EDUCATIONAL AND CAREER NAVIGATION EXPERIENCES OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER ADULTS IN SILICON VALLEY: FINDINGS FROM FOCUSED INTERVIEWS

Produced for the Silicon Valley Alliance for Language Learners’ Integration, Education, and Success (SV ALLIES) by:

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Executive Summary

To inform the development of the Silicon Valley ALLIES, twenty-five adult English Learner students in San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties were interviewed about their career goals, employment trajectory, and experience navigating between English and vocational or college classes. These qualitative interviews were intended to gain a better understanding of the needs, successes, barriers and challenges experienced by English Learners attempting to improve their English ability and their career prospects. Key findings include:

Navigation of Classes and Services

- Most students initially located classes through their social networks, such as family, friends or compatriots; a number also looked online, and a few were made aware of classes through flyers or when visiting social service providers, or through their union.
- Proximity, affordability and familiarity were the primary criteria students used to select a class. Students generally did not report “comparison shopping” for classes prior to enrollment.
- In addition to learning English or vocational skills, many students reported emergent outcomes from their participation in classes: these included gains in social support and expanded social and professional networks, and a wider understanding of available educational and career opportunities.

Workforce Experience and Pathways

- Students also relied heavily on social networks to locate employment. Most of those who found jobs knew a family member, compatriot, friend or fellow student in the same field.
- Most students had aspirations for career advancement: either to move up in their current job or field, or to transition to a new career.
- Although career advancement was a primary educational goal for most of the students, only a few had a clearly defined idea of how they would parlay their improved skills into a new job or a promotion.
- Those students with bachelor’s or advanced degrees had difficulty obtaining work in their professional fields; most were either in much lower-skilled employment or were not working.

Assets of English Language Learners

- Almost all of the students had strong social networks which helped them to locate classes and jobs and aided them in overcoming barriers.
- The students exhibited a high degree of motivation and determination to pursue their career and personal/family goals.

Barriers to Accessing Classes or Employment

- Barriers experienced or anticipated included: cost of classes; location or transportation access; scheduling conflicts with work or family responsibilities, particularly childcare; eligibility restrictions for specific classes or programs; and intimidation or fear of being stigmatized for not speaking English fluently.
- Specific barriers, such as cost and transportation, were often restricting factors in determining in which classes students chose to enroll.
- Other than English ability and educational level, the predominant barrier to employment or career advancement was lack of clear information on how to move up in, or into, a certain career or occupation.
Introduction

The Silicon Valley Alliance for Language Learners’ Integration, Education, and Success (SV ALLIES) initiative was launched in September 2013 through a Workforce Innovation Fund grant awarded to the County of San Mateo by the Department of Labor. SV ALLIES is a partnership dedicated to supporting English learner adults to attain and succeed in family-sustaining careers through collective impact and collaborative systems change.

In May 2014, SV ALLIES launched the Community Asset Referral System (CARS) project. The intent of CARS is to understand challenges and develop strategies to increase the potential for information sharing, relationships, and coordination among service providers, in order to support English language learner adults to more effectively access existing education, training, and support services. Working Partnerships USA has been engaged as a consultant to SV ALLIES to produce five research products designed to inform these goals, including:

1. An asset map of existing education, training, and related programs and services, as well as provider-specific data;
2. Identification of industries and occupations of opportunity;
3. Career pathways analysis;
4. Demographic analysis; and
5. English Language Learner interviews.

This report concerns the English Language Learner Interviews, which were a series of qualitative interviews conducted with English language learner adults currently in classes at a variety of educational, community-based, and non-profit training organizations in San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties. From these interviews, we wanted to understand the students’ experiences in two main areas: identifying, locating, and accessing the classes and/or services needed to achieve their career and/or language goals; and the career trajectories they have been on so far, including their career goals.

Career Navigation

One common theme emerging from the interviews was a need for more information and resources to aid in career navigation. Excerpts from three interviewees highlight some of the challenges:

“Everything is very strange for me, I don’t know how to do it, which one is the next step, so I can stand on this step, and I’m looking for the last step, and…sometimes I’m very confused about my future.”

“As a janitor there are three higher positions that I would like to apply to...but I have no information on what I need to do to get there.”

“I want to know if there is some local service or platform that can assist new immigrants like me to search for information and resources we need.”
Methodology

The objectives for the English Language Learner interviews were developed based on input from SVALLIES partners provided at four provider focus group meetings, as well as by the Steering Committee and the project director. The primary goal identified was to increase understanding of how English Language Learners (ELLs) locate and navigate across multiple classes and services, and how they locate and navigate employment and career opportunities.

Informed by this goal, we created a qualitative interview process that would facilitate gathering ELL narratives of their education, training, and career trajectories, as well as identifying barriers or unmet needs. We then tested the interview protocol to refine the lines of questions and to identify points of clarification for volunteer interviewers (see Appendices A and B for copies of the English Language Learner Interview Questions and English Language Learner Interview Protocol & Guidelines documents).

To identify interview participants, we reached out to SV ALLIES partner organizations who serve ELLs to recommend potential interviewees. As a result, a total of eleven agencies—Community Colleges, Adult Schools, Community-Based Organizations, and Non-Profit Training Providers—participated in this piece of the project, coordinating interview appointments with twenty-five total students: fifteen from San Mateo County agencies, and ten from Santa Clara County agencies. Students who participated in an interview received an incentive of a $35.00 Safeway gift card for their time.

In most cases, the interviewer traveled to each agency to meet with students, usually during or around their class times. Each interviewee granted their permission for us to record the interviews, which were then translated or transcribed (see Appendix C for copies of interview transcriptions and translations). All interview documentation has been anonymized, with identifying information eliminated from the final report, transcription, and translation. The interviews took place over roughly thirty minutes, depending on the student’s class, service, or work history.

