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## **The Dual Language Question**

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By

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this interactive qualifying project was to research the current methods libraries have of facilitating non-native integration into American society. The scope of the research included several branches of the Providence Public Library. The field research included library visitations, librarian interviews, multiple observation sessions in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms, and several interviews of the people involved in ESL programs. The literature research uncovered the ability and preparedness of libraries to meet the demands of the non-native, as well as the basis for ESL classes and how they can function as a productive part of the library. The project is concluded with a breakdown of the positive and negative fundamental aspects of the systems and suggestions for applying the results.

## I. Introduction

Just prior to the turn of century, it became apparent that America was a land of hope for people from other countries who sought a better life for themselves. While immigrants to the United States at this time were predominantly English in language, the turn of the century brought with it a turn of races, and some inherent problems. A large percentage of the newer wave of immigrants spoke little or no English, and found it difficult to adapt to American social and legal atmospheres.

While this difficult transition was or, as the case may be, was not occurring, it was generally assumed that new residents would find their way to adapting, just as they found their way to America. It was, after all, a cultural transition, and many had done it before, albeit from non-English-speaking cultures.

The obstinate barriers that illiteracy in English presents are easily underestimated by those who are on the literate side of the fence. Our governments are such complex and relatively mysterious entities to those who could use its assistance, that we as a country have been historically and categorically inept at providing specific literacy aid to the non-native. The problem of transition therefore rests on some other entity's shoulders, by default.

It is important to note here that a transition into American culture should not necessarily include a forgoing of heritage. It is an American credo to continue to be the melting pot for the world, and to create an entirely "American" society is to recognize and accept the people and manners that we allow to cross over our borders. The ability to recognize some of the norms of American culture, particularly those based on the English language, is an entirely different matter, however.

The responsibility to aid non-natives in adapting to the United States has never been designated to any specific association or organization. There has, however, been precedence in such affairs.

In the latter part of the 19th century, librarianship was a relatively new occupation that served as an avenue for women who were seeking to establish themselves as capable of the most professional and socially redeemable responsibilities. As a result, they had, as one of their most valuable resources, a wealth of energy and desire. They became the group of professionals that America needed to curb the inevitable social strife.

Librarians sought to “Americanize” the new Americans by providing education with humanitarian goals in mind. Despite the fact that many of the librarians sought this profession specifically to reject the common belief that the only truly “professional” work for a woman was social work, librarianship resembled social work in both ideology and “settlement house” practice. While maintaining a staunch attitude toward the integration of immigrants into our society by providing translation sources, such as dual language dictionaries, and striving to gain material in the language of the immigrants, these librarians also sought to befriend the non-native, and make them feel as if they were accepted as a student is accepted by the ideal teacher, with unfailing support and guidance.

My goal, upon the undertaking of this project, was to observe the libraries of today to see if they were able and prepared to serve a similar role in today’s society. A number of questions framed my venture, and among them were:

- Are today’s libraries prepared to provide help as necessary for non-natives seeking to learn about our society and culture?



-What roles do the librarians see themselves as playing in the life of the non-native and how do they feel they are performing in these roles?

-What outside assistance is the library receiving in its attempts to assimilate the non-native with American norms?

The thrust of the research eventually became more focused as the last question was answered. Outside organizations did consider the library a catalyst for non-native assimilation, and utilized its resources accordingly.

To start, I made the decision to focus on the libraries with<sup>in</sup> Providence, Rhode Island. This decision was based on the realization that Providence has always been rich in cultural diversity, traditionally with Spanish and Portuguese and more recently with Southeast Asian. Observing the libraries' approach to such diversity would prove or disprove the adaptability of the library. After a discussion with some of the personnel who work within the main branch, I was able to determine which libraries existed within the predominant ethnic areas of the city.

The research then involved direct interviews with the head librarian within each library. This would reveal the most about the resources of the libraries themselves, and would lead me to the aforementioned outside organizations that I sought. If I was able to target a specific organization, the research would then turn to that organization's ideology, technique, and routines concerning the non-native individual. The librarian, as always, remained the key to the information I needed.

## II. Literature Review

One of the most useful books found that precisely examines the recurring historic role of librarians in a public library is Apostles of Culture: The Public Librarian and American Society, 1876-1920, by Dee Garrison. Although the dates covered are around the turn of the century, the book covers two particular areas that help to understand the librarian as related to the whole of society at any time in America. The era covered by the book includes a number of significant social, or antisocial, events, including the first World War and the early immigration wave after the turn of the century. This wide range of human affairs allows the basic principles defined by the research to be applied to other areas of history, including the present day.

An area of note is the relationship between the librarian and the sometimes more economically inferior patrons of the library. Apostles discusses the transition from the superior "You should be learning from me" attitude that was charity workers and librarians. This approach was often rejected by both natives and non-natives, as annoying and degrading:

Experience had taught both groups of workers that the old presumptions about mass needs were simply not true. Librarians had learned that the public would not read the "higher" literature, no matter how cleverly it was presented...The suffering of only a small percentage of the poor could be explained by laziness or impertinence alone. (Apostles, p 203)

By 1900, the terminology of "deserving" and "undeserving" poor had been all but abandoned by the Charity Organization movement.... By 1903, the general secretary of the New York Charity Organization Society could declare: "We may quite safely throw overboard, once and for all, the idea that the dependent poor are our moral inferiors..."(Apostles, p 204)

What eventually stemmed from this sort of social rejection was the "How can I help you?" attitude that librarians began to realize worked much more efficaciously. The understanding of the fragile relationship between librarian and patron evolved from this

awakening as time wore on, and became an important factor in the success of the programs found in the library today.

