AMEP RESEARCH CENTRE

Fact sheet – Retention of adult migrant learners

miscellaneous 1

Context

The retention of adult migrant learners in English programs has always been a complex issue for organisations that provide these services. Many adult migrant learners are often faced with other priorities such as finding work or accommodation, which compete with their desire to learn English, a situation common in other adult learning contexts (Kerka 1995; National Center for Educational Statistics 1997). In the period 1996–98, for example, 28% of eligible Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) clients left the program without either completing their 510-hour entitlement or achieving functional English. However, the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA) measures the performance of organisations providing English language instruction to clients in the AMEP based on reach, retention and results. Therefore, DIMIA and service providers were interested in investigating retention within the AMEP, to determine strategies that could be used to increase retention rates. The National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research (NCELTR) at Macquarie University conducted research to examine retention patterns (Noy 2001) in order to:

- identify client groups with relatively low retention rates within the AMEP
- focus research on a number of these groups
- examine reasons for the low retention rates in these groups
- research and trial strategies to improve retention rates.

This fact sheet complements Noy's research report, *Competing priorities: Retention patterns in the Adult Migrant English Program*, by drawing on research on retention in adult migrant English programs in a number of countries and providing an updated chart of the successful retention strategies identified in the Noy report.

Barriers to retention

Studies in Australia, the United States of America and New Zealand have identified a number of reasons why learners exit programs before they achieve optimal results. These include:

- the need to find work (Burnett 1998) or a change in work circumstances (National Center for Educational Statistics 1997)
- the need to look after family (National Center for Educational Statistics 1997; Plimer and Candlin 1996)
- lack of previous formal education (Ross 2000)
- lack of or inaccurate information (Plimer and Candlin 1996)
- personal attitudes such as lack of confidence, family attitudes and religious beliefs (Watts et al 2002)
- psychological factors of torture and trauma (Herman 1992; McPherson 1997).

Reasons for client continuation

In any consideration of retention strategies, organisations and teachers need to understand why clients persevere with their English language studies. Recent studies have identified reasons such as:

- access to a range of flexible learning options (Plimer and Candlin 1996; Watts et al 2002)
- encouragement of student learning (Noy 2001)
- flexibility for learners to express their own learning needs (Merrifield 1998)
- pacing appropriate to learner needs (McPherson 1997)
- compatibility between students' learning style and teaching methods (Willing 1988).

Support strategies to promote retention

Noy's study (2001), drawing on interview data from all Victorian AMEP managers (interviewed individually) and approximately 80% of AMES staff (at staff meetings), identified a variety of strategies that

either help break down the barriers to retention or provide procedures and programs that promote perseverance. The following chart is adapted from a chart in Noy's report (2001; 28–31) and identifies strategies at various stages of the learning process as well as strategies for clients with different needs.

Target group	Strategy	Process
Recruitment and enrolment		
All clients	Provide information at the initial interview in the client's home language Have a bilingual ethnic officer available at the initial interview	• Provide only essential information – avoid overwhelming the client
All clients	Provide clear information on: • the course • what is expected of the client • realistic learner goals • services within and outside the Centre that can help the client	• Use bilingual aides to give information in L1 prior to start of course
All clients	Run an enrolment day	• Enable clients to negotiate their class and extension modules prior to starting • Provide information on services available
Program options and learning styles		

All clients	Run optional extension classes so that clients can:
	• increase their hours
	• select their learning focus
		• Suggested extension classes:
		  – accessing your community services and networks
		  – pronunciation workshops
		  – conversation groups
		  – grammar workshops
		  – further study elective
		  – vocational elective
		  – reading the newspaper
		  – parenting elective
		  – online computing
		  – preparation for work placement/experience
		  – learner driver preparation

Clients wanting to join the workforce	Offer 'Ready for work' or 'Job search' module	• Include modules such as:
		  – general English
		  – OH&S
		  – résumé writing
		  – casual conversation
		  – negotiation skills
		  – invited speakers
		  – workplace visits
		  – computing skills
		  – work placement
		  – cold canvassing
		  – telephone skills
		  – interview skills

Elderly clients and/or slow-paced learners and/or clients with family/work commitments	Provide low-intensity classes	• Provide classes of 6–10 hours per week