The majority of subjects preferred to be interviewed in English, often as an opportunity to practice their English skills. Sixteen interviews were thus conducted in English, and nine were conducted in-language in Mandarin, Spanish, or Vietnamese. The in-language interviewers were either permanent or contract staff of Working Partnerships USA, and each interviewer was trained on the interview questions and protocol prior to conducting any interviews.

There were three main areas of questions in each interview: background and demographic information; classes and/or services; and workforce experience and pathways. We collected background and demographic information to get a better understanding of the population currently accessing services as well as to identify any trends which may have emerged in their experiences. Information we asked for in this section included their age and marital status; length of time in the U.S.; their first language or languages; and their level of education.

In the classes and services sections, we were looking for information in a number of areas, including: how they located a class or service; where they took the class or service, and why; how they moved between classes; any barriers to access they may have experienced, and their response to the barrier; and their educational or language goals.
In the last section, we asked questions about their workforce history to identify their career pathways and goals. Examples of information discussed in this section include: the job or jobs they held before relocating to the U.S.; the job or jobs they have had since moving to the U.S.; how they found and were hired to those jobs; any special classes or training required for them to move into those jobs; and their career goals.

From these interviews, we learned how English language learner adults are accessing classes/services and working towards their language or career goals, including the assets and needs of each student as s/he works to integrate socially and economically in the U.S. Five major areas of findings will be presented in the following report, including: classes and services; workforce experience and pathways; barriers to access; assets; and needs.
Findings

Summary of Demographics

There was a wide range of demographics in our twenty-five-student interview pool (see Appendix D for more demographic details of interviewees). The ages of interviewees ranged from 20 to 58, with an educational range from no education beyond the 1st grade to completion of a Master’s degree. The interviewees also represented diverse ranges of countries and languages. The first languages spoken by students we interviewed included Spanish; Mandarin; Cantonese; Vietnamese; Farsi; Arabic (one Arabic-speaking student also spoke Assyrian and Kurdish); Italian; Tongan; German; Burmese; and Armenian.

The shortest length of time in the U.S. of students we spoke with was 2.5 months, and the longest length of time was over 31 years. The twenty-five students also had a wide range of experience locating and accessing classes and services, as well as time spent in the workforce.

Navigation of Classes and Services

In this section, we will examine how the English language learners we interviewed navigated through the education and supportive service system to achieve their language or career goals. The majority of the students with whom we spoke found their classes, or agency provider that offered the classes they needed, either through their social networks or an online search. Typically, the students continued in ESL classes at an agency until they completed all available levels, at which time those who planned on continuing their education transferred or planned on transferring into another institution with which their current agency has a referral relationship. Most of the students had enrolled in classes because they felt improving their English was the only way for them to move into their desired career, or to complete the education they needed to reach their career goals.

Locating Classes and Services

Many interviewees found their English classes or other services and agencies through their social networks. Students said they heard about the agencies from family, friends, or neighbors who had taken English or other classes or services from the agency or were familiar with the types of agencies in their area that offered the classes or services sought by interviewees. Some students initially enrolled in one class and then heard from classmates about additional programs. A couple interviewees located their classes through a combination of consulting their social networks and searching online. A few students found their classes and agencies when they were told by their social networks that they needed to learn English, and happened to live close enough to the agency that they were already aware of it prior to considering enrolling in classes.

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1 For example, one week after relocating to the U.S., a student asked his extended family where he could take English classes. He was told to look at Community Colleges or Adult Schools, and he used that information to search and find online the Adult School he currently attends.

2 For example, one woman—who had married an American citizen and then relocated to San Francisco—was told by her husband that she needed to study. At the time, she lived just one or two blocks from San Francisco City College, which is where she went to enroll and take her first English classes.
In addition, a number of interviewees found their classes and agencies online, without help from social networks. This group typically possessed the level of education and digital literacy needed to navigate available resources to find the classes they needed and the agencies that offered those classes. The students in this group also placed a high priority on the proximity of the agency to their home, and most enrolled in the agency closest to them.

Other means of locating classes or services and agencies included close proximity of an agency to the students’ home, resulting in that agency being the first and only place at which the student sought classes after concluding they needed to improve their English. In a couple instances, the agency nearest their home left flyers or information pamphlets at the door of the student’s apartment, which was the first introduction of classes and agencies to that student. Two students also located classes and agencies when Social Services either gave them a list of agencies or helped them sort through agencies nearest their homes at which they could obtain the language skills needed to find employment. A couple interviewees were taking classes through their employer or through an employer-agency partnership, and a few others found their classes and agencies through newspaper advertisements.

Of those students planning to continue their education beyond the English classes they are enrolled in currently, the majority identified the college they will attend through existing adult school-community college partnerships. For example, the students we interviewed from Sequoia Adult School who are enrolled in college will be attending Cañada College, and the students from Jefferson Adult School who want to continue their education plan on attending Skyline College.

The overwhelming majority of students chose their school or agency due to its proximity to their homes, and/or the low cost of the classes.

Moving Between Classes and Services

Most of the interviewees were currently enrolled in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, in community-based organizations; non-profit training providers; adult schools; or at the community-college level. The majority of those students moved through multiple ESL classes in one agency, starting in the level they tested into and continuing through the levels according to their assessments upon completing each level. Counselors, teachers, or other agency staff reviewed their test scores upon completion of a class, and would provide guidance to the student about which class to enroll in next. After completing all available levels at one agency, the most popular next step among interviewees was to transition or transfer into another agency with which their current agency was affiliated or had a referral relationship. Those students currently enrolled in community colleges were also moving through the classes required of their major or certificate program, with the guidance of professors and counselors.

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3 In one case, a woman in the refugee program was told by Social Services where she needed to take classes and which classes she needed to take to fulfill the requirement that she be in school if she is not working. In another, a woman went to Social Services to get her food stamps, and was asked by an employee if she wanted to take classes. The employee then worked with her to identify the agency closest to her home that offered the classes she needed to obtain employment.

