

## CHAPTER NINE

# AFRICAN IMMIGRANT FAMILIES' VIEWS ON ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE (ESL) CLASSES HELD FOR NEWLY ARRIVED IMMIGRANT CHILDREN IN THE UNITED STATES ELEMENTARY AND MIDDLE SCHOOLS: A STUDY IN ETHNOGRAPHY

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### Abstract

*Twenty immigrant families from different Anglophone, Francophone, and Lusophone African countries were interviewed about their views on English as a Second Language (ESL) classes offered by the school systems in the United States to newly arrived immigrant children. Whereas nine families (mostly from Francophone and Lusophone Africa) found the ESL classes useful, eleven families (mostly from Anglophone Africa) found them to be useless because they did not help to improve their children's English. Some respondents were frustrated because of the criterion used in selecting students to participate in the program, and also because their children were kept in the program long after their English proficiency had improved. Most respondents saw inclusion within the mainstream classes, instead of separate ESL classes, as a better way to increase students' English competency.*

An estimated 7 million African immigrants live in the United States. Studies about these Africans immigrants have focused, among other topics, on the macroeconomic impact such immigrants have on their home countries (with regard to remittances); on patterns of migration; on the impact of the brain drain on various sectors of Africa's economy, especially on the health and higher education sectors; and on the religious beliefs and practices of the immigrants.

With respect to ESL studies, a close and methodical attention to the literature suggests that such studies have concentrated on microanalyses of classroom discourse and teacher self-reflections (Lazarton & Ishihara, 2005), on reading and writing skills (Klingner, Artiles, & Barletta, 2006), on academic

listening and speaking tasks for ESL students (Ferris & Tagg, 1996), on the role of ESL in dual Spanish-English language programs (Zucker, 1995), and on the role of comic strips on ESL learners' reading comprehension (Liu, 2004). Other studies have concentrated on the academic discourse socialization experiences of L2 learners (Morita, 2004), on students' appropriation of the writing process in the context of their ESL language arts courses (Parks, Huot, Hamers, & Lemonnier, 2005), and on discourse and participation in ESL face-to-face and written electronic conferences (Fitze, 2006).

Research regarding the involvement of immigrant parents in the education of their children and the educational benefits to the children of such immigrant parents (Ramirez, 2003) is notably lacking. As far as we know, no study has been done on African immigrant parents' views on English as a Second Language. This groundbreaking study therefore seeks to fill in the dearth of knowledge about African immigrant parents' views and/or reactions toward ESL classes offered to their Elementary and Middle school children. The paper examines parents' perceptions about the criteria for selecting children to participate in the ESL classes, length of stay in the program, benefits derived from the classes, and the relevance of the immigrants' reaction to ESL program implementation and evaluation.

### Background of Participants

The participants who were interviewed for this study were: (a) student families who had arrived in the United States to study for various university degrees; (b) African immigrants who were employed at a university setting (this included families who were students at some point but had completed their education and were either working as faculty or staff in various universities); (c) immigrant families who emigrated to the U.S. with the sole aim of working.

In all, twenty African immigrants parents living in Indiana were interviewed. The rationale for selecting the research participants was based on their unique linguistic and educational backgrounds and on the fact that they either had (or had had) a child in an ESL program. Also, they were willing to express their views on the ESL classes. Thus, although about twenty-eight parents were identified, only twenty willingly agreed to be interviewed on this subject matter. We collected the data for this study in 2005. Our research site, Indiana, was chosen due to the presence of African immigrants in the state capital, Indianapolis, and in Bloomington (at the Indiana University, Bloomington campus). Also, we had easy access to the immigrant community (we knew several members of the Ghanaian Association of Indianapolis).

Eleven of the families were from Anglophone Africa and had therefore done their studies in the English language in their home countries. Six families

were from Francophone Africa and therefore studied in French in their home countries. The remaining three families were from Lusophone Africa and had done their studies in Portuguese in their native countries. Seventeen of the participants interviewed had a respondent who had completed a Bachelor's degree and was pursuing graduate work. The remaining three families had a parent who had completed high school. Given their educational and professional backgrounds, it is fair to argue that the respondents knew about and/or understood the importance of ESL in the academic lives of their children.

