

Clark University Clark Digital Commons

International Development, Community and
Environment (IDCE)

Master's Papers

12-2018

Learner Persistence in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) Programs

Elyse Waksman

Clark University, ewaksman@clarku.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://commons.clarku.edu/idce_masters_papers

 Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Commons](#), [First and Second Language Acquisition Commons](#), and the [Language and Literacy Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Waksman, Elyse, "Learner Persistence in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) Programs" (2018). *International Development, Community and Environment (IDCE)*. 223.
https://commons.clarku.edu/idce_masters_papers/223

This Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Master's Papers at Clark Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Development, Community and Environment (IDCE) by an authorized administrator of Clark Digital Commons. For more information, please contact mkrikonis@clarku.edu, jodolan@clarku.edu.

Learner Persistence in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) Programs

Elyse Waksman

December 2018

A Master's Paper

Submitted to the faculty of Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the department of International Development, Community, and Environment

And accepted on the recommendation of

Kathryn Madden, Chief Instructor

Abstract

Learner Persistence in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) Programs

Elyse Waksman

Persistence – or continued, intense study – is a common challenge for adults in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programs because of various institutional, situational, and dispositional factors. The current state and federal funding standards for adult ESOL programs are driven by human capital theory, and therefore most funders require demonstrated employment outcomes for students.

These top-down objectives do not always align with English learners' own motivations and goals. ESOL organizations must consider the complexities of these interacting forces to develop effective persistence strategies for their constituents.

This case study of an ESOL organization in central Massachusetts is based on information from an English learner focus group, an educator focus group, an anonymous survey, and a quantitative analysis of attendance data. Two major findings emerged from the data. First, English learners' social context and educational experiences are inseparable, and a special focus must be given to the influence of family and life stage on a student's educational path. Second, the conflicting priorities of funders, organizations, teachers, and English learners are evident in the classroom. At the organizational level, several changes to instructional strategies and allocation of resources have been recommended to promote learner persistence. Policymakers must reconsider the purposes and desired outcomes of adult ESOL programs when shaping funding standards.

Kathryn Madden, M.C.P., M.S.Arch.S, AICP

First Reader

Carmen Ocón, Ph.D.

Second Reader

Elyse Waksman

December 2018

M.A. Community Development and Planning, Clark University, December 2018

Other degrees:

B.A. International Development and Social Change, Clark University, May 2017

Academic Connection

Undergraduate Student, 2013-2017

Graduate Student, 2017-2018

Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank my advisor, Professor Kathryn Madden of the Community Development and Planning program at Clark University. Professor Madden consistently stood by me throughout my time as a graduate student and challenged me to think and write in new ways.

I also want to extend my gratitude toward Literacy Volunteers of Greater Worcester for their collaboration and support in this research. The staff, educators, and English learners of LVGW displayed an immense passion for language education, social justice, and their community.

I also want to thank Professor Carmen Ocón of the Education Department at Clark University for her guidance as the second reader of this paper. Her expertise has been invaluable and her inclusive approach to education has been an inspiration.

Thank you, Akbar, Mikayla, Wessam, Yasmeen, Matheus, Isabella, and Juan for translating the surveys and making the study more accessible for participants.

Lastly, I am beyond grateful for the encouragement, support, and patience of my family and friends. Without this support system, I could not have persisted in my own education. I cannot say thank you enough.

Elyse Waksman

Table of Contents

Glossary of Terms and Acronyms	vi
1. Introduction	1
2. Conceptual Framework	3
2.1 Purpose	3
2.2 Context	4
2.3 Second Language Acquisition & Approaches to Language Instruction	9
2.4 Factors Affecting Persistence	10
2.5 Addressing Learner Persistence	12
2.6 Need for Further Research	12
3. Methodology	14
3.1 Case Study Context	14
3.2 Methods	16
4. Data Analysis	18
4.1 Registration and Attendance Data	19
4.2 Learner Persistence	23
4.3 Motivation(s)	23
4.4 Challenges to Persistence	27
4.5 Supports	31
5. Findings	33
5.1 Categories of Factors	33
5.2 Social Context	36
5.3 Family and Life Stages	38
5.4 Conflicting Priorities	39
5.5 Instructional Practices	40
6. Conclusion	43
Appendixes	48
Bibliography	59

Glossary of Terms and Acronyms

- Adult Basic Education (ABE): instruction for adults with limited reading, language, and math skills
- Communicative Language Teaching (CLT): an educational approach with a focus on learning for the purpose of communication, using authentic and meaningful instructional activities, integrating different language skills, and viewing learning as a process of creative construction (Wright, 2015)
- Dispositional factors: characteristics of an individual English learner that may inhibit or promote their persistence
- Drop out: permanently depart from class/program
- English learner: an ESOL student, sometimes referred to as “English language learner” (ELL)
- English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL): language instruction for non-native English speakers living in an area where English is the principal language
 - Note: English as a Second Language (ESL) is the former term. ESL assumes that all learners speak only one other language, which is not always true. However, sometimes the terms ESOL and ESL are still used interchangeably.
- High School Equivalency Test (HiSET): formerly known as General Equivalency Diploma (GED), passing this test is generally accepted as evidence that an individual has attained an equivalent level of education to a high school graduate
- Institutional factors: aspects of an ESOL program that may inhibit or promote persistence
- Learner (or student) persistence: “adults staying in programs for as long as they can, engaging in self-directed study or distance education when they must stop attending program services, and returning to program services as the demands of their lives allow” (Comings, 2007); intensity and duration of study
- Situational factors: aspects of students’ lives outside of the ESOL program that may inhibit or promote persistence
- Second language acquisition (SLA): a sub-discipline of applied linguistics dedicated to the study of the process by which people learn a second language
- Stop out: temporarily depart from class/program

1. Introduction

Committing to continued education can be difficult for anyone. Family, health, and work are just a few of the priorities that come before education for most people. The commitment to learn English as an adult immigrant or refugee in the U.S. brings its own set of additional challenges. It can be expensive, both in terms of paying for courses as well as the opportunity cost of missed work time. For many, the thought of attempting to learn an entire new language as an adult can be overwhelming and the process can be frustrating. Some adult English learners have attained high levels of education in their home countries and are forced to start over again when they arrive here. Many have children whose education takes precedence over their own English education. Many adult ESOL programs are focused on employment outcomes, shaping the instruction that students receive, and often the students' goals do not align with those of the program.

With the purpose of understanding the effects of various factors influencing learner persistence, this case study of an ESOL organization in central Massachusetts was developed based on an English learner focus group, an educator focus group, an anonymous survey, and a quantitative analysis of attendance data. Through dialogue and shared narratives, the focus groups investigated learner motivations, challenges to persistence, and supports. The anonymous survey was distributed to English learners at the organization to gather data on attendance, motivations, and reasons for temporary departures from ESOL

education. Through an analysis of the organization's attendance data, a clearer picture of persistence trends could be formed.

The data revealed a rich diversity of motivations and challenges, some of which were already known to the organization, but many of which have not previously been understood. Students' educational experiences are shaped by many factors in their own lives, but most of these challenges are presumed unchangeable, and therefore institutional factors – or aspects of the organization – fall under greater scrutiny from students. Despite these challenges, English learners do what they can to keep learning. Although the U.S. does not have an official language, English is the sociolinguistic key to opportunity in this country, which motivates many students to persist.

From the stories, musings, and other responses to the study, two major findings have emerged. First, the educational experience is inseparable from the social context. Some educators struggle to stay within the confines of their roles, because ESOL education is embedded within students' lives. Families and life stages can help dictate an English learner's educational path. Second, educators' instructional strategies and students' expectations are often at odds, reflecting the mismatched beliefs about the purposes of ESOL education from the providers and recipients of these services.

ESOL organizations need to recognize the social influences on learners' educational experiences as well as the ways that the organizations can fall short in meeting students' needs. Organizations and educators are responsible for

incorporating students' feedback based on their experiences into their programs and instructional strategies, as these institutional factors play a significant role in students' decisions to persist. At a policy level, a paradigm shift away from human capital theory will be key in ensuring the future success of adult ESOL education. While employment is a goal for many English learners, it is not the only one or even the primary one. The ideal approach would prioritize English learners' sociocultural perspectives and personal learning goals over economic growth.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1 Purpose

In the United States, an inability to communicate effectively in English is a formidable social and economic barrier for many immigrants and refugees. English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) education aims to provide non-native English speakers the tools necessary for social mobility, self-sufficiency, and integration. English learners' persistence – continued, intense study – is critical in reaching their learning goals; researchers have found a positive correlation between persistence and learning outcomes for ESOL students (Fitzgerald & Young, 1997). For ESOL programs to be effective, they must implement evidence-based strategies that address barriers and establish supports for student persistence.

Many ESOL organizations have faced the challenge of encouraging persistence among English learners; student dropout rates are high and attendance

is inconsistent (Schalge & Soga, 2008, p. 151). In recent years, some scholars have moved away from a framework of retention in favor of the term “persistence.”

Learner retention comes from the teacher’s or program’s perspective, whereas persistence comes from the learner’s perspective. This new framework more aptly describes the resolve that learners demonstrate in overcoming the barriers in their lives and the agency that they have in determining their own educational paths. This is not to say that the responsibility lies solely on learners. In fact, a salient belief in the field is that the task of addressing these barriers should be a joint effort by the learner and the organization providing the ESOL instruction. An organization with an effective persistence strategy fosters agency among learners while providing supports when possible, accounting for the complex network of barriers that learners face. This study aims to understand the various reasons that students stop out (depart temporarily) or drop out (depart permanently) from ESOL programming. It will explore the frequency and impact of each factor, and further will make recommendations for ESOL organizations to address them effectively.

2.2 Context

ESOL education in the United States has a fraught history. In the 1700s, English language instruction for immigrants in the U.S. was based on principles of assimilation, pushed by leaders like Benjamin Franklin who were “convinced of the political need for the emphasis on teaching English” (Cavanaugh, 1996, p. 40).

Schooling became a tool for maintaining English as the dominant language under

the guise of unity and combating illiteracy. Throughout the 1800s, debates on multilingual versus monolingual education came to the forefront as immigrant populations grew and formed isolated communities. Some school reformers fought for bilingual education for immigrants. Many groups of immigrants, predominantly German immigrants, even formed their own school systems and communities based in their own languages and cultures. However, a “resurgence of nativism in the late 19th century – a backlash against the foreign-born, led by such organizations as the Know-Nothing Party – marked the beginning of a decline for bilingual education” (Crawford, 1987). Xenophobic discourses proliferated during the late 1800s and into the 1900s, with many Americans becoming wary of more immigrants entering the country.

Increasing nationalism led to the Americanization movement during and following World War I, which pushed immigrants to learn English for purposes of understanding the government and American history. The movement implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) called for immigrants to leave behind their own cultures, customs, and languages for the homogenized American culture and “English only.” In 1915, President Theodore Roosevelt declared,

“There is no room in this country for hyphenated Americanism...Any man who comes here...must adopt the institutions of the United States, and, therefore, he must adopt the language which is now the native tongue of our people, no matter what the several strains in our blood may be. It would not be merely a misfortune, but a crime to perpetuate differences of language in this country” (Crawford, 1987).