4 One of the Community Colleges that participated in these interviews provides classes at neighborhood schools for adults who wanted to learn English but were not yet at a college-level, which they called a Community-Based English Tutoring (CBET) program. The program allows students to begin their English through a community-college program and acquire the language and other skills needed to move from the CBET program into the Community College. It also provides classes on subjects like “College Success” and “Exploring Careers, Majors, and Transfers,” as well as digital literacy classes.

5 For example, students at Jefferson Adult School planned on enrolling in Skyline College, and students at Sequoia Adult School had already enrolled in Cañada College.
Following is a summary of student trajectories through and/or between agencies, organized by agency type.\(^6\)

**Community-Based Organizations (CBOs)**

Three of the interviewees were currently attending ESL classes at community-based organizations. None of the three had taken other types of vocational or adult education classes since immigrating to the U.S.; they felt their first step was to become proficient in English. One of the students had found her class and agency through an online search, and the other two students found their classes and agencies through their social networks.

One woman, who immigrated ten years ago, started learning English through her family and by reading simple books or watching television with subtitles. Her first job also helped her practice her English, but she left that job when her family moved to the Bay Area. After a few years of only speaking her home language, she felt she was losing her English skills. She searched online for ESL classes in her zip code and found the agency she currently attends. She tested into the intermediate group, the only ESL class she has taken, which lasted for eight weeks. At the end of the class, she took an assessment test to see if she will move on to the advanced group, which is the final level of classes offered by the agency. She said if her English skills are not to the level at which she can find a job in her field, she will continue retaking the advanced class with her agency.

The second interviewee attending a community-based organization started her ESL classes at a community college next to her house. However, because she was not eligible for residency tuition, the cost of the class was too high. Her classmates told her about the CBO course, which she is now attending until she gets her residency.

The final student in this category has taken ESL classes at multiple agencies, all of which she found through her social networks. She started her classes at a high school in her neighborhood, which a neighbor told her about—the program also offered child care, which was important for her. When she left that agency, she began taking classes at the community-based organization she is currently attending, which she also heard about through her neighbor and which also offers child care. A classmate at this agency told her about a low-cost child care service in the neighborhood as well, which she also uses for day care. She wants to attend another program offered through a neighborhood high school; however, the program does not offer child care, so she plans on attending classes in the afternoons when her husband is home from work and can watch the children. Once she has reached a level of English at which she can succeed in college, she plans on enrolling—to any college her family can afford—to pursue a degree, though she is not sure in what field.

**Non-Profit Training Providers**

Four interviewees were currently enrolled in ESL classes at non-profit training providers.

Two of these students are in a class that is affiliated with their employers and with the union of which they are both members, and both heard about the classes through the social network of their union. One woman is also taking ESL classes held at the office building where she works.

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\(^6\) All classes discussed in this section are ESL classes unless otherwise noted.
The second student started her ESL classes when her young children were involved with the Head Start program, which required parents to donate time as child care providers; on her days off from child care, she would attend ESL classes.

The other two students in this group also found their classes and agencies through their social networks. One woman started her ESL classes in 2010, but left when her granddaughter was born. Her son-in-law received his GED from the agency in which she is currently enrolled, so when she was ready to take ESL again, she went to the same agency. The second woman had taken a Certified Nursing Training, which she heard about from her daughter’s ex-sister-in-law, and decided to enroll in ESL classes at the agency she attends when she heard about it from a friend. She would like to continue her medical training to work in a hospital or clinic, but needs English to accomplish that goal.

Adult Schools

Fourteen of the interviewees were currently or recently enrolled in adult schools, and the overwhelming majority of this group found their agencies through their social networks. Most students had only attended the one agency, and some were planning on transferring to a community college once they completed all levels of ESL at their adult schools. For example, one interviewee initially tested into Level 2 ESL, then went on to complete Levels 3 and 4 as well as a job-search class. She has enrolled in a community college, which she heard about through an orientation the college held at the adult school. Though she already has a University degree, she is taking college classes in order to get the certification she needs to go back into teaching in the U.S.

Another interviewee found her agency when a teller at her bank, who had previously attended the adult school, convinced her to overcome her shame associated with not being able to speak English and took her to enroll. The woman now describes it as the best thing that could have happened to her, and she took as many classes as she could fit in her schedule: conversation, pronunciation, grammar, and multiple levels of ESL. After completing all the English language classes at the school, she left to find a job.

A third interviewee found his adult school through family who had lived in the area for over twenty years. Initially, he tested into the intermediate-level ESL class, but they quickly discovered his level of English was a bit high for Intermediate, and they moved him into the advanced-level ESL class. He has only taken the one class at the one agency, but plans on enrolling in a community college program when he completes his ESL.

Two other interviewees found their adult schools through friends, and only plan on completing as much ESL as is necessary to find employment in their fields of study. One woman had looked online at other agencies, but because she didn’t have a driver’s license, she decided to go to the school nearest her home. The other interviewee asked his friends where he could take ESL classes, and after narrowing down the types of agencies that offer the programs he needed, he looked online and found the school in which he enrolled. He has taken conversation, grammar, writing, and job-search classes and plans on staying a full-time ESL student at the school until he has the language skills he needs to apply for a job in his area of study and experience.

Two women had attended ESL classes at multiple agencies. One woman began her ESL classes at the community college where her brothers-in-law were studying, though she left the agency when she had a child. When she decided to take classes again, other family members currently studying at her adult school told her about the program, and she enrolled. She tested into and completed
Low Intermediate; then High Intermediate; and is currently enrolled in the Advanced ESL class. She has taken Advanced three times, as she says she struggles with the academic focus of this class, but she is determined to pass it and then enroll in the community college where she started her ESL, this time to pursue a degree in her desired field of employment.

The other woman had married an American citizen from the Bay Area, and when she first immigrated he told her about ESL classes and the types of agencies that offered them. She lived only a block from a community college in San Francisco, and began her ESL classes there. She left the agency when she had a child, then re-enrolled when her child was a bit older, and finally left that agency permanently when her family relocated to the Peninsula. When she was ready to start ESL classes again, her neighbor told her about the adult school in their community, so she enrolled and was placed into the Advanced class. When she has completed the class, she plans on enrolling in the local community college to complete the degree she began in her home country, though she does not have any defined or urgent career goals.