The strength of this new approach led to a new phenomenon known as the “settlement house” movement. What the settlement house movement entailed was a specific set of social workers who felt that it was their duty to overcome the social and economic problems of America by targeting some of the glaring deficiencies, one of the largest of which was illiteracy, but was also extended to racial and labor reform necessities. They were explicitly opposed to the slow attitude reform of charity workers and chose to appeal directly to the underprivileged:

Settlement house workers were more inclined to base their work upon the needs and desires of the poor, rather than to ask the poor to conform to a predetermined pattern of behavior. (Apostles, p 205)

Another contribution from the book is the attitude of the librarian to society in general. By the end of the period surveyed by the book (circa 1920), librarians had developed a sense of responsibility to assist the impoverished and less fortunate individuals in American society. While at the time this appeared to be more devoted towards women overcoming the rigid norms and expectations regarding women in society, the attitude was and should be easily shifted toward the people undergoing the integration process of learning the American culture. The title alone suggests that this should be one of the main priorities of the librarian, notwithstanding the time period.

While the historical aspects of the library and the transformation of the attitude of the librarian is practical in framing this research, the thrust of this project requires a great deal more contemporary perspective to answer the questions posed in my introduction.

In an article titled “Global is Local” from The Library Journal, Mary Somerville suggests that one of the biggest players in the non-native integration process should be

the public library (Library Journal, p 131). Most of the library's facilities are free, which is a vital key to the library's effectiveness when discussing poverty-stricken areas of major cities, which are often inhabited by recent immigrants. Because of the general goals of librarianship formulated at the turn of the century, librarians seek to obtain or find the source of information for their patron's questions. The library then becomes useful to both the native and the non-native seeking language and grammar assistance or cultural information. The library can also help second generation and long-removed immigrants to maintain their original cultures by providing information about their home countries.

The American Library Association's 1966 publication, "Rural Public Library Services to Disadvantaged Youth," contained some guidelines on the establishment of library policy to promote literacy and adaptation among young adults. The list of twenty-nine specific instructions to assist the library in its quest included the following:

Literacy classes should be set up and sponsored by the library. Young adults who enroll in these classes would in turn be able to teach other members of their families. (Library Service, p 377)

The basis for emphasis on literacy classes is not limited to non-natives, however. It is a nationwide issue, and has been a bullet on the national agenda for more than a decade. In 1989, Forrest P. Chisman wrote and published Jump Start: The Federal Role in Adult Literacy, an analysis of the country's need to address the issue of illiteracy. In it the author emphasizes several key points, one of them being that "20-30 million of (American) adults have serious problems with basic skills: they cannot read, write, calculate, solve problems, or communicate well enough to function effectively on the job or in their everyday lives." According to Robert Wedgeworth, a full one third of the U.S. population as of the year 2000 will be from some ethnic minority, many of whom will

undoubtedly contribute to the basic skills problem that Chisman mentions. Wedgeworth proceeds to expound upon the differences between past approaches to these minorities and the more modern approach:

“At an earlier time, libraries faced such populations with the principle objective of helping them become just like other Americans. Today we recognize how other cultures have enriched our society. The challenge becomes how can the library be an effective institution for acculturation while understanding and respecting the many different cultures that our users represent.” (“Global Perspective,” teleconference)

Another statement he makes is the following:

There is no way in which the United States can remain competitive in a global economy, maintain its standard of living, and shoulder the burden of the retirement of the baby boom generation unless we mount a forceful national effort to help adults upgrade their basic skills in the very near future. (Jump Start, p iii)

I do not know presently what Mr. Chisman’s sponsoring establishment, the Southport Institute for Policy Analysis, had at stake in forcing such powerful, sweeping gestures into their attempts to spur political and social action, but he wasn’t done there:

There are at least two dimensions of the literacy problem: the difficulties experienced by all of those with limited basic skills and the difficulties of the 3-4 million Americans with limited proficiency in English (the “ESL population”)—and our systems for serving the latter are far more refined. But unless we invest more to address the language problems of immigrants and of Hispanic-Americans, the nation is headed toward a major economic and social crisis, because these groups are the fastest-growing segments of our population and workforce. (Jump Start, p iv)

While Chisman outlines a plan to aid the ESL programs throughout our country to the tune of \$200 million in 1989 and \$300 million in 1992, he never truly expounds upon the receptors of this capital. During my research, I was able to uncover some of the ESL community, and found that it was primarily funded by Providence Housing, the Providence school system, the Smith Hill Center for Literacy, and the Providence Public Library. None of the members of the Family Literacy Program, the program on which most of my research is based, complained excessively about the lack of funding, as the libraries and librarians themselves did, so we would assume that the topic has been

addressed since then. The problem may not lie in the finances of the program, but within the proliferation of the programs themselves.

But, while literacy courses should be an essential element of library-community interaction, at the core of the problem is not necessarily the existence, or lack thereof as the case may be, of classes for the functionally illiterate. Some research, including my own queries of librarians, points to a cultural difference that actually inhibits the library's ability to perform its functions. Few societies other than America can maintain an institution such as the library that can be mutually beneficial to both young and old, rich and poor, native and non-native alike. The inevitable consequence of this is that many immigrants and their descendants do not understand the concept of a free library, and their illiteracy in English preempts any attempts to learn more about the institution.

Eleanor Frances Brown, in Library Service to The Disadvantaged, worded it thusly:

Libraries have been organized with the assumption that all their would-be patrons...can read and read well...can use catalogs, indexes, and other reference tools. The modern library with its thick carpets and impressive stacks of books might be inviting to those readers who are educated and more fortunate, but for the less privileged the are awe-inspiring symbols of an America to which they do not belong. (Library Service, p 394)

This feeling of not belonging is most likely a function of the difference in cultures between that of the non-native's homeland and that of America. During the 1997 teleconference "A Global Perspective: Challenges to Libraries," Lesley Williams, the Head of Information Services for the Evanston Public Library, expounded on the reason for this:

"The American public library is almost a vague institution. Many people who are coming into our libraries come from countries where access to libraries was primarily for the academic elite, or where you did not have the feeling that you had the right to go into a public library and ask any question that you wanted...They find it very intimidating."

And explained in a different way by the moderator to that conference, Robert Wedgeworth who believes that

"they often come from totalitarian countries where it is difficult to obtain information and the library was just another bureaucracy."

