

# Why Are They Studying English? Assessing the Goals, Beliefs, Needs, and Attitudes of Adult Immigrants in ESL Programs

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Keywords: ESL, immigrants, goals, beliefs, needs, attitudes

**Abstract:** The purpose of this study was to develop and pilot a questionnaire for limited English proficient adults that would 1) provide adult ESL programs with information about their students' goals, needs, and attitudes and 2) enable large-scale data collection among these students for both program planning and research purposes.

## Adult Immigrants in ESL Programs

The purpose of this study was to develop and pilot a questionnaire that would 1) provide teachers and administrators of adult ESL (English as a Second Language) programs with important information about their students and 2) enable large-scale data collection among adult ESL students for both research and program planning purposes. Although English proficiency is essential to almost all aspects of adult immigrants' lives, most adult ESL classes suffer from high rates of student attrition (Kouritzin, 2000). While much of it may be due to factors such as lack of time, transportation, or child care (Kouritzin, 2000), researchers have been increasingly interested in adult learners' goals and needs and the fit between these needs and the available ESL instruction. Adult immigrants may stop attending classes when they encounter a mismatch between their own goals and those of the program (Skilton-Sylvester & Carlo, 1998) or instructional content that is irrelevant to their lives (Norton, 1997).

### *Beliefs and Affective Variables in Second Language Learning*

Learners' beliefs play an important role in learning a second language (L2). Previous research has shown that having positive attitudes and realistic beliefs about language learning is related to faster progress at the early stages of studying an L2 (Horwitz, 1988). Huang and Tsai (2003) found that higher-proficiency learners of English had more positive beliefs about themselves as language learners and were more willing to take risks in communicating with native speakers than their lower-proficiency peers.

The relationships of affective variables such as attitudes, motivation, anxiety, and self-confidence to achievement in L2 have been extensively studied (see Dörnyei, 2005, for a recent summary). Research in Canada on L2 learning motivation among anglophone learners of French has focused on the sociocultural context of language learning (MacIntyre, MacMaster, & Baker, 2001). Positive attitudes toward the L2 community have been found to be important to L2 achievement (Gardner, 2001), while anxiety around L2 use has been consistently shown to be detrimental to L2 performance (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 200).

### *Existing Instruments and the Difficulties of Using Them with Adult Immigrants*

The most widely used instruments in assessing beliefs about language learning and the relevant affective variables have been the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) (Horwitz, 1999); the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) (Gardner, Tremblay, & Masgoret, 1997); and the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). These instruments have been used in many large-scale studies. However, they are

not optimally suited for research with adult immigrant learners for two reasons: the settings for which they were originally developed and issues related to the language of administration.

*Settings and context.* The BALLI, the AMTB, the FLCAS, and their subsequent versions (see, for example, Gardner, Tremblay, & Masgoret, 1997; Horwitz, 1999) were developed primarily for use with foreign and second language learners in school and university settings, and the content and wording of the items reflect that. For example, the BALLI includes the following two items: "It is important to practice in the language laboratory" and "You shouldn't say anything in the foreign language until you can say it correctly" (Horwitz, 1988). Clearly, the language laboratory is not part of most adult immigrants' reality when it comes to learning English, nor do most of them have the luxury of waiting until they can say something correctly before speaking. Different situations, beliefs, and issues may be salient for adult immigrants because of these learners' everyday experience with English (Norton, 2000).

*Language of administration.* The instruments described above have typically been administered in the learners' native language. However, this is not practical when conducting research with adult immigrants in community-based and adult education settings, because learners in these programs usually come from a large variety of linguistic backgrounds. Drago-Severson (2004) demonstrated that it is possible to use English for conducting research on complex issues with this population by reducing the linguistic complexity of interview or test items and providing support such as the use of bilingual dictionaries. This suggests that a measure of learner goals, beliefs, and affective variables could be written in English accessible to adult immigrants with limited English proficiency that would greatly facilitate data collection with this population.

## **Method**

The study was completed in two stages. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of adult immigrants enrolled in community- and workplace-based ESL programs (Dörnyei, 2003). The interview questions focused on the students' goals for and beliefs about learning ESL, their views of themselves as ESL learners, and their definitions of success in ESL learning. The interview transcripts were then examined for the range of beliefs these adults held about language learning and themselves as learners, as well as for the reasons they wanted to learn English and how they defined success in doing so. Based on the findings, a detailed questionnaire was developed, which was then administered to a larger sample. An initial item analysis was then conducted. Each stage of the research is described in detail below.

### *Initial Semi-Structured Interview*

Fourteen adult ESL learners (10 women and 4 men) from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds were recruited from two different ESL programs--a small community-based program and a large workplace program. Ages ranged from 18 to 57, with a mean age of 34.4 years. Length of residence in the United States ranged from 11 months to 16 years, with an average of 4.9 years. The participants were administered a semi-structured interview that explored their goals for and definitions of success in learning English, views of themselves as ESL learners and users, and beliefs about successful ESL learning. The interviews were conducted in English, with frequent verbal checks for comprehension, aids such as bilingual dictionaries available for students if they wished, and rephrasing of the questions if necessary (Drago-Severson, 2004). All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed.