For a long time, English instruction for immigrants in the U.S. promoted assimilation, which was framed as beneficial for immigrants but was steeped in xenophobia, racism, and language suppression. In more recent years, the emphasis for many professionals in the ESOL field has shifted toward a more holistic approach that encourages integration, multilingualism, and multiculturalism.

It is worth noting that due to shifts beginning in the late 1900s, the purposes and structures of English instruction for immigrants in the U.S. come with another set of problems. In 1998, the Workforce Investment Act, and more recently the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014, have served as the backbone for adult education, including ESOL instruction. Adult education in the U.S. is framed primarily in terms of its contributions to workforce development. About English language education, the U.S. Department of Education states, “The program seeks to assist students in acquiring the skills and knowledge necessary to become *productive workers* [emphasis added], parents and citizens, and transition to postsecondary education and training” (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education, 2016). Theodore Shultz was one of the foundational theorists of human capital, especially as it relates to educational investments, arguing that “Schooling and advance in knowledge are both major sources of economic growth... Investment in schooling is presently, in the United States, a major source of human capital” (Shultz, 1963, p. 46). Many criticisms of human capital have been related to its methodology. For example, the outcomes are not measurable, and there are several fallacies in the argument that education spurs

economic growth. There are still often problems of skills mismatch and a lack of job availability, and further, meritocracy is largely a myth as many other factors contribute to variations in income. “Increased expenditure on, or investment in, education in itself is not therefore necessarily a guarantee of economic growth and personal prosperity” (Harber, 2014, p. 57). In addition, human capital comes with a set of fundamental issues about the perceptions of power and inequality in society. Critics, including sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, proposed the alternative concepts of cultural capital and social capital, which are concerned with the ways in which power structures and social divisions are maintained from one generation to the next. These theories critically view education – along with other institutions – as a means for reproduction of inequality. Finally, in recent years, especially within the field of adult education, moral criticisms of human capital theory have proliferated. Framing education as a tool for economic growth objectifies learners as cogs in a machine. “Not surprisingly the discourse of adult education as a fundamental human right or as a vehicle for social transformation was absent from federal policy debates” (Cannon, 2006, p. 7).

Due to the current state and federal funding standards like WIOA, many ESOL organizations must tailor their instruction to fit the human capital framework, with a “focus on preparation for workplace, career and college” (Eyring, 2014, p. 126). In order to sustain their funding, ESOL programs often need to demonstrate an employment-based curriculum and employment outcomes for their students. In practice, these approaches to ESOL education are not always successful, either in

meeting the state and federal goals or in helping students reach their personal learning goals. Many programs are designed with the belief that students must learn “basic” English before being prepared for work-related English instruction.

“Experience has shown that immigrants who start as beginning ESL [English as a Second Language] students seldom have the resources to persist between one or two additional levels of ESL and often leave programs far below the proficiency levels that training providers demand as a prerequisite for access to job skills training” (Spruck Wrigley, 2008, p. 5). Another problem with WIOA and the current government-issued framework is that a one-size-fits-all approach to adult education does not work. “Experts have rightfully argued that the decision by the U.S. Department of Education to conflate classes for native and nonnative speakers under one umbrella of ‘Adult Education and Literacy’ has tended to mask the real needs and interests of the largest group being served” (Eyring, 2014, p. 133).

This study does not – and should not – pretend to address all the complexities surrounding the history of ESOL education, human capital theory, and the current state of adult ESOL education in the United States. However, it does aim to use this critical lens to examine the ways in which the ESOL education system could better help learners persist and meet their personal learning goals. “With a complete understanding of the foundations of human capital theory, educators and education policymakers can...design educational programs that contribute to economic growth without compromising educative purpose” (Sweetland, 1996, p. 357). ESOL education can perhaps even be a force for positive change, equipping

immigrants with an important tool for power and agency.

2.3 Second Language Acquisition and Approaches to Language

Instruction

The field of second language acquisition (SLA) – a sub-discipline within applied linguistics – contains a wealth of literature that establishes the value of formal ESOL instruction, as well as the impacts of student persistence on learning gains. Stephen Krashen’s research was foundational in the field of SLA. “Although Krashen's theory of SLA has been widely criticized for failing to propose hypotheses that can be empirically tested, most teachers (and many researchers) find his views intuitively appealing” (Spada, 2007, p. 274). Krashen focused more on “acquisition,” which he defined as a subconscious process, as opposed to explicit “learning” (Krashen, 1976, p. 163). Krashen’s other major contributions included the natural order hypothesis (there is a predictable process through which learners acquire parts of a second language), monitor hypothesis (learners inspect and correct their own errors as they produce language), comprehensible input hypothesis (learners can understand language at a level just above the level at which they can produce language), and affective filter hypothesis (factors like anxiety and self-confidence can inhibit language comprehension) – all of which have persisted through more recent developments in the field of SLA.

While there are still a variety of approaches and methods used in ESOL instruction, this paper will focus on one of the most widely used approaches,

communicative language teaching (CLT), as it is the approach used by the program featured in this study. CLT emerged from Dell Hymes' idea of communicative competence, which moved the emphasis from "how a language is structured" to "how a language is used" (Appachu, 1994, p. 12). For that reason, in CLT, grammar is taught and learned through communicative texts, with the emphasis on meaning. In this manner, CLT incorporates Krashen's belief that language acquisition occurs through communicative use. CLT encourages the use of authentic, real-world materials and activities in the classroom to promote applicable communication skills. Interestingly, while the evidence backs CLT, one study has shown that students do not feel they are learning; the favorable teaching approach was at odds with what students actually wanted (Schalge & Soga, 2008). This dissonance represents a paradox in language instruction: in some cases, best practices that result in the greatest learning gains are less favorable to students, making them less likely to persist in attending classes than in classrooms with more traditional, outdated instructional approaches. However, it is widely agreed that attendance is beneficial; "Students who attended a higher proportion of scheduled time (in hours) had more growth in reading comprehension and oral communication skills" (Condelli and Spruck Wrigley, 2008, p. 127).

2.4 Factors Affecting Persistence

In 1978, K. Patricia Cross set forth a framework that divides the factors affecting persistence into three categories: institutional, situational, and dispositional.

Institutional factors refer to aspects of the ESOL program, which may include “dealing with inflexible attendance requirements...getting career or academic advising...[and] having classes available at convenient times” (Mertesdorf, 1990, p. 135). Within the realm of institutional factors, it is important to consider a program’s efforts toward creating a community; programs with “clusters” allow for students to learn together and build relationships. Instead of framing students’ education and social lives as distinct phenomena, “a more accurate representation would have academic and social systems appear as two nested spheres, where the academic occurs within the broader social system” (Tinto, 1997, p. 610). Further, professional development is key when it comes to addressing institutional factors; “becoming more effective as an instructor or a programme is a never-ending process” (O’Neill and Thomson, 2013, p. 170).

Situational factors are related to a student’s life outside of the program, such as “having enough time for assignments or studying...having competent child care...[and] having to pay the cost of transportation” (Mertesdorf, 1990, p. 136). As many adult learners are low- to moderate-income, they “must weigh the ‘opportunity cost’ of participating... determining if they will gain more from the educational program than their costs (money, time, etc...) of participation” (Finn, 2011, p. 35). Finally, dispositional factors are a student’s internal characteristics that can influence their learning, including “concentration in classes...experiencing stress in classes and studying...[and] feeling confident as a student” (Mertesdorf, 1990, p. 135). In the current climate, challenges “including legal and cross-cultural issues, and past

trauma” may interfere with learner persistence (Kaz, 2014, p. 12). Of course, institutional, situational, and dispositional factors interact with one another, but this framework serves to divide the many barriers to persistence into groups that can be addressed more easily.

2.5 Addressing Learner Persistence

Researchers have recommended several practices for ESOL providers – student participation in the classroom, investment in structured curricula, full-time and experienced staff, and client support services – which were all shown to have positive effects on the students’ learning outcomes (Fitzgerald & Young, 1997). Other recommended supports include working with students to manage outside forces that inhibit persistence, increasing a sense of self-efficacy, establishing goals, and measuring progress (Comings, 2007). Many of the current efforts to promote student persistence in ESOL programs focus on the following points: identifying specific barriers and potential supports, goal-setting, and orientation, which are all most effective during the “critical first three weeks” of instruction (Quigley, 1998).

2.6 Need for Further Research

While it is evident that ESOL education has been studied in various contexts and frameworks, there are still significant gaps in existing research. Most studies used in shaping this research are not specific to adult English learners in independent ESOL organizations. “The vast majority of research with adults...tends

to surround those learners in higher education contexts” (Mathews-Aydinli, 2008, p. 210). This study is focused on adults studying English in an independent organization, outside of the context of higher education. Findings from research within community colleges and other institutions are not necessarily generalizable to ESOL contexts like the one in this study. The distinctions between college and stand-alone ESOL programs are vast and have a large impact on the factors that can affect persistence. While some insights from such studies have informed the conceptual framework for this study, there is a clear need for further qualitative and quantitative research of adult learners in nonacademic contexts.

Much of the existing literature about ESOL education is about K-12 programs and ESOL in public schools. These studies were of little relevance to this research, because the needs and lifestyles of children are so vastly different from those of adults. Still, research on adult learners tends not to be specific enough to this population, as these studies often involve all-encompassing adult education programs. Researchers and teachers agree that adult English learners have a diverse set of needs that differ from other adult learners (such as those in ABE or HiSET programs). Many of the current research outside of institutions of higher education have been for broader adult education programs or for those other than ESOL. While principles of andragogy and other findings from these studies may apply to adult English learners, this group has a distinct set of needs from other adult learners, due in part to the current political context around immigration.

This brings forth the next gap in current literature. Little research on English learners has been conducted for the purpose of influencing policymakers. The following observation emerged from a synthesis and review of 41 recent studies of adult English learners:

“[T]here is increasing political discussion and thus interest in the language skills and subsequent ‘employability’ of these adult ELLs. From the President on down, the correlation between postsecondary education and training—for which adequate English skills are essential—and economic stability is frequently argued. The apparent inconsistency between such an agenda for adult higher education and the realities of achievement raises immediate and important questions about the nature of language learning and teaching with respect to this community of students. What, for example, are the unique characteristics of these particular adult ELLs’ language learning processes? What external factors have the greatest impact on their language learning success or failure? What are the most effective curricula and pedagogical approaches for these students?” (Mathews-Aydinli, 2008, p. 199).

There is a critical need for research that addresses these questions, producing results from which reasonable conclusions can be drawn and policy changes can be made. At the same time, many ESOL teachers are not informed about the complexities of persistence and the current findings on effective strategies for encouraging learner persistence. “Finding ways to make important findings in educational research accessible to practitioners as quickly as possible will make a tremendous difference” (O’Neill and Thomson, 2013, p. 170). This study will be used for two sets of recommendations: for the partnering organization and policymakers.

