

**English Language Acquisition:  
The Opportunities & Experiences of  
Somerville's Latino Community**



**URBAN BORDERLANDS**

**Researchers: Lerone Lessner (Tufts),**

**Sidia Escobar (AHORA) & Yesenia Portillo (AHORA)**

**Fall 2003**

# Table of Contents

I. Introduction.....	3
Acknowledgements.....	3
Personal background and project introduction.....	4
Research methods and limitations.....	6
II. Who’s Who of the Project.....	10
III. ESOL programs: The Basics.....	16
Concilio Hispano.....	16
Welcome Project.....	16
Centro Presente.....	17
SCALE.....	18
Other Programs.....	19
Up & Coming.....	19
Listing of Programs.....	21
IV. Strengths & Weaknesses of ESOL programs.....	22
V. English Acquisition: motivations and experiences of a community.....	25
On the Job.....	26
Independence.....	28
Citizenship.....	29
Reaching out.....	31
Life at Home.....	32
VI. Bilingualism through the Eyes of the Future: the young adult perspective.....	35
VII. Conclusion.....	38
Concluding Thoughts.....	38
Yesenia Portillo & Sidia Escobar’s thoughts.....	41
Further Research.....	42

## **Part I: Introduction**

### **Acknowledgements:**

I would first like to acknowledge the involvement of the many kind members of the Latino community of Somerville. However, there are a few people who deserve a special thanks for the instrumental role they played in the research and project development. Sidia Escobar and Yesenia Portillo, my partners from the AHORA program, who are wise beyond their years. You have both provided me with inspiration for the project as well as a greater connection to the Latino community of Somerville; I could never have done this without you. To the directors and staff of all the ESOL programs who guided me in my research, your work is invaluable and I greatly appreciate your willingness to participate in the project. Many thanks must go to each and every one of the English language students that shared with me their time and their stories, for while I inquired about their motivations to learn English, they were truly my motivation for exploring the captivating impacts of English-language issues in the Latino community of Somerville. My appreciation must also be extended to the Urban Borderland class, particularly Professor Deborah Pacini Hernandez and our “right-hand woman”, Rosaura Vega, who both provided endless support, organization, understanding and, of course, sanity, throughout a semester of intense and extremely gratifying work. To each and every contributor: Thank you.



### **Personal Background and Project Introduction:**

My name is Lerone Lessner and I am currently a senior at Tufts University in Medford, MA, studying International Relations with a concentration in cultural anthropology. I was born and grew up in Connecticut, however both of my parents are Israeli and the majority of my family resides in Israel. I was raised speaking Hebrew until I reached kindergarten, at which point I began speaking both Hebrew and English in my home environment. Thus my initial interest in bilingualism and culture was set into motion. My interest in English for Speakers of Other Languages and Latino communities first flourished during my senior year in high school when I was fortunate enough to experience tutoring native Spanish-speaking freshman in English and general science. Working with these students sparked my desire to find out more about their experiences with bilingualism, how their family members, particularly the parents of these students, were affected by learning English and becoming bilingual.

Urban Borderlands is a fieldwork based class at Tufts University in which students strive to investigate and promote the positive contributions and cultural capital of the Latino community in Somerville. Somerville has become home for many Latino immigrants since the 1980's when many fled to the United States to escape political,

economic and social crises in their sending countries. Currently, there is a large community of Salvadoran immigrants in Somerville, however there are members of the community from various other Latin American backgrounds, such as Peru, Colombia, and Guatemala. There are substantial Brazilian and Haitian immigrant populations that add to the unique atmosphere within Somerville, MA.