Two students found their schools through Social Services. The first, who is in the refugee program, started her ESL at a community-based organization. When that was completed, she was told by Social Services to enroll in the adult school because she had not yet found work. She started at the adult school at the beginning-low level, then completed the next four levels, and is currently taking advanced-level ESL. The second woman found her agency through the Social Services staff who helped her locate the school nearest her home. She tested into Level 2 ESL, and has since completed Levels 3 and 4, as well as a job-search class. She is also enrolled in community college, where she will pursue a degree which makes her eligible for employment in her desired field.

Another interviewee had come to the U.S. with an au-pair program, which required her to fulfill credit hours by taking classes, and provided her with a list of eligible classes and agencies. She used this list to find a number of agencies and classes, taking conversation and writing classes at one adult school, a marketing night class at a University, a summer ESL class at another adult school, and a job-search class at the adult school in which she is currently enrolled. She will move back to her home country upon completion of the au pair program and enroll in University there in an International program, and she tried to tailor the classes she took in the U.S. for a head start on her University program.

Of the remaining adult school students interviewed, three found their current schools through an online search and one found her agency due to its proximity to her home. All four had only attended the one agency for ESL classes. One woman enrolled in her school full-time after finding it online, taking conversation, grammar, pronunciation, and a job-search class until she felt her language was at a level that she would be able to find employment in her field. She left the agency after finding her current employment, though she found a private ESL tutoring agency online that is near her job, and she meets with her tutor once a week after work. Another student plans on enrolling in a community college when she has completed her ESL to better understand what requirements she needs to meet in order to find employment in her field of study. One student had no employment or educational plans beyond improving her English.

Community Colleges

Four of the interviewees were enrolled in community colleges. One of the four is only taking ESL through her community college. She is also enrolled in a trade program through a trade school, where she is taking a variety of classes for a cosmetology license.
Another interviewee began her ESL classes at an adult school, where she learned about and decided to enroll in the community college with which that school has a relationship. At the community college, she continued her ESL classes and earned an English-as-a-Second-Language certificate. She received guidance about which classes to take to meet the requirements of her major from the school’s counselor and some of her professors, and is now in a Business and Computer Technology associate’s degree program.

A third community college student is working towards a Chemistry major, and has also taken three ESL classes at the college. When she first immigrated to the U.S., she utilized employment services provided through a community-based organization that serves the immigrant population from her home country. She previously took 1,600 hours of classes at a trade school in her community to earn her cosmetology license.

The final interviewee started her ESL classes through the Community-Based English Tutoring (CBET) program offered by a community college, which she heard about from a flyer her daughter brought home from school. The program, intended to elevate students’ English skills to a college-level, was held at a neighborhood school, and she was able to bring her daughter with her. When she completed all the classes offered through the CBET program, she enrolled in the affiliated community college where she earned her ESL certificate and is currently enrolled in the Bookkeeper certificate program. She plans to continue at the college for her degree in Accounting.

Reasons for Seeking Classes and/or Services

A few reasons for learning English emerged from these interviews. The overwhelming majority of interviewees were improving their English for work-related outcomes. Interviewees in this group fell into a few categories: some were improving their English to obtain employment in their fields of study or experience; some in order to pursue higher education and then employment in their desired field; and others to be able to navigate the application and hiring process of any job.

A small group of interviewees were improving their English skills not for employment purposes, but to be able to help their children or grandchildren with homework or English, or to be better able to communicate with people in their daily lives.

However, outcomes other than improving their language skills seemed to emerge from their participation in classes. Many mentioned the sense of community and support fostered by the agencies they attended. One woman described it as follows:

…when you are here, you are all on the same level, and you make friends with others because it doesn’t matter where they are from, or what their social level is, or their education, or whatever…Your feelings are the same…because you’re like stranded on the moon, literally, so that’s one of the positive aspects of this school, because they put together people, every kind of person, all together, with the same problem, so you have the possibility to meet someone who can understand you, even with your few words of English…It’s like you feel like part of a community, and this is important.⁷

⁷ Interview 14, page 4.
Workforce Experience and Pathways

The following section discusses the previous and current employment of the interviewees, as well as their career goals. Most of the interviewees had career goals that required formal education and were planning to remain in school to achieve the required credentials. Some were not currently working, instead focusing on improving their English and/or continuing their education.

Occupational and Career Experience

The students we interviewed had a range of occupations and careers before moving to the United States, often corresponding with the fields in which they received their degrees. Below is a chart illustrating levels of education and the range of most recent occupational fields and careers in their home countries and after immigrating to the U.S.8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Education/Degree</th>
<th>Occupational Field/Career in Home Country</th>
<th>Occupational Field/Career in U.S.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Completion of 1st Grade</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Certified Nursing Assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completion of 5th Grade</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Janitorial services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completion of 6th Grade</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Janitorial services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some High School</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Janitorial services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some High School</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>In-home caregiver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Degree</td>
<td>Secretary</td>
<td>Day care assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Degree</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Supermarket general labor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Degree</td>
<td>Call center employee</td>
<td>Call center supervisor; volunteer language tutor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Degree</td>
<td>Part-time service work; student</td>
<td>Au pair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Degree</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Hair stylist</td>
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<tr>
<td>High School Degree</td>
<td>Volunteer nurse</td>
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<td>Some University</td>
<td>Small business owner (grocer)</td>
<td>Bartender</td>
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<td>N/A</td>
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<td>Preschool teacher</td>
<td>Service leader at Virginia Tech dining hall</td>
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<tr>
<td>University Degree</td>
<td>Middle school math teacher</td>
<td>Kmart fitting department</td>
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<tr>
<td>University Degree</td>
<td>Auditor</td>
<td>Supermarket cashier</td>
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<td>Nurse</td>
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<td>University Degree</td>
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<td>Volunteer at adult school computer lab</td>
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<td>N/A</td>
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<td>Master’s Degree</td>
<td>Administrative assistant</td>
<td>Paid intern in commercial kitchen; volunteer language tutor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s Degree</td>
<td>Sales account manager</td>
<td>Sales account manager; volunteer translator</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8 Some interviewees had immigrated to the U.S. when they were so young they had not had significant employment in their home countries. In addition, some interviewees chose not to provide information regarding their employment, and some interviewees have not worked since immigrating to the U.S.
In addition to, or in lieu of, work, some interviewees were also volunteering. One student volunteered at a hospice while in classes, and currently volunteers teaching Italian. Another student volunteers, in addition to working, at various local churches to help with translation for Spanish speakers. One student, who isn’t working currently, volunteers in the computer lab at his adult school, and another currently-unemployed student volunteers at her college’s library.

