

# CYBER-ESL



**DISRUPTIVE INNOVATION:** A SUMMARY OF THE CYBER-ESL PROGRAM MODEL AND EVALUATION

# Need for Innovation Emerges

Throughout Instituto del Progreso Latino's (Instituto) nearly 40-year history, the organization has created bold approaches to delivering outstanding education programming, tailored to meet the unique needs of its community. Thanks to its innovative ideas, rigorous research and evaluation, and commitment to student success, Instituto has become a trusted education institution, establishing preeminent models in adult education, youth education, and workforce development. What began as a small but creative program serving 30 adult students has grown into a nationally-recognized education hub serving over 9,000 families annually through a diverse set of programs for participants ranging from children to seniors.

**Illinois' adult education providers only had the capacity to serve 15.7 percent of the demand from the more-than 600,000 potential ESL students.**

In September 2014, Instituto ventured into a new area – Cyber-ESL, a technology-assisted English language learning initiative that leverages advances in low-cost, web-based education programming to overcome logistical and socio-economic barriers to success for adult learners.

The inspiration to launch Cyber-ESL came from growing evidence that ESL courses for adult learners in Illinois were falling short of their need. At the time, the state's adult education providers only had the capacity to serve 15.7 percent of the demand from the more-than 600,000 potential ESL students statewide, according to a 2010 study by the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights.

Given the potential for ESL courses to unlock stable, gainful career pathways, this data reflected a complex and urgent need for an innovative solution. Simply adding classroom space to meet the deficit of classroom seats would require exorbitant costs. Further, Instituto's years of experience as an alternative educational space for adult learners had proven that traditional daytime class schedules do not accommodate the majority of adults working full-time and even multiple intermittent jobs to support a household.

Moreover, multiple Instituto programs funded by the U.S. Departments of Education and Labor, have shown that adult learners from low-income, low-education communities succeed at higher rates in programs that feature culturally-competent supportive services that mitigate barriers to success such as familial or work problems.

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## Cyber-ESL Model

Cyber-ESL is a learning model combining a traditional online program (for this research, Instituto selected USA Learns), real-time video-chat and on-line interaction between teachers and classmates, classroom sessions, and a unique set of supports and enrichments. Access to online classes improves the regularity with which students engage teachers by minimizing the need to commute. Classes are supplemented by weekly one-on-one calls with teachers, providing more personal attention on each student's unique needs. Students practice language skills and bond with other language-learners online through PBWorks where teachers post assignments and students ask questions and interact

with one another. Instituto enhances what is established online through scheduled in-person sessions on Friday evening and Saturday morning on alternating weeks. Instituto also adds independent homework to the course, including a weekly written research assignment, built to establish basic skills in word processing and web-based research. Finally, students had continuous access to advisors, including session on alternating weeks, to help address potentially derailing personal issues outside of class (e.g., job loss, domestic violence). To ensure students are primed for success, the program starts with orientation to sharpen their computer skills and introduce the program's technical tools.

# Launch and Evaluation

Launched with support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Instituto has now recruited and enrolled over 300 students into five, 16-week cohorts. The program included a robust process and outcome evaluation undertaken by a research team from the Center for Urban Research and Learning (CURL) at Loyola University of Chicago directed by Dr. Malcolm Bush.

Initial screening of candidates for the program was based on their performance on the standardized Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE). Through continuous study of initial outcomes, Instituto's leaders determined students who tested at the intermediate-level on the TABE to be the best candidates, displaying the minimum language proficiency appropriate for benefiting from the lesson plans. Also, this group typically possessed a base of technology experience necessary for the program's utilization of USA Learns, a tried and tested ESL software built by the Sacramento County Department of Education.

Recruiting through Instituto's network of traditional community partner organizations, Cyber-ESL's participant demographics included:

Student ages ranged from 20 to 68 with a median age of

43

56% had last been out of school six years or more

76% of students were women, including

22% who were single mothers

84% were in the workforce, including 73% who worked 30+ hours weekly

Large majority of students were lower-income with an average annual income of **\$19,428**

While quantitative and qualitative data was collected since the program's inception, key quantitative findings for Cyber-ESL were focused on the 71 students in the most recent pair of cohorts. Researchers, in collaboration with Instituto, selected the TABE CLAS-E test, as it is a test normed to non-English native speakers.

In lieu of a control group, Instituto added to its program a comparison group of students in one of the Cyber-ESL cohorts. Specifically, students in the comparison group cohort were provided a laptop computer, free internet connection, access to USA Learns, and a syllabus for the course. However, these students did not regularly interact with Instituto staff or receive academic advising, they did not interact with one another through PBWorks, and were not provided regular assignments by teachers.

