

INTERIM REPORT: HISPANIC OUTREACH

During the 2003-04 academic year, the Linguistics Department at Oakland University began administering job surveys to the participants in its Hispanic Outreach Program in Pontiac, Michigan. The surveys are designed to solicit and track information that will help us provide ESL instruction that is more relevant to the participants' needs, in particular, their efforts to secure employment and become fully integrated members of American society.

DESCRIPTION OF THE SURVEYS

Three different job surveys are used: a survey for those participants who are currently employed; one for those not currently employed but seeking employment, and one for those not currently employed and not looking for employment. Each survey consists of 8 multiple-choice questions written in Spanish. After the questions, there is a space for the participants to add comments on how the ESL Program has helped them and to make suggestions for improvement. All surveys begin with the following two questions:

1. When do you attend English classes?
 - a. Day
 - b. Evening
2. What level of English class are you currently attending?
 - a. Beginning
 - b. Intermediate
 - c. Advanced

The remaining six questions differ on the different surveys and are directed at issues most relevant to each of the three groups. The questions on the individual surveys are included in the Appendix.

ADMINISTRATION

The current academic year is the first time the surveys have been administered. It is our trial year, during which time we hope to work out any difficulties that arise in giving the surveys and interpreting the data. So far, the surveys have been administered in both the fall 2003 and winter 2004 semesters, roughly one month into the semester in each case. They will also be given in the spring 2004 semester. During winter term, we changed minor wording and clarified our instructions. For example, since there seemed to be confusion about the number of possible answers to the questions on the fall surveys, we clearly indicated on the surveys for winter term when more than one answer is acceptable. In spring, the instructions to the teachers administering the survey will be formalized, again in an effort to reduce the number of variables.

PARTICIPANTS

A total of 107 participants took the survey in fall and winter: 52 in the first group (those currently employed; 52% male, 48% female); 43 in the second group (those unemployed and looking for work; 19% male; 81% female), 12 in the third group (those unemployed and not looking for work; 100% female). During the winter, we added the third group because it seemed that some of the questions were not relevant to some of the participants who have no intention of looking for a job outside the home. In the spring, we will add additional questions to all the surveys asking how often the participants want and need to use English during the course of an average week.

RESULTS AND EVALUATION

Among the participants who are already working, an overwhelming 94% say that being able to read and write English better would help them a lot (77%) or a good deal (17%) in their current job. Equally significant, 93 % of the working participants feel that being able to speak and understand English would help them either a lot (75%) or a good deal (18%) in their current job. The areas of English that cause participants difficulty are, in descending order, speaking (37%), writing (23%), understanding (18%), reading (15%), and vocabulary (7%).

One revealing statistic is that, in most instances, a family member made the suggestion that the participants try to improve their English skills (44%). Sometimes, the suggestion came from a friend (25%). Interestingly, the suggestion that participants try to improve their English skills came from a supervisor only 12% of the time and from an owner of the company only 14% of the time. It seems clear that the pressure to improve their English skills is coming mainly from the Hispanic community itself. Perhaps the most surprising finding is that, while 44% of working participants never think about changing jobs, an equal number (44%) think about looking for a higher level job with more responsibility. So, equally clearly, the participants want to advance in their employment.

Among those currently looking for a job, our survey indicates that deficient skills in English is the major impediment to finding employment: 53% say that their inability to speak and understand English well enough causes them difficulty trying to find a job; 25% cite reading and writing as an impediment. Importantly, lack of education is not cited by any of the participants as a cause of difficulty, and lack of experience is cited by only 9%. These statistics are all the more significant because 62 % of those looking for work say that finding a job is causing them a lot of difficulty (23%) or a good deal of difficulty (39%).

Among those not working and not looking for a job, better English skills are desired when trying to deal with doctors and other health professionals (38%), teachers and school officials (23%), and merchants (15%). The same group reports that the people they come in contact with the most are doctors and other health professionals (33%), merchants (33%), and teacher and school officials (19%). During such interactions, speaking and understanding cause the greatest difficulty (33%), with reading and writing not far behind (30%).

SOME TYPICAL WRITTEN COMMENTS FROM THE PARTICIPANTS

Comments Written in Spanish and Translated by the ESL Staff

1. The English Program has helped me very much because it has prepared me to have better working conditions with other people. Bilingual people have more possibilities for better jobs.
2. The classes give an important base to communicate with other people that aren't Latino in daily life, at work, and in the community in America.
3. In reality we are limited in the words we know and speak in this country. It is for this reason we are unemployed or have lower level work, because it is necessary to learn English to communicate. Writing is very important. When we know how to communicate in English we can get education and better salaries.
4. I think when we learn to speak, write, and read English it will help a lot with people and co-workers in the supermarket, at work, and other necessary situations. I love learning English!