Target group	Strategy	Process
Program options and learning styles (continued)		
Elderly client group and groups that prefer bilingual support	Provide bilingual classes at CSWE I level	• Choose a bilingual support strategy such as: 　– bilingual teacher 　– bilingual assistant but also plan transition from bilingual to monolingual (English) activities
Clients whose culture or religion does not permit free mingling of men and women	Offer single-gender classes and/or ethno-specific classes	• Involve the community in negotiation of these classes
Higher education/highly motivated learners (fast-track learners with 11+ years of schooling)	Increase activity hours to maximise clients' learning options Focus on educational background and client goals when grouping clients Stream studies to match client goals and study purposes	• Offer a variety of learning options to fast-track clients and those requesting a greater number of hours (eg distance learning or extension classes) • Give course vocational, further study or settlement titles • Offer accredited TAFE modules: 　– Identify competencies that can be mapped against CSWE II/III 　– Clients receive CSWE competency plus an accredited TAFE module
Multi-level classes	Recruit volunteer tutors	• Have volunteers work with individuals or small groups
Refugees and special humanitarian cases	Provide stability: retain client group and teacher for at least one semester if possible	• Explore greater use of L1 in teaching and administration
Timetabling options		
Clients needing flexible class arrangements	Timetable classes over only four days to accommodate settlement and lifestyle needs of clients	• Negotiate with clients the expectation that, whenever possible, the 'fifth' day will be used for non-class activities
Clients with weekday commitments or lack of childcare	Provide evening and Saturday classes	
Class content and resources		
All clients	Provide textbooks for learners who prefer or expect a textbook rather than sets of handouts	• Give CSWE I clients an Australian course book • Provide CSWE II & III clients with access to (preferably) an Australian course book • The course book will not dictate the course content but should offer homework opportunities and revision • Have class sets in the centre library and offer clients the opportunity to purchase a course book
All clients	Scaffold instruction through explicit explanations of teaching	• Make explicit to clients the outcomes expected from various class activities • Provide the reasons behind a specific mode of delivery (eg group work)

Target group	Strategy	Process
Class content and resources (continued)		
All clients	Recruit bilingual ethnic aides	• Have a bilingual aide working in the classroom on a regular basis at all certificate levels
Students at risk of not continuing		
Random/all clients	Seek feedback from clients to provide support and to deal with issues before they lead to withdrawal	• Have a staff member designated to follow up new clients: – to ensure they are satisfied with their class – to resolve any issues if they arise
Clients leaving to travel	Provide practical strategies for clients to continue their English language learning while travelling	• Encourage clients to buy distance learning material or listening tapes
Clients not attending	Use personal contact to encourage client to return	• Have teachers or bilingual aide telephone 'no shows' after one week's absence from class
Clients likely to withdraw/not re-enrol	Ensure client knows the hours remaining and his/her AMEP eligibility expiry date In the last week of class, ensure that all clients know the learning options that are available to them	• Conduct exit/withdrawal interviews • Identify clients who are likely to leave (eg poor attender, has health problems) • Make an appointment with the Vocational Counsellor to give future study options
Clients threatened by competency-based approach	Lessen the pressure of assessment	• Provide information about low-intensity classes or other learning options
All clients	Seek feedback from bilingual aides about student satisfaction	• Have aides act as mentors for their specific language group
Clients preferring to use first language to discuss issues	Provide clients with access to a pool of bilingual support staff on-call to centres	• Rotate bilingual staff between centres within a region • Timetable bilingual staff to be available by telephone at certain times • Advertise and promote to clients the availability of bilingual staff
Awareness of entitlement		
All potential and current AMEP clients	Provide clients with details of entitlements	• Ensure student ID cards include the clients' details and their remaining entitlement hours • Update cards at the completion of each course
All potential and current AMEP clients	Promote 510-hour entitlement and explain how hours are 'used'/lost	• Develop an AMEP 510-hour promotional kit including posters, writing pads and paper
All potential and current AMEP clients	Advertise on ethnic radio stations	• Promote the availability of classes through the 510-hour entitlement • Encourage clients to use their full 510-hour entitlement • Advertise telephone numbers for bilingual assistance for all language groups

The strategies listed above cover the range of services provided in the AMEP for clients. Many of these suggestions, particularly those concerning instructional strategies, have been documented elsewhere (see, for example, McPherson 1997; Burns and de Silva Joyce 2000; Yates 2002; Wigglesworth 2003). This fact sheet, however, brings together in one place those strategies that research and practice have been found to be effective.

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