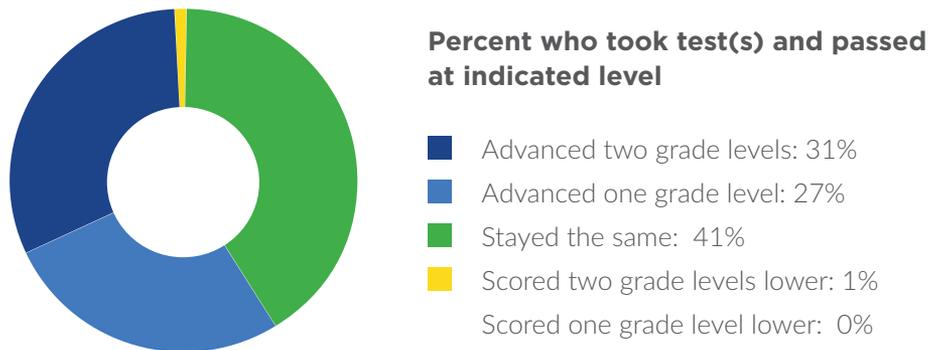
While students in this comparison group were held to the same expectations as others with regard to the hours-per-week of online study, they had to agree to two additional days of pre-testing, two days of post-testing, and to return the computers after the post-tests were concluded.

# Success and Gains in Literacy

The key finding of the Cyber-ESL model is that relevant ESL gains were driven by leveraging the flexibility of technology and a unique support system to build a comprehensive suite of resources solving adult learners' unique needs and circumstances.

The gains in literacy proficiency were significant with 58% of students advancing one or more grade levels. By comparison, 30% of students on average make a leap of one federal level in Illinois' community college programs, according to the Illinois Community College Board.

## Grade Change Among Cyber-ESL Students in 16-week Period:



Use of the comparison group proved the program drove significant increases in scores with an average of 26.42 points gained in Listening and Speaking (compared to 5.93 in the comparison group) and 23.89 gained in Reading and Writing (compared to 7.38 in the comparison group), as outlined in the table below.

The significance of such an increase is further demonstrated when compared to the range of scores for each literacy level indicated by the TABE CLAS-E. For instance, the intermediate level for Listening and Speaking ranges from 486 – 558 and intermediate level for Reading and Writing ranges from 483 – 556, demonstrating that the Cyber-ESL model can move students quickly along these levels in a 16-week period. These results were statistically significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level for the Listening and Speaking tests and at the  $**p < 0.01$  level for the Reading and Writing results.

	Program group (N)	Program group mean	Program group std. deviation	Comparison group (N)	Comparison group mean	Comparison group std. deviation
<b>Listening and Speaking</b>	71	26.42	32.34	42	5.93	50.13
<b>Reading and Writing</b>	71	23.89	37.85	42	7.38	51.03

To further bolster the final analysis, research included a qualitative survey of Cyber-ESL student opinions. In this survey, the majority of students favorably rated their experience in the program. Specifically, students most frequently cited the following program attributes as drivers for success:

1. **Flexible** class schedule accommodated the needs of family and work
2. **Personalized** attention from teachers
3. **Support** of the cohort that shared similar barriers to success
4. Support from Instituto staff proved more **holistic** than prior experiences with other adult education providers
5. Online access to ESL program provided **practice without fear** of embarrassment
6. Lessons were **structured** around practice soft skills (e.g. discussions with employers, landlords, health providers)
7. Computer technical support was **readily accessible**.

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## Looking Forward

The Cyber-ESL model has demonstrated the potential to make landmark impacts on the delivery of adult education and immigrant integration initiatives. This is particularly true in the low-income, low-education communities where education systems have the potential to generate impact that lifts both families and local economies.

Throughout Instituto's history, its leaders have seen the reality that many adult learners quickly become discouraged by their limited education options when they take into account the time they must devote to work and family responsibilities. Cyber-ESL offers these learners an alternative that fits into their lives, lessening the burden on learners and their families.

Guided by sound methodology, Cyber-ESL has demonstrated that to provide immigrants and adult English learners with effective solutions, policy makers and education providers will do best to collaborate on properly scaled investment in technologies that provide flexible, advanced solutions with personalized enrichments that increase both education and personal support. In this manner, Cyber-ESL is an opportunity to amplify the power of adult education practices by leveraging technology to overcome traditional hurdles and ease the ability for students and teachers to connect.

A special thank you to the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation for the generous support to pilot and research the Cyber-ESL model.

## STUDENT REFLECTIONS

*“Cyber-ESL was perfect for me because I could have managed my time much better. I had been watching my mom during the day, and I been working part-time on the evening.”*

*“As to here, the attention is more direct with us, that at times I do not know and I say ‘I can’t’ or ‘I don’t know’ and she says ‘you can’ and she repeats the question slower then I try to understand and respond. Then she tells me ‘ok’, corrects me, and I become more comfortable.”*

*“It’s funny that this is a virtual program, but yet there is a lot human interaction and personal attention to help you. I feel that is a very strong style of this program.”*