**Entering Their Fields**

Many interviewees found their jobs through their social networks, with a few exceptions: the paid internship at the commercial kitchen was found on Craigslist; the sales account manager position was found at a city Job Fair; the service leader position at the Virginia Tech dining hall was found through a newspaper advertisement; and the supermarket cashier position was found because a new market was being built in the interviewee’s neighborhood.

The hiring processes for each position varied. Many, especially the unskilled positions, were acquired through a simple application and interview process. The interviewees in these positions found help navigating that system through avenues which included their school counselor; their social networks; through a shared language or immigration experience with their potential employer; or they had the education, language skill, and experience level to navigate the process on their own.

Two positions required special training: the certified nursing assistant had to take a course and pass a test to receive her certification; and the day care assistant had to complete a one-day, seven-hour first aid course. The au pair position also had a unique application and hiring process, which was completed while the interviewee was still in her home country.

Overall, the application and hiring processes for the positions the interviewees had held since immigrating to the U.S. were facilitated through social networks—either from networks they had established through family members, friends, and/or coworkers; or in some cases through the social support of their classes. Many interviewees were currently enrolled in, or had taken, job-search classes, which help students understand the application process in the U.S., teach them the vocabulary they need to navigate job searches and application processes, as well as provide support to the students as they look for employment.

**Occupation and Career Trajectories**

Career trajectories and goals among the interviewees varied widely. Most interviewees had tended to find employment opportunistically, based on what job openings were available and accessible to them at the moment, rather than by following a defined career plan or pathway. The majority were taking classes with the ultimate goal of changing careers; a few were seeking to move up in their current field. Although career advancement was a primary educational goal for most of the interviewees, only a few had a clearly defined idea of how they would parlay their improved English skills into a new job or a promotion.

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9 Details of application and hiring process can be found in the transcription of her interview, Interview 16, page 3.
ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER INTERVIEWS

The following career trajectory narratives are organized by the interviewees’ levels of educational attainment (see Appendix E for a flow chart of career trajectories).

Group One: Some Elementary Education

Those interviewees with the lowest level of formal education also had some of the longest lengths of time living in the U.S. They also tended to have the strongest connection to the workforce, generally because their income was needed to support themselves and their families; all of them had at some point held at least two jobs at once.

One interviewee, who had no formal education past the first grade and has been in the U.S. for over thirty-one years, started working at a dry cleaner’s when she first immigrated. She held that job for twelve years before completing her Certified Nursing Assistant training. She learned of the CNA training through a relative who worked as a CNA supervisor and trainer. Following training she was hired as a CNA by the agency that provided the training. She has now worked there for over ten years, and wishes to improve her English so she can further her training and work in a hospital or clinic.

Another interviewee, with a 5th grade education and twelve years in the U.S., has worked as a janitor at Google since 2008. Her brother worked with her current supervisor, and helped her get this job. She is tired of the amount of manual labor required and hopes for a less physical job, though she is not sure what she would rather do, nor how she would change careers or occupations. She said that, if she were born again, she would want to go to school to be like the computer programmers at Google. As she described her situation now: “We don’t have the same opportunities [as the computer programmers], many times we have to do both [go to school and work] or if you can’t do both you have to leave school in order to work or leave work in order to go to school, but then how do we pay rent?”

Another interviewee with little formal education has been in the U.S. for thirteen years. When she first immigrated, she worked at a print shop, and then in retail, and finally as a janitor. The first janitorial company she worked for changed ownership after she had been there for about eight years, and she said they began mistreating the employees—they changed her schedule and took away their benefits—so she moved into a position as a janitor at a different, unionized company with the help of a former coworker. She has always had at least two jobs until this past year, when she quit her part-time job. She has also grown tired of the amount of manual labor her position requires, and would like to work in an office setting, or become a janitor supervisor. She also says she wants a job that allows her to “take vacations like other people.” She said she would “feel more secure applying to a different/better job” if she had better English skills—she had tried taking care of children in her home, but said, while it was good money, she was forced to quit because of her inability to communicate with parents who didn’t speak Spanish. She hopes to enroll in the computer literacy classes offered at her current agency to facilitate finding an office position.

Group Two: Some High School Education

Two interviewees had some high school education, but no degree. The first immigrated to the U.S. about twenty years ago, and has worked as a janitor since 1998. She changed companies in
2000 for a better salary and benefits, and has stayed in her occupation because, she said, it’s the work she knows and it doesn’t require English. She would like to apply for the higher positions in her company—a team lead or supervisor—but she feels there is a lack of information available about how one moves into those positions.

The second has had only one job since immigrating to the U.S.: a caregiver position that she found and acquired through her sister. She had to leave the job, however, after having surgery, and has since focused her efforts on her education. She hopes to become a preschool teacher in the future.

Group Three: High School Degree

Interviewees whose highest educational attainment is a high school degree had worked primarily in the service industry at minimum-wage-paying positions. Every interviewee in this group is focused on pursuing a degree or certificate to advance their careers, with most seeking a career change.