This semester, each student or pair of students has in some way captured the vibrancy and importance of the Latinos in Somerville, together creating a diverse collection of research and experiences through which this cultural capital can be promulgated and preserved. As a result of my prior experiences with language acquisition experiences, I was intrigued about how language plays a role in the Latino community we would be studying and therefore chose to investigate the English acquisition experiences of the Latino community of Somerville. I strove to gain a contextual understanding of these experienced by answering the following questions: What programs are available for Latinos in Somerville to learn English? What motivates Latinos to seek out these classes and how do these classes fit in with their rest of their lives? What are the main obstacles that they face in actually learning English? I also asked, which was perhaps most important, how does learning English change/affect a person's job, family? I also sought to understand where the concept of bilingualism fits into the lives of these community members, particularly in the lives of the young adults of the community.

The Latino community in Somerville has been subject to a significant amount of discrimination by the greater community, including unconstitutional singling out of groups of Latino men by police, as well as an outlawing of bilingual education in schools due to a Massachusetts vote. Latino immigrants in Somerville have also not escaped from

the stereotype that they are reluctant or not trying to learn English, and are criticized for not speaking English fluently. Through my interview and oral-history based research, I plan to clearly demonstrate the immeasurable amount of determination and motivation demonstrated by the Latinos of Somerville in their quest for English language acquisition. Despite the fact that many have lower levels of literacy in their native language, making it infinitely harder to learn English, the community has remained dedicated to improving themselves in this manner. Their determination to learn English is only a small hint of a much greater desire to be an active part of the greater Somerville community. It is crucial that this attitude and active seeking of English education opportunities be fully acknowledged and appreciated by the surrounding communities. Thus, the research results will be used to fight the false stereotypes about Latinos and their lack of desire and ability to speak English, and promoting a genuine respect for the strength and contributions of the Latino community of Somerville.

### **Research Methods and Limitations:**

The research process for this project involved first getting to know the community and the English-language classes that were offered by various organizations. While there were clearly informal ways of learning English from friends, television or one's job, I sought to speak to those that enrolled in classes in the community, and how their more formal way of learning English affected them. After the preliminary task of attaining background knowledge from the program directors of various organizations in Somerville and Cambridge, Sidia, Yesenia and I began the process of interviewing Latinos in the Somerville community about their English acquisition experiences, beginning with both

of my partners' mothers. We then branched out and interviewed some friends of family and students in the various ESOL classes. In order to gain some perspective on these students and the programs they have enrolled in, I also interviewed staff and instructors from a few of the ESOL programs attended by many Latinos from Somerville. The interviewees ranged in nationality, and while there were more Salvadoran narrators than others, I felt it was important to include ESOL students from other nationalities if possible.

These interviews were both extremely informative and challenging for me as a researcher. The majority of the interviews were conducted in Spanish (not my native language), which increased the overall level of comfort for the members of the community and my confidence that the interviewees felt capable of answering the questions as they wished. However, this was clearly a limiting factor in the sense that I was naturally less prone to question and delve further into information that was presented at first glance. While I am confident that I have a relatively accurate understanding of all that was discussed during the interview, I am also positive that I did not understand every phrase and am therefore more tentative in drawing my conclusions in an effort to accurately portray the experiences and insights that were shared with me throughout the duration of the project. In addition, my ability to be clear about what information I was seeking during the interviews was somewhat limited by this language barrier. However, language was a limiting factor and created obstacles in the research; in some ways I feel that it gave me a deeper understanding and appreciation for the drive and motivation the community members had to overcome these language-based obstacles.

While I am relatively well-informed as to the general history and context in which the Latino immigrants that I interviewed arrived in the United States, as well as the social, economic, and political situations which were abandoned in immigrating to the U.S.. However, I truly believe that contextualizing any issue increases the ability one has in understanding current practices, values and obstacles of any community. Thus, I was very much limited by my modest knowledge of the sending countries of the Latino immigrants I was fortunate to establish a connection with, and my context was limited to the experiences that were shared with me during the interviews and that previous knowledge I had of the Latino community in Somerville. In the same regard, I have little knowledge of how other communities have experienced English acquisition and what motivates them to learn English when arriving in the United States. This lack of knowledge has influenced my ability to understand language acquisition within the Somerville community as within other immigrant communities nation-wide.