### *Developing the Questionnaire*

There was considerable overlap between the participants' responses, suggesting that the interview questions may have tapped goals, attitudes, and experiences that are shared by many

adult immigrant ESL learners from diverse backgrounds. Based on the responses, a 68-item questionnaire was constructed. All the Likert-scale items were limited to 4 points (two positive and two negative) to ease the linguistic load for the respondents and to counteract the tendency of some respondents to choose the "neutral" category (Dörnyei, 2003). To make the questions easier to understand, "YES!" and "NO!" were used instead of "strongly agree" and "strongly disagree" respectively. "Yes" and "No" were used in place of "agree" and "disagree." Whenever possible, items were worded similarly to the actual responses to the interview questions (Dörnyei, 2003).

#### *Piloting the Questionnaire*

The questionnaire was administered to an ethnically and linguistically diverse sample of 37 adult ESL learners from several community-based and workplace ESL programs, including 11 of the 14 who had been interviewed. There were 19 women, 14 men, and 4 participants who did not indicate their gender. Ages ranged from 19 to 57, with a mean age of 34.9 years. Length of residence in the United States ranged from 1 to 16 years, with an average of 6.5 years. Those who had been interviewed during the first stage of the study ( $n = 11$ ) were slightly more educated (with an average of 13.8 years of education in the home country vs. 10.7 years for those who had not been interviewed,  $t = 2.10$ ,  $p = 0.04$ ), but the two groups did not differ in age and length of residence in the United States.

### **Results**

Based on an exploratory cluster analysis of the 17 items related to goals for learning ESL, 5 underlying goal composites were formed: Biculturalism (goals characteristic of someone who views immigration as an enriching opportunity but hopes to eventually return to his or her country of origin), Competence (goals related to feelings of high self-esteem and being able to form meaningful connections with people while at the same time being able to take care of one's needs independently), Practical Concerns (goals related to the demands of everyday life), Upward Mobility (items related to the ultimate goal of providing a better life and more opportunities for one's family), and Being Informed (items related to the goal of being able to acquire and understand information). The final versions of the composites are summarized in Table 1 (the item numbers correspond to those in the questionnaire).

The questionnaire also includes the English Confidence Scale and English Use Anxiety Scale (see Table 2). In the study sample, English Use Anxiety was positively correlated with the beliefs "I am too old to learn English," "Learning English is difficult for me," and, paradoxically, "Everyone can learn English well." It was negatively correlated with the amount of English used at home. English Confidence, on the other hand, was positively correlated with the amount of English used at home (but not at work) and the number of American friends. Neither anxiety nor confidence were correlated with age, length of residence in the United States, or the level of education in the country of origin. Half of the participants chose "going to school" as the most important factor in learning English successfully. While another 20% chose "speaking with Americans" as the most important factor, most participants reported relatively little English use at home and at work and few English-speaking friends.

### **Conclusion**

The list of learner goals used in the questionnaire was compiled inductively, based on the interview data rather than theory, but an interpretable structure of five goal dimensions emerged. The emergent structure of five goal composites (Biculturalism, Competence, Practical Concerns, Upward Mobility, and Being Informed) echoes Skilton-Sylvester and Carlo's (1998) qualitative categorization of adult immigrant ESL learners' goals that is comprised of Language (including

communication with native speakers); Relationships (including issues related to family and friends as well as independence); Economics and Education (including work demands, job advancement, and further education); and Programmatic Considerations (a goal dimension that was not part of the present analysis). More attention needs to be paid to the voices of adult learners themselves (Norton, 2000) when designing instructional programs and assessments for this population. For example, incoming students may be asked about their long-term goals as part of the intake process, and if many of them express an interest in returning to work in their field or earning a degree or certificate, topics such as resume writing, interview skills, and obtaining information from local colleges may be incorporated into the curriculum.