3. Methodology

3.1 Case Study Context

This research was a case study of one organization that provides ESOL education in Worcester, Massachusetts. The partnering organization has provided one-to-one tutoring to immigrants and refugees in Worcester for over forty years. Now, group courses are also available to students with a suggested donation for materials and organizational expenses. Courses meet once a week for 90 minutes and last six to twelve weeks, with three trimesters each year. There are typically about ten courses offered each trimester, some in the mornings from 9:30-11:00, some in the evenings from 6:30-8:00, and some midday on Saturdays. Tutors are individually matched with students and must commit to meeting with their student for at least two hours every week for nine months. There are caps for class registration, and there is usually a waiting list for tutoring. Tutors are volunteers and they must complete an 18-hour training in CLT at the organization. Teachers must have previous ESOL experience before being hired, with some having also volunteered as tutors, and many have TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) certifications or something equivalent. The organization offers continuous opportunities for professional development for tutors and teachers, through monthly in-house trainings as well as ongoing trainings through the Massachusetts adult education professional development system. Most teachers only instruct one course each trimester, so there are typically about ten teachers per trimester, and they are paid for two hours of work each week to include a half hour of lesson preparation. The organization reaches over 600 students each year with courses and over 150 with tutoring; some students are involved in both. The organization's annual budget

was just over \$200,000 in 2017, primarily (75%) from foundation and corporate funders, followed by individual donations (15%), and lastly from its parent organization (10%).

3.2 Methods

This project combined multiple methodologies: two focus groups, an anonymous survey, and an analysis of registration and attendance information from the partnering organization.

The focus group method was utilized to encourage collaboration among the study's participants, allowing them to respond to each other's comments. The first focus group consisted of five ESOL educators who were recruited by email: one teacher and three tutors from the partnering organization and one educator from another local ESOL organization. There were four female participants and one male participant. Each participant had been working or volunteering in the field of ESOL for at least two years; most had many more years of experience. This focus group discussed learner persistence, motivations, challenges, and supports for students based on their professional and volunteer experiences with English learners. The second focus group consisted of English learners who were recruited by email and in person during ESOL courses at the partnering organization. There were nine participants. The students discussed similar topics to the first focus group, but from a different perspective, based on their learning experiences with ESOL programs. Both focus groups explored the factors that promote learner persistence as well as

those that inhibit it. Both focus groups were conducted in a classroom of the partnering organization, and both sessions were audio-recorded. The questions, which were used as prompts, can be found in Appendix A.

The survey participants were identified using registration data from the last two years at the partnering organization. An email invitation including the anonymous electronic survey was sent out by email to students of working age who were registered and active with the organization within the previous two years. The limitations with this method were that not every student had an email address (the email was sent to approximately 150 working email addresses, while the organization serves over 500 English learners) and that the academic language in the recruiting text may have posed a barrier to responses for some students. The data in this paper reflect 19 survey responses. The survey was originally created in English and made available in four most common first languages of learners at the partnering organization (Spanish, French, Arabic, and Portuguese) through the translation assistance of several multilingual students at Clark University.

An analysis of quantitative data collected by the partnering organization was conducted. This data included registration and attendance records from the fiscal year prior to the period in which the study occurred. The partnering organization categorizes students' attendance in English courses as good, fair, or none for each course they register to take. Many students registered for more than one course, and for the purposes of this research, students' "overall attendance rating" was determined using midpoint coding for the categorical data provided. The levels of

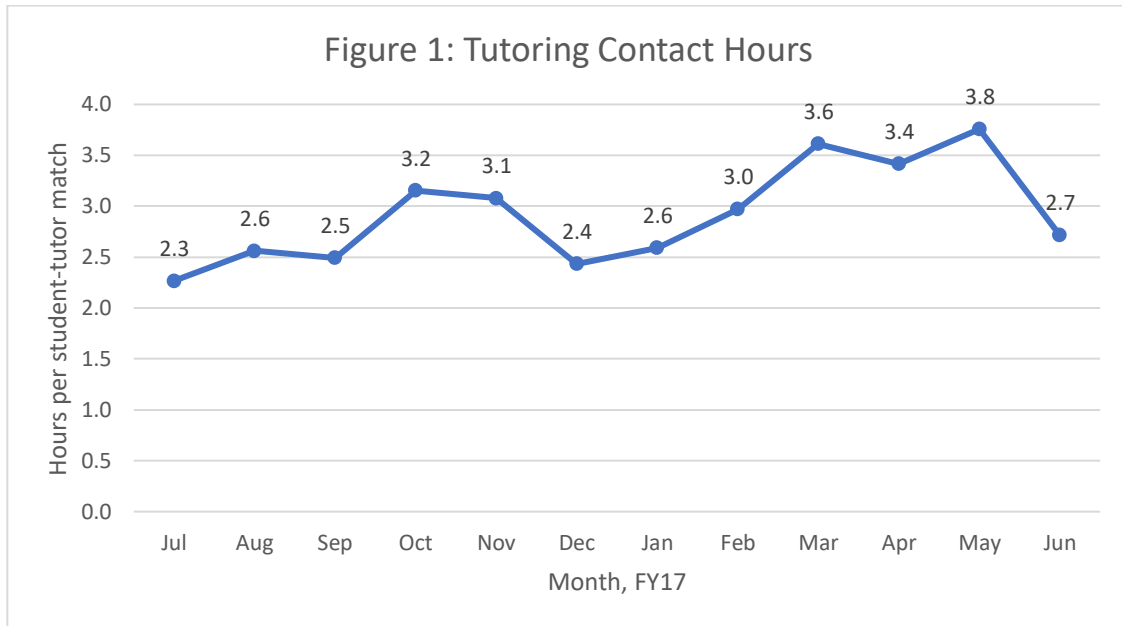
each course were also rated categorically, and the same method was employed to determine a student's "overall level rating." The partnering organization also provided data on how much time each tutor and learner met one-to-one for fiscal year 2017. This data served as the foundation for a quantitative assessment of persistence trends in the organization.

The reasoning behind the mixed method approach was guided in part by the linguistic barrier between the researcher and the English learners. The students who participated in the focus group needed to have a higher proficiency level in English than was required for the anonymous survey, because it was conducted in English. Still, Krashen's concept of comprehensible input guided the language used in the student focus group, and students were asked more clarifying questions to ensure mutual understanding. Although gathering richer data from past students who had stopped out of classes would have been useful, it would have been more difficult to reach and communicate with this population due to their lower proficiency levels in English and their disconnectedness from the organization compared to currently enrolled students. This project triangulated a combination of quantitative and qualitative data, drawn from primary and secondary sources, to provide a holistic understanding of the topic, from which clear and useful recommendations could be drawn for the partnering organization and others like it.

4. Data Analysis

4.1 Registration and Attendance Data

For the fiscal year 2017, the partnering organization’s tutors worked with students individually for over 4,900 hours in total. The number of student-tutor matches fluctuated slightly throughout the year, with between 59 and 82 active matches each month and a total of 140 unique, active matches for the year. Figure 1 below shows the trend of average hours of tutoring for each match over the course of the year. In the summer and winter each year, the partnering organization typically notices a slight drop in participation, partly due to childcare responsibilities and weather and transportation problems, respectively. Student-tutor matches aim to meet for at least two hours each week. Figure 1 demonstrates that the average match met for at least 2.3 hours per month – more than half an hour each week.



For students who were registered for courses in FY17, attendance was analyzed along several other factors: sex, first language, proficiency level, and number of courses for which each student was registered. The orange bars in Figure 2 display the proportions of students with “good” attendance in their courses. Although in total there are more female students, the proportions are approximately equal, showing that sex does not greatly influence students’ attendance.

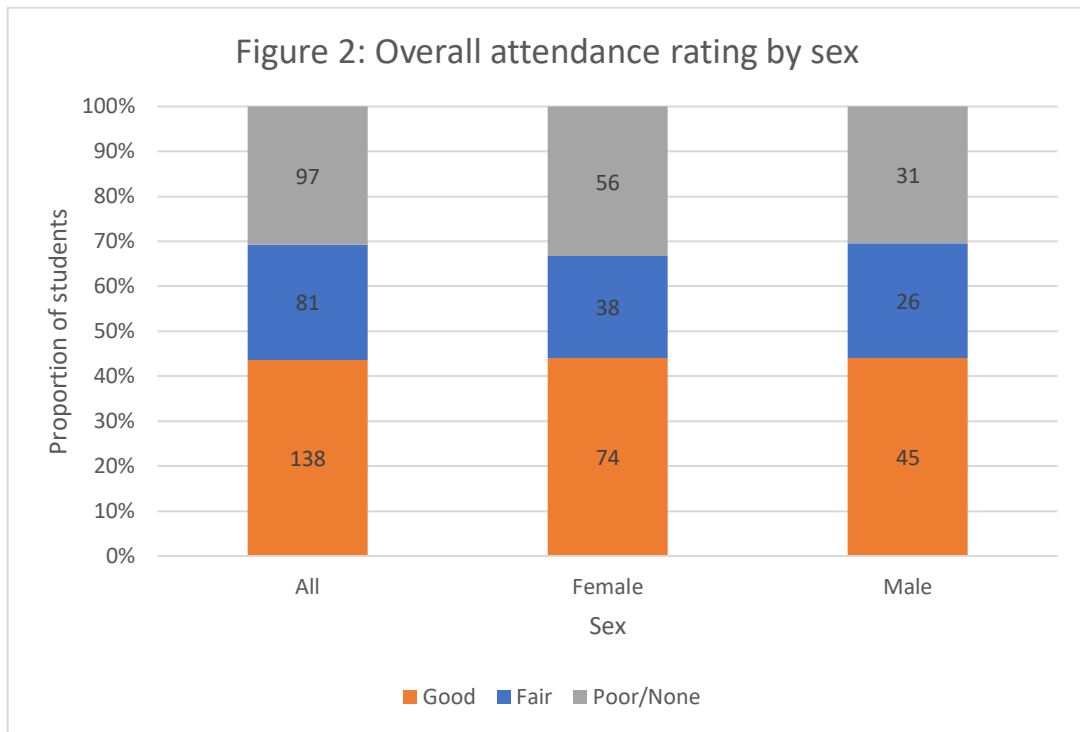
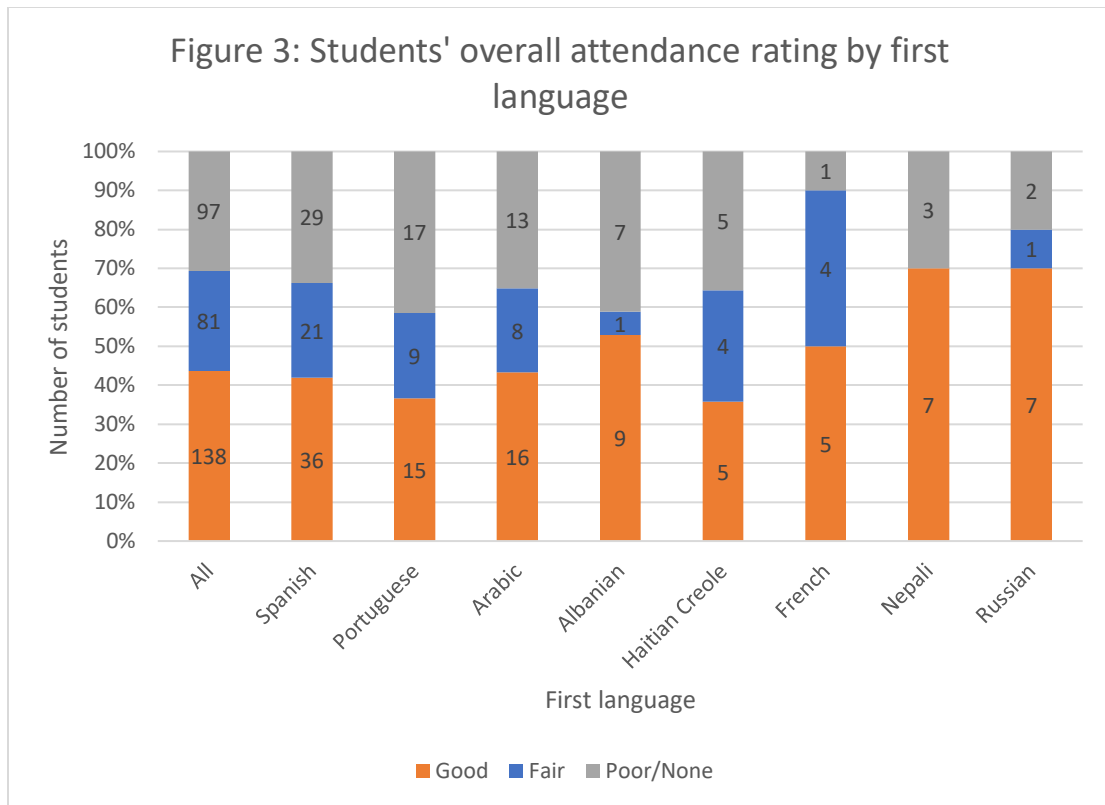
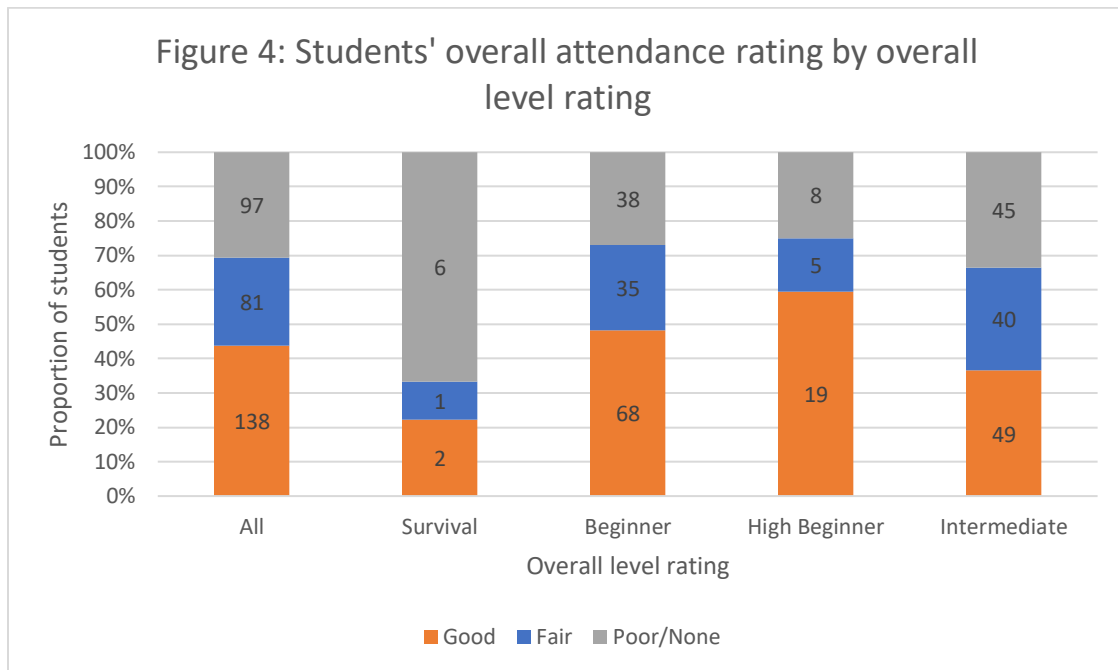


