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Language learning for integration and inclusion

Understanding the needs of adult learners
from immigrant backgrounds in the US

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Research findings on adult migrants learning English for integration

Migrant adult learners face unique challenges when it comes to English language learning, yet mastering the language is essential for their integration, employment and access to vital services.

Ventures is a Cambridge English language proficiency course, developed specifically for adult learners in the US, many of whom come from migrant and vulnerable backgrounds. The course focuses on equipping adult learners with “survival English” skills to help them navigate their daily lives – from communicating with healthcare providers and educators to securing stable jobs and participating in civic life.

Key Findings

10 million+ students have learned English with Ventures since the series was first published in 2007

Last academic year, there were **745,936** students enrolled in ESOL programs across the US

More than **5,000** ESOL students per year are enrolled at El Monte, with 65 ESL classes offered each day in the afternoon and evening

1,400 ESOL students attend FSCJ every semester, with **50** ESL classes offered in the mornings and afternoons

Our evaluation

In January 2025, we completed an impact evaluation study of the adult ESL programmes, delivered using Ventures, in two community colleges: El Monte-Rosemead Adult School in California (El Monte) and Florida State College at Jacksonville (FSCJ).

Data was collected through 318 questionnaire responses, seven classroom observations, six focus groups, and seven interviews with teachers and course leaders. The participants from both colleges represented a wide variety of backgrounds, first languages, literacy and language proficiency, and ages, ranging from 17 to 82 years old. Most students come primarily

from Latin America and the Caribbean, followed by China, Vietnam and the Middle East. In terms of education, students range from PhD holders to those with incomplete primary education, all learning English together in the same settings.

Our findings

Our findings highlight that, despite significant differences between learners, all groups share a strong desire to improve their English skills. For example, respondents frequently cited everyday communication (19%), social integration (16%), improved confidence (14%), and employment-related goals (13%) as key motivations, along with supporting their families’ language needs (13%).

Importantly, the study draws out the challenges faced by many adult learners, including limited study time, limited technology access and digital literacy, financial constraints and the emotional toll of migration. The most frequently reported barriers were competing responsibilities such as work and childcare (37%), low confidence (10%), health problems (8%), travel to college (8%), and feeling nervous about returning to the classroom as an adult (8%). Smaller but notable proportions also highlighted difficulties with digital access, or adjusting to new ways of learning.

“When there are so many problems on your mind about... everything: documents, college, everything. It’s hard to study.”

Student. Ukraine

Our evaluation also incorporates the teachers’ perspective. The findings show that teaching can be demanding in classrooms where students range in age from 18 to over 80. Although they are generally motivated learners, our interview and classroom observation data show that some have low literacy in their native language and may be unable to read or write in a first language, which makes teaching a second language extremely challenging.

“Out of those 60 students that I teach, maybe five are true literacy students in the sense of they have never been to school at all. Or they can't even write in their own language. So, it's been a bit of a challenge trying to teach them a new language and write in a new language when they can't even write in their own language.”

Teacher

The study found that the Ventures course was widely valued by both teachers and students for its integration of listening and reading skills, practical language use, and relevance to “survival English”, as evidenced in interviews with teachers.

“I rely heavily on the supplemental work, using Ventures as a guide. I wish you could see my teacher's book. It's heavily noted on and how I break down the units. It's my 'bible'.”

Teacher

However, our classroom observations and school visits revealed some difficulties related to implementation, showing some instances of disconnection between the communicative approach included in the Ventures course and actual classroom practice. During focus groups, several students expressed the view that their lessons were overly focused on grammar, which limited opportunities for engaging, communicative activities.

“We need grammar, but we also need more speaking practice, more practice communicating.”

Student, Haiti

Nonetheless, the evaluation highlights the profound impact that English language learning can have, with teachers noting the impressive and life-changing improvements – in skills and confidence – that were seen in many students from diverse backgrounds and of all ages.



ESOL class at FSCJ community college.

“We're at the end of November, and what they can do from that first day to right now – it's incredible!”

Teacher

Our impact

Overall, the data emphasises the need for a holistic approach to adult English language education that addresses academic challenges and is more responsive to students' needs.

This feedback from learners and educators is informing the subsequent editions of the Ventures course to better meet adult student needs and create more effective, engaging learning environments. As a result of the findings identified through our evaluation, the Cambridge team in the US are now promoting best practices in English language teaching for this varied demographic, calling for a better alignment between the curriculum, learning materials, assessment and students' needs.

Reference

This summary is based on the following study carried out by the Impact Evaluation team at Cambridge English:

Séguis, B., Miu, H., & Goldstone, R. (2025). English in Displacement: Language Learning and Test Preparation Experiences of Refugees and Asylum Seekers. *TESOL Quarterly*, 59(3), 1316-1355. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.3356>

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