### Theoretical Underpinning

The study is done within the framework of Van Maanen's (1988) *impressionism* and Hymes' (1962) *ethnography of speaking* (see also Saville-Troike, 2004). We chose the above theoretical frameworks because they enabled us to situate our research participants in a natural and/or appropriate research site and time. As impressionistic researchers, we are allowed to put emphasis on precision and objectivity by presenting participants' worldview as expressed by them. Participants' striking anecdotes, stories, and/or narratives are deemed important in our synthesis and analysis because such genres help to provide deeper insights into participants' worldview.

We take it as axiomatic that it is participants' own utterances and their orientations to our stimuli (interview questions) as well as their interpretations of their own actions that should form the basis of our analytical claims. By so doing, we avoid premature theory construction. Using participants' stretch of utterances as the basis of our claims gives credence to participants' knowledge of their specific or unique situations, of their personal contexts, and of their reaction to their own social, political, and educational actions.

By relying on Hymes (1962) ethnography of speaking, we are able to identify and amplify participants' setting and scene, the intended outcomes and goals of their social actions, their message form and content, the key in which they render their support for or protest against the ESL classes, and the genres in which their messages are expressed. We are also able to observe how each of the above factors influences the way the immigrant respondents perceive their children's educational situation and the action they intend to either take or impress upon teachers to take to improve their children's linguistic and communicative competence in English.

## Results

### Respondents' Perceptions of the Criteria for Selecting Children into the ESL Program

A close and systematic observation of the data suggests that more than two-thirds of the respondents (14 respondents representing 70% of the people sampled) were dissatisfied with the criteria used in selecting students to participate in the ESL programs. Specifically, some respondents complained that the school system had no proper entrance evaluation criterion and that their children were put in ESL classes because they were seen either as foreigners, as Africans, or as people with an accent different from the American accent. One respondent commented:

No sooner had we entered my son's classroom and greeted the teacher than she said, 'Your son will have to be put in an ESL class so that he can improve upon his English.' I explained to her that my son was in an International School and therefore spoke impeccable English, but she did not even listen to what I was saying. She began to tell me about the importance of the ESL classes. I continued to explain that my son spoke good English, but she wouldn't listen. I suspect she was basing her judgment of my son's competence in English on my accent. She did not even speak to my son to judge the level of his English. You see, these people, as soon as they hear you speaking with an African accent or as soon as they hear that you are from Africa, they assume you don't speak English. It's the media that has influenced them. They have low opinion of Africa and Africans.

Another respondent noted:

When we came here three years ago, it was tough on us. We took this girl (pointing to her daughter) to the school to have her registered in K-2. When we went to the office and I spoke English to the people, they kept pretending that they did not understand what I was saying. I told them I was from Angola but had studied English. As soon as they heard Angola, one of the women began to talk about the war. She was surprised that I was able to even go to school. She immediately concluded that my daughter would have to be in the ESL classes. I agreed with her but was surprised that she did not even speak at length with my daughter. All she did was to ask her name and how old she was. My daughter was able to answer these questions, but I think her mind was already made up. Even if my daughter spoke English well, she would have sent her to the program anyway. I think having students in the program helps them to get a job so they do whatever it takes to put foreigners in that program. I must say it helped my daughter, though.

A third respondent who called for the program's abolishment noted that his son was born here in the United States and had had three years of formal schooling in the U.S. school system. The child attended Kindergarten and Grades 1 and 2 in Virginia; yet when they moved to Indiana the school official she spoke with insisted that the child be enrolled in an ESL program. The respondent indicated that it took him almost three months and four letters to the principal of the school before the child was placed in the mainstream class. He noted:

As soon as the woman heard my name and my son's name, her mind was made up. I think my name sounded gibberish to her ears and so she thought "these people do not speak English." I told her I had lived in this country for over ten years and that I had all my studies back home in Nigeria in English. She kept saying Akin had to be in the ESL classes. I told her he would learn better if he stayed with the other native speakers of English since he also spoke American English. The next thing I learnt was that my son had been put in that program. I went to talk to the school authorities and wrote several letters before they moved him back to the main classroom. Once these people hear our African names they conclude that we don't speak English and they don't care even if we speak the Queen's English; they will still say 'Pardon, pardon' if we speak with them.