Sentiments which were echoed very similarly by the American Library Association's Social Responsibilities Roundtable Chicano Task Force in Library Service to the Spanish-Speaking:

(The reluctance) is not due to a lack of interest, but rather to a misunderstanding of how libraries function and mistrust and uneasiness about what to expect from them. (Changing Role, p 19)

The logical transgression of solving this issue brings us to the concept of librarian skills that would be useful in bringing the reluctant non-native into the library.

Perhaps one of the essential, yet overlooked, skills of the librarian is an understanding of, or at the very least a sensitivity for, the culture of the non-native patrons of the library. Arnulfo D. Trejo, writing for the American Library Association Bulletin in 1969, revealed a few of his suggestions about library service to those with language-based integration problems. Among those were:

Staff the centers with highly qualified librarians who should not only have skills to locate and impart information, but also know the language and culture of the people. (Library Service, p 394)

Whitney North Seymour, in The Changing Role of Public Libraries, is a bit more bold in his assessment of the need for bilingual librarians:

Clearly, sustained and effective service to Spanish-speaking populations in this country requires the existence of a body of Spanish-speaking, Spanish-heritage librarians.... When public library directors in localities with significant Spanish-speaking populations were asked...what suggestions they would make to improve library service to them, the overwhelming response to both questions was "a Spanish-speaking staff." (Role, p 21)

Regardless of the strength of conviction of its supporters, the distinct advantages of bilingual staff members cannot be denied. Robert Wedgeworth believes bringing members of the ethnic population into the library to assist is the best solution to most of the library's ethnic problems:

“It’s simply a matter of taking advantage of the people who are in the community and being able to diversify staffing. I think that the library support staffs are really the best avenue for being able to move quickly and effectively to deal with a whole range of problems that stem from cultural diversity.” (“Global Perspective”, teleconference)

Barriers to library usage are something which non-natives do not need; the inability to take advantage of a particular function of the librarian, to show the patron how to find the information he or she requires, could easily be the final and ultimate stumbling block.

In a 1997 satellite teleconference, “A Global Perspective—Challenges to Libraries,” Bill Erbes, the Assistant Director for the Bensenville Public Library, perhaps accentuated the usefulness of bilingual and culture sensitive librarians by revealing some of the differences of patrons of different ethnic backgrounds. He notes the:

“...different levels of expectation that different cultural groups have. Some groups expect a great deal more service than our reference desk is necessarily prepared to offer. We have some that perhaps have no expectations at all, and it becomes our job to perhaps educate them as to what we can do to help them. It would never occur to them to come to the public library reference department in response to some need that they have.”

Along the same lines is the book Reform and Reaction: The Big City Public Library in American Life, which treads further into the immigrant issues. Again, solid facts and breakdowns are given, but the book’s forward thinking (it was actually written in 1977) reveals facts about the English illiteracy of immigrants in America, thereby linking the two concepts on which much of the main argument of this research is hinged. It also gives a nod to the matter of book selection during the years surrounding the turn of the century, when immigration was at one of its highest rates in history.

Another book, titled Libraries and Librarianship in the West: A Brief History, serves to be useful in much the same way as Apostles, only to a much lesser degree. The book devotes itself to the entire history of the library, but the only truly useful section is a chapter titled “Social Change, the State, and Libraries.” This chapter also addresses the



necessities of the big city public library on a statistical level, by describing the trends in urbanization. A chapter titled "Libraries and Librarianship, 1890-1919" touches briefly on the issues of the non-native in American society and his access to the library.

The Changing Role of Public Libraries: Background Papers from the White House Conference, published in 1980 by Whitney North Seymour, Jr., is, although dated, a bit-more-up-to-date look at the modern society and its interaction with the public library. Three sections, one concerning the functionally illiterate, one concerning the Hispanic American, and the last concerning the Native American, all serve to provide insight into the library's priorities concerning these groups of individuals. These conclusions and analysis are useful in any research project concerning minorities and immigrants, because they are all directly addressed or inextricably attached to the issues in the main argument. In a remotely related chapter, the advancements in technology, again a little dated, are revealed, along with their direct effect on the usefulness of public libraries.

### III. Methods

The first part of the research involved delving into the Providence Public Library System and determining what, if anything, was being done specifically for the non-native individuals. After conversing with Louise Moulton, the literacy department coordinator at the main branch, I was able to determine four sections of Providence, serviced by separate libraries, that had distinctly different ethnic compositions. Smith Hill Library lies within a predominantly Hispanic section of Providence, its patrons having origins in Central America and Puerto Rico. Rochambeau Library finds itself servicing a large population of Russian Jews. And Knight Memorial exists within a community that has nearly equal proportions of African-Americans, Southeast Asians, and Hispanics.

Since Knight Memorial, having the most “melting-pot” appearance to its community, seemed the most promising, I decided to venture there first. Mrs. Moulton recommended the librarian there, Kathleen Vernon, as an excellent and knowledgeable source of information on interaction between the library and the non-native. I set up an interview and proceeded to the library.

The library was situated amidst an area that could be described as clean, but spattered with graffiti. The building looked old, perhaps 50 to 60 years so, but its gray and elaborate styling was unmistakably classic, despite the spray-painted gibberish that adorned its doors. The inside held much of the same nostalgia in its look, as accentuated by the well-worn black-and-white tiles and hardwood bookshelves and trimmings. The library was not unbecoming, but at the very least was not the most receptive atmosphere.

Upon meeting with Ms. Vernon, it became clear that my interview was perhaps not priority number one. She and her assistant moved stacks of books and periodicals

and rushed about as if preparing for something. That something, I would soon find out, was the afternoon rush of school students. She answered my questions, but in a disjointed fashion; she would often begin an explanation and break off during it to perform some task, only to finish the explanation five minutes later.

I began my questioning based on the list that I had composed ahead of time (see Appendix A). Ms. Vernon expounded on her answers with little prodding and with much enthusiasm.

