same people attended both classes, we may say that 9 regular students out of a total of 194, or 5%, have carried the greater portion of attendance. The

purpose of this research was to identify what motivated students to attend class. I sought to identify what attracted students to the class, so that I could then determine what measures the program could take to increase the 5%.

### **Inquiry:**

*Why, from the perspective of the students, do people attend class or not? What keeps them coming back?*

### **Data Collection:**

Qualitative researchers work with words and this study was no exception. Over five months of participant observation was conducted in both classes. Field observations of the classroom were recorded in anecdotal form, including quotations of student comments. Besides field notes, two focus groups were held with a mix of volunteers from both classes. Two participants in the focus groups were learners who had since dropped out of the program. Transcriptions of each taped session were included as part of the data. A third source of information resulted from student responses to class tasks designed by the teacher. The tasks included ten activities in which students completed a procedure for each

activity: naming items, writing dictation responses, completing partial sentences. I further examined class documents such as surveys conducted in past classes and the entrance sheets that students filled out as part of class registration. In short, I examined class documents, focus group transcripts, and observations of students engaged in or talking about class activities.

Except for the field notes, all data collection relied on students' perspectives. Some field notes included comments from non-students: a literacy volunteer who observed a class; an uncle who sent a nephew to the class; an office manager who supports the program; a colleague who tutors ESL students; and some students who had dropped the class. As these individuals were in contact with people who observed program classes or had participated in the class, they provided information that was not usually accessible to me as teacher. Some of the informants, such as the colleague who tutors, regularly work with students from my program. For this reason, I included their perspectives with the students.

Analysis of the wording collected took two steps: transcribing the

material on to index cards and then sorting the cards into general themes. Each card included data in one of four forms: a single quotation from an informant; a single student comment of one to five sentences addressing a single topic; a written comment produced from a student document; or a line or two from the transcript addressing a single topic (a transcript quote). Cards were sorted into general themes; all data sources were pooled together to see what themes cut across them. What follows are the general themes that emerged from the data analysis.

### Findings:

The adult learners in our ESL program, like other adult learners, bring to class needs that they expect to see met through instruction, yet, at the same time, those needs conflict with a number of competing demands in their lives. Students highlighted these conflicts during the focus group sessions, and repeated them during class tasks and class activities recorded in the field notes.

Needs were typically expressed as linguistic skills: grammar; pronunciation; and vocabulary. Students perceive these needs in response to pressures at work and in university classrooms. Some also want help preparing for standardized tests such as the TOEFL or the GRE. Perhaps the strongest need is that for practice. Students want to practice communicating thought or meaning in English. Students look for genuine opportunities to use English consistent with American usage or customs. They want the classroom to provide such opportunities. For some, the instructor is one of the few Americans that they regularly talk to.

Student conflicts include different life activities or circumstances that interrupt attendance. Some conflicts involve family issues such as pregnancy or childcare. Others involve personal issues such as illness or simply having no desire to attend class. Other personal conflicts may be travel, moving, or holiday activities. There are also practical conflicts such as transportation or snow days. The class schedule deters many from attending, too. Other ESL programs either create more scheduling conflicts or pull some students away from attending.

Needs and conflicts are personal. They relate to the individual student's effort to act on his or her needs within the context of many competing demands. But the individual acts on those efforts within the classroom, which is a social system. Interaction with the culture of the classroom, the particular classroom with its instructor, resources, and personalities, affects attendance, too.

According to student comments in class and during the focus group sessions, some aspects of the classroom culture attract students. What one student called "the mood of the class" is an important part of this, including the teacher's personality and students' general relationships with each other. The reputation of the class and the fact that it is free further attracts students. Students also noted the teacher's ability to coordinate with other public services such as Literacy Volunteers; the frequency of the class meetings; and particular instructional topics. Some class tasks also suggest that the teacher's methodology, such as group work or

practicing short question-answer dialogs, attracts students.

There are aspects of the classroom culture, though, that deter some students. The open enrollment of the class with its mixed levels and overcrowding deterred some. A lack of textbooks and materials and even insufficient lighting in the classroom were pointed out in both the focus groups and the end-of-year survey. Instruction can also deter students. Unclear instructions on the part of the teacher, discomfort with participating in certain kinds of activities, and problems with comprehending in general, affected some students. The presence of dominating students who were more assertive than others, or the presence of certain groups of students who often spoke in their native language, made participation for some students difficult. Students usually pointed out these difficulties in class or after class, as recorded in the field notes.