From our transcripts we also learn that thirty percent (30%) of the respondents were satisfied with the criteria used in selecting students to participate in the ESL program. All the respondents who were satisfied with the selection criteria were either from Francophone or Lusophone Africa. Such respondents noted that the decision to place their children in ESL classrooms was based on the fact that they had told the principals or a school official that their child either spoke little or no English. One respondent noted:

The lady asked me where I was from and I said Cote d'Ivoire and she asked whether we speak English in my country and I said, "No, we speak French." She explained that for my son to catch up with the other children, he had to be put in the ESL class. She said other children in the program pick up the language fast. I think it was a good idea.

Another respondent who was happy with the method of selecting children to participate in the ESL program said:

I am a teacher and I knew those teachers knew what they were doing. They asked me several questions about my daughter's educational background and I told them she had done her studies in French and, although she knew a little English, her English was weak. They tried to speak with her, but she was shy so she [*sic*] kept nodding instead of speaking. If a child does not speak it is difficult to judge whether he speaks or understands what the teacher is saying. I cannot blame them for putting her in the class. They took a decision based on what I

told them and what they themselves saw. Although, I must say they kept her in the program for too long.

### **Length of Stay in the Program**

An important part of our study had to do with how long the children stayed in the ESL program and the respondents' perceptions about the children's duration of stay in the program. From our interview transcripts, we learn that the African immigrant children were, on the average, kept in the program for between two and a half to three years. Only one respondent reported that his son was kept in the program for four years, but he indicated that it was due to the child's speech deficiency. He praised the teachers for helping the child to get help from a speech therapist.

With respect to respondents' perceptions of the children's duration of stay in the program, ninety percent (90%) of the respondents felt the length of stay was too long, one respondent (5%) felt it was appropriate, and another respondent (5%) felt it was too short. Some of the respondents were frustrated with the ESL classes because, despite the fact that their children had been in the program for long periods of time, they (the respondents) had seen no improvement whatsoever in the children's written or spoken English. One respondent commented:

My daughter was in that class for two years and her English went from good to bad. It was only when we complained and they moved her to the proper class that we began to notice real improvement in her English. I don't know exactly what they teach them in that ESL class but it was not helpful to our daughter.

Another respondent from a Lusophone African country complained:

I liked the program at the beginning, but I think after a certain point they should have moved the children to the main classroom. I don't know but I think they have the same teacher for all the foreigners and she probably puts all of the children in the same classroom. It is difficult to teach children of different levels and language needs in one classroom. That, I believe, was the reason why there ceased to be an improvement in our son's language after some point. I think after one year they should integrate the foreign children into the main classroom. Children learn language better from other children, not from an adult or a teacher.

A respondent from Francophone Africa noted:

I like the program, but I think the teachers intentionally keep the children in the program for long periods of time in order to remain in their jobs. If there are no children in the program, there will be no jobs for them so they never graduate the

children into the mainstream. It's all business, you know. In this country you have to be 'wise' to survive.

A third respondent noted:

My children have been in the ESL class for a long period of time ever since they've gotten here. I don't know how they are supposed to graduate from such classes into the regular class. The longer they keep the children in the class, the more difficult it is for the teachers to let them go.