One of the most important facts that Ms. Vernon revealed to me was that the largest percentage of non-native patrons to her library sought the assistance of English classes or something along those lines. That this does not go unrecognized is a duty of the librarian, and one that Ms. Vernon, along with many of the other librarians that I interviewed, realizes completely. She sets aside a portion of her budget every month to maintain the most useful books, such as skilled trade books, educational English books, and Spanish-English dictionaries. The latter, as a matter of fact, she finds herself replacing in quantities of up to twenty a month as a result of people simply keeping the books to themselves, which could be a statement as much about the non-native's perception of the library as much as anything. Why would a person steal a book from a free public library at the risk of never being able to use the libraries services again? Ms. Vernon believed that perhaps the adult patrons didn't understand the concept of a "free" library, as their former countries might never have had a similar institution. This is an important point that I would find later might actually just skim the surface of the matter.

Ms. Vernon believes that the promotion of the library for assimilation and learning of American culture is an area that deserves a great deal of attention. She noted

there are several Native Americans that attend her library that don't read English very well, and about one third of the adults that attend her library are Spanish speaking and wish to read both English-teaching literature and Spanish literature. This is an area which her budget (about \$2000 a month for literature, \$500 of which goes toward Spanish material) isn't increased or altered to reflect, despite the fact that the requests for such materials have increased tremendously during her two-year tenure there.

There is a significant indicator, however, that Ms. Vernon's employment here was the result of a recognition of the pressing demands of a library situated in an highly ethnically diverse community. First, Mrs. Moulton firmly believed and recommended her as the first and foremost source of information on library-community interaction, and spoke very highly of her abilities. Second, Ms. Vernon herself claimed that the Providence Public Library system places a significant amount of confidence<sup>in</sup> her to buy what she can afford and assist her patrons to the utmost of her ability. And, as she put it, "The Providence Public Library trusts all of the people they put in charge."

Despite this, Ms. Vernon noted that there is nonetheless a marked deficiency in the funding for her library. With an aged building, an ever-shifting demographic (that she claimed, and the advent of more expensive tools such as computers, her budget is stretched to extreme thinness. Her specific assessment was the necessity for "more money for everything."

Jackie Cooper faced a slightly different situation working for the Rochambeau branch of the system. Rochambeau's ethnic patrons are, for the most part, Russian Jews who have come to America, in essence, to escape social prosecution based on religious beliefs. They are, according to Ms. Cooper, generally well-educated and either skilled at

a trade or professional occupation, so their needs tend to be different. Often, they seek employment within the field that they have been educated or trained, and need manuals or dictionaries. Ms. Cooper also believed that they understand very well the functions of the library, as several of them have requested that she subscribe to several Russian newspapers, which she now does.

The higher educational level of the non-natives, as well as the understanding of the library function, makes Rochambeau the most effective in its approach. The patrons understand the library's function, and request materials that they need. They trust that those materials will be there when they return, so the library conserves budget space by not needing to replace items. They have a consistent, working relationship with the library.

The final library I attended was the Smith Hill library. Judanne Hamizada was the head librarian, and her role became similar to that of Kathleen Vernon. The library was old, decrepit, and its public acceptance generally hampered by its appearance. Mrs. Hamizada believed that, just as Ms. Vernon did, the building maintenance and Hispanic materials are the most to suffer for the small library budget. Mrs. Hamizada also estimated that about 40% of her accumulated patronage was of Spanish, Asian, or African-American origin, which presents its own budget problems. She opened a special fund for the small adult Spanish collection her library owns, but expected that a larger budget, with English assistance books as well, would increase her patronage. While she planned for magazine subscriptions and new literature, she also received significant book contributions from people, which seemed to be a common theme among the libraries.

Like Ms. Vernon, Mrs. Hamizada realized that the English translation dictionaries are the most popular books that she owns among non-natives. But her problems with non-native language material, such as professional books and even simply Hispanic or Asian books, is that she has no easily identifiable source from which to buy books. The most likely source, a New York book warehouse, and the shipping and demand-based cost alone forces her to limit her buying sprees.

There was one common thread throughout the several library excursions that I took. Each time that I queried on the topic of programs, be they internally or externally provided, to assist non-natives to learn the English language and/or American culture, the answer always began the same way. All three librarians noted that an outside group known as the Family Literacy Center utilized each library's resources to give courses in English and, ultimately, adaptation to American life.

The Family Literacy Center, or Family Writing Center, as it is also called, is a division of the Providence Public Library. While the program utilizes the facilities of each library, it is not restricted to the environment of the library. I chose to pursue the ESL courses further, and I found that the only sections of the library it actually uses are the computer areas and the children's reading sections.

This was, of course, the bridge between our culture and the non-native for which I had been looking.

Effectively, then, my goal had shifted. I had originally formulated the opinion that libraries would serve as the bridge between the non-native and American culture. That was not imminently the case, however. Libraries, in general, have very limited budgets, and the general perception of funding providers such as the government and

private organizations does not include the recognition of the ever-more-foreign face of inner city culture. Specific programs were required, programs that would seek definite funding and justify that funding with proven results.

What I found was English as a Second Language, or ESL, courses that would utilize some of the library resources and some other local resources to help teach English and general educational skills to adults and young children in order to assist them in understanding and adapting to our society. The research had come to its crux; I had discovered the organization whose soul purpose was to provide the non-native with opportunities to learn the language and the culture. It is important to note here that my objective was not to evaluate the performance of the ESL program or the library system.

Judanne Hamizada was the most helpful with information about the ESL programs, and she helped me to contact the instructors of the first class I would observe. She knew the instructors names and numbers, simply because she was required to open the library for the class when they were scheduled to utilize the library's computers. I chose, therefore to utilize this opening to begin my research on the ESL classes.

My research plan was to sit in on and observe several classes of this particular ESL group, and to take field notes on everything that I observed. If time allowed, which it eventually did, I would do the same for a second ESL group. After all of my field notes were taken, I coded them into six categories based on my opinions of their effects on the success of the course. The six categories included:

- 1. Student Interrelationships
- 2. Instructor-based Factors
- 3. Opinions Given by Instructors
- 4. Opinions Given by Students
- 5. Class Structure Points
- 6. Student-Class-Instructor Relationships

There is no particular order of importance to these categories; they were simply chosen as I commenced my coding of the notes. Each of the notes eventually fit into one of these categories, and sometime they fit into several. A few example pages of notes are shown in Appendix A.

