



December 2009

The Relationship between Learning Gains and Attendance

Introduction

Each year, about 14,000 adults enroll in English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) programs throughout Connecticut. These learners seek to improve their English language communication and literacy skills in order to function more effectively at home, in the workplace and in the community. The educational progress that ESL learners achieve in the program is measured through standardized assessments that are administered pre- and post-instruction.

Many programmatic factors influence the progress that learners achieve on such assessments. These include:

- the quality of the curriculum and instruction and their alignment to the assessments;
- the intensity and duration of the instructional interventions;
- class grouping approaches and class sizes; and
- the assessment practices of the program.

Learner characteristics such as their prior educational background, motivation and literacy level in their native language may also impact learning gains.

This study analyzes the relationship of another critical factor – the number of hours that learners actually attend ESL programs – to the gains they achieve in the basic skill areas of *listening* and *reading*.

Background

The Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) coordinates the statewide adult education and literacy system. Programs are free to Connecticut residents aged 16 and older who are no longer enrolled in a public elementary or secondary school. Instructional services are offered at over 300 sites statewide by a variety of agencies including school districts, community-based organizations, community colleges, volunteer programs, and correctional institutions.

Since the mid-1980s, the CSDE has supported the implementation of a standards-based framework in adult education. This framework was developed by the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System

(CASAS) and connects curriculum, assessment, and instruction (CASAS, 2005).

The CASAS curriculum standards are based on competencies and content standards that youth and adults need to function effectively in society. The CASAS competencies are critical *contexts* for instruction while the content standards in reading, math, and listening identify the basic sub-skills that are necessary to perform the competencies and guide instruction. CASAS standardized assessments measure an individual's ability to *apply* basic literacy, numeracy, and communication skills to perform the competencies. Item Response Theory (IRT) is used to establish indices of item bank, test, and test score reliability (Hambleton, Swaminathan, and Rogers, 1991). Results from CASAS assessments are reported in scale scores that clearly define the basic skills along a fixed continuum of difficulty.

Connecticut's implementation of the CASAS system which includes the competencies, content standards, available tests, relevant policies, and professional development is referred to as the Connecticut Competency System (CCS). To implement CCS effectively, adult education providers maintain Program Facilitators with the appropriate training and certification. These Facilitators are teacher leaders who play a critical role in maintaining the integrity and quality of the assessment process. They also assist instructors with curriculum issues and help integrate test results into instruction.

Methodology

The CSDE utilizes an Internet-based management information system, the Connecticut Adult Reporting System (CARS), to collect data on learners. Student records from CARS are selected for this study if they:

- enrolled in ESL classes for at least 12 hours in a fiscal year from 2002-03 to 2006-07; and
- evidenced a matched pre- and post-test in a fiscal year in either *listening* or *reading*.

For this study, a total of 33,578 student records with matched pre-and post-test scores in listening assessments, and another 15,421 student records with matched pre- and post-test scores in reading assessments over the five year

period between fiscal year 2002-03 and fiscal year 2006-07 were extracted from CARS and analyzed.

For each of the five years in this study, learners are grouped according to their National Reporting System (NRS) Educational Functioning Level (DAEL, 2005) based on their pre-test scale score in the skill area.

Learning gains are analyzed using two methodologies:

1. **Level Completion:** A core performance measure for adult education activities outlined in Section 212(b)(2)(A) of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) is “demonstrated improvements in literacy skill levels”; a legislative mandate that is implemented through the NRS measure of “level completion” (DAEL, 2005).
2. **Mean Gain:** The average difference between the pre-test and the post-test scale scores represents the mean learning gain in a skill area. Unlike the level completion measure that evaluates attainment of a specific threshold score, the mean gain metric computes the extent of gain on the CASAS scale.

The total hours a learner attends ESL classes for each month in the fiscal year is reported through CARS. Because pre- and post-tests may not always be administered in the first and last month of a learner’s attendance in the fiscal year, only those hours attended by learners in the months between pre- and post-test are included.

Level completion and mean gain in the skill areas of listening and reading are calculated for the following three ascending categories of hours attended between pre- and post-test for each fiscal year and each NRS level:

- Below 60 hours;
- 61 to 100 hours; and
- 101 or more hours.