To sum up, students feel pressure to learn certain language skills, particularly the skill to communicate meaning to Americans. But competing with this are other pressures in their lives that draw them away from the class. The culture of classroom, the personality of the teacher, and the kinds of instructional efforts and topics presented, all may pull students to the class if the classroom climate is welcoming and friendly. That the class is free further attracts learners.

### Conclusions:

Adult learners live lives. They participate in an ESL class with one key goal: to learn language as a means to participate more easily in

American life. They want to participate in class in order to participate fully in the lives they lead.

My role as an ESL teacher, from this perspective, is often as a resource. Students want me to provide them with topics, expressions, and practice. I am expected to provide a variety of all three, with greater frequency than I have provided before. My adult learners see participation in life as competency in all three and they tend to judge their performance in the three according to traditional linguistic skills such as vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. What attracts many to my class is what they get from me as a resource — the chance to practice; the chance to learn a variety of topics; and the chance to learn how the topics are used in conversation. This is why, for example, phrasal verbs rank as important to so many of my students. They see phrasal verbs as one way to speak American.

In terms of improving attendance, this research study points to the importance of variety and frequency. Students want to cover a number of topics more frequently. They want competency in talking about certain subjects. And they want to have frequent opportunities to talk about the same topics but in different ways. This may suggest the need for including different texts. A Japanese student, during a focus group, talked about how useful it was to practice operations such as talking about how to put on clothing and tying shoes. Other students described the usefulness of other texts such as comparisons and narratives. It may be helpful, then, to practice with a variety of texts on a variety of topics. The issue of frequency further points

to memory, which is a common complaint among students. For many, memory of what was learned in class easily slips away. But frequent practice opportunities may help with reinforcing memory. Summing up here, I believe that different kinds of texts, from narratives to dialogues and from comparisons to operations, with a variety of topics and expressions, practiced frequently over a number of classes, may attract more students.

Participation refers to placement, too. Throughout the data, the condition of having open enrollment with mixed levels of students was not preferred. Some students felt intimidated by higher level students. Other students felt uncomfortable working with lower level students. The data suggest that instruction will work better in the future if students participate according to their proficiency levels. Finding the balance between not overwhelming part of the class while at the same time challenging the other part, has not always been achieved. The loss of students at the highest and lowest levels of proficiency indicates that my program needs to work more on placement.

I see my role here, though, as more than a resource; I also see my role as an editor. My students want frequent feedback on their performance. They want to have clear criteria on their performance spelled out in a manner that allows them to judge for themselves. They want to know what works and what does not. Unclear directions on my part when assigning a class activity often lead students to creating criteria for themselves. In the future, classes should pay as much attention to

performance criteria as to class goals. If students are to participate, they need to know the desired end and how they can judge if they have reached such an end effectively. It may help my class planning to focus more on ends, criteria, and activities.

Finally, I am also reminded that as an adult educator, there are some circumstances that are beyond my intervention. I have listed a number of points on how I plan to improve the classroom, which is where I have influence on my learners. There are instances, however, where my role as adult educator leads me to a spectator role, as conflicts ranging from bad weather to pregnancy, work schedules, or university level classes, distract my students from attending. It is quite possible that by enhancing my role as resource and editor, I may be less afflicted by the difficulties of spectator. Ultimately, what matters is how I perform these roles in a classroom culture that is non-threatening. As my students suggest here, attendance relies as much on the class mood as with class activities. Students want to participate to satisfy their needs without the pressure found outside the classroom. It is the personality of the teacher, too, that attracts students to class. Teacher personality and instruction work as the agent of that mood, competing with the many demands adult learners face living their lives. □

## Practitioner Research Briefs, 1998-1999 Report Series

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*The Virginia Adult Education Research Network supports practitioner research as staff development. In practitioner research, groups of teachers, tutors, and administrators use qualitative inquiry methods to systematically explore issues or problems, arising from their own practice. Practitioner research is a long-term learning process that occurs, over the course of months, within a supportive group and continues as researchers carry out projects in their classrooms and programs. Through brief reports that they write practitioner researchers contribute their knowledge to others in the literacy education field. The complete series of Practitioner Research Briefs, 1998-1999, is available on the Internet at <http://www.vcu.edu/aelweb/vaern.html>*

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