Once the notes were coded, they were then chosen for their importance and relevance within the category. If there were several examples of events that could positively affect the outcome of the class, for example, students talking to each other during class, then it would be considered part of the positive attributes, and would be analyzed as such. The same analysis would be performed for negative aspects. The following “survey” sections are a formulation of all of the attributes into readable form. I also talked to the individual students when the opportunity arose and asked each of them some of their opinions and reflections on the course. The language barrier hindered my efforts slightly, but I was able to gather a few short answers that ultimately proved helpful to my research.



## **IV. Results**

### **Surveying the ESL Setting: Course Organization**

The ESL courses offered by the Providence Library System are unique and somewhat flexible in their function. They are held at several of the branches, seven in all, and are held at different times during the day. The ESL course that I first observed were based at the Smith Hill Public Library, and their courses were held Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, between the hours of 9:30 AM and 2:30 PM. Mondays, Fridays, and Wednesday afternoons were spent at a school facility known as the Tavares Learning Center, or, as renamed recently, the Chad Brown Center. Wednesday mornings were spent at the library itself, utilizing the computer technology and children's book collections found there. The second course that I observed operated under a very similar schedule, with the days of the week being different but the times roughly the same. Both operated during the term of the school system of Providence, observing the same holidays and beginning and ending school dates.

The course was designed with one extremely useful function that enables nearly everyone to attend if they desire to. An ESL course employs two teachers, one being for adults, and the other there to teach preschool children. In this particular case, the courses are held during the working day. This means that most parents who aren't working are, if applicable, taking care of their younger children. The courses allow the parent or parents to bring along their children and both child and parent can learn English in separate classrooms. They are united for lunch and end-of-day craft work routines, as well as for a portion of the computer class done at the library.

There are two reasons for not holding all of the classes within the library itself. First, the classes time period (as referenced above) does not fall within the normal operating hours of the library. Ms. Hamizada normally opens the library at 1 PM, but she does make an exception for Wednesdays, when the computer courses are held. Second, the library is not always a perfect classroom setting, if not merely for the potential interference of and with other patrons, but for the lack of props and tools needed to teach preschool children.

The second ESL class I observed was held at the Asa Messer School in Providence, which was very similar to the Chad Brown Center, save for the difference in the age of the facilities. Whereas the Chad Brown Center was obviously recently built or remodeled for its purpose as a schooling center for all ages, the Asa Messer School appears to have acted as a school for many years, and the age shows by the stained and darkened walls on the outside as well as the cracked plaster on the inside. The ESL course is in the basement of the school, and the children's class is held in essentially the same room, with a partial wall separating the two.

This second ESL course was attached to the Knight Memorial Library. The schedule was similar, two and a half days of work at the school, and a half a day of computer work at the library. It was also held during the day, although I was made aware that a similar program existed at Knight Memorial that operated at night.

### **Surveying the ESL Setting: Class Structure Points and Student Interaction**

There is a key class structure point that I believe was a strong factor in the success of the course, regardless of where it was based. The classes, although advertised as a literacy course, were also partly GED courses. That is, at the Chad Brown Center, for

most of Monday and Friday mornings the topic of discussion was from a GED course booklet, and it was not taught by the ESL instructor, although she was often present. On my first day in the classroom, the class was discussing Geometry. The instructor did not seem to know the students particularly well, as the ESL instructor did. He also was not concerned with the learning of English, as he taught much of the course in Spanish and did not bother to ask for pronunciations to the words. The ESL instructor would often help her students with the more difficult concepts. For about a half to a full hour prior to lunch, the ESL teacher would prepare the class for the afternoon discussion with a review of the last class' concepts.

Merging these two elements, the GED and ESL, gives the student two potential reasons to join the course. Those who are joining simply for the GED part will get the benefit of the ESL course and their children will learn some essential preschool concepts. Those who are joining for ESL education will be happy to know that they can obtain the equivalent of a high school degree at the same time.

The ESL class I observed was small, only of about 6 adults at the most at any given time (not all of the students would attend every day). Consequently, my task of observing the class' function was made a bit more difficult. In small classes such as this, any sort of outside observer can tend to make students more self-conscious, and less likely to act as they normally would. Elsa, the ESL adult teacher, and I agreed that I should be introduced to the class first so that the class would eventually adapt to and expect my presence during the course of the class.

While the GED courses had a specific test that determines knowledge at the end of the year, the ESL courses did not have a specific exam. Both adult teachers used

evaluations to judge the performance of the individual. This is inevitably a function of the type of course it is. Not a lot of students attend the courses, but there would be considerably less participation if the perception of the course was that a student might be given a failing grade no matter what effort he or she put into the course, simply because they didn't perform up to the standards of other students. The student is evaluated in terms of progress, and the recommendation is given by the teacher as to whether the course should be taken again or not.

There were five adult students (I hadn't seen the children yet) in class on the first day I visited. They were all Hispanic, as evidenced by their constant Spanish rapport with Elsa. While one of the students was obviously around twenty or perhaps younger, the other four appeared to be between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five. What I didn't know then, but would soon learn, was that they were on vastly different levels when it came to English. As a matter of fact, one student spoke nearly perfect English (she would come to say that her only purpose there was to take the GED course), while another seemed to have almost no familiarity with the language at all.

After I was introduced to the five members of the class, I took a seat in the back of the room. I noticed that, although the room was obviously a classroom (blackboard, whiteboard, teaching aids, etc.), there were no desks, only tables, chairs, and benches. I noted and would continue to realize the potential value of this, so as to create a more home-like atmosphere and promote more class participation, which was probably the key to student success in courses such as this. The size of the class also allowed a comradery that was evident by the conversation that transpired consistently both during, before, and after the class.