### **Benefits Derived from the Program**

Forty-five percent (nine out of the twenty families) of the respondents reported that their children were benefiting from ESL classes. Those families that were in favor of the ESL classes were mostly from either Francophone or Lusophone African countries. Of the nine respondents who reported that their children were benefiting from the ESL program, six reported that their children spoke no English whatsoever when they came to United States; the remaining three families, however, indicated that their children knew some English prior to coming to the United States and that the children's English had improved considerably because of their attendance in the ESL program. Only one respondent from an Anglophone African country said the program was beneficial. Like the other people who found the ESL classes to be useful, this respondent praised his daughter's ESL teacher for helping to improve his child's English. He noted:

Her teachers back home (Nigeria) taught her nothing with respect to English Language. The only course textbook her Grade 2 teacher had was an old dilapidated grammar book and my daughter learned nothing from those books. Since coming to this country and enrolling in the ESL program, I have seen great improvement in her language. You talk with her now in English and you realize how good her grammar and pronunciation are. The ESL teacher is good with kids and she spends a lot of time practicing spoken English with them. Back home the teachers spend little time on each student because one teacher teaches about eighty students.

Respondents who reported that their children benefited from the classes were also full of praise for the ESL teachers and were also happy that the teachers were able to help their children to improve their English competency.

Three of the respondents reported that the ESL teachers' English-French bilingualism helped their children to relate well to the teachers. Such a rapport, they noted, contributed considerably toward the improvement of their children's proficiency in the English language.

A respondent from Senegal, a Francophone African country, responded:

I found the ESL classes very useful. It's good and the teacher was very helpful and kind. When Abdul came here, he didn't know any English at all. His English teacher was patient and very clever. She helped Abdul a lot. She spoke French and so she could speak with Abdul in both French and English. Now Abdul speaks better English than anybody in our house.

An important discovery made in the study was that three respondents whose children were in K-2 opposed the recruitment of their children into the ESL program. Two of such respondents specifically noted that the ESL classes held their children back and that if the children had been included in the mainstream classes, the children's English usage would have improved much quicker and more considerably. One respondent noted:

When a child has a young mind that is when you should allow him to explore together with his peers. Putting him in seclusion under the guise of providing ESL is a major hindrance toward achieving good English. When my son was put in the program, his proficiency in English dwindled. He was speaking book English. When I appealed to the teachers and they moved him into the main classroom, his performance in the English language jumped up. If the ESL classes would be done as an extra effort and will not replace the students' interaction in the main classroom with their classmates, then I'm all for it. However, if it is offered during normal class hours, then I'm against it.

A respondent from a Lusophone African country noted that the ESL classes were not necessary. She indicated that her child did not like the classes because there were only six students and her son was the main focus of attention in the class. The respondent noted:

I don't think those classes are beneficial to the children. Honestly, as far as the child is able to communicate in English and can follow what is happening in the classroom, I don't think they need ESL class. The classes are not beneficial because the children have made no complaints about having problems with the English language. The children do not like the classes. My son always complains to me, but when I tell the principal, she tells me the classes are good. You know, these people don't listen.

Ten out of eleven respondents who were against the ESL classes were from Anglophone Africa. Six of the respondents indicated that English was the language used in their homes and that their children spoke English as a first and primary language. They therefore felt that the ESL classes were unnecessary and not beneficial to their children since the children did not need it. Two of the respondents felt that the ESL classes had hurt rather than benefited their

children. Three other respondents indicated that although they felt that their children did not need the ESL classes, they did not adversely affect the children's academic performance. One respondent felt that the ESL may have benefited his child, but he was unable to say in what way the child may have benefited.

Four of the respondents who saw the ESL classes as non-beneficial said they spoke both English and an African language in the home. Three of these four respondents felt the ESL classes were useless, because they saw the classes as a form of indoctrination. One respondent noted:

They use these classes to make the children think and behave like Americans. They forget that these children have dual and sometimes triple identities. My son is, for example, an African and an American. When he was kept in that program for one year, he forgot his Igbo completely although my wife and I continued to use our ethnic language in the house. Once the child is immersed in that kind of program, that is it!

## Discussion

With respect to respondents' perception of the criteria for selecting children into the ESL program, we would like to argue, based on our transcripts, that although some respondents may have viewed the ESL classes as being beneficial, quite a number of them saw the criteria upon which their children were selected and placed in the ESL classes as flawed and biased against them (Africans). Some respondents felt it would be more fair and appropriate if the program specialists based their selection on the children's competence in English, not the parents'.