One interviewee had some technical training in her home country in addition to her high school degree, and was a secretary before moving to the U.S. nine years ago. Since then, she has worked as quality control in two restaurants, for about two years at each job, and then as an assistant at a daycare. She left the first restaurant she worked at for a better learning opportunity at the second, ultimately quitting that job because she was embarrassed about having to take public transportation and being late to work. She started at the daycare a few months after her second child was born, a job that required her to take a one-day, roughly six hour training; get fingerprinted and a background check; and take a tuberculosis test. She was there for almost two years before deciding to quit and focus on caring for her children. She is pursuing her English skills and plans on attending college to become a preschool teacher.

Another interviewee immigrated not long after graduating high school, about nine years ago, and started a family. Since then, she has had one job, in a supermarket, which she left after her second child was born. Now that her children are older, she feels it is time for her to get her degree. She is focused on gaining the language skills she needs to enter college, though she isn’t sure what she would like to do.

The third interviewee graduated high school and worked at a call center in her home country before immigrating five years ago. She now works for the same company as a supervisor. However, because the work is commission-based, she said the pay isn’t reliable, so she is attending college to get her Bookkeeper’s certificate, perhaps followed by an Accounting degree. She emphasized that she is pursing the career path she feels is the best for her family—one that provides a good living, but that most importantly allows her to spend time with her children.

Another interviewee with a high school degree from her home country had held only one short-term job in a hair salon. She left her job because she was pregnant. Now she is focused on taking classes at a local trade school for her cosmetology license, and ESL classes at a community college. She said she feels there are not many jobs here for her, in part due to her lack of English, which is the main reason she had decided to go into cosmetology. She has considered becoming a dental assistant, but says to do that she would have to change majors, which she feels she is unable to do because she has to care for her children and find a stable career to help her family.

The last in this group is working as an au pair in the Bay Area between graduating high school and entering University back in Europe. She came to the U.S. through an au pair program, which
requires her to fulfill a certain number of class hours. She is pursuing classes that will improve her English, and that will also prepare her for the International Textile Management program she wants to enter in University, which is intended to lead to a job in retail marketing or design in her home country.

Group Four: Some College Education

Two interviewees completed some college in their home countries but did not obtain degrees. The first of them completed thirteen years of education in his home country, where he also owned and operated a grocery shop for about twenty years. Since immigrating 5 months ago, he has been working as a bartender at a local restaurant in the evenings so he can focus on improving his English in the mornings. He found his job through his social networks, and—because the owner is from the same country as the interviewee—received help from the owner filling out his application. He hopes to enroll in an automotive program at a community college. The second woman, who had studied Psychology in her home country, stressed that in her culture, the man must provide for the family—she has no pressing or certain career goals, she just wants to complete her education in an area that might provide a job whenever she decides to enter the workforce. She is considering completing her Psychology degree, but said her husband has suggested majoring in something to do with computers because of the tech industry in the Bay Area.

Group Five: University Degree

Eight interviewees had completed their University degree prior to immigrating. The majority are working towards re-entering their field of education and experience. It seems most of this group are in economic situations that enable them to remain out of the workforce while attending classes.

One interviewee, who had been a preschool teacher for about six years in her home country, moved to Virginia ten years ago with her family where she eventually took a job as a service leader in the Virginia Tech dining hall as a means to improve her English. She was there for three years before they moved to the Bay Area, where she has been focused on improving her English so she can work again in a preschool in any capacity.

Another interviewee, a middle school math teacher for thirty years who retired before immigrating to the U.S., has lived here for just over one year. She briefly worked in the fitting department of Kmart, but left after being told if she took a month off—her mother and sister were visiting from her home country—she would have to reapply to get her job back. She has instead focused on improving her English and has enrolled in college to meet the California requirements to work in a classroom again, as a teacher’s assistant.

A third interviewee had been an auditor in her home country for about two years before immigrating. She spent one week working as a cashier at a supermarket in her neighborhood, but quit because she was going to be permanently placed on night shifts, which she described as bad for her health. She is focused on improving her English and, if necessary, enrolling in college or university so she can work in accounting or as an auditor.

Of the rest of the interviewees with college degrees, two have taken a break from working since immigrating to spend time with their families; two are focused on improving their English in order to find a job in their fields; and one is focused both on taking care of her children and on improving her English so she can continue her education to find a job in her field. Of these:
- One had been employed in the telecommunications industry in her home country, and is improving her English to eventually work in the San Jose office of her most recent employer, where they want her to expand their business in the U.S.

- One had worked in her home country as a business assistant and then a financial assistant.

- One had worked in information technology for nine years at three different companies before immigrating; he is using his time to improve his English, familiarize himself with the application and hiring process in the U.S., and seeking to get a professional certificate before applying to his desired job at Cisco.

- One had practiced nursing in her home country before immigrating about four years ago; she was told that she can take a test to practice nursing in California, and is focusing on gaining the language skills she believes will enable her to pass the test.

- One received a University degree in her home country, as well as a 1,600-hour course in the U.S. leading to a cosmetology license. She is now enrolled in college for a Chemistry major and is taking English classes to help her understand the course material.

**Group Six: Master’s Degree**

Three interviewees held advanced degrees: two are currently working and one is taking a break from work to spend time with her family and improve her English.

The first interviewee had a university degree in engineering and a master’s degree in technology, and worked as a sales account manager of a national account for a large company in her home country. She immigrated to the U.S. with her husband eleven months ago, and immediately enrolled full time in English classes while waiting for authorization to work. One of her classes encouraged participants to attend a local Job Fair, where she applied for and was hired as a sales account manager. She hopes to change companies soon, to work either for her old employer at a U.S.-based office or a startup company.

The second interviewee had a master’s degree in foreign language and literature. She had been a part-time administrative assistant for eleven years in her home country, a job which allowed her time with her young children. Her family immigrated to the U.S. about four years ago, and she was unable to work until she received her green card. She recently found employment in a paid internship at a commercial kitchen. She hopes to find a job that has a better salary and offers benefits, but is not sure in what field.