While the adults were learning, the children were in another classroom upstairs. They were also learning English, but from a much more simple perspective such as descriptive poetry and pictures. After the morning session, the parents met their children and head to the basement, where the school provided bagged lunches of sandwiches, chip, and fruit, as well as milk and soda. The lunches were complimentary, and often greatly appreciated by some of the parents; sometimes the food that was not finished would be kept and taken home. Lunch was short, but not without enjoyment, as all of the students talked and joked with each other, or laugh at the children's antics.

During the days on which the students utilized the library's computers, the adult and children separation was also part of the routine. The adults would utilize the computers to learn English words and sentence structure, but here the training was significantly different. First, the students often played computer games based on the English that they were learning. Although the games were sometimes child-like in their approach, the parents were hardly put off by that (another area that might not succeed with the traditional male), and often they found more complex games with which to learn. Secondly, with the wide range of computer programs and levels, the students were able to learn at a suitable pace and their learning was not hindered by the instructor paying more attention to one student and not another.

After the afternoon ESL courses, the adults headed to the children's classroom and the instructors and their assistants guided the adults, children and the parent-child teams (the latter is the most common) through an art session. The session was planned by the children's teacher, Kristen McKenna, and usually followed a theme based on an approaching holiday or special day (e.g., Easter, Earth Day, etc.). The parents and

children would converse, sometimes on what was learned that day, sometimes on the tasks at hand. This part of the session was not always a productive one, as one or two of the parents believed that either a) the session could be skipped, apparently because it lacked value, or b) the session should be rushed, apparently for the same reason. Whenever the latter occurred, it seemed to “cheapen” the experience for everyone, because the parent that would rush things would take the tasks such as cutting, gluing, and coloring, away from the child so as to get it done faster, which apparently pushed the other parents to prod their children, as well.

The fact that the classroom was all female intrigued me a bit, because the lack of male persona present may have made the classroom more amiable. A traditional male would potentially have brought a sort of competitiveness that might be detrimental if he were not able to accept the atmosphere of the classroom as friendly and mutually beneficial. It is difficult to speculate on such possibilities, given the range of human personality and interaction.

My observation mission at Asa Messer revealed a surprisingly similar program to that of Chad Brown. The class schedule was slightly different, of course, but the general construction was the same. The first class I observed included only three people, but the long weekend was believed to be the reason why some students did not show. The average attendance for this class was between four and five adults at a time. They, too, were all females, although there had been male students present in the past, according to the instructors.

## **Surveying the ESL Setting: Instructor Characteristics**

After talking with Ms. Hamizada, I was able to determine the instructors for the first ESL course that I was going to observe. The adult teacher and organizer, Elsa Vieira, was a little suspect at the motivations for my research, but I was able to meet with both her and the children's teacher, Kristen McKenna, and answer any and all questions they had, prior to my first observing session.

Elsa was a very proficient teacher in all respects. Even while the GED instructor was present, Elsa could take control of the classroom by simply speaking up. The students all respected Elsa, and with good reason. I would come to find that not only was Elsa very fluent in both Spanish and English, but she had also taught second, third, and fourth grades at another time and, judging from her classroom techniques, was very aware of how the learning mind works. She made eye contact with all her students, prodding for participation and involving each student. She was very loud and projecting with her teaching. She walked around the tables, pointing things out on books and directing questions to specific students, often waiting and pressuring the student to answer before moving on to something else. She often used the whiteboard to show word and sentence structure and diagram concepts. Elsa understands the different ability levels of her students and gives each one a little extra help as necessary, and conversely, doesn't ask as much from the more advanced students. Students in the class ask her questions in Spanish, but she responds in English in order to promote English usage. Through all of this, her confidence was evidenced by such comments as, "You know this, \_\_\_\_" and "\_\_\_\_, I know you can do this."

Peggy Boyer, the instructor for the Asa Messer Family Literacy course, was of a different mold, but nonetheless helpful as an instructor. Teaching was not her previous occupation, but she had majored in education in college. She did not speak a foreign language, although she learned quickly from what was heard during class. The inability to communicate expediently with her students was a drawback only partially made up for by her positive attitude and sense of a common goal. Like Elsa, she was very patient and encouraging, but she did not expect as much of her students, and as such did not "brow-beat" them as Elsa did. Peggy's respective children's teacher, Michelle Jordan, filled a role similar to Kristen's, but she did not have all of the teaching/learning supplies to which Kristen had access. Nonetheless, Michelle's upbeat attitude and strength of character made her a very good teacher, and she received nothing less than great praise from both Peggy and even Barbara.

Peggy helped each and every student understand the issues they were covering in order to move on, but, like Elsa, she recognized the abilities of her students and set them at different levels. One of her students was a girl who would be attending college in the fall, and was struggling to complete her GED requirements. Peggy made sure that the most of her lessons were focused on GED issues, even issuing her practice GED tests to prime her for her final. Peggy's students included a Hispanic woman, a Southeast Asian woman, and an African-American woman.

The computer parts of the course were not taught by Elsa or Peggy, but by a woman named Barbara Wierzbicki. Barbara was intimately familiar with the programs found on the computers and coordinated with the ESL instructors to guide the students toward the program that would best suit their levels of learning and their interests. She



did not, however, speak Spanish, a fact that meant that made Elsa extremely valuable helping out and she was always prepared to translate when necessary. Elsa's presence also allowed Barbara some aid when instructing about the computer programs. Peggy did not speak Spanish well (although she was learning), so Barbara's attempts to communicate with Peggy's students took a bit longer.

Barbara was the computer instructor for several other ESL programs, including the second course I observed, at Asa Messer. They were all sponsored by the Family Literacy Program, but each utilized the computer resources of a different library. Apparently, many of the computer areas of those programs were similar to these, but held at different times, allowing Barbara, who was an employee of the main branch of the Providence Public Library, the ability to cover all of the computer needs of the Family Literacy courses. Her role of being the computer instructor of the course involves little more than that; she does not see or hear from Elsa, or the other Family Literacy Course instructors, more than the once a week that she sees them.

## **V. Discussion and Interpretation of Research Results**

The Family Literacy courses have been positioned where their effectiveness is maximized. There are several factors that lead to this reasoning.