This relationship between attendance and learning gains is also controlled for two additional factors:

- (i) **Years of Prior Education:** This characteristic is self-reported by learners at entry. Learners are grouped into three categories based on their number of years of education: less than nine years of education, nine to 12 years or 13 or more years.
- (ii) **Intensity of Attendance:** This is the total hours attended divided by the number of calendar days between pre- and post-test (Young, 2007). The resulting “intensity ratio” is sorted into the following three categories:

- a. **Low Intensity** (ratio less than 0.65): Learners reflecting low intensity rates of attendance typically attend fewer than five hours a week.
- b. **Medium Intensity** (ratio is between 0.65 and 1.3): Learners reflecting medium intensity rates of attendance typically attended between five and nine hours a week.
- c. **High Intensity** (ratio is greater than 1.3): Learners reflecting high intensity rates of attendance typically attended more than nine hours a week.

Results

Learning Gains and Attendance

Learning gains on listening pre-post assessments increase for each ascending category of hours attended at each NRS level except the ESL Advanced level (Table 1).

**Table 1: Learning Gains in Listening Assessments
FY 2002-03 to FY 2006-07**

NRS Educational Functioning Level and CASAS Scale Score Range	Percent Completing Level [Mean Gain] (N)		
	Below 60 Hours	61-100 Hours	101 or more Hours
ESL Beginning Literacy (<=180)	74.3% [16.3] (1,730)	91.2% [22.4] (364)	94.8% [25.3] (252)
ESL Low Beginning (181 - 190)	77.9% [9.5] (2,709)	86.0% [12.7] (714)	90.8% [14.7] (606)
ESL High Beginning (191 - 200)	64.6% [6.4] (5,022)	78.0% [9.4] (1,465)	83.5% [10.8] (1,221)
ESL Low Intermediate (201 - 210)	49.7% [4.4] (6,288)	58.2% [6.1] (1,769)	67.8% [7.9] (1,622)
ESL High Intermediate (211 - 220)	34.3% [2.0] (4,423)	42% [3.6] (1,171)	49.7% [5.0] (1,023)
ESL Advanced (221 - 235)	13.5% [0.5] (2,285)	15.7% [1.6] (517)	17.6% [1.6] (397)

Learning gains on reading pre-post assessments also increase for each ascending category of hours attended at each NRS level (Table 2).

**Table 2: Learning Gains in Reading Assessments
FY 2002-03 to FY 2006-07**

NRS Educational Functioning Level and CASAS Scale Score Range	Percent Completing Level [Mean Gain] (N)		
	Below 60 Hours	61-100 Hours	101 or More Hours
ESL Beginning Literacy (<=180)	79.0% [18.7] (347)	83.8% [21.0] (80)	85.6% [23.5] (139)
ESL Low Beginning (181 - 190)	78.2% [9.4] (459)	87.7% [13.3] (122)	92.2% [14.7] (154)
ESL High Beginning (191 - 200)	65.1% [6.8] (1,194)	79.5% [10.1] (307)	88.2% [12.4] (348)
ESL Low Intermediate (201 - 210)	52.9% [5.4] (2,290)	65.3% [8.0] (646)	70.3% [9.2] (846)
ESL High Intermediate (211 - 220)	55.4% [4.7] (2,113)	68.4% [7.2] (662)	76.8% [8.9] (871)
ESL Advanced (221 - 235)	28.8% [3.1] (2,907)	40.2% [5.4] (964)	43.8% [6.7] (972)

Learning Gains at the ESL Advanced Level

A comparison of the data in Tables 2 and 3 reveal that learning gains at the ESL Advanced level in listening are lower than that in reading. Furthermore, the gains in listening at this level do not increase with greater attendance.

