Factors Affecting Attendance Patterns For Hispanic Participants In Adult ESL Education

Steven Carter

When formulating a plan to address attendance issues for Hispanic students in adult ESL education, consider the following important points:

1) Adults are distinct from younger groups in their approach to education.
   a) See Quotations from Knowles (1984) about Adult Characteristics and Their Approach to Education
   b) Lindeman observed that adults are not oriented toward studying “‘subjects’ in the hope that some day [the] information will be useful….Facts and information from the differentiated spheres of knowledge are used, not for the purpose of accumulation, but because of need in solving problems” (Gessner, 1956, p. 160).
   c) Competing Demands for Adults’ Time:
      i) Adults must perceive a clear connection between the achievement of their long-term goals and their day-to-day classroom instruction. Genuine commitment is fostered by a sense that progress is being made and goals are being met (Tracy-Mumford & Baker, 1994, p. 11).
      ii) Cost-Benefit Theory. In order to adequately describe how adults determine the value of potential educational experiences, several scholars have referenced the “cost-benefit theory of private industry” (Noel, 1985, p. 9; Tinto, 1975; Tracy-Mumford & Baker, 1994), which essentially states that individuals direct their energies toward activities that are likely to yield the biggest ‘bang for their buck’ (Tinto, 1975, pp. 97–98). “As consumers of service, [adult learners particularly] directly or indirectly assess the cost-benefit ratio of their program participation every time they attend or do not attend classes…” (Tracy-Mumford & Baker, 1994, p. 8).

2) Address affective factors. Both the quantitative and qualitative results from our research indicated that affective factors are critical to address, especially for the Hispanic population.
   a) There is an “element of tension” that is often present during students’ first experiences in the language classroom:
      People typically experience unpleasant feelings of anxiety, uncertainty and a lack of confidence (McCollom, 1990b)….They are uncertain about what membership in the group will involve, and whether they will be able to cope with the tasks. They observe each other and the leader suspiciously, trying to find their place in the new hierarchy. They are typically on guard, carefully monitoring their behaviour to avoid any embarrassing lapses of social poise. (Dörnyei & Malderez, 1997, p. 68)
   b) Build Unity and Community in the Classroom:
      i) Dörnyei & Malderez (1997) suggested the importance of class participants (including the teacher) “learning about each other as much as possible,” indicating that, “acceptance simply does not occur without knowing [other people] well enough,” (Dörnyei & Malderez, 1997, p. 69). They also suggest the importance of establishing group norms.
      ii) Beder and Medina (2001) shared several ways that teachers can create and maintain a nurturing and trusting atmosphere: teachers should (1) be “liberal in their use of praise;” (2) “[level] the social distance between [themselves] and learners” by sharing information and having students do the same; and (3) attempt “to reduce the perception that they [are] authority figures, to be perceived as being with the class rather than over the class” (pp. 82–83).
3) Feedback, Feedback, Feedback!!!
   a) Make Progress Transparent:
      i) Attempting to detect progress in your language learning simply by monitoring your own
         language could be compared to staring at a plant, hoping to see it grow. Making progress
         transparent for students is incredibly important because otherwise they may simply be
         unaware of their gains. Formative assessment is an excellent tool for helping both teachers
         and students be aware of progress.
      ii) Hartshorn et al. (2010) suggested that the benefits of formative feedback have been
          consistently demonstrated by meta-analyses in a variety of disciplines (p. 85). They argued
          the need for feedback that is “meaningful, timely, constant, and manageable” (p. 87).
   b) Are your tests effective? Do they have face-validity?
      i) Whether or not students are able to discern their progress is largely dependent on their being
         made aware of it through the mechanisms of assessment and feedback. Thus, the factors
         related to assessment have a direct influence on students’ perceptions of themselves (their
         achievement and ability to achieve), which in turn have an influence on student affective
         factors. Harmer (2007) affirms that, “part of a teacher’s job is to make sure that students
         recognize their achievements, however small those achievements actually are” (p. 154). Brod
         (1995) adds, “Programs need to provide regular feedback on progress so that the learner
         continues to perceive goal attainment as possible” (p. 4). The fundamental question becomes:
         If programs and teachers do not help students recognize their progress through feedback and
         assessment, then who will?

4) Other Issues
   a) Teacher Practices in general - Many students want grammar instruction and error correction.
      Teachers should find out what students want and evaluate their own methodologies to see if they
      are indeed complete and reflective of students’ desires.
   b) Students’ Sense of Investment - Look for ways to help students cultivate a sense of investment in
      their studies.
   c) Regular Teacher Training - There is often a need for more TESOL-specific training in
      community adult ESL education programs.
   d) Adequacy of Teachers’ Preparation Time - In order to teach well, teachers need much more than
      a book. A book does not function as a curriculum or a syllabus. Teachers need adequate time to
      prepare meaningful lessons that rely on multiple resources (including the text book).

References

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