The final interviewee in this group is a medical doctor with a master’s of medicine, who practiced obstetrics for about four years in her home country, but immigrated to be with her husband when the job became too stressful. She is taking a break to spend time with her family and to improve her English, but wants to get back into medicine in the future.

**Assets of English Language Learner Interviewees**

In this section, we will discuss the assets the interviewees possessed which have facilitated their experience navigating classes, services, and the application and hiring process. Many of the interviewees stated how simple it was for them to find the information they needed about classes or agencies, and in most of those instances their ease of movement through the system was due to one or a combination of the assets outlined here. These assets include social networks, education levels, work experience, and self-motivation.
Almost all of the interviewees had strong social networks established in the United States. A few students had immigrated because their family or extended family already lived in the U.S. Some immigrated with their immediate families, who have provided support through, for instance, watching children or taking care of the home so the student could attend class. Others have established a social network through their community and neighbors, and others have expanded their social networks through the relationships they developed with their classmates and teachers. Still others have formed a social network through their coworkers and colleagues. These networks have led to students finding classes or services and employment.

One woman said “I have family here, their kids study in University, it’s easy to get the information now…or the internet, it’s easy.”

Another asset many of the interviewees possess is a level of education that facilitated their navigation of classes, services, and the application and hiring process. The majority of students had at least a high school diploma from their home country, and many had also received their University Degree. Finally, of those interviewees who had work experience prior to immigrating to the U.S., most had spent years or even decades in a particular field or occupation. Their education and experience has helped them identify the steps they need to take to find work in their fields or desired fields.

A final observation about the group of interviewees as a whole: every interviewee seemed to be very focused on their career goals, and to possess a level of self-motivation and determination that helped them overcome barriers that may have been presented to them. While the inspiration for their drive may vary—some said they would do whatever it takes to find a job that both allows them to support and spend time with their families, others expressed an intense desire to go back into their field because they could not imagine working in another occupation—every student who participated in these interviews was enthusiastic about improving their English and/or continuing their education to find employment in their desired occupation. They were willing to do whatever was necessary to overcome any potential barriers to meeting their goals. Some coordinated with family members for child care or transportation, and others were intent on working as many jobs as they needed to afford to enroll in college. Still others spent the time they had to wait for residency taking as many English classes as they could, sometimes even voluntarily repeating a class until either they could enroll in college or they felt they had reached an acceptable level of English to accomplish their goals.

**Barriers to Accessing Classes or Employment**

A number of barriers to classes, services, and career pathways were mentioned by interviewees. Most interviewees had found ways to overcome or circumvent the barriers they experienced; however, specific barriers such as cost or transportation were often restricting factors in determining in which classes students chose to enroll. (Since our interview universe was defined as individuals currently enrolled in ESL classes or who had successfully completed their ESL education, individuals who encountered barriers that prevented them from taking any classes at all would not have been included.) Several interviewees also anticipated future barriers as they advanced their education—for example, while most students were currently enrolled in classes that were free or very low-cost, some of those who planned on attending a community college anticipated a cost issue.

13 Interview 11, page 4.
Barriers experienced or anticipated included: cost of classes; location or transportation access; scheduling conflicts with work or family responsibilities, particularly childcare; eligibility restrictions for specific classes or programs; and intimidation or fear of being stigmatized for not speaking English fluently.

**Access to Classes and/or Services**

There were a number of barriers to taking classes or services mentioned throughout these interviews, including: children; lack of transportation; finances; schedule of classes or time constraints; and stigma. Many interviewees were able to overcome these barriers. One woman, when discussing what might make it difficult to take classes for adults who want to learn English, said “You know, if you wanted to do it, you can do it.”14 However, not all barriers were or have been easily overcome by every interviewee.

Those interviewees who had children mentioned leaving school when they were pregnant, a child was born, or to otherwise care for their children. In some cases, they scheduled their classes around their children’s schedules, which resulted in their inability to enroll in certain classes they thought might have been helpful to them. Some left school when their children were young, and now that their children are older, they are back in school full time and focused on continuing their education. Other responses to this barrier included working with family members to coordinate child care during class times; taking classes when children are in school; or locating agencies that provide child care, either at the agency the parent attends, or at separate daycare agencies.

Lack of transportation was mentioned by a number of interviewees, and appeared to heavily influence their choice of educational providers. The majority attended classes that were located lived within walking and/or biking distance of their homes. Others used public transportation to commute to and from school, which was further facilitated by the proximity of bus stops to their agencies. Finally, some interviewees coordinated rides with family or friends.

Another potential barrier to classes and services mentioned by this group was financial. In all cases, the classes or services they were currently taking were either free or very low cost. However, some interviewees anticipated a financial issue when they enrolled in college. Their responses to this anticipated barrier included waiting until they were eligible for residency, which would greatly reduce the cost of college classes, or finding one or two jobs to save the money to pay for their degree or certificate.

The schedule of classes, or time constraints, was another barrier mentioned by a couple interviewees. One woman mentioned classes she would have liked to take, but that did not fit into her schedule due to her children being home from school at the time it was offered. She responded to this barrier by just not taking the afternoon classes. One woman mentioned that, while she might like to continue her education or take classes, it’s difficult for her to because she has to work.

The final barrier to finding or taking classes was the stigma surrounding those who do not speak English well, and embarrassment about their lack of English skills. An interviewee described the language barrier and stigma surrounding a lack of English skills when she was discussing why she decided to take English classes:

14 Interview 14, page 5.
...You know, when you were in your country, and everything is normal for you, it’s famous, you speak well, you are studied...And you come here, and you feel like a zero. And you’re gonna start from the [bottom]...I don’t like to be embarrassing with people...I was talking good in my country, I have a University degree, I’m a good person...when I came here, oh...I can’t make a sentence. It’s hard. Especially when I came here, you know I speak like...my only pronunciation, it’s different [than a native speaker’s].

