

# Student Persistence in the Adult ESOL Classroom



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Adult education ESOL instructors are all too familiar with the ongoing ebb and flow of students who pass through their classroom. With attrition rates near 70% in many programs, an “examination of the process learners go through in deciding to stay or leave a program and the many factors that influence them” (Garner, as quoted in Belzer 1998) is at the core of much research and discussion on the topic of *student persistence*. This article offers some strategies that programs can implement to address the persistence of their students. But, first we will define student persistence.

## What Is Student Persistence?

The definition of student persistence is not a synonym for “retention.” Retention speaks specifically to the time a student is attending class. Once that student is no longer attending class, he or she is traditionally defined as having “dropped out.”

Student persistence, on the other hand, suggests that students have many forces working both for and against them. The same family, friends, job, childcare, and health issues that support students attending class can, in a flash, become the very things that keep them from coming to school. These “positive” and “negative” forces are defined as being outside of the control of the students.

When negative forces work against students, they may be forced to “stop out” from classroom

instruction while continuing with self-directed instruction at home. When positive forces work in their favor, they are able to return to the program and attend class regularly. Therefore, “persistent” students manage their language learning through self-directed study away from the ESL program when they must “stop out” and by returning to class when they are able.

The challenge facing educators with respect to this new perspective on student persistence is to find ways to:

- help students identify the negative forces that make it difficult for them to attend class;
- provide students with strategies to deal with those negative forces so that they can stay in school as long as possible;
- provide students with materials they can use for self-study during a stopping out period; and
- provide students with the impetus to return to the program as quickly as possible once the negative forces have diminished.

## What Can Programs Do?

### Program Orientation

Programs that provide students with an orientation to the campus and to the educational offerings report higher levels of student persistence. Many students are not aware of the opportunities that are available to them as they progress up the ESL levels. Students should know what is expected of them in order to advance

successfully through the different ESL levels, and they should know how to matriculate into ABE, GED, High School Subjects, ROP and other certificate programs, and, eventually, into the community college and beyond. Orientation can be provided: (1) at the time of registration; (2) at orientation meetings offered on a weekly or bi-monthly basis; and/or (3) in the classroom (teachers should be trained on strategies to integrate orientation and matriculation information into their teaching, including lesson plans).

### **Certificates**

Students are motivated by certificates that acknowledge their accomplishments. Attendance certificates can be awarded weekly and/or monthly in the classroom, with a more “official” certificate at semester’s term. Certificates that recognize completion of one level of ESL and advancement into another provide students with tangible evidence that they *are* progressing.

### **Professional Development**

The importance of professional development cannot be understated. Keeping teachers abreast of new research and knowledge in the teaching of language acquisition, as well as providing training on the needs of students particular to the community the program serves, is a commitment toward excellence. To ensure the professional development needs of the teachers are being met, survey the teachers and then implement training that specifically addresses their needs. For example, multilevel instruction, student persistence, classroom management, publisher training on using the program’s core texts, retention, standardized testing preparation, assessment, games, cooperative learning, basic phrases in the languages of the students, and the like.

### **Identify Mentor Teachers**

Research on the benefits of mentoring by the National Education Association has shown that pairing a seasoned instructor with a novice instructor to provide support and guidance during the first semesters of teaching benefits both participants. While novice instructors

receive valuable information on lesson planning, classroom instruction, and the general ins-and-outs of the program, mentors have the opportunity to reflect on their own instruction and methodologies, leading to an improvement of their own teaching practices.

## **What Can Teachers Do?**

### **Create a Safe Learning Environment**

ESL students represent a wide range of ages, educational backgrounds, personalities, goals, and levels of motivation. In his Affective Filter Hypothesis, Dr. Stephen Krashen suggests that a student’s ability to acquire a second language is directly related to variables such as positive or negative classroom experiences, nervousness, anxiety, and sense of self-esteem. A “low” affective filter is associated with an environment in which a student feels safe, relaxed, and is willing to take risks with language learning.

There are myriad ways teachers can create a safe learning environment and thereby lower the affective filter of their students. Memorizing the names of all of your students within the first week of instruction reduces anxiety and increases self-esteem. Learning a few key phrases in the languages of the students is a fun way to model for students that it is acceptable to struggle with pronunciation and language learning. Students are eager to share their languages, and everyone has a good laugh when teachers mispronounce the vocabulary they are learning.

A powerful tool for lowering the affective filter of the students is to set up a buddy system. During the first week of class, have students buddy with someone who speaks their first language and exchange phone numbers so that they can contact each other. The buddy system has several benefits. First, it immediately connects students to at least one other person in the classroom. This connection may help to motivate them to keep coming to class, even when negative forces are working against them. Second, buddies can keep each other apprised of missed lessons. Third, buddies can keep in contact with each other during the “stopping out” periods, which encourages absent students to return when they can.

## **Build a Strong Classroom Community**

In addition to providing students with a safe learning environment, teachers need to facilitate the building of a strong classroom community. Using pair work, small group, and whole class activities from the first day of class helps the students get acquainted. However, once the semester is in full swing, it is not uncommon for students to have found a comfortable niche that they seldom leave. One activity I found helpful was “Crazy Wednesday.” Every Wednesday, students had to sit somewhere different from their “regular” seat, and they had to sit with at least one person who did not speak their first language. Providing ongoing opportunities for students to make new connections promotes and strengthens the classroom community, promoting both academic success and reinforcing the social and emotional connections which improve student persistence.

Providing students an opportunity to share their cultures also helps to build a strong classroom community. Students are passionate about their cultures and the countries they have emigrated from, and it is moving and powerful to watch them share their passion with their classmates.

## **Have Students Identify and Establish Short-term and Long-term Educational Goals**

The research gleaned on student persistence from study circles around the country shows clearly that students who have set *specific* goals for their English learning are more persistent than students who have a general goal of “I want to learn English.” It is important that teachers teach lessons on goal setting, even with the lowest-level learners, and to provide the students with examples of short-term and long-term goals that are specific, measurable, and achievable.

In addition to setting goals, encourage students to set their bars high. Many students think only of getting and keeping the most menial entry-level positions. Instead, encourage them to think about working their way up to manager or even owner of their own business.

## **Allow Students to Purchase Their Textbooks**

Central to the mission statement of the majority of educational institutions is the objective of preparing students for lifelong learning. How can a student be successful in this endeavor if they cannot purchase a textbook? Students who purchase their textbooks are empowered because:

- they have made a monetary investment in their futures
- they have learned to prioritize and value learning and education
- they can serve as a role model to their children
- they can continue to use their textbooks for self-study should they be forced to “stop out” for a period of time

Tell students about the importance of being able to complete the activities in their own text, and of being able to review their work later at home or on a break at work.

A program in Southern California recently switched from class sets to student-purchased books. Now retention rates in their levels 1 and 2 classes are the best they have ever been.

## **Got Persistence?**

Once programs and teachers have an understanding of what improves student persistence, they can see how implementing a few simple strategies can have far-reaching, positive effects on their student population. At Pearson Longman, we are dedicated to supporting the classroom teacher. Check our *Got Persistence?* link every other week for new persistence strategies, along with lesson plans and handouts that can be downloaded and brought to class that very day.

Some of you are already using persistence strategies in your programs and classrooms. We would love to hear about them! Your ideas could end up on our *Got Persistence?* website! Write to me at [melinda.roberts@pearsoned.com](mailto:melinda.roberts@pearsoned.com). Or send your strategies and lesson plans to Melinda Roberts, Pearson Longman, 10 Bank Street, White Plains, NY 10606

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