It would seem that the majority of the classes from library to library, or ESL course to ESL course, are held during the day. This is the most useful to the women hailing from traditional families, where the woman stays home to take care of the children and cooks a meal for the man. It is only an assumption, but there is obviously a lot of precedence that shows us that many Hispanic and African-American families with limited incomes operate in this fashion. The day classes end in the early afternoon, thereby allowing the adult students to go home to meet their spouse getting home from work, and meet their older children leaving school. The classes are supplied with lunches, which helps out with both the budget and saving time from heading home to eat.

The GED and ESL mixture of classes provides the potential students with some accreditation to their learning that they can immediately translate to occupational success. The GED is a prized possession, especially cases similar to that of the African-American girl who attended Asa Messer. She was studying for her GED in order to attend the Community College of Rhode Island (CCRI) that fall, something which she was visibly excited about each time Peggy Bauer mentioned it. It is plausible that this scenario would replicate indefinitely, given the respect education garners in this country.

The availability of young children's classes is also of significant importance to the students attending. First, the parents who attend the classes need someone to watch the children, and babysitters are expensive commodities for limited budgets, particularly if they are need three times a week. The children's classes are held in learning

environment, but it becomes obvious that the day-care approach is needed in some cases as well (each morning the children had a nap time, or “quiet time,” for example). Second, the classes teach the child students some of the basic English words they need to know prior to attending grade school or kindergarten, and it gives them a nurturing social atmosphere in which to spend the day.

The usefulness of the children’s classes may be evident, but it may not be enough. Four students in the Chad Brown ESL program were asked if they thought friends of theirs could benefit from this course, and two of them stated that they knew someone who wanted to pursue the course but could not because they had children that were too young and they could not find a baby-sitter for the times of the classes. It is a possibility that, given a strong enough response, a day care for the younger children could be set up. In both of the courses observed, the children’s instructors would not have been able to take on the day-care responsibilities of babies as well as their teaching jobs, so other people would have to be brought in for the duties.

Finally, this ESL program takes advantage of local institutions and provides some insight to them for those unaware of the resources. The purpose for this research was to find a group that utilizes the library and its apt resources to bridge the gap between our culture and the culture of the non-native, and this group has accomplished that. Because the ESL courses offer both classroom usage and computer usage, they are able to not only employ the best learning environments, but they also allow access to elements of learning that, usually for monetary reasons, might not be accessible to the non-native.

The relaxed atmosphere is a component of the ESL program that should not be neglected. It allows a working environment whereby the students can feel that they are

part of a group, rather than an individual student, alone in a place and curriculum that he or she doesn't really understand. While this course could be taught completely at the library, the relaxed atmosphere would almost certainly be sacrificed for the peace of the library setting; such a move might not be advisable unless the library is equipped with separate classrooms. Student interaction also allows for better learning, because the teacher is not necessarily required to answer every question students have if they can converse among themselves.

The programs also, in effect, require some special time spent between the parents and the children, a favorable aspect that aids the program in a more subtle way. While the afternoon artwork session may not be all that useful to the non-parent, except in terms of the watch-and-learn-for-future-use aspects, the parents and children get to spend some mutually beneficial quality time together. While observing, I did notice that in both monitored ESL programs, the parents appreciated the work of their children, and let them know about it. While we don't know if they all do the same at home, this type of atmosphere allows the parent to know, regardless of background, what meaningful time with their child or children feels like. This is not to say that the ESL programs should become parenting sessions, but simply that the social aspects of the program assist in parenting skills.

The ratio of ESL to GED to computer use is probably sufficient for nearly any such program. One half of one day is spent working on the computers, and it is a reasonable amount considering the fact that little communication is passed between students or between the teachers and the students during this time. Less communication usually means less is being learned, but the computers allow the student to understand

other methods of learning, and it allows them to become acclimated with modern technology, as well as simply add a little bit of enjoyment to learning. Roughly half of the remaining time is spent on GED work, with the other half being occupied by ESL work.

In short, the course is structured, both from within and from without, very soundly with the potential for some minor improvements.

The problems that may be immediately evident to those reading this are the attendance. If seven libraries held similar courses and similar turnouts were expected, no more than a hundred persons would achieve graduation from this course for an entire school year. While this is progress, it will not placate the problems caused by ever-shifting city demographics.

The courses offered by the Family Literacy Center are not as popular as they could be. When questioned concerning the issue, three of four students said that they heard about the class from their friends, and the fourth said that the flyer left (fig. 1) at her house was the first time she heard about it. All four claimed to have friends that might be able to use the course, but just didn't care to. One went so far as to say that she believed that it was a matter of pride: no one wants to be told how to live their lives.

What these perspectives reveal is a lack of understanding of the purpose or existence of the ESL course, and the library in general. This is something that was reflected in Brown's Library Service, and by both Wedgeworth and Williams in the teleconference, "Dancing with Change." If a non-native went into the library to seek assistance with English-based problems or occupational needs based on lack of understanding or education, the librarian would not hesitate to help the individual and



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10:30AM - 12:00Noon  
Comienzan January 12

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Figure 1: Front and Back of Flyer

direct him or her to these courses if necessary. This can be assumed to be true for any of the librarians that I interviewed, as they were all more than willing to take the time to aid their patrons. The non-native must make it into the library, though, and must understand for what the library exists.

One of the factors which might draw greater attraction to the program and definitely improves the level of learning found within the course is the ability of the instructor to speak the native tongue of the students. The banter between students and instructor in Elsa's classroom facilitated the communication of key learning points, and Peggy was not able to duplicate that effect in her own class. Elsa always relied on speaking English to her class normally, but there was little doubt the advantage of speaking Spanish when a difficult issue arose.

Elsa was as close to a quintessential instructor for this course as could be expected. Drawing on her experience as a teacher, she understood some of the basics of teaching: keeping the students interested, placing value on their improvement, requiring interaction from them, and continuing to keep them challenged. Peggy was able to keep her students occupied, but not being able to speak the right languages didn't allow her to keep in interesting. Whereas Elsa would joke occasionally with her students, in Spanish, Peggy could do little to alleviate the long breaks of silence that slowed things down and dulled the activity a bit. You could do no better than obtaining an instructor for such course who is equipped with Elsa's social skills and general likeability.