Many interviewees overcame this barrier through a realization that they would only meet their career goals if they improved their English. One student said at first she didn’t want to talk to anyone, but “…you just have to though, that’s why I came here, so I was like ‘ok, you’re gonna go and then you just have to speak to people.” Another woman said she was finally dragged to the school she attended by a bank teller she met when she and her husband were opening an account. The interviewee said she had not wanted to seek English classes, even after taking the assessment test at the Stanford International Center, because she was embarrassed about her lack of English.

I was too afraid...I didn’t want to go there because to me, Stanford people are like, very educated people, and I was ashamed of myself, because I couldn’t speak English, and so—what kind of image would I give to those people? So I...well, I wanted to hide myself—this was my life for the first month—and this lady convinced me to come here, and it was difficult in the first month here, because you don’t know anything and it’s frustrating because you’re over 40 and you have to go back to school, like elementary school, because it’s really from the beginning...but, well, it’s the greatest thing that could have happened to me, to find this school.

Access to Career Pathways

A few barriers to desired career pathways or other employment opportunities were mentioned by this group—by far, the most common barrier expressed was a lack of English skills. The other barriers mentioned included unclear information on how to move up in, or into, a certain career or occupation, and a lack of the education necessary to work in a specific field.

The vast majority of the interviewees felt they would only find good, better, or any employment if they improved their English skills. One woman, who had been a preschool teacher in her home country and who vehemently stated it was her “dream job,” was improving her English in order to get back into that field. She had recently been looking for volunteer opportunities with organizations that work with children, but was told they didn’t need volunteers. She worried they just didn’t want her to volunteer, because of her English skills. She said,

I didn’t apply yet [to work in a preschool] because even [as] a volunteer, they didn’t want me. Maybe they listen how I speak, and...I think if my English would be good, they would want me.

15 Interview 11, pages 2 & 3.  
16 Interview 16, page 5.  
17 Interview 14, page 2.  
18 Interview 8, page 3.
Another woman noted that she felt if she immigrated when she was younger, she may have more quickly acquired the language; but as her English is now, “searching [for] a job in this economy is difficult.”

Some students felt there was a lack of or unclear information available about how to move into their desired field, or move up in their current career. One young woman, who had worked as an auditor in her home country, described her confusion as standing on one step, and looking for the last step along the path to becoming an auditor again, but not being able to find any of the steps in between. She is responding to that barrier by continuing through each ESL class in succession, and is considering enrolling in community college and transferring to university, until she figures out what she needs to do to get back into her field. Other interviewees have responded to this barrier, with varying degrees of success, by asking their teachers, agency staff, and/or counselors for guidance; asking people already in their desired career how they obtained their job; and looking at online resources. It should also be noted that those students who felt they knew what steps they needed to take to reach their career goals may also not have accurate or complete information.

The final major barrier to desired careers expressed by interviewees was a lack of formal education. For example, a few students wished to become teachers, but had only a high school, or some high school, education. The students responded to this barrier by taking classes to improve their English to a level at which they could successfully complete their college or advanced degrees, or obtain the licenses or certifications relevant to their career goals.

**Needs of English Language Learner Interviewees**

Most of the interviewees stated their experience navigating the classes and services system was “easy,” in large part due to their social networks or other assets. However, there were a few needs expressed by interviewees regarding either a lack of or insufficient information available about how to achieve their goals, or the scheduling of classes; for example, one interviewee mentioned that it would be helpful if the same classes were offered at different times of day, so that she could schedule classes around her childcare obligations.

Outstanding needs included:

I want to know if there is some local service or platform that can assist new immigrants like me to search for information and resources we need, especially in Chinese language. I am still very confused for my future career development. Any information or resources that can help me to find a way out is appreciated.

Everything is very strange for me, I don’t know how to do it, which one is the next step, so I can stand on this step, and I’m looking for the last step.

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19 Interview 24, page 2.
20 In two cases, the class curriculum included looking at requirements for desired jobs on the Bureau of Labor Statistics website. Once they had found some of the requirements for their desired careers, the students then looked at the course offerings of a community college to find classes that would fulfill the educational or certification requirements of their desired careers.
21 Interview 15, page 2.
and...sometimes I’m very confused about my future, because...I’m not young. I need to start everything over.\textsuperscript{22}

I feel that there needs to be more information about the requirements for different careers because since we don’t know about it we feel that we can’t change jobs. For example, as a janitor there are three higher positions that I would like to apply, such as team lead or supervisor, but I have no information on what I need to do to get there.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{22} Interview 5, page 2.
\textsuperscript{23} Interview 2, page 2.
Conclusions

These interviews provided a glimpse into the experiences of adults who are taking classes to learn English and improve their prospects of finding stable, family-sustaining employment. In general, these students located their classes and agencies through their social networks, and enrolled in an agency due to its proximity to their homes and the low cost of classes. They typically moved through classes along the trajectory laid out by the agency and in accordance to their assessment scores, and when they move to another agency, it is usually through a referral to a partner organization after they have completed all levels of ESL classes available at their current organization.

There is a diverse range of careers these students have or had, and overwhelmingly they are working to improve their English so they can either find employment in their field of education and/or experience, or to continue their education to find employment in their desired field. The students with the least amount of formal education are also the individuals with the most stable employment histories, likely due to either the length of time they have been in the U.S., or a lack of financial security that would allow them to focus solely on their education.

The majority of students have strong social supports which have facilitated their navigation of both the classes and services system, and the application and hiring processes for their employment. The interviewees also possess a high degree of self-motivation, which also seems to have played a role in their successful responses to barriers they may have faced to their education and employment. However, there is still a need for information regarding how to move into or up in a career. Overall, the students with whom we spoke are enthusiastic and optimistic about their education and their future employment potential.

Appendices

A. English Language Learner Interview Questions

B. English Language Learner Interview Protocol & Guidelines

C. Transcriptions/Translations of 25 English Language Learner Interviews

D. Demographics Information

E. English Language Learner Career Trajectory Flow Chart