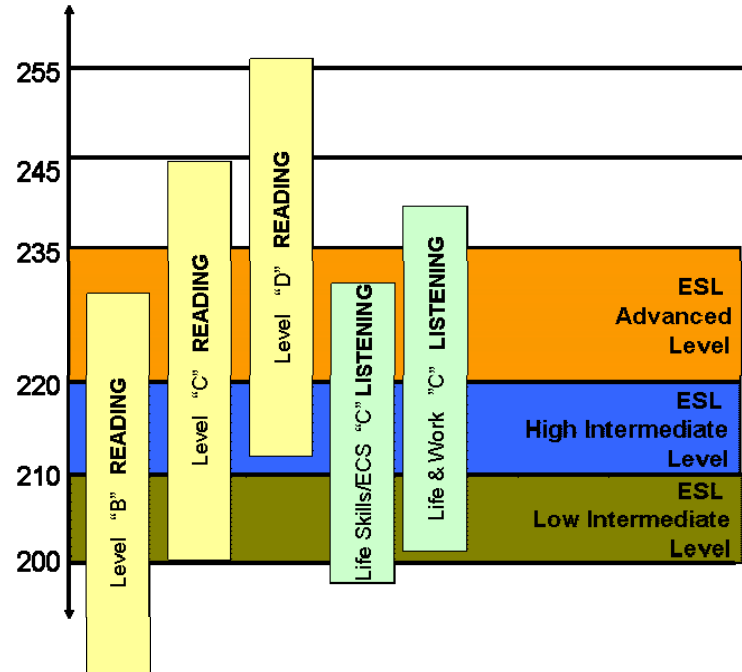
The ESL Advanced level ranges from a CASAS scale score of 221 to 235. The maximum valid scale score of listening assessments in the Life Skills and Employability series ranges between 225 and 228 (Figure 1); scale score estimates above the valid range extend beyond 235.

Unlike in the listening assessments, the maximum valid scale score ranges of the reading assessments extend well beyond 235 to around 256 (Figure 1) thus allowing sufficient range for learners to demonstrate their skills in reading. Consequently, at the ESL Advanced level, learning gains in reading far exceed those in listening.

The valid scale score range of the advanced (i.e. Level C) listening assessments in the recently released Life and Work listening series extend above the ESL Advanced

level (Figure 1). This should enable learners to demonstrate their higher listening abilities and complete the ESL Advanced level in that skill.

**Figure 1: Valid Scale Score Ranges of
CASAS Reading and Listening Assessments**



Years of Prior Education

Even when controlled for the learners' years of prior education, there remains an increasing relationship between learning gains and the attendance categories in both listening and reading (see Table 3). When disaggregated by NRS Level (Appendix A and B), the results confirm that the increasing relationship between learning gains and the attendance categories persists at almost all the levels.

A closer examination of Appendix A and B reveal that learners with 13 or more years of prior education reflect high learning gains even among those who attend fewer than 60 hours. On the contrary, learners with eight or fewer years of education may need to attend more than 100 hours to achieve similar gains.

Moreover, at the intermediate and advanced levels, despite attending more than 100 hours, learners with eight or less years of education fail to match the levels of performance attained by learners with 13 or more years of education. It appears that even attending more than 100 hours in a fiscal year is insufficient to compensate for fewer years of prior education.

**Table 3: Learning Gains in Listening and Reading
Controlled for Years of Prior Education
FY 2002-03 to FY 2006-07**

Years of Prior Education	Skill Area	Percent Completing Level [Mean Gain] (N)		
		Below 60 Hours	61-100 Hours	101 or more Hours
<=8	Listening	53.4% [6.1] (5,215)	62.3% [8.3] (1,232)	68.8% [9.9] (1,054)
	Reading	52.4% [5.8] (1,444)	56.4% [7.1] (376)	67.9% [10.3] (492)
9 to 12	Listening	51.3% [5.5] (12,876)	61.7% [7.7] (3,583)	68.2% [9.0] (3,013)
	Reading	48.8% [5.2] (6,013)	59.7% [7.5] (1,792)	67.1% [9.3] (2,165)
13 or more	Listening	50.3% [4.9] (4,366)	60.3% [7.5] (1,185)	67.0% [9.0] (1,054)
	Reading	50.5% [5.9] (1,853)	65.3% [8.8] (613)	70.0% [10.0] (673)

(Note: For results disaggregated by NRS Level, see Appendix A and B)

Intensity of Attendance

Learners who participate at a high intensity are far more likely to attend more than 100 hours during the fiscal year than those who participate at a low intensity (Table 4).

Even when controlled for the intensity of learner attendance, there remains an increasing relationship between learning gains and the attendance categories in both listening and reading (Table 4).

When disaggregated by NRS Level (Appendix C and D), the results confirm that the increasing relationship between learning gains and the attendance categories persists at almost all the levels.

The data in Table 4 and Appendices C and D also illustrate that among all learners who attend between 61 and 100 hours, those who participate over a longer duration (i.e. low intensity ratio) reflect greater gains than those who attend similar hours but over a shorter duration (i.e. high intensity ratio). This pattern was observed in both listening and reading.

**Table 4: Learning Gains in Listening and Reading
Controlled for Intensity of Attendance
FY 2002-03 to FY 2006-07**

Intensity of Attendance	Skill Area	Percent Completing Level [Mean Gain] (N)		
		Below 60 Hours	61-100 Hours	101 or more Hours
Low	Listening	52.7% [5.7] (16,448)	67.6% [9.2] (3,222)	69.4% [9.6] (869)
	Reading	50.5% [5.6] (6,425)	67.0% [9.5] (1,381)	73.2% [10] (388)
Medium	Listening	49.1% [5.1] (4,655)	54.3% [6.0] (2,009)	69.9% [9.7] (2,329)
	Reading	47.3% [4.9] (2,052)	53.0% [6.0] (911)	69.6% [10.3] (1,247)
High	Listening	46.8% [4.7] (1,354)	54.9% [6.5] (769)	65.2% [8.3] (1,923)
	Reading	49.6% [5.3] (833)	55.8% [6.1] (489)	65.3% [9.0] (1,695)

(Note: For results disaggregated by NRS Level, see Appendix C and D)

Discussion

At each NRS level, learners who attend more hours during a fiscal year reflect higher rates of level completion and greater mean scale score gain. Regardless of the learners' years of prior education, those who attend more than 100 hours reflect the greatest learning gains.

Additionally, learners who attend between 61 and 100 hours in the fiscal year but at a low weekly intensity (i.e. less than 5 hours a week) also reflect strong learning gains. Perhaps learning a new language requires not only a minimum time-on-task (i.e. 61 to 100 hours) but also sustained engagement over several months in order to practice and internalize the new language.

Because low intensity ESL classes generally meet fewer than 15 weeks for four hours each week, learners who enroll in such classes in the fall will need to persist into the second semester (winter/spring) in order to attend between 61 and 100 hours in the fiscal year.

In light of these results, adult education providers should attempt some of the following strategies so that more ESL

learners will attend at least 100 hours during the fiscal year and/or persist for a longer duration:

- Establish class schedules and locations that are based on the needs of learners;
- Offer (at least some) intensive classes that deliver 10 or more hours of instruction a week (especially to learners who enroll after January) so that they can attend more hours over a shorter duration;
- Utilize authentic materials (e.g. job applications, utility bills, promotional materials, pay stubs, etc.) and listening contexts (e.g. phone calls, informal conversations, live announcements, and verbal instructions) that learners may interact with in their daily lives as contexts for basic skills instruction¹;
- Provide learners with feedback about their performance on standardized assessments and utilize those results as one indicator of learner progress toward their goals; and
- Provide support services that help learners to manage the positive and negative forces that help and hinder persistence (Comings, Parrella, and Soricone, 1999).

The only exception to the general tendency of increased gains with greater attendance was observed at the ESL Advanced in the skill area of listening. At this level, learning gains in listening are lower than that in reading due likely to the shortened scale of advanced listening assessments in the Life Skills and Employability series.

Therefore, adult education providers that assess ESL learners in the skill area of listening should begin transitioning to the Life and Work listening series. In the interim, providers that continue with the Life Skills or Employability listening assessments must ensure that learners with slightly advanced listening abilities (i.e. scale score greater than 215) are pre- and post-tested in reading or writing.

Because learners with more years of prior education may progress faster, programs and teachers should consider a learner's educational background when making decisions relative to learner placement and class groupings.

¹Approaches that connect classroom learning to the outside world produce greater improvements in basic reading skills (Condelli, 2002) and promote increased learner engagement with literacy activities in their daily lives (Purcell-Gates et al, 2002). Such a contextualized approach to basic skills instruction is recommended and supported within the CASAS system.

Conclusion

Though many factors may influence the gains that learners achieve on standardized assessments, the results from this study demonstrate an overall positive relationship between learning gains and attendance. The study further illustrates that this increasing relationship persists, even when it is controlled for a learner's years of prior education or the intensity of attendance.

Therefore, implementing strategies that enable more ESL learners to attend at least 100 hours during the fiscal year and/or persist for two semesters in order to attend more than 60 hours should become a priority for all providers of adult education.

References

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Appendices

Appendix A: Listening Gains by Hours Attended Controlling for Years of Prior Education FY 2002-03 to FY 2006-07

Years of Education	NRS Educational Functioning Level	Hours Attended								
		Below 60 hours			61-100 hours			101 or more hours		
		N	% Completing Level	Mean Gain	N	% Completing Level	Mean Gain	N	% Completing Level	Mean Gain
<=8	Beginning Literacy	873	70.1%	15.0	154	88.3%	20.5	123	91.1%	23.4
	Low Beginning	981	70.8%	7.8	213	77.9%	10.4	227	86.3%	12.7
	High Beginning	1,364	57.0%	5.1	363	70.5%	7.8	286	76.6%	9.1
	Low Intermediate	1,179	43.9%	3.6	301	49.5%	5.3	272	58.5%	6.4
	High Intermediate	613	28.5%	0.9	161	34.8%	2.8	107	32.7%	3.0
	Advanced	205	4.9%	-2.0	40	10.0%	0.6	39	10.3%	0.0
9 to 12	Beginning Literacy	792	77.1%	17.1	178	93.3%	23.5	101	99.0%	26.3
	Low Beginning	1,459	80.7%	10.1	410	88.5%	13.6	316	93.4%	15.9
	High Beginning	2,910	66.1%	6.7	878	79.5%	9.6	716	84.8%	11.2
	Low Intermediate	3,785	49.3%	4.4	1,107	58.8%	6.0	1,005	68.7%	8.0
	High Intermediate	2,646	33.6%	1.9	702	40.7%	3.4	648	51.2%	4.9
	Advanced	1,284	11.2%	0.5	308	14.6%	1.4	227	13.7%	1.3
13 or more	Beginning Literacy	65	95.4%	23.5	32	93.8%	24.6	28	96.4%	29.8
	Low Beginning	269	88.5%	11.9	91	93.4%	14.2	63	93.7%	16.4
	High Beginning	748	72.3%	7.5	224	83.9%	11.2	219	88.1%	12.1
	Low Intermediate	1,324	56.3%	5.3	361	63.4%	7.0	345	72.8%	8.8
	High Intermediate	1,164	39.1%	2.8	308	48.7%	4.6	268	52.6%	5.9
	Advanced	796	19.3%	1.2	169	18.9%	2.4	131	26.7%	2.5

**Appendix B: Reading Gains by Hours Attended Controlling for Years of Prior Education
FY 2002-03 to FY 2006-07**

Years of Education	NRS Educational Functioning Level	Hours Attended								
		Below 60 hours			61-100 hours			101 or more hours%		
		N	% Completing Level	Mean Gain	N	% Completing Level	Mean Gain	N	% Completing Level	Mean Gain
<=8	Beginning Literacy	155	76.1%	16.7	35	71.4%	19.3	68	79.4%	20.4
	Low Beginning	158	72.8%	7.6	37	78.4%	9.2	69	89.9%	13.0
	High Beginning	292	57.5%	5.0	66	69.7%	7.2	87	82.8%	11.1
	Low Intermediate	416	48.8%	4.4	92	53.3%	5.6	143	60.8%	7.0
	High Intermediate	249	49.0%	4.2	85	52.9%	5.3	74	62.2%	8.0
	Advanced	174	17.8%	1.3	61	29.5%	3.5	51	25.5%	3.9
9 to 12	Beginning Literacy	173	79.8%	19.4	42	92.9%	22.1	64	90.6%	26.4
	Low Beginning	273	80.6%	10.0	74	90.5%	14.6	77	93.5%	15.9
	High Beginning	803	66.3%	7.2	208	80.8%	10.1	224	90.2%	12.4
	Low Intermediate	1,543	52.1%	5.2	444	65.5%	7.8	584	70.7%	9.2
	High Intermediate	1,482	53.8%	4.4	453	67.1%	6.9	614	76.5%	8.6
	Advanced	1,739	25.6%	2.6	571	35.0%	4.8	602	39.5%	6.2
13 or more	Beginning Literacy	19	94.7%	28.2	3	100.0%	24.7	7	100.0%	26.1
	Low Beginning	28	85.7%	13.8	11	100.0%	18.1	8	100.0%	16.6
	High Beginning	99	77.8%	9.1	33	90.9%	15.5	37	89.2%	15.4
	Low Intermediate	331	61.9%	7.5	110	74.5%	11.1	119	79.8%	11.9
	High Intermediate	382	65.7%	6.3	124	83.9%	9.5	183	83.6%	10.2
	Advanced	994	36.2%	4.3	332	51.2%	6.6	319	54.9%	8.1