Another limitation was the number and various life situations of the people that I was able to interview during the course of my research. The Latino community of Somerville is brimming with a unique diversity that adds to its strength and character. From murals and Mass, different family structures to different family recipes, Somerville is filled with various expressions of culture. It can then be concluded that while I was able to interview several men, several women, and hold a discussion with a small group of students about their experiences in English acquisition, there are surely views, opinions, stories that differ from those I was fortunate enough to have shared with me. Even within the small group of intriguing women, men, and young adults that I interviewed, many of whom live in the same area of Somerville, there were significant

variations in their life experiences, clearly a result of diverse backgrounds and the lives that they lead. Thus, perhaps the most limiting factor of all was the time that I was able to devote to this research. I, along with my partners Sidia Escobar and Yesenia Portillo, did all we could to capture the experiences of the community in learning English and understand the difficulties of such a task. Nevertheless, I can only imagine how much more there is to learn and I hope that others will contribute in the future to the introductory research I have done during this 12 week project.

## **Part II: Who's Who of the Project**

### Antoinette Basualdo Delmonico

Antoinette Basualdo Delmonico is the coordinator for the ESOL program at Concilio Hispano, as well as the supervisor for the AHORA program for high school students (like my research partners Sidia Escobar and Yesenia Portillo. Antoinette has been involved in the Latino community through Concilio Hispano for many years, and throughout that time has gained a great deal of insight as to what motivates members of the community to seek out English acquisition opportunities such as the classes offered by Concilio Hispano.

### Betty Stone

Betty Stone is the coordinator for the ESOL program at Somerville Center for Adult Learning & Education (SCALE), and has been part of the program since 1978. Betty Stone has had a great deal of experience working with the Latino community of Somerville through SCALE and plans to continue working alongside other organizations such as Concilio Hispano, the Welcome Project, and Centro Presente to educate the adult community and provide learning opportunities for as many students as possible.

### Diego Fernando Lopez

Diego Fernando Lopez is a nineteen year-old young man from Colombia, and had resided in the United States for a year and five months at the time of the interview. He lives in Somerville with members of his family, all of whom have moved to the United States. He works at Northeastern University in the evenings and studies as an ESOL

student in one of Concilio Hispano's classes held in their Somerville branch office. He has been a student of these classes for approximately six months; however he has previously attended classes at SCALE as well. Diego hopes to improve himself and gain a higher level of education through his acquisition of the English language.

#### Edith Sanchez

Edith Sanchez is from Costa Rica and arrived in the United States (in Somerville) approximately 11 years prior to the interview. She arrived with her four children as a resident, reuniting with her husband who had arrived before her. Edith had limited experience with ESOL classes at the time of the interview, and had only had the opportunity to attend a month of ESL classes at the Welcome Project before leaving the class for personal economic reasons. Edith expressed the need to use English to improve not only herself but her community through the transcendence of knowledge and empowerment that results from English acquisition.

#### Faustino Delacruz

Faustino Delacruz immigrated to Somerville, MA from Peru in 2002. Faustino's wife and children remain in Peru, and he has been working to provide his son with the financial means to attend the university. After arriving, Faustino signed onto the waiting list at Concilio Hispano, and had been taking classes with Concilio Hispano for three months at the time of the interview. Faustino currently has no other family in the U.S.; however he wishes to stay here and work and educate himself. He has a great

appreciation for the Concilio Hispano for providing him with the opportunity to learn English and is very dedicated to his studies.

Jaime Vargas

Jaime Vargas is from El Salvador and has resides in Somerville with his wife and two daughters. He arrived in the United States without his family approximately six years ago, and since been reunited with his family and begun taking ESOL classes. He had been enrolled in one of Concilio Hispano's Somerville branch classes for two months at the time of the interview. Jaime would like to remain in the United States and enjoys and appreciates the opportunity offered to him by Concilio Hispano to learn English and improve himself.