Comments Written in English

1. It's important to learn English because we are in an English speaking country and need to communicate well in order to feel more comfortable.
2. The program helped me to take more opportunities in my job or outside of it. We are learning how to improve.
3. I think if I speak, read, and write in English it will help with opportunities to communicate and make good money.
4. Very important to prepare for my job and every place. (Knowing) two languages is very important. In my job I talk to customers, managers, and co-workers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The curriculum for each of our classes is designed to be responsive to the immediate needs of the participants and to their goals for the future. Certain activities and lessons have general applicability. For example, survival skills like how to read labels and signs or how to address an envelope are important for all participants. Some aspects of our culture which Americans take for granted also need to be understood, such as the appropriateness of asking questions of teachers and doctors, or even of going to a superior or seeking a second opinion. For those looking for jobs, we provide specific lessons on how to read classified ads and how to fill out applications. We also

incorporate useful activities aimed at helping participants feel more secure during appointments and interviews.

The information gathered from the surveys is being used by our teachers to construct lessons, so that class time concentrates on those areas that the participants find most important for their success. Perhaps the greatest challenge in this regard is how to give more students an opportunity in class to engage in conversation. In one way or another, a large number of the participants feel that they need to improve their conversational skills. In a class of 25 to 35 students, it is very difficult to practice such skills.

The results of the surveys administered so far strongly suggest that the usefulness and effectiveness of our classes is directly proportional to the amount the participants need to use English outside of class. Essentially, the more they need to use English, the more useful they find the Program to be. Thus, of the 46 participants who are looking for work, 31% say that the ESL Program is helping them a good deal, and 18% say it is helping them a lot. In contrast, none of the 12 participants who are not looking for work think the ESL Program has helped them either a good deal or a lot. Since one of our goals is to encourage participants to use English more often, we have intensified our efforts to avoid using Spanish in and out of the classroom. Some of our teachers speak Spanish, and they have now been specifically instructed to speak English in all cases except an emergency.

IMMEDIATE GOALS

Now that we have collected data on the participants' job interests, it is appropriate to make more concrete our connection with the JobLink Career Center. The ESL staff at Hispanic Outreach is in the process of identifying some participants who will go to the Center for job counseling. Also, we will ask a member of the JobLink staff if someone can come to Hispanic Outreach to describe the services they provide, and we will formalize a referral process so that JobLink clients who need ESL training can be referred to the Hispanic Outreach Program. Finally, plans are underway to make the Hispanic Outreach Program an "outpost" of JobLink so that participants can take full advantage of JobLink's on-line services.

APPENDIX

Questions beginning “how much” or “how often” have choices on a five point Likert scale from “not at all” (choice “a”; Casi nada) to “a lot” (choice “e”; Muchísimo). The choices for the remaining questions are as follows:

Those who are currently employed:

3. Which of the following people have suggested that you learn more English?
 - a. A supervisor
 - b. The owner of the company you work for
 - c. A co-worker
 - d. A friend
 - e. A member of your family.
4. Which skills that you are learning in English class are the most difficult for you to learn?
 - a. Speaking.
 - b. Understanding
 - c. Writing
 - d. Reading
 - e. Vocabulary
5. How much would it help you in your current job if you could speak and understand English better?
6. How much would it help you in your current job if you could read and write English better?
7. How often do you think about changing jobs?
8. How often do you think about looking for a higher level job - a job with more responsibility?

Those unemployed and looking for work:

3. Which of the following are causing you difficulty as you look for a job?
 - a. You do not speak and understand English well enough
 - b. You do not read and write English well enough
 - c. You do not have enough education
 - d. You do not have enough experience
 - e. You do not have anyone to help you
4. How much difficulty are you having finding a job that you want?
5. How much has the ESL Program helped advance your English skills?
6. How much has the ESL Program helped you fill out applications or forms?
7. How much has the ESL Program helped you read and understand classified ads?
8. How much has the ESL Program helped you to feel more comfortable during interviews or appointments?

Those unemployed and not looking for work:

3. Which of the following are causing you difficulty?
 - a. You do not speak and understand English well enough
 - b. You do not read and write English well enough
 - c. You do not have enough education
 - d. You do not understand American customs
 - e. You do not have anyone to help you
4. Which of the following types of people do you deal with fairly often?
 - a. Teachers and school officials
 - b. Doctors and other health professionals
 - c. Legal and government officials
 - d. Bank clerks and insurance agents
 - e. Merchants and clerks in stores
5. In what aspects of your daily life do you wish you had better English skills?
 - a. Dealing with your children's teachers and school officials
 - b. Dealing with doctors and other health professionals
 - c. Dealing with legal and government officials
 - d. Dealing with bank clerks and insurance agents
 - e. Dealing with merchants and clerks in stores
6. How much has the ESL Program helped with your speaking and listening skills?
7. How much has the ESL Program helped you in dealing with your reading and writing skills?
8. How much has the ESL Program helped you in understanding American culture and customs?