## **VI. Conclusion**

The lines of the battle against functional illiteracy within our country have been drawn long ago, and the realization that the non-native may not be keeping step with America socially and culturally and that it is potentially a by-product of this illiteracy is a

thing of the past. English as a Second Language, or ESL, programs have been established nationwide and have taken hold, particularly in urban areas where the concentrations of population of non-natives is considerably higher.

The need to extend these programs to a larger group is high, however. For example, in the first ESL program which I observed, there were only six members, at the most, present at any given point in time, yet the class was offered in an area which the librarian estimated the Hispanic population alone (of which all of the class members were) to be approximately 20% of the total population. Those numbers don't correlate well, but for that reason they do translate into one fact: ESL programs, and the library in general, are not accepted as particularly favorable methods of learning among non-natives and their families.

Seymour, Trejo, and Wedgeworth have all stated their opinions on the universally positive aspects of having librarians that can speak the language of their patrons. The same stress could be placed on an ESL instructor of the same ability, except that the results would be more concentrated, and therefore even more effective. A user friendly program can only promote the system among non-native communities.

If anyone can possibly shoulder the responsibility of public promoting the ESL programs that utilize the library, it would be the libraries themselves. They have access to the local community, and they know what methods have worked the best in the past. As of this report, the only methods of promoting, or "advertising," the classes outside of posting flyers within the libraries themselves, was the one-time distribution of flyers to houses in areas of high non-native population by hand of the Chad Brown instructors and assistants. This was not necessarily received well, as the instructors tell it, because some



people did not take kindly to the flyers being posted on their cars or in their mailboxes. With the proper budget, the library could send these flyers through the mail, as well as posting them in conspicuous places, taking out radio and television advertisements, and attending some major local events for the purpose of increasing local awareness of the ESL classes and the library functions.

One potential area of “advertisement” is within the primary school systems of the communities. Not only can the students deliver flyers to their parents concerning the ESL programs, but they can promote the library with their own exuberance. If the school were able to bring students to the library and allow them to obtain library cards and take out books, their natural desire to learn and their enthusiasm to explore the potential of the library would eventually make it home to the parents. Somerville believed that this was the usual mode of communication about the library (“Global is Local”, p 133). The hope is that the parents would bring their children to the library and learn a little about the library themselves, and they, too, could promote the resources of the library.

Both the activity and the public action of the library and the ESL programs is key to the elevation of these programs to the next level. It is no longer suitable that we simply have the programs in place. Significant progress must be made in the areas of increasing the approachability of both the library and the programs. Touting the future benefits and the present convenience of ESL programs is pivotal, as the returns of acculturation are simply not enough to overcome the aversion to patronizing the library present among the non-native population. Our affinity with the notion of “Build a better mousetrap and the world will beat a path” must give way to the realization that we, as a society, have not made the advantages of taking on certain “American” qualities seem

attractive enough. As we have learned from Wedgeworth, however, the advantages don't belong simply to the non-native, but to all of us as a unified nation.

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**Appendix A: Sample Field Notes**

- ⑥ Student #1 very outspoken
- ⑤ Morning is all math with a little ESL review
- ③ Compliments (multi bica) on good answers
- ② Instructor constantly asking questions, to keep class interactive.
- ⑥ Student #4 - no response - just observes
- ② Elsa observes class as well
- Difficult concept - parallel lines?
- ③ Instructor - does not proceed to next step without probing for answer first
- ⑤ Students have booklets for math - don't know anything about booklets, paper book
- ② Instructor gives page number, asks for answers based on book examples - for <sup>with</sup> ~~to~~ solidify lesson ~~with~~ books
- ③ Instructor again probes student #3 - particularly delicate - seems apathetic - maybe a bit put off by direct consultation, but instructor needs to know she is able to keep along with him

- ② Patricia Sharpener - spoken in Spanish but Elsa responds in English - to promote English usage
- ② Instructor - very patient and talkative  
takes time after class to talk to students
- ⑤ book is GED en español
- ③ Elsa - everything in English - almost - "best class in the world"
- ⑤ comes in to review
- ⑥ April 7 - spelled by #1
- ⑤ Reviewing tenses of do, does, asking students to complete written sentences  
Lisandra #1, Sophie #3, Cassandra #2, Maria #4
- ② Elsa - not as talkative, but complimentary of all responses
- ② Elsa - on humorous terms with class members
- ⑤ "to do"
- ② Elsa uses notebooks and written language to promote English usage  
also tests review and learning from last week
- ④ #2 appears to know most of lessons, so - Elsa does not direct a lot of questions to her

① Elsa - checks every body's books - to see if they have learned well

② verb to live

③ Elsa - same exercise, give each person and ask for completion with verb compliments every person on right answers then, if they get rocky (#) she says "Let's see if you know it in a sentence" hands out "test" to see if they understand actual usage of

④ Children's classroom - very busy

⑤ Elsa - also conversant with students, but tries to teach in English, but response from students usually in Spanish

⑥ Asks for pronouns for "my brother and I" etc

⑦ Gives answers to Maria for #2's paper so she can copy

"You know this, Sophie"

⑧ #1 put off by difficulty of subject - much more accepting to math.

⑨ - breaks for lunch - after lunch - workbook.

① Age difference between #1 & #2 and #3 & #4

② #3 cares little about other things they are interested in.

③ No one in hurry to leave classroom

After lunch session - ESL

④ Elsa List of words on board she asks everyone to write in notebooks and put checks next to ~~own~~ words each doesn't know

⑤ Students talk between each other very readily.

Elsa - asks #3, if she knows the word - asks for Spanish equivalent - goes through list giving "rights" for correct answers, giving context for wrong answers - constant interaction

⑥ Student #1 telling jokes about bowling, some directed at I could understand

⑦ - more vocabulary - nationalities

⑧ - every one has input, including quiet #4 nationalities are liked by students