Maria D. Escobar

Maria D. Escobar, at the time of this oral history recording, was participating in the ESOL program at Somerville Center for Adult Learning Experiences (SCALE) for eight hours a week and had been doing so for the previous two years. She had emigrated from El Salvador to central Florida and later to Somerville, Massachusetts where she now resides with her four children. She attends classes ESOL classes through the SCALE program four days a week for two hours a day in the mornings and then works every afternoon. All four of her children attend public school and are fluent in both English and Spanish, and the preservation of both languages are very important to Maria.

Nelson Salazar

Nelson Salazar arrived from Sonsonate, El Salvador in 1980. He lived in Cambridge and worked for Concilio Hispano for some time, and is currently the coordinator of the Welcome Project at the Mystic Ave housing developments. He lives with his wife and children in Somerville. Nelson has been instrumental in this project in both connecting me and my partners to people of the community, as well as providing a space for us to meet and discuss the topic of English acquisition and ESOL programs.

Ralph Hergert

Ralph Hergert, age 56 at the time of the interview, grew up in many different locations in the United States but has been residing in Somerville for approximately the last 25 years. He has been an instructor at the Welcome Project for about ten months, but has known about and been involved in the Welcome Project for a long time. He thoroughly enjoys teaching these classes and is interested in pursuing a certificate in this field to improve his ability to instruct these ESOL classes. Over the years, Ralph has had extensive interaction with the Latino community of Somerville and also works as the minister of a small Baptist Church on Cross St. in Somerville.

Rosa G. Medrano E.

Rosa G. Medrano E. is from El Salvador, and has been living in Somerville ever since she arrived in the U.S. approximately 18 years ago. She currently works for Harvard University's janitorial system and takes ESOL classes twice a week for two hours as a student of the Harvard Bridge Program, an opportunity open to any employee

at Harvard University. Her children attend public school in Somerville and are all bilingual which serves as a great source of pride for Rosa. Previously, she had also taken a citizenship-oriented history class at Centro Presente, which contributed to her ability to successfully achieve U.S. citizenship.

### Margarita Escobar

Margarita Escobar is a 39-year-old Salvadoran, mother of three. She first arrived in Somerville on October 13, 1989, with only one sister to turn to. As time progressed, she informally learned English while practicing with her coworkers. She is currently a resident of the United States and attends free English classes provided by her employer at the Winchester Nursing Home. She began these classes the year 2002 and plans to continue along the path towards English acquisition.

### Sidia Escobar

Sidia Escobar is currently 15 years old and is a freshman attending Somerville High School. She was born in El Salvador and raised by her grandmother Rosa. At the age of nine, she arrived at the United States in hopes of being reunited with her mother who had immigrated to the United States seeking employment when Sidia was very young. Sidia is very dedicated to preserving her Spanish language and culture and hopes to encourage her younger brother to do the same. She strives to do her best in school and supports her peers in their academic efforts as well.

## Yesenia Portillo

Yesenia Portillo is a 15-year-old 9th grade student at the Somerville High School. While her parents were both born in El Salvador, she was born and raised in Somerville, MA. Yesenia has four sisters and one brother; two of her older siblings currently live on their own, two younger siblings live in East Boston, and one of her younger sisters lives with her in Somerville. Yesenia's favorite subject is Math and hopes to be eventually apply these skills to her future career. Her current goals are to improve her grades and effort in school and successfully graduate from high school. She is fascinated by Law and the way laws influence society, and is therefore interested in becoming a lawyer. She hopes to enjoy studying law while providing justice for those who deserve it.

## Part III. ESOL programs: The Basics

# ConcilioHispano



Concilio Hispano, Inc. is a non-profit human service organization founded in 1969 by Latinos who wanted to improve conditions in their community. Today, still managed by Latinos, