

Learning from Practice: PALPIN

How Do ESL Students in Two Pittsburgh Neighborhoods Talk About the Situations They Face as Limited English Proficiency (LEP) Parents?

Susan H. Evans

The Story of the Question

In March of 1997 students studying English as a Second Language (ESL) with Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council's (GPLC) volunteer tutors accounted for only 18% of the total number of matched students in the entire program. Over the last three years the ESL population of Allegheny County has grown quickly. Now ESL students consistently account for about half of all the matched students and for more than half of the waiting list students.

At one time western Pennsylvania was a popular destination for immigrants from Europe, especially Eastern Europe. That demographic changed with the decline in the steel and coal mining industries. The current trend of increased national immigration is changing the composition of the population of Pittsburgh again, and GPLC's students come from almost every part of the world.

To meet the needs of the increasing numbers of students, we trained close to 100 new volunteer ESL tutors in the first six months of 2000. In addition, AmeriCorps members and staff provide one-to-one and group tutoring, and students are participating in Crossroads Cafe distance learning groups. We've run three citizenship information study classes, and we're adding a full-scale ESL Family Literacy program.

Susan Evans is an Education Specialist with the Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council.

Prospect Park, a large apartment complex in the South Hills of Pittsburgh has become the new home of about 200 Bosnian refugee families. Everyone involved with the refugee and immigrant families in the neighboring communities agreed that there is a crucial need for the services that a Family Literacy program could provide and that Prospect Park would be an ideal place to locate a class.

Working through the planning process as Program Director, I started to think about the issues about which our ESL learners who are parents really want to know more. We know what we think they need, but what do they say they need? I was concerned that we make every effort to provide a student-centered program and that we avoid making assumptions about the students' needs. Sometimes I think that we forget that ESL students are adults because it's just so difficult to communicate with non-native speakers. Then we sometimes define the students' greatest problems from our own perspective and respond with solutions to what troubles us the most about their difficulties.

With good information student recruitment could be done more effectively, and we could develop a student-centered, adult class curriculum. I set out to learn what I could from the students themselves about how they handle various parenting situations in Pittsburgh with their limited English skills. I wondered if what I'd learn would agree with everything I'd been reading about ESL parents and their problems or if I'd learn something new from GPLC's ESL students.

Data Collection

I collected data in two ways: first, through a survey administered to students by their tutors and, second, through telephone conversations with two more students I know personally. I included students from within Prospect Park as well as from another South Hills community. Including comments in my data from both the Prospect Park refugees and other immigrants would allow me to generalize the information for use with other students in the program.

I collected the names and addresses of all the active ESL students in the two neighborhoods who are parents and of their tutors. I selected 15 tutors who work with a total of 37 students and mailed the survey, along with a self-addressed stamped, envelope, to the 15 tutors with a cover letter explaining the project. I hoped, by asking the tutors to administer the survey for me, that I would be able to get more accurate information than if I, a stranger, asked what could be seen as snoopy, personal ques-

tions. Based upon the responses to the survey, I built my questions for the two students I spoke with.

The mailed survey resulted in responses from 19 students (51%). Nine are permanent resident immigrants, and 10 are Bosnian refugees. They parent 24 children ranging in age from 8 months to 17 years. The survey included open-ended questions about things that the children like to do and that their parents like to do with them, about managing health care for their children and for themselves, about school communication, and about after-school activities.

The two women I spoke with came to the United States with Basic English skills and have been in the United States long enough to speak comfortably on the telephone. One is a Bosnian refugee, and the other is a Chinese immigrant. The questions addressed to them covered the same issues as those in the survey.

The Bosnian woman with whom I spoke is an outgoing, smiling person. Because her husband still does not know much English, she manages the "officials" and the business of day-to-day life for the family. They've been here for three years and have one teenage daughter. The Chinese woman's family has been in Pittsburgh for six years. She and her husband have three children ranging in age from 6 to 15 years old. She's a pleasant, quiet person who pauses before she speaks. Both she and her husband studied English before moving to the United States and expected communication problems, but both now feel quite comfortable speaking English.

Data Analysis

I compiled the answers to each question and then separated the responses into two groups, one with the immigrants' responses and the other with the refugees' responses. Since there are differences in the reasons each group is in the United States, I wondered if there would be different responses to the questions between the two groups of parents. There were not! The variations in the responses of the two groups were more a factor of language skill level than other circumstances. Most managed their problems initially in the same way—by depending upon others to help them.

Both parents in the refugee couples worked at full-time jobs. They often had an hour of commuting time each way each day and sometimes worked different shifts to allow one or the other to be home with the children. This reduced the amount of time available for whole family

activities. When both immigrant parents were working, they worked long hours in family businesses that were closer to home and which provided extended family support.

Health Care

In addition to the language barrier, ESL speakers have to navigate our health insurance maze. To communicate with doctors, most of the students have given up their privacy and personal control and depend upon others to communicate for them. Usually females (sisters, sisters-in-law, wives), and even children, acted as translators during a visit to the doctor. Several students write out a script that they follow to make medical appointments and then write out all their questions for the doctor. Sometimes the communication problems are frightening. One woman said that she understands her doctor, but she isn't sure he understands her! Communicating the medical histories of family members is difficult. One baby has had lots of problems, and the mother is not sure what is going on.

The parents who arrived in Pittsburgh with Basic English skills and anticipated many of the language problems developed a common strategy for handling all situations. All said they carried a dictionary everywhere they went and made the doctors and nurses wait while they checked the meaning of *every* new word.

The Bosnian woman said that this strategy worked well until her husband needed to see a specialist and the language needs exceeded her dictionary. It was interesting to me that even though she was the helper for the family, she had to relinquish her own privacy and ask her caseworker to accompany her to the gynecologist.

Just getting to the doctor's office was a problem because most of the parents don't have cars and Pittsburgh's public transportation system is limited. Understanding directions was difficult. Given Pittsburgh's hills, valleys, and rivers, there are few straight lines between two points.

School Communication

When communicating with school personnel, the parents again relinquished their authority to relatives, caseworkers, or, in one case, a priest. Some volunteer tutors made telephone calls and translated and explained paperwork to the parents. However, none of these helping people actually knew the children's academic backgrounds, a situation that makes me question the accuracy of the information they provided.

In a school setting with the complicating issue of learning a second language while keeping up with the regular academics, students often need extra services, not fewer. The amount and types of educational services a student receives depends often upon the parent's ability to request, or even demand, services. I wonder how much ESL help school systems automatically provide students, especially those who arrive late in their high school careers, as opposed to those students who arrive in first grade? In this sample, more of the elementary schools provided ESL services than the high schools, but older children who won't be in the school system as long need the help, too, and need it quickly.

One of the high school girls was placed in lower level classes until she picked up the language on her own. Sink or swim! She managed to catch up and was moved into the academic courses she needed to go on to college. I wonder what would have happened had she not caught up on her own?

The parents of children of high school age worried that their children weren't being registered in the right courses for graduation. The structure and terminology used in the American School system is different. Credits implied a financial debt to one parent, not something a student earned for completing a course.

The teachers spoke slowly so the parents could understand, but the communication was still one way from the teacher to the parent. Parents seldom spoke. Every parent expressed interest in his or her children's education, but none mentioned any involvement with the school. They said they don't attend PTA/PTO meetings because of work hours or transportation problems, but I wonder if they know what a PTA/PTO is. A common response, when asked what they did with their children, was homework, so it's not disinterest that keeps these parents out of the school.

The parents of older children were concerned about their children wanting part-time jobs and driver's licenses, and they were confused by the schools' musical instrument programs and holidays. What is Halloween? Understanding often requires more background knowledge than a newcomer has, and getting that background knowledge can take more time than may be available before decisions have to be made. Those kinds of situations add a great deal of stress to parenting.

Report cards were a problem. Sometimes a tutor translated for the parents, and, once, the child himself did the translating and explaining of his own grades. The parents appreciated a School Handbook because they could read it, but, often, they had to relinquish the parental role to a stranger to get the information.

Gender Patterns

Usually the male parent said he had no problems with school and health communication, and, in truth, he really didn't have a problem—not, however, because he could communicate well. In most cases the husband delegated talking with teachers and doctors, the “officials” as he described them, to a female in the family. Only one of the fathers said he wanted to talk with an official—his son's basketball coach—and soon!

Socializing

Participation in formal, after-school activities was limited by access to transportation. In Prospect Park there are many other children in the community, so the children have ready-made playmates. In other communities there were no other children nearby, and some of the children arranged their own play dates with children from school. When I asked about the kinds of opportunities the parents had for socializing with adults, several said that they'd like to get to know Americans; however, their main contacts are still with people who speak their first language.

The Hardest Thing

The Bosnian woman, who was totally upbeat throughout our conversation and described all her miscommunications with a smile, stopped laughing when I asked about the hardest part of parenting. She said that the hardest part was trying to find and keep a bad job while she tried to get a better job. She had to support her family, and the other problems were insignificant in comparison.

The Chinese woman, as usual, paused before answering. She wanted tutors to teach each student as many new words as possible as quickly as possible. (Initially, she depended heavily upon her dictionary as a means of accomplishing all her parenting and survival tasks.) She said that the hardest part for her was writing notes to her children's teachers. Her daughter, who is now in high school, proofreads everything she writes before it leaves the house. She's still embarrassed by this weakness.

Implications

I feel that I had gathered some good information about instructional topics that could be addressed by both an ESL Family Literacy Program and by tutors in the one-to-one tutoring program. Most of what the students said was not surprising. All of us certainly can understand why weak language skills magnify all parenting problems. A visit to the doc-

tor produces sweaty palms in native speakers, but, for Limited English Proficiency (LEP) adults, their increased fears are justified. There are real dangers of misdiagnosis when patient and doctor do not understand each other and the medical history might be inaccurate. With all the concerns about malpractice that doctors have today, I have to wonder what goes through a medical practitioner's mind when trying to treat a patient with whom he or she cannot communicate. How many extra tests are being done? How many patients are referred unnecessarily to another practitioner? How often is someone brushed off to avoid having to struggle to communicate? What do health care providers do when a LEP patient has no health insurance? What quality of care are LEP families receiving?

The LEP parents more often are onlookers than participants in their children's education. Putting an ESL Family Literacy Program in place in cooperation with a school system will give these parents and their ESL teacher access to the ins and outs of the system. The program will also give the children access to more ESL instruction, which is so important to academic success.

The high school kids need to be considered as well. Not everyone can pick up English on his or her own. Teenagers can be a tough audience, and I don't know what it might take to reach that age group. We should ask the teenage children in the families for some advice.

We should use the list of topics generated by the study to do two things. First, some of the topics should be included in any recruitment literature as examples of what a student could learn through the program. Secondly, we should use this data to generate a needs survey to present to all new students. They should determine their own class curriculum. Over time the curriculum will probably change to reflect the needs of each new group.

I still have questions about where and how we'll find the services and the resources to respond to the students' needs. We need to pull together information about the resources and services already in place. There is no need to reinvent the wheel if it already exists, but I suspect this wheel has lots of holes. With the turnover in adult education staff and the constant structural changes in programs, it's important that the list of resources be maintained in such a way that the information isn't lost when a staff person leaves. That process should involve the students in collecting and compiling the resources they have located.

We need to build relationships with the local school systems and the health care providers. Those relationships will be most helpful if they

can be developed on both the professional and personal levels. Because staff members are able to make their programs work when they see the need themselves, it is essential that we bring the staff from the various organizations and the families together often. We must invite people from the organizations into the classroom settings often as resources and as guests at events and for any other reason the students or teachers can imagine. Let them get to know each other!

The biggest surprise to me was the comment that the hardest part of parenting was needing to hold onto a bad job while trying to get a better job. I believe that job search and workforce education skills should be included in the list of choices we give parents in an ESL Family Literacy Program. A job search/workplace culture mini-course just might be the topic that brings working fathers and mothers out to attend a program in the evening. Tired as they are from working all day, the desire for a better job might be a strong motivator.

We'll need to provide flexible scheduling—days, afternoons and evenings—to catch parents and children when they are available. The evening piece might be a drop-in resource center that adults could visit for help with health, school, and job application forms; children's school work; socializing; a series of mini-courses; or whatever! Let's put something in place, but not in cement, so that pieces can be responsive to the students as they tell us what they need.

Most fathers in this study had no role in communicating with health care providers or school personnel, either for themselves or their children, yet, in a few cases, the men were the stronger speakers of English. The men need to communicate for themselves with health care professionals as much as the women do. I wonder if they would attend a short series of meetings, with more male-oriented topics, if they were taught by a male?

It was obvious that LEP parents are relinquishing parental authority and their adult privacy to everybody and anybody, including their own children, in order to accomplish basic parenting tasks. The difficult situations in which they all find themselves as LEP adults are unsettling enough to a family without having the parents placed in a role of dependency and vulnerability as these parents are. Parents usually provide the sense of security for their children, and these parents are all working hard to do just that.

It seems to me that the level of English skill, the amount of family support, and the basic personality of the individual seem to affect how the parents emotionally responded to the day-to-day situations. Parenting

is difficult at best, and, even with a positive outlook, some language skill and extended-family support in place, parenting in Pittsburgh is difficult for LEP parents. The parents who participated in this survey told us how they manage, but they speak for themselves, not for all ESL students. Let's keep asking the students what they want!

Using Tic-Tac-Toe Math: A Case Study

Patricia Y. Pisaneschi

The Story of the Question

For the past three academic years I have worked part-time as a mathematics instructor in an adult literacy program sponsored by Luzerne County Community College. Students enrolled in the program meet for two, 2-hour sessions each week, and those students at the GED or upper ABE level focus on math during one of these weekly sessions.

Although my bachelor's degree was in mathematics, I had not begun to teach math in the classroom until 1995, when I began serving LCCC as an adjunct instructor in developmental mathematics courses. In the spring of 1997 I went to a workshop presented by Dr. Richard Cooper and was fascinated by his alternative methods of presenting math. During the summer several teachers left the adult literacy program and I was assigned, somewhat by default, to an ABE group of students who were working at a low level in both reading and math. Most of these students added reasonably well and subtracted with just a little difficulty on large numbers. Multiplication and division, however, were quite difficult for all of them.

We worked on simple word problems, mostly addition and subtraction, to help build both reading and math skills. Another teacher was assigned to share the class, and the group got so large that no one was

Patricia Pisaneschi is an Instructor of Adult Basic Education/GED with the Luzerne County Community College, Mountaintop, PA.