The relationships between social networks, patterns of language use, English use anxiety, Table 1 *Summary of the Goal Composites*

Item	Correlation with total	Cronbach Alpha <sup>a</sup> if item deleted
Biculturality		
10. To get a better job in my country	0.61	0.74
12. To make friends	0.62	0.69
14. To learn about American people and culture	0.66	0.66
Cronbach Alpha <sup>a</sup> for the 3 items = 0.77; Mean <sup>b</sup> (SD) = 3.18 (0.76)		
Competence		
9. To resolve problems outside of my home	0.56	0.78
13. To feel good about myself	0.61	0.72
12. To talk about my thoughts and feelings	0.74	0.57
Cronbach Alpha <sup>a</sup> for the 3 items = 0.78; Mean <sup>b</sup> (SD) = 3.73 (0.40)		
Practical Concerns		
1. To talk to people (street, bus, store)	0.40	0.71
3. To work in the profession I had in my country	0.46	0.71
4. To talk to people at work	0.57	0.65
16. To understand newspapers, the news, the radio	0.53	0.66
17. To talk to the doctor about medical topics	0.57	0.65
Cronbach Alpha <sup>a</sup> for the 5 items = 0.72; Mean <sup>b</sup> (SD) = 3.60 (0.50)		
Upward Mobility		
6. To get a better job in the United States	0.51	0.93
7. To help my children at school	0.84	0.58
8. To talk to my children's teachers	0.86	0.55
Cronbach Alpha <sup>a</sup> for the 3 items = 0.82; Mean <sup>b</sup> (SD) = 3.70 (0.65)		

Being Informed		
18. To know what is happening in the US/world	0.60	0.62
19. To understand the political situation in the US	0.58	0.63
20. To read books, magazines, Internet sites	0.53	0.71

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Cronbach Alpha<sup>a</sup> for the 3 items = 0.74; Mean<sup>b</sup> (SD) = 3.56 (0.46)

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<sup>a</sup> A measure of internal consistency reliability; should be 0.70 or higher for scales of 3-4 items (Dörnyei, 2003)

<sup>b</sup> The means are based on a 4-point scale: 4--Very important; 3--Important; 2--Not very important; 1-- Not important

Table 2 *Summary of the English Confidence and English Use Anxiety Composites*

Item	Correlation with total	Cronbach Alpha <sup>a</sup> if item deleted
English Confidence		
32. I am comfortable with my English.	0.58	0.68
34. I have a special ability to learn languages.	0.60	0.66
36. I am happy with my English.	0.58	0.68
Cronbach Alpha <sup>a</sup> for the 3 items = 0.76; Mean <sup>b</sup> (SD) = 2.61 (0.69)		
English Use Anxiety		
43. [I am] afraid that they <sup>c</sup> will be rude to me.	0.83	0.95
44. [I am] embarrassed because I make mistakes.	0.84	0.95
45. [I am] afraid that I will not understand them <sup>c</sup> .	0.82	0.95
46. [I am] afraid that they <sup>c</sup> will not understand me.	0.90	0.94
47. [I am] embarrassed because of my accent.	0.85	0.95
48. [I am] afraid that they <sup>c</sup> will laugh at me.	0.92	0.94
Cronbach Alpha <sup>a</sup> for the 6 items = 0.95; Mean <sup>b</sup> (SD) = 2.60 (0.88)		

<sup>a</sup> A measure of internal consistency reliability; should be 0.70 or higher for scales of 3-4 items (Dörnyei, 2003)

<sup>b</sup> The means are based on a 4-point scale: 4--YES!; 3--Yes; 2--No; 1--NO!

<sup>c</sup> Americans

and English confidence also need to be explored further. Of course, these correlations do not indicate causality. Do opportunities to speak English make people more confident in their ability to do so, or do people who are more confident seek out more opportunities? These questions are among those that need to be explored in future studies.

#### *Implications and Directions for Future Research*

Most studies of adult immigrants' experiences with learning English have been qualitative, relying on in-depth interviews and student diaries and thus necessarily limited to relatively small sample sizes (e.g. Skilton-Sylvester & Carlo, 1998; Norton, 2000). While these studies can generate valuable insights into the experiences of individual learners, a measure that would allow for large-scale data collection is needed. Such big-picture studies can be useful for program planning, comparisons between different groups of adult immigrant learners, and tailoring instruction to the needs of the populations served by particular programs. Are there

differences between learners who come from different countries that need to be addressed by the programs that serve them? Do learners with different levels of education have markedly different goals and thus would benefit from different curricula?

Discussions of student responses to the instrument can also be useful in teacher training contexts and for helping students understand how their beliefs, attitudes, and the ways they use English may affect their progress in learning English. For example, if students do not have many opportunities to use English meaningfully at work or with friends, it may be useful to have more class discussions of topics that are important to them or match them with American conversation partners (who may be volunteers or local college students). If students are anxious about speaking English, understanding the reasons for this anxiety may help them cope with it more effectively.

The most important potential contribution of this instrument to the field may lie in exploring the relationships among the factors it measures and whether they predict actual and perceived gains in English proficiency. For example, the present study did not reveal any relationships between the five goal dimensions and other variables such as patterns of language use, anxiety, or confidence. Is this because the sample size was too small? Is this because these goals are shared by most learners regardless of their other characteristics? Do these goals change over the course of ESL instruction, as the learners' proficiency increases? These and other questions need to be explored in order to deepen our understanding of how adult immigrants learn an L2 so that we can equip adult educators to better serve the needs of these learners.

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**The remainder of references are available upon request.**