Figure 3 displays the top eight most commonly spoken languages among registered students. As with sex, first language does not appear to influence attendance, at least for the three most commonly spoken languages – Spanish, Portuguese, and Arabic. The other first languages show some greater variety in distribution of attendance, but by definition, these slight variations make up only a small part of the overall student body.

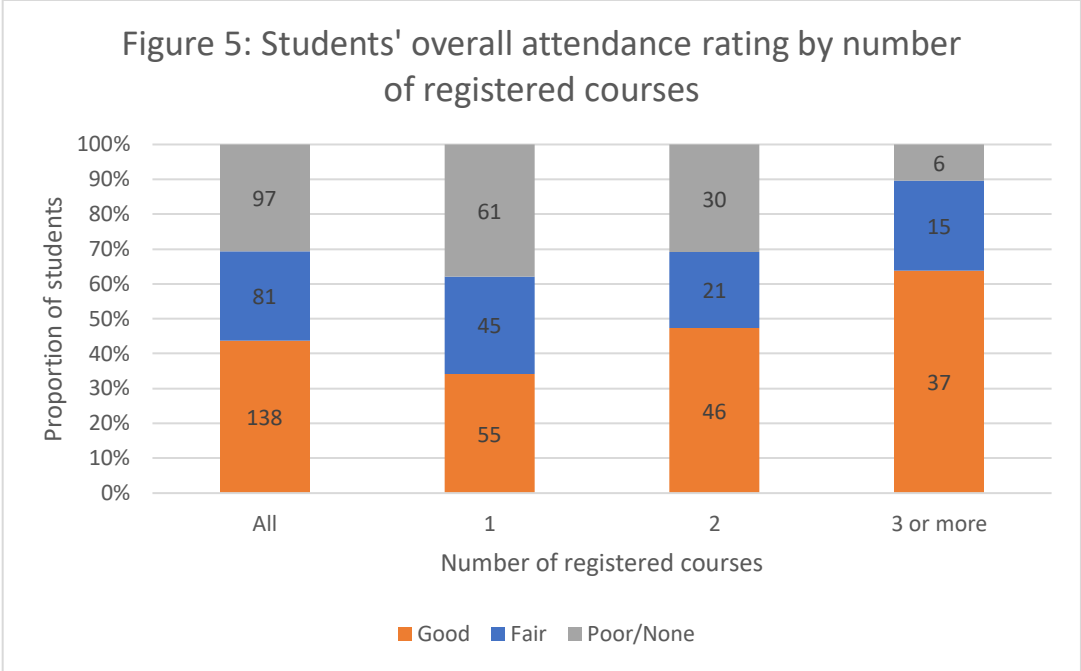


The next chart, figure 4, shows variations in overall attendance based on students' overall level. Many students are registered for more than one course and their attendance and level in different courses may be different. For this analysis, midpoint coding was used in order to find their overall attendance and level ratings. While there are not many students with English proficiency rated as "survival" level, attendance is evidently a problem for this group. There was only one survival course that year, which makes it more likely that the individual teaching style contributed to students' poor attendance. The intermediate level students also had poorer than average attendance. Perhaps these students were feeling that their needs were not met in the course; some of the students' comments in the focus group and on the survey asked for more advanced courses and support from teachers at the higher

levels. The beginner and high beginner level students had better attendance, likely due to a concentration of resources and attention on the needs of students at those levels.



Finally, figure 5 shows that the more courses for which a student registers, the more likely they are to have good attendance overall. While it was expected that the students registered for only one course would have better attendance, the opposite was shown to be true. Those who registered for more courses were likely to demonstrate continuous commitment to their studies. It is likely that most students who sign up for multiple courses in one year have already found ways to address the challenges that many other learners face when it comes to persisting in their studies.



4.2 Learner Persistence

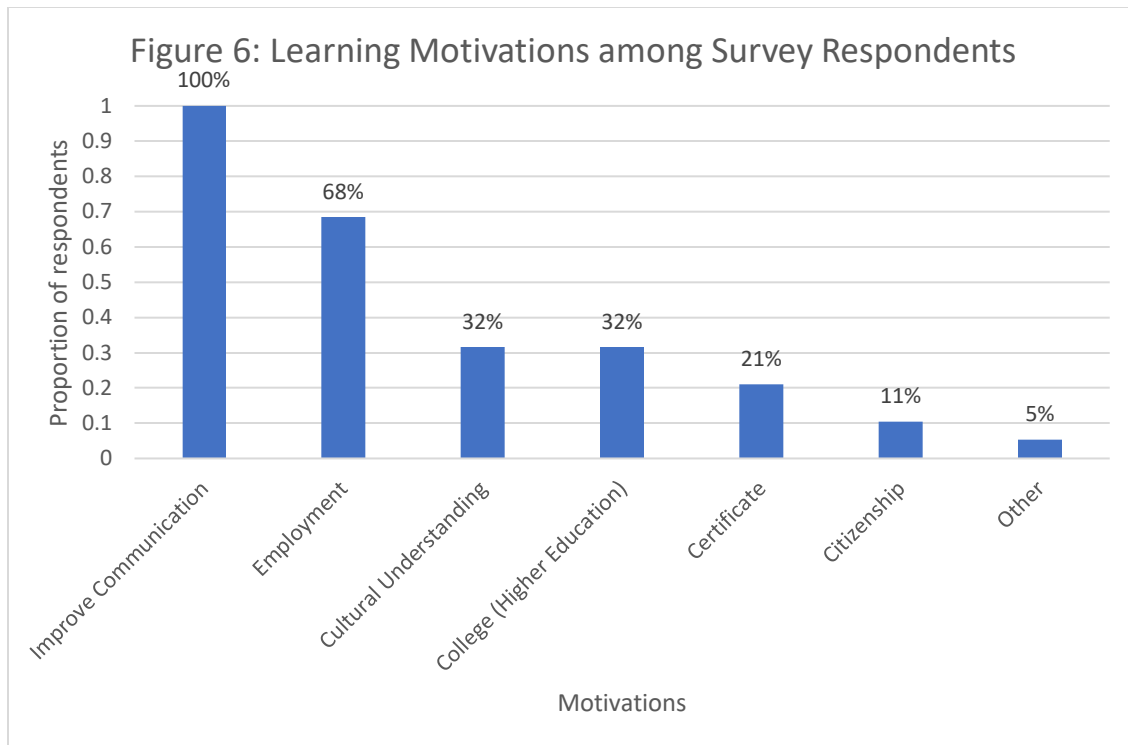
When asked to define learner persistence from their perspective, one educator called it “staying the course.” The literature defines persistence as a measurement of two qualities: intensity and duration of study. One educator in the focus group added an element to this definition. She explained that for students to continuously dedicate enough time each week (intensity) over the course of many weeks (duration), there must be a source of pressure (or motivation). Every participant in the survey and the student focus group revealed some reason or reasons for learning English, which led them to keep studying.

4.3 Motivation(s)

In both focus groups, participants touched upon both motivation and motivations. Motivation here refers to continued dedication, and motivations are the reasons behind it. While the reasons vary greatly, a strong commitment to learning seems to be a common thread. An English learner in the second focus group stated, “I don’t have time at all, but I make time.” The English learners who participated in this study were a self-selecting group, who likely have already found ways to overcome many of the barriers that still prevent some of their peers from persisting. This group of learners, some of whom participated in the focus group and others who responded to the survey, displayed a hunger for more instruction and practice. In fact, they were much more interested in discussing phonemes, alphabets, idioms, and phrasal verbs than challenges to persistence. Their continued motivation was evident. Several student focus group participants asked if there would be another focus group for them to practice speaking. Others asked for further instructional options like conversation circles and classes at other organizations that cover more specific topics of interest.

When asked about the motivations of English learners in general, one educator stated, “Language is power.” Another added that without English proficiency, adult immigrants “won’t be able to branch out, to better themselves.” For some, it is about joining a larger community and getting “acclimated” to living in the U.S. English learners remarked about all the places they need to use English in their everyday lives, like stores and restaurants. Many simply stated that they wanted to improve their communication.

According to educators, the motivation to learn English “can be economic” or “something to do with work.” This is not the primary goal, however, but it is certainly a common one. Most participants in the student focus group did not have employment-related motivations, but it was the second most common response on the survey. The survey asked English learners to select from a list their motivations for learning English, allowing them to select multiple options. Figure 6 below shows the responses to this question. The most common motivation was “improve communication,” which was selected by 100% of respondents. One tutor in the focus group told about a student who had come to the U.S. with her children and a dream of becoming a U.S. citizen. This student had never learned how to read and write in her first language, making literacy in a second language even more difficult, and yet she passed the citizenship test, marking a major accomplishment in her journey. On the survey question, one respondent selected “other” and wrote, “to help my children.” Three-quarters of those who were unemployed at the time of the survey marked employment as one of their motivations for learning English. Employment and college (higher education) were more common motivations among English learners registered for tutoring than those registered for classes.



One educator noted that there can be different motivations and goals at varying proficiency levels; for advanced students, she says, the motivation to attend class is rooted in the desire to build confidence in speaking. One student, for example, had attained a high level of education and become a successful physician in her home country. When she immigrated, she realized that she would need to improve her English skills for giving professional presentations.

Another educator in the focus group discouraged making sweeping generalizations about English learners, touching upon this idea multiple times throughout the conversation. He emphasized the need to figure out what the individual student wants and needs, to find out what is important to them, and to work from there. Some stories from the educator focus group featured student goals like passing the HiSET, going to college, finding a job or better job, and buying a

house. He said, “I mostly just try to listen long enough to figure out what I think they’re really trying to do. It isn’t that hard to figure it out.” The focus group educators agreed that English learners are almost always highly motivated, regardless of their different learning goals.

4.4 Challenges to Persistence

Unfortunately, they were not all success stories. The educators had little difficulty thinking of challenges their students had faced, and the English learners were prepared to share feedback about ways that the organization was not meeting all their needs.

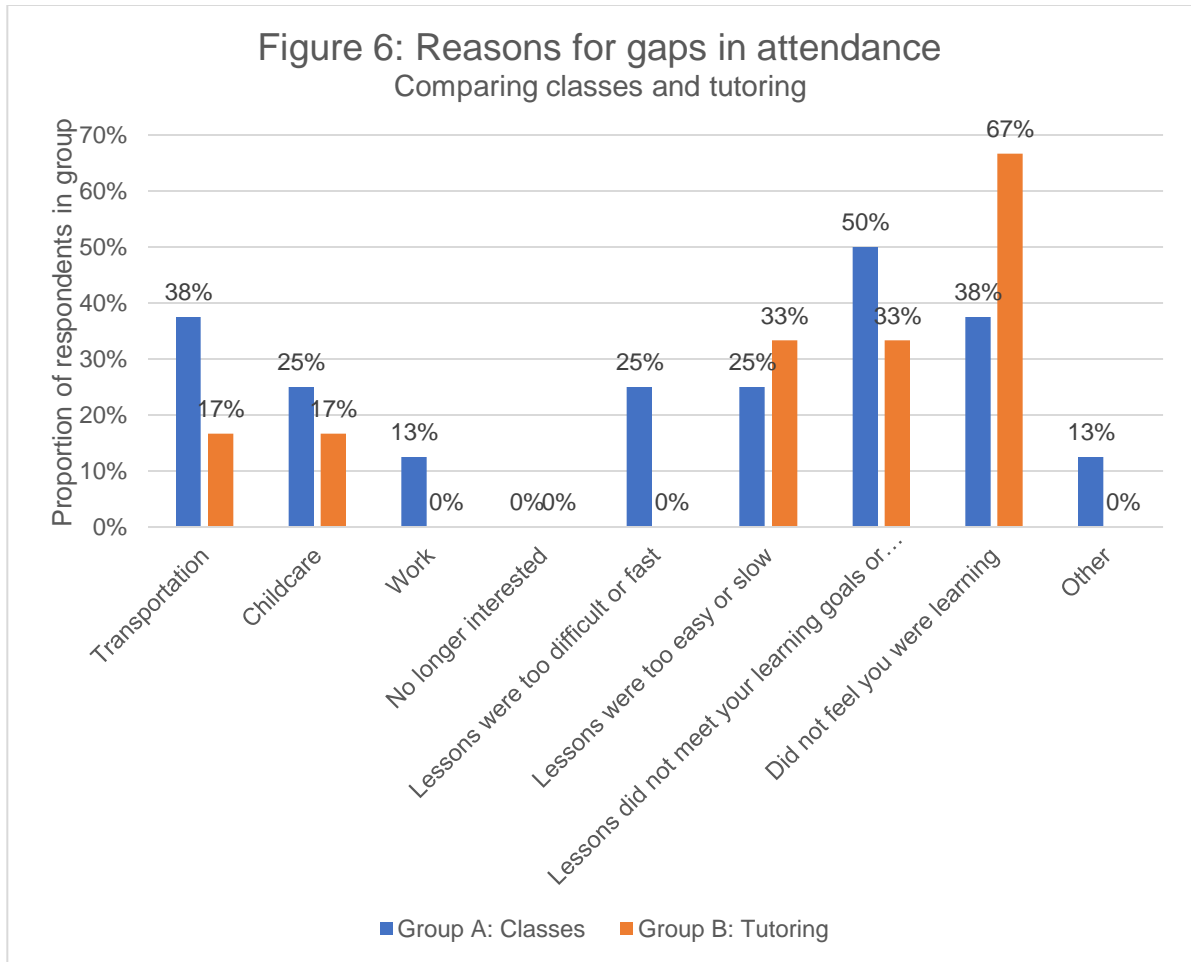
For many English learners, living here as an immigrant can be an isolating experience. The educators talked about students’ homesickness and loneliness. Some were diagnosed with major depressive disorder. One student had come to the U.S. from Sri Lanka with his brother. He was depressed, which contributed to his low self-esteem. He felt immense pressure from his parents back home in Sri Lanka to look after and support his brother, all while managing to take care of himself. In this case, the external pressure was not motivating, but crippling. Another student had come to the U.S. as a refugee minor and was 19 years old when she worked with her tutor. She needed to pass the HiSET exam; the tutor stated that “something else was defining her goal.” She also worked in a bakery and had the challenge of navigating the refugee minor foster care system. She did not pass the exam and quickly became discouraged in herself and in the tutoring. She stopped meeting with

her tutor shortly after, due to the combination of external pressures, work conflicts, stress from her living situation, and lack of faith in herself and the ESOL education she was receiving. The teacher participant who told this story found it challenging for herself as well, because she had just started tutoring and did not feel she had sufficient experience or preparation for this role. One educator mentioned that the task of learning a language can prove daunting to many people, as learning a language as an adult takes an average of five to seven years. This number comes from a study about cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) and basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS), two different types of competency in English as a second language. According to this study, “it took immigrant students who arrived in Canada after the age of six, 5-7 years, on the average, to approach grade norms in academically-related aspects of English proficiency” (CALP), compared to the one to two years required for “face-to-face communicative skills” (BICS) (Cummins, 1984, p. 9). Committing to intense study for such an extended period can be overwhelming, especially given how many other aspects of students’ lives take priority over their studies.

Other challenges included physical health problems, with students often going to medical appointments instead of class or meeting with their tutor. Many students work, sometimes more than one job. Their work schedules can pose a conflict for attendance, especially when their boss calls them to work on a given day. Students are often so exhausted from their workday that they do not have the energy or time to commit to completing their homework or practicing English. One student

explained that she works six days a week and goes to class on the seventh. She misses it sometimes because of appointments or other commitments that she cannot schedule on any other day of the week. Many students have families, children, and babies to look after. The data displaying tutored hours for the previous fiscal year included some notes explaining gaps in attendance, one of which said that the learner was due to give birth in July and planned to resume tutoring afterward. These conflicting commitments, of course, take precedence over their ESOL education, and they are not necessarily permanent barriers. Learners tend to return to their studies whenever they can, as evidenced by stories from both focus groups.

The survey asked respondents whether they had experienced any difficulty in continuing to attend their classes and/or tutoring sessions. Of the students who responded to the survey, 16% were enrolled in tutoring alone, 58% were in classes alone, and 26% were in both classes and tutoring. The responses were as follows: 47% had had trouble attending classes or tutoring, 42% had not, and 11% did not answer. The next two survey questions asked those who had said “yes” to select the reason or reasons for their difficulty, whether it was in relation to classes or tutoring. Figure 6 compares response rates for two groups, Group A being students who had had trouble attending classes, and Group B being students who had had trouble meeting with their tutors. The bars represent the percentage of students in each group who selected that reason. For example, 38% of respondents in Group A marked “transportation” as a barrier to attendance.



One student in the focus group mentioned that her car does not run, so she can only attend when her friend gives her a ride. Another stated that he lives a town away, and when the weather is bad, he does not drive to class and does not have public transportation options. Tutoring reduced the rate of problems with transportation, childcare, and work, all of which are situational factors, to use Cross’s framework. This finding is not surprising, as tutors and their students work together to arrange times and places for just the two of them to meet, whereas with courses, there is a set time and place for everyone. Regarding institutional factors, there were no responses of “lessons were too difficult or too fast” by tutored students, which again

is likely due to the fact that a tutor can easily address the level and specific needs of their one student, as opposed to teachers who work with large classes. However, “lessons were too easy or slow” was still a significant problem among tutored students. This problem is harder to explain; with one-to-one tutoring, it is expected that tutors will adjust to the level of the student and continue to challenge them.

4.5 Supports

When asked to provide examples of supports for learner persistence, educators talked about lesson planning and instructional activities. For example, they emphasized the need for teaching about “real communication” and providing skills for “real situations.” They also said that students should talk at least three-quarters of the class time. Teachers and tutors should work with students to create goal ladders (a tool used to visualize the steps necessary for achieving a given objective). These three pieces of advice directly reflect the training that tutors at the partnering organization receive, based in the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach.

Regarding classroom approaches, students rallied behind the idea of teachers correcting their mistakes. One student told about a teacher in another program who consistently told her what a great job she was doing, but she ended up failing the final test because of the mistakes that had gone uncorrected. English learners struggle most with pronunciation and feeling uncomfortable with speaking. They asked for more oral practice and public speaking courses. They wanted

teachers to read first out loud before the students, to help with listening and pronunciation. Many students also suggested courses that focus on basic everyday English, so that they can go to a coffee shop or restaurant and know what questions to expect and be prepared to answer them appropriately. One student said that at times, teachers treated the students like kids and told them to memorize words and phrases. This student went on to explain that if you know the “formula,” you will learn better and feel more confident in speaking. During the student focus group, participants spent a significant portion of the conversation discussing linguistic challenges in learning English, preferring this topic over the topic of persistence challenges. Many of the suggestions were related to teaching strategies and other classroom practices that would help them improve their English, as opposed to supports for persistence.

Survey respondents had the option of suggesting one action that the partnering organization could take to better help students continue to attend classes and/or meet with their tutors. More than half of respondents gave recommendations. The recommendations were sorted into four categories, and some recommendations were included in more than one category: increased organizational capacity, level-specific, lesson planning, and support. Over half of the responses fit into the category of increased organizational capacity, calling for more classes, more class time each session, and more tutors (“I had to wait months to get a tutor”). Students in the focus group echoed some of these suggestions. They suggested reducing class size to no more than ten students, so that the teacher can explain and help

students more than is possible in a larger class setting. Over a quarter of the responses were level-specific recommendations, such as more basic classes and classes focused on intermediate and advanced grammar. The recommendations for lesson planning and general support included these comments: “Maybe more structured lessons, assigned homework and practice to keep me on track?” and “It will be helpful if someone from [partnering organization] sit in at the first time with the tutor.”

5. Findings

The data analysis led to a reframing of the factors that affect learner persistence, as well as two main findings. The factors have been categorized thus far as institutional, situational, and dispositional, following Cross’s framework, but a new set of categories may be more accurate and relevant. Next, the data analysis indicates that an increased focus on understanding learners’ social contexts will be necessary for addressing their educational needs and encouraging persistence. Finally, the ESOL field requires a realignment of priorities from the bottom up; students’ personal motivations should inform educators, ESOL programs, and funders.

5.1 Categories of Factors

Cross’s framework for categorizing factors that affect learner persistence is useful in beginning to determine which of the factors found in this study are the most

prevalent among learners at the partnering organization. However, the names of the categories can be misleading. The proposed new category names are programmatic, systemic, and internal. The content of the categories does not change significantly, but the understanding behind the framework takes a critical perspective.

Programmatic factors would be those stemming from the ESOL organization. The programmatic factors cited by participants in this research were mostly related to instructional practices, curriculum orientation, and organizational capacity. For example, many students felt that they were not learning in their classes or disliked the level and speed of instruction. Many felt that there was not enough individual attention in courses, and therefore there should be more tutors and smaller class sizes. Some wished there were more courses or that the courses met for more time each week.

There are many systemic factors that affect English learners at this organization, meaning problems that emerge due to societal structures and phenomena like capitalism, poverty, poor infrastructure, and social disconnectedness. The proposed shift from “situational” to “systemic” reflects the commonality of these problems, as opposed to the conventional view of them as individual instances. Systemic factors noted in this study included work conflicts, with some learners working multiple jobs and working every day or nearly every day. Some had problems with transportation, like not having a car, having car problems, or being fearful of driving under certain weather conditions. Many dealt with physical

and mental health problems as well as appointments that conflicted with course times. Most students have family responsibilities, including siblings, children, older relatives, and babies; one student who was due to give birth at the end of the year made plans with her tutor to return to her studies as soon as possible.

The internal factors refer to personal characteristics and individual situations, and thus are less common. Feelings of depression, loneliness, and homesickness may be understood as both systemic and internal, due to the complexity of mental health issues. Students expressed that a limited English proficiency can be isolating and can make life boring. Anxiety often accompanies trying to speak a second language; some English learners have low confidence in their language production abilities. Some students were absent due to travel out of the country. Some students have extrinsic motivations, like standardized tests for citizenship, licenses, school, and certifications. Many have external pressures like family members who expect them to learn English and provide for them. The sheer difficulty of learning English as an adult can be overwhelming, as it takes most people years to reach a high proficiency level in academic language.

Taken together with the stories and suggestions from research participants, the challenges listed here point toward two core findings. First, English learners' educational experiences cannot be separated from their social context, and it is especially important to understand the influences of family and life stages on a student's educational path. Second, English learners' motivations and priorities are

often at odds with those of the institutions providing instruction, a conflict that can manifest within the classroom.

5.2 Social Context

An adult English learner's educational experiences and social context are inseparable. As opposed to a Venn diagram, "a more accurate representation would have academic and social systems appear as two nested spheres, where the academic occurs within the broader social system" (Tinto, 1997, p. 610). While this idea may seem obvious, it is not always valued as much as perhaps it should be. Some organizations view professional relationships with their constituents as having very specific boundaries. In the partnering organization in this case study, volunteer tutors are specifically instructed not to be "social workers" for their students, meaning not to get involved with the students' lives beyond their English learning. Maintaining professional boundaries is of course important in any profession, but it is imperative to reconsider how these boundaries are defined in the field of ESOL education. Building relationships and getting to know one's students are important parts of being an effective ESOL instructor, partly because this allows for open communication about potential barriers to persistence. Instead of viewing poor attendance as a monolithic problem for all English learners, educators should work toward understanding their students' individual circumstances in order to address their challenges on a case-by-case basis. This strategy would include connecting

students to necessary resources and incorporating persistence supports into the classroom.

Participants of the educator focus group told about students who had experienced depression and feelings of isolation and low self-esteem. These issues were not discussed in the student focus group, although it is likely that students facing these issues would not be comfortable discussing them in that setting, given the stigmatization of mental illness and people's general need to build trust before sharing vulnerabilities. While it is not a teacher's place to provide counseling, it is important to know about these issues and find ways to work through them within the curriculum.

Some educators and students believe that it would be beneficial if the educators connected students to necessary resources, like mental health professionals and affordable youth programming, as many adult English learners can be more disconnected from community resources than their tutors and teachers are. Some teachers and tutors care deeply about their students and struggle to understand why certain boundaries are in place, e.g. not being a social worker, when breaking those boundaries may benefit their students. For English learners, the language can be a way to make life in this country more meaningful. One student said, "I know a lot of people that found this country...so boring [because they could not speak English]." She later explained further that the U.S. can be a country of opportunities for those who seize them. Many English learners do not have

access to the opportunities she described unless their English teachers and tutors help make the connection.

5.3 Family and Life Stages

A common phenomenon among English learners in this study was a focus on family. Several students described moving to the U.S. to make a better life for themselves and their families, whether their family members were with them or back in their home countries. Some immigrants in this study spent years in the U.S. without ever learning English, because they needed to prioritize their children or siblings first. For example, one woman in the focus group was retired and had lived in the U.S. for over 15 years before starting her ESOL education. Her son was a teenager when they arrived, and she needed to work two jobs to afford to send him to college. Her son is now an adult, so she lives alone. She feels embarrassed that she does not have a higher proficiency level in English given how long she has lived here. Many participants related to her story and had other friends who still had not begun to learn English. They emphasized the segregation and isolation that the language barrier creates for immigrants. Another participant was a second-generation immigrant whose mother had worked hard to provide for her daughter in the U.S. Her mother never had the opportunity to learn how to read and write, but she strongly encouraged her daughter, saying, “You’re young, so you have to learn.”

A person’s family and stage in life both influence their educational path, in terms of how much time they can commit to learning English and in their motivations

for learning. Understanding the influential role that these two factors play in students' lives will prove useful to ESOL organizations in better serving their constituents. Instead of focusing primarily on students' employment goals, a more relevant framework might place the emphasis on social inclusivity and cultural values, such as family sustenance and life stages.

5.4 Conflicting Priorities

Funders often prioritize employment and higher education as desired outcomes for adults in ESOL programs. These funding institutions often view ESOL education as a tool for economic growth; ESOL instruction is an investment in potential contributing members of the labor force. While ESOL organizations including the one in this case study do not always align with this top-down approach, they recognize the importance of demonstrating these outcomes to secure more funding and are often constrained by grant funding requirements. For the fiscal year prior to this research, the partnering organization had secured 33 grant awards, composing 75% of the annual budget. With the clear majority of funding coming from foundations and corporations, the organization's activities are shaped by external priorities.

Teachers and tutors each come in with their own set of priorities. Of course, they are trained and guided toward meeting the organization's mission, vision, and objectives, as with faculty and staff of any nonprofit organization. However, their personal goals can differ, creating internal conflicts. Again, the example of the tutor

who was instructed not to be a social worker is relevant. Teachers and tutors are, for the most part, at liberty to create their own curricula and lesson plans, although they are given general guidelines. Several courses are specifically grant-funded and have more strict expectations for curricula that will help students produce certain prescriptive outcomes.

Not many generalizations can be made about English learners, except that they are highly motivated and that ESOL programs should recognize this as an asset. “It’s difficult for me, but I try. I try every single day,” stated one participant in the English learner focus group. More than anything else, English learners simply want to feel prepared to speak and write confidently. While some students do have goals like entrance into an institution of higher education, obtaining a job, or finding better employment, these are not the most common motivations, and even for students whose goals include employment and education, they are not always the highest priority. Students want communicative competence, including both linguistic and social knowledge; students want to be able to use English correctly and appropriately in social contexts in hopes of being full participants in their communities.

5.5 Instructional Practices

Regardless of whether teachers and tutors at this organization also want their students to achieve communicative competence, many students feel that the instructional strategies and organizational resources are not meeting their needs

toward this end. English learners have provided numerous recommendations for improvement in these areas. For one, many students request more class time. The courses at the partnering organization meet for 90 minutes once a week over the course of six to twelve weeks. Students want more practice, meaning more time each class session, more sessions per week, and more weeks per course. The organization would also like to provide more instructional time, but there are simply not enough resources, especially given how much time the executive director already spends writing grant applications. Interestingly, students met with their volunteer tutors for an average of 35 hours for the fiscal year 2017. If a student attended every class session for one course per trimester, they would attend 45 hours of class time in one year. Perhaps students view an hour of one-to-one tutoring as more valuable than one hour of time in a group classroom setting, and therefore they expect that courses meet for more time each week. Another possibility is that because students know they will not be able to attend 100% of class sessions, they want more opportunities to attend. Still, the expectation would be that students would meet with tutors for more time than they would spend in courses, because tutoring is one-to-one and provides greater flexibility in scheduling, while courses meet on a set schedule at a predetermined location. Nevertheless, students recommend more class time.

With this proposal for increased class time, students also had some suggestions for changes within the classroom. In the English learner focus group, participants spent much more time discussing linguistic challenges with learning

English than persistence challenges. If lessons were modified to address these linguistic challenges, perhaps course attendance would improve. Many students agree that teachers do not correct them enough. Teachers should provide corrective feedback in the moment, rather than simply providing all positive feedback and ignoring errors. Students can learn from each other's mistakes this way as well. Many English learners expressed feelings of nervousness in speaking English. They want more classes that help with pronunciation, and they want more opportunities to practice speaking, including public speaking courses. They want to feel prepared to speak in everyday situations, like ordering food at a restaurant; they want to know specific words, what questions they should expect to be asked, and appropriate answers for those questions.

Along this vein, students want smaller class sizes, with ten or fewer students, allowing for more speaking practice. They also expressed frustration with the long waiting periods before being matched with one-to-one tutors. These smaller classes and increased tutor availability would help students receive more individual attention and make mistakes in less intimidating settings. Students also tend to want direct instruction, which means a shift away from the communicative approach to language instruction. While the communicative approach is evidence-based and more commonly accepted today in the field of SLA, students learning in this environment can often feel like they are not making progress. Direct instruction may be more beneficial for beginning students, whereas CLT is preferred at more advanced levels. The dissonance was evident from the survey responses, which conveyed

students' feelings that the lessons were not meeting their goals and needs and they did not feel they were learning. Some students request word-for-word translations, which is not a best practice in second language education. One survey respondent wanted teachers to "reinforce the most common words and the most used verbs." Many wanted more specifically grammar-focused courses at the intermediate and advanced levels. Through the communicative approach, grammar is often taught implicitly or through examples, as opposed to more direct instruction, which explicitly teaches grammatical rules. A focus group participant said that she wanted to learn the "formula" for grammatical structures in English, which she could apply to many different circumstances.

6. Conclusion

This research study has addressed one gap in existing literature: learner persistence in non-academic ESOL programs. Prior to this study, most research on learner persistence in this field has been with either general adult education programs or with ESOL programs at institutions of higher education or in programs for children and teens. The needs of constituents of non-academic ESOL programs differ from those of constituents at these two types of programs. Still, there are opportunities for further related research. A longitudinal study of English learners who have stopped out or dropped of ESOL instruction would be useful in revealing the most severe persistence challenges. Another useful study would involve a comparison of multiple organizations like this one in relation to persistence

challenges and successes. Additionally, some instances in this research study begged the question: what is the relationship between educational background and learner persistence.

Adult English learners face a complex network of institutional, situational, and dispositional challenges that influence their ability to persist in their education. With the goals of exploring these challenges, understanding learner motivations, and finding possible solutions, this research paper was based on a case study of an ESOL organization in central Massachusetts. The study consisted of two focus groups, an online survey, and an analysis of the organization's registration data. These four sources were used to triangulate findings about English learners at the partnering organization.

The organization provides two forms of ESOL education: group courses and one-to-one tutoring. The funding for group courses allows 90 minutes of weekly instruction per course, with about ten courses each trimester, and each trimester lasts between six and twelve weeks. The tutoring services are offered by trained volunteers, with approximately 70 active student-tutor matches who meet for at least 2.3 hours per month on average. Both students and educators who participated in this research made it clear that English learners in general are highly motivated, although the reasons for that motivation may vary. While the quantitative data shows the common challenge of inconsistent attendance in courses, many students demonstrate learning persistence outside of the classroom. Fair or poor attendance do not necessarily equate to a lack of motivation, and they do not indicate a poor

quality of instruction from the organization. In fact, this research showed that sometimes students' expectations for classroom activities differ from evidence-based best practices. When students say that they do not feel they are learning, it may be a result of conflicting beliefs of what instruction should look like.

There were two principal findings from this study. First, English learners' social context and educational experiences are inextricable, and their social contexts should not be ignored or considered to be separate. Students' families and stages in life play significant roles in their lives, thus shaping their education. ESOL organizations need to consider these factors at the programmatic and classroom levels. Second, there are conflicts among funders, organizations, educators, and English learners surrounding the purposes and goals of ESOL education. These conflicts become apparent in the classroom and can drive away students by making them feel like their motivations and desires are secondary to those of the organization. This issue is likely not limited to this organization, as it is a problem that stems from institutional funding sources that base their expectations in human capital theory. Employment is not the top priority of many students, and ESOL education should reflect a diversity of learning goals, with a student-centered instructional approach.

The following additional specific recommendations emerged from this data to help the partnering organization and others like it better serve their constituents.

- An overarching framework for course curricula to ensure lessons are congruent and provide stepping stones from one level to the next

- More courses focused on intermediate and advanced grammar
- Increase resource allocation to survival-level courses
- Provide more tutor trainings and encourage tutors to accept more than one student, as tutors are willing to meet for two hours each week, and most matches meet for less than two hours each week
- Incorporate findings into tutor and teacher trainings; help educators better understand the contexts and needs of their students
- Have a staff member present at the first meeting of a student-tutor match
- Take advantage of the critical first three weeks of instruction; orient the learner to the organization and identify motivations, potential obstacles, and learning styles
- Check in on students who temporarily stop out of courses, especially those who are only registered for one course
- Provide conversation circles and other opportunities for speaking practice

At the level of governmental, foundational, and corporate funding sources, a reassessment of the underlying function and outcomes of adult ESOL programs must be conducted. A paradigm shift away from human capital theory, i.e. investment in the labor force, will be important for promoting learner persistence. This new paradigm would be learner-centric, prioritizing personal learning goals; incorporating students' social contexts; and emphasizing agency, connectivity, inclusion, civic participation, and psychosocial wellbeing. There is no question that funding sources shape programs, and therefore this shift needs to occur within these

sources to have a lasting impact. All learners deserve programming that meets their individual needs.

Appendix A: Focus Group Questions

Focus Group I: Educators

1. How would you define learner persistence?
2. What do you think motivates most English learners? What motivates the learners you have worked with?
3. What do you see as the biggest challenge to English learners' persistence and achieving their learning goals?
4. Think back to a time when a learner had difficulty attending class or meeting with you for tutoring. What caused that difficulty? Did they overcome the barrier? If so, how?
5. In your experience, what have you seen as being a big help in encouraging learner persistence? What additional resources might learners need to continue to persist?
6. How do you think learner persistence and employment goals relate to one another?
7. What do you think ESOL programs (teachers, tutors, and staff) do well in encouraging learners to persist? How can ESOL programs (teachers, tutors, and staff) improve in helping learners reach their learning goals?

Focus Group II: English Learners

1. What motivates you to learn English? Is it related to employment?
2. What is the biggest challenge for you?
3. Think back to a time when you could not attend class or meet with your tutor. What caused you to miss class?
4. What has made it easier for you to attend class or meet with a tutor?
5. What could ESOL programs do to help English students attend classes?

Appendix B: Survey Questions (English)¹

1. How have you learned English with [partnering organization]? Please check all that apply.

- Classes
- Tutoring
- Other. Please explain:

2. Why do you want to learn English? Please check all that apply.

- Improve communication
- Employment
- College (Higher Education)
- Citizenship
- Certificate
- Cultural Understanding
- Other. Please explain:

3. Have you ever had difficulty attending English classes or meeting with a tutor at [partnering organization]? Please choose one.

- Yes
- No

4. If you answered yes to question 3 because of difficulty attending classes, why did you have difficulty attending classes? Please check all that apply.

- Transportation
- Childcare
- Work
- No longer interested
- Lessons were too difficult or fast
- Lessons were too easy or slow
- Lessons did not meet your learning goals
- Did not feel you were learning
- Other. Please explain:

5. If you answered yes to question 3 because of difficulty meeting with a tutor, why did you have difficulty meeting with a tutor? Please check all that apply.

- Transportation
- Childcare
- Work
- No longer interested
- Lessons were too difficult or fast
- Lessons were too easy or slow
- Lessons did not meet your learning goals

¹ The survey was administered online, and the formatting has been changed to display the questions here.

- Did not feel you were learning
- Other. Please explain:

6. What one action can [partnering organization] do to help you continue to attend class or meet with a tutor?

Demographics

Age:

Gender:

Country of Origin:

First Language:

Are you currently employed?

- Yes
- No

Appendix C: Survey Questions (Arabic)

١- كيف تعلمت الانجليزية في مركز؟

حصص

معلم خاص

أخرى :من فضلك اذكر الطرق الاخرى

لماذا تريد تعلم اللغة الانجليزية؟ يمكنك اختيار أكثر من اجابه؟

تحسين التواصل

العمل

الجامعة

المواطنة

الشهادة

لفهم الثقافة

اخرى :من فضلك اشرح بالتفصيل

هل من قبل واجهت صعوبات لحضور دروس اللغة الانجليزية أو قابلت معلم خاص في المركز؟

ضع دائرة حول الإجابة الصحيحة

نعم /لا

لو كانت اجابتك ع السؤال الثالث بسبب صعوبة حضور الدرس ،لماذا قابلت صعوبات لحضور الدرس؟

يمكنك اختيار اكثر من اجابه

وسائل النقل

رعاية طفل

العمل

لم تعد مهتم

الدروس كانت صعبه جدا

الدروس كانت بطيئة أو سهله جدا

الدرس لم يكن مساوى لأهدافه التعليمية

لم تكن تشعر بأنك تتعلم شيئا

اخرى :من فضلك وضح

لو كنت أجابت السؤال الثالث ان السبب كان صعوبة مقابلة معلم خاص، لماذا واجهت صعوبات في مقابلة المعلم الخاص؟

يمكنك اختيار أكثر من اجابه

وسائل النقل

رعاية طفل

العمل

لم تعد مهتم

الدروس كانت صعبه جدا

الدروس كانت بطيئة أو سهله جدا

الدرس لم يكن مساوى لأهدافه التعليمية

لم تكن تشعر بأنك تتعلم شيئا

اخرى :من فضلك وضح

اذكر كيف يستطيع المركز مساعدتك لاستكمال حضور الدروس أو مقابلة معلم خاص؟

:السن :الجنس. :بلد المنشأ

اللغة الاولى

هل تعمل الان؟ نعم /لا

Appendix D: Survey Questions (Portuguese)

1. Como você aprendeu Inglês com [partnering organization]? Verifique todos os que se aplicam.

- Aulas
- Tutoriais
- Outro. Por favor explique:

2. Por que você quer aprender inglês? Verifique todos os que se aplicam.

- Melhorar a comunicação
- Emprego
- Colégio (Ensino Superior)
- Cidadania
- Certificado
- Compreensão Cultural
- Outro. Por favor explique:

3. Você já teve dificuldade em frequentar aulas de inglês ou se encontrar com um tutor na [partnering organization]? Por favor circule um.

- Sim
- Não

4. Se você respondeu sim à pergunta 3 por causa da dificuldade de frequentar as aulas, por que você teve dificuldade em frequentar as aulas? Verifique todos os que se aplicam.

- Um lugar para deixar sua criança
- Trabalho
- Não está mais interessado(a)
- As lições eram muito difíceis ou rápidas
- As lições eram muito fáceis ou lentas
- As lições não atingiram seus objetivos ou necessidades de aprendizagem
- Não sentiu que você estava aprendendo
- Outro. Por favor explique:

5. Se você respondeu sim à pergunta 3 devido à dificuldade de se encontrar com um tutor, por que você teve dificuldade em se encontrar com um tutor? Verifique todos os que se aplicam.

- Transporte
- Um lugar para deixar sua criança
- Trabalho
- Não está mais interessado(a)
- As lições eram muito difíceis ou rápidas
- As lições eram muito fáceis ou lentas
- As lições não atingiram seus objetivos ou necessidades de aprendizagem
- Não sentiu que você estava aprendendo
- Outro. Por favor explique:

6. Qual é uma coisa que o [partnering organization] pode fazer para ajudá-lo a continuar a frequentar a aula ou se encontrar com seu tutor?

Idade:

Sexo:

País de origem:

Língua materna:

Você está atualmente empregado

- Sim
- Não

Appendix E: Survey Questions (Spanish)

1. ¿Cómo ha aprendido usted el inglés con [partnering organization]? Por favor, marque todos los que aplican.

- Clases
- Tutorías
- Otro. Por favor, explique:

2. ¿Por qué quiere usted aprender el inglés? Por favor, marque todos los que aplican.

- Mejorar la comunicación
- El empleo
- La universidad (educación superior)
- La ciudadanía
- Certificación
- El entendimiento cultural
- Otro. Por favor explique:

3. ¿Ha tenido usted dificultades al asistir a las clases o a la tutoría de inglés en [partnering organization]? Por favor, circule uno.

- Sí
- No

4. Si respondió usted “sí” a la pregunta 3 por tener dificultades al asistir a las clases, ¿por qué tuvo dificultad al asistir a las clases? Por favor, marque todos los que aplican.

- Transporte
- Cuidado infantil
- Trabajo
- Ya no está interesado/a
- Las lecciones eran demasiado difíciles o rápidas
- Las lecciones eran demasiado fáciles o lentas
- Las lecciones no estaban acordes con sus objetivos o necesidades del aprendizaje
- No sentía que estuviera aprendiendo
- Otro. Por favor, explique:

5. Si respondió usted “sí” a la pregunta 3 por dificultades al asistir a la tutoría, ¿por qué tuvo dificultades al asistir a la tutoría? Por favor, marque todos los que aplican.

- Transporte
- Cuidado infantil
- Trabajo
- Ya no está interesado/a
- Las lecciones eran demasiado difíciles o rápidas
- Las lecciones eran demasiado fáciles o lentas
- Las lecciones no estaban acordes con sus objetivos o necesidades del aprendizaje
- No sentía que estuviera aprendiendo

- Otro. Por favor, explique:

6. ¿Qué puede hacer [partnering organization] para ayudarle a usted en continuar a asistir a las clases o a la tutoría?

Edad:

Género:

País de origen:

Lengua primera:

¿Está usted empleado/a actualmente?

- Sí
- No

Appendix F: Survey Questions (French)

1. Comment avez-vous appris l'anglais avec [partnering organization]? Veuillez cocher tout ce qui s'applique.

- Cours
- Séance de tutorat
- Autres. Veuillez expliquer :

2. Pourquoi voulez-vous apprendre l'anglais ? Veuillez cocher tout ce qui s'applique.

- Amélioration de la communication
- Emploi
- Université (Education supérieure)
- Citoyenneté
- Certificat
- Compréhension Culturelle
- Autres. Veuillez expliquer :

3. Avez-vous eu des difficultés à assister au cours de l'anglais ou au rendez-vous avec un tuteur au [partnering organization]? Veuillez entourer une des options.

- Oui
- Non

4. Si vous avez répondu oui à la question 3 à cause de la difficulté d'assister au cours, pourquoi aviez-vous cette difficulté d'assister au cours ? Veuillez cocher tous ceux qui correspondent.

- Transportation
- Garderie
- Travail
- Perte d'intérêt
- Les leçons étaient trop difficiles ou rapides
- Les leçons étaient trop faciles ou lentes
- Les leçons n'étaient pas à la hauteur de vos attentes
- N'avais pas l'impression d'apprendre
- Autres. Veuillez expliquer :

5. Si vous avez répondu oui à la question 3 à cause de la difficulté de rencontrer un tuteur, pourquoi aviez-vous cette difficulté de rencontrer un tuteur ? Veuillez cocher tous ceux qui correspondent.

- Transportation
- Garderie
- Travail
- Perte d'intérêt
- Les leçons étaient trop difficiles ou rapides
- Les leçons étaient trop faciles ou lentes
- Les leçons n'étaient pas à la hauteur de vos attentes
- N'avais pas l'impression d'apprendre
- Autres. Veuillez expliquer :

6. Qu'est-ce qu'une action que [partnering organization] pourrais faire pour vous aider à continuer d'assister aux cours ou avec votre tuteur ?

Age :

Sexe :

Pays d'origine :

Langue maternelle :

Êtes-vous employé en ce moment ?

- Oui
- Non

Bibliography

- Appachu, L. (1994). *An Exploratory Study of the Feasibility of the Communicative Approach to the Teaching of English as a Second Language to Pre University Students of the State of Karnataka in South India* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from Shodhganga. Order number 10603/86151.
- Bahrani, T., Shu Sim, T., & Nekoueizadeh, M. (2014). Second Language Acquisition in Informal Setting. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 4(8), 1714-1723.
- Belzer, A. (1998). Stopping out, not dropping out. *Focus on Basics: Connecting Research & Practice*, 2(A).
- Brock, T. & Richburg-Hayes, L. (2006). *Paying for Persistence. Early Results of a Louisiana Scholarship Program for Low-Income Parents Attending Community College*. Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC).
- California Department of Education. (2007). *CALPRO Learner Persistence Project*. Sacramento, CA: American Institutes for Research.
- Camoy, M. (1977). Schooling and Society. In *Education as cultural imperialism* (pp. 1-49). New York, NY: Addison-Wesley Longman.
- Cannon, J. (2006). *U.S. Adult Education for Democratic Social Change*. Unpublished master's project, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Massachusetts.
- Carter, S.J. (2016). *Program and Classroom Factors Affecting Attendance Patterns For Hispanic Participants in Adult ESL Education*. Retrieved from Bepress Digital Commons.
- Cavanaugh, M.P. (1996). History of Teaching English as a Second Language. *The English Journal*, 85(8), 40-44.

- Comings, J., et al. (2003). *“As Long As It Takes”*: Responding to the Challenges of Adult Student Persistence in Library Literacy Programs. New York, NY: Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC).
- Comings, J., Parrella, A., & Soricone, L. (2000). Helping Adults Persist: Four Supports. *Focus on Basics: Connecting Research & Practice*, 4(A).
- Comings, J.P. (2007). Persistence: Helping Adult Education Students Reach Their Goals. *Review of Adult Learning and Literacy*, 7, 23-46.
- Condelli, L., & Spruck Wrigley, H. (2008). Instruction, Language and Literacy: What Works Study for Adult ESL Literacy Students. In S. Reder and J. Bynner (Eds.), *Tracking Adult Literacy and Numeracy Skills: Findings from Longitudinal Research* (pp. 111-133). London & New York: Routledge.
- Crawford, J. (1987). Bilingual Education Traces Its U.S. Roots to the Colonial Era. *Education Week*. Retrieved from <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/1987/04/01/27early.h06.html>.
- Cross, K.P. (1978). *The Missing Link: Connecting Adult Learners to Learning Resources*. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED163177.pdf>.
- Cummins, J. (1984). Wanted: A Theoretical Framework for Relating Language Proficiency to Academic Achievement Among Bilingual Students. In C. Rivera (Ed.), *Language proficiency and academic achievement* (pp. 2-19). Washington, DC: United States Department of Education.
- Eyring, J.L. (2014). Adult ESL Education in the US. *The CATESOL Journal*, 26(1).
- Finn, D. (2011). Principles of Adult Learning: An ESL Context. *Journal of Adult Education*, 40(1), 34-39.
- Fitzgerald, N., & Young, M. (1997). The influence of persistence on literacy education in adult education. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 47(2), 78–92.
- Goodman, M.D., et al. (2015). *The Foreign-Born Population of Worcester, Massachusetts: Assessing the Challenges and Contributions of a Diverse Community*. Retrieved from <http://www.sevenhills.org/whats-happening/the-foreign-born-population-of-worcester>.

- Harber, C. (2014). Economic Development: Human Capital or Dependency and Socio-Economic Reproduction. In *Education and International Development: Theory, practice and issues* (pp. 53-68). Oxford: Symposium Books.
- Kaz, D. (2014). *Investing in Effective Employment & Training Strategies for English Language Learners: Considerations for the City of Seattle & Other Localities*. Retrieved from http://www.seattlejobsinitiative.com/wp-content/uploads/SJI_ELL_Report_1.13.14.pdf.
- Knowles, M.S. (1970). *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Cambridge Adult Education, Prentice Hall.
- Knowles, M.S. (1973). *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species*. Houston, TX: Gulf Publishing Company.
- Krashen, S.D. (1976). Formal and Informal Linguistic Environments in Language Acquisition and Language Learning. *TESOL Quarterly*, 10(2), 157-168.
- Krashen, S.D. (2013). *Second Language Acquisition: Theory, Applications, and Some Conjectures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Long, M.H. (1983). Does Second Language Instruction Make a Difference? A Review of Research. *TESOL Quarterly*, 17(3), 359-382.
- Mathews-Aydinli, J. (2008). Overlooked and Understudied? A Survey of Current Trends in Research on Adult English Language Learners. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 58(3), 198-213.
- Mertesdorf, J.C. (1990). *Learning Styles and Barriers to Learning Perceived by Adult Students on Campus*. Retrieved from <https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd/11207/>.
- Nash, A., & Kallenbach, S. (2009). *Making It Worth the Stay: Findings from the New England Adult Learner Persistence Project*. Boston, MA: New England Literacy Resource Center.
- O'Neill, S., & Thomson, M.M. (2013). Supporting academic persistence in low-skilled adult learners. *Support for Learning*, 28(4), 162-172.
- Quigley, B.A. (1998). The First Three Weeks: A Critical Time for Motivation. *Focus on Basics: Connecting Research & Practice*, 2(A).

- Roberts, C., Cooke, M., Baynham, M., & Simpson, J. (2007). Adult ESOL in the United Kingdom: Policy and research. *Prospect*, 22(3), 18-31.
- Savignon, S.J. (1987). Communicative Language Teaching. *Theory Into Practice*, 26(4), 235-242.
- Schalge, S.L., & Soga, K. (2008). "Then I Stop Coming to School": Understanding Absenteeism in an Adult English as a Second Language Program. *Adult Basic Education and Literacy Journal*, 2(3), 151-161.
- Schultz, T. (1963). *The economic value of education*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Spada, N. (2007). Communicative Language Teaching: Current Status and Future Prospects. In J. Cummins and C. Davison (Eds.), *International Handbook of English Language Teaching, Part 1* (pp. 271-288). New York, NY: Springer.
- Spruck Wrigley, H. (2008). *Adult ESL and Literacy: Issues and Options*. Montreal, QC: The Centre for Literacy.
- Sticht, T.G., McDonald, B.A., and Erickson, P.R. (1998). *Passports to Paradise: The Struggle to Teach and to Learn on the Margins of Adult Education*. San Diego Consortium for Workforce Education and Lifelong Learning.
- Sweetland, S.R. (1996). Human Capital Theory: Foundations of a Field of Inquiry. *Review of Educational Research*, 66(3), 341-359.
- Tinto, V. (1997). Classrooms as communities: Exploring the educational character of student persistence. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 68(6), 599-623.
- Tinto, V. (2003). Student success and the building of involving educational communities. *Higher Education Monograph Series, Syracuse University*, 2.
- Tracy-Mumford, F., et al. (1994). *Student Retention: Creating Student Success*. Washington, D.C.: National Adult Education Professional Development Consortium, Inc.
- U.S. Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education. (2016). *English Literacy/English Language (EL) Education in the Adult Basic Grant Program*. Retrieved from

<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/AdultEd/factsh/english-literacy-education.pdf>.

Wright, W.E. (2015). *Foundations for Teaching English Language Learners: Research, Theory, Policy and Practice*. Philadelphia, PA: Caslon Publishing.