We would like to argue further that children's prior exposure to English as reported by their parents, the children's ability and/or willingness to communicate in English, and respondents' perceptions of their children's competence in English formed an important basis or yardstick for children being selected to participate in the ESL program.

On the length of stay in the ESL program, we learn from participants' responses that most of them were against keeping their children in the program for periods of time that were longer than necessary. Some respondents perceived the program organizers as intentionally keeping the children in the ESL program longer than was necessary in order to keep their jobs. They also viewed the delayed integration of the children into the mainstream as being caused by poor organization due to the 'mixing' of children of different language competence levels and needs in the same classroom (an allegation they could not substantiate). An important discovery from the transcripts is the fact that the African immigrant respondents interviewed in the study viewed early

integration of the children into the mainstream classroom as being a better language learning alternative than separating them and putting them in an ESL class. As one respondent pointed out, "Children learn language better from other children; not from an adult or a teacher."

We argue further that respondents had mixed feelings and/or perceptions about the ESL classes that their children enrolled in. We observe that their perceptions were influenced by their overall context of situation (Hymes, 1962; Saville-Troike, 2004) or experiences. Specifically, these perceptions were influenced by the historical background and its affiliated identities of the immigrants' home countries—European colonization of Africa with its attendant linguistic legacy of making the immigrants view themselves as either English (that is, Anglophone and therefore their children needing no remedial or ESL classes), or as French or Portuguese (and therefore seeing themselves as 'foreign' in the American English-oriented linguistic context and hence in need of ESL).

Also, the respondents' notions of what constitutes appropriate or efficient ESL practice influenced their overall perception of the ESL classes. Respondents who saw the ESL classes as non-beneficial formed such a perception based on the fact that they saw their children as not improving their English competence, the selection criteria as being wrong and inappropriate, and the teachers as keeping the children in the program for longer than necessary time periods due to teachers' greed or incompetence. Those perceptions may have prevented them from objectively evaluating the benefits that their children may have had from the ESL classes.

Respondents who saw the ESL classes as beneficial based their perception on the fact that they saw their children's performance in English improving. They also saw teachers' efficiency and dedication to helping the children improve upon their English.

### **Conclusion and Relevance of Study to ESL Program Implementation and Evaluation**

A close observation of the respondents' reactions to the ESL classes point to the fact that the study has implications for ESL program organization and evaluation. In particular, it identifies an urgent need for educators and parents to interact with each other in order to reach a common ground regarding students' educational needs in particular and parents' expectations and goals for their children's education in general.

In particular, we have also learned that it is incumbent upon parents to express their dissatisfaction about decisions affecting their children if they believe such decisions to be false or inappropriate. Specifically, parents' input

must be deemed necessary in determining which child takes ESL classes and which child does not. Educators, for their part, must listen to such complaints with an open mind and act for the benefit of the child.

The study has revealed that for a program such as ESL to be successfully managed, it is incumbent upon teachers to thoroughly examine the students' overall background (both linguistic and sociocultural) and not to take such an important factor for granted or ignore it.

It is also suggested that educators must be open about the criteria upon which they base decisions affecting students' academic and social lives. Failure to make such criteria explicit subjects such decisions to misinterpretations as well as unwarranted and unfair criticisms.

An important issue that emanates from respondents' reactions to the ESL program has to do with policy regarding how the ESL classes or program must be evaluated. Participants' responses point to the fact that it is essential for educators associated with an ESL program to occasionally assess and/or evaluate such programs, taking into consideration students' length of stay in the program, students' competence in English (including rate of improvement, students' failures and problems), and parents' perceptions about the program issues.

In conclusion, for an ESL program aimed at newly arrived immigrant children to be successful and efficiently implemented, it is essential for educators to listen to and to act on the 'voices' (concerns, needs, and expectations) of the parents whose children they teach.

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