**Appendix C: Listening Gains by Hours Attended Controlling for Intensity of Attendance
FY 2002-03 to FY 2006-07**

Intensity of Attendance	NRS Educational Functioning Level	Hours Attended								
		Below 60 hours			61-100 hours			101 or more hours%		
		N	% Completing Level	Mean Gain	N	% Completing Level	Mean Gain	N	% Completing Level	Mean Gain
Low	Beginning Literacy	1,321	75.9%	16.9	234	94.9%	24.1	56	91.1%	27.0
	Low Beginning	1,962	78.3%	9.7	420	88.1%	13.7	107	94.4%	15.8
	High Beginning	3,782	65.7%	6.6	797	82.6%	10.7	247	88.7%	11.2
	Low Intermediate	4,675	50.3%	4.5	994	64.1%	6.9	298	62.4%	7.5
	High Intermediate	3,281	35.4%	2.1	604	48.0%	4.8	165	50.9%	4.7
	Advanced	1,650	15.4%	0.6	258	19.8%	3.0	66	15.2%	0.9
Medium	Beginning Literacy	349	67.9%	13.5	94	87.2%	19.0	131	96.2%	24.5
	Low Beginning	558	76.7%	8.9	209	82.3%	10.9	320	91.6%	14.6
	High Beginning	916	61.7%	5.8	451	72.1%	7.4	544	81.1%	10.5
	Low Intermediate	1,205	48.1%	4.0	534	48.9%	4.9	635	67.9%	8.3
	High Intermediate	809	30.4%	1.9	369	34.1%	2.2	362	50.8%	5.3
	Advanced	443	9.3%	0.3	164	12.8%	0.2	148	19.6%	2.3
High	Beginning Literacy	60	75.0%	18.6	36	77.8%	19.7	65	95.4%	25.3
	Low Beginning	189	77.8%	8.6	85	84.7%	12.4	179	87.2%	14.4
	High Beginning	324	60.2%	5.3	217	73.3%	8.8	430	83.5%	11.1
	Low Intermediate	408	47.8%	4.8	241	54.4%	5.4	689	70.1%	7.8
	High Intermediate	333	33.3%	1.7	198	38.4%	2.7	496	48.4%	4.8
	Advanced	192	6.8%	0.3	95	9.5%	0.3	183	16.9%	1.2

**Appendix D: Reading Gains by Hours Attended Controlling for Intensity of Attendance
FY 2002-03 to FY 2006-07**

Intensity of Attendance	NRS Educational Functioning Level	Hours Attended								
		Below 60 hours			61-100 hours			101 or more hours%		
		N	% Completing Level	Mean Gain	N	% Completing Level	Mean Gain	N	% Completing Level	Mean Gain
Low	Beginning Literacy	216	78.7%	18.9	29	86.2%	22.3	13	84.6%	20.8
	Low Beginning	302	78.1%	9.8	62	90.3%	15.7	20	100.0%	16.6
	High Beginning	804	66.9%	7.2	165	85.5%	12.6	50	92.0%	16.1
	Low Intermediate	1,606	54.8%	5.7	337	74.2%	10.6	99	70.7%	9.6
	High Intermediate	1,464	57.2%	5.1	311	75.6%	8.8	110	80.9%	8.1
	Advanced	2,100	29.6%	3.2	508	46.5%	6.4	124	52.4%	7.1
Medium	Beginning Literacy	81	79.0%	18.1	20	80.0%	20.6	51	92.2%	26.1
	Low Beginning	103	73.8%	8.3	34	82.4%	10.8	62	91.9%	15.5
	High Beginning	267	62.5%	6.1	85	76.5%	7.7	130	85.4%	11.2
	Low Intermediate	438	46.6%	4.5	173	52.6%	5.2	297	68.7%	9.3
	High Intermediate	455	50.8%	4.2	215	62.3%	5.8	274	78.8%	9.8
	Advanced	571	27.0%	2.7	298	33.6%	4.2	329	48.6%	7.4
High	Beginning Literacy	50	80.0%	18.3	31	83.9%	20.0	75	81.3%	22.1
	Low Beginning	54	87.0%	9.4	26	88.5%	11.0	72	90.3%	13.4
	High Beginning	123	58.5%	6.0	57	66.7%	6.4	168	89.3%	12.3
	Low Intermediate	246	52.0%	5.2	136	59.6%	5.2	450	71.3%	9.0
	High Intermediate	194	52.1%	3.1	136	61.8%	5.9	487	74.7%	8.6
	Advanced	236	25.4%	3.0	158	32.9%	4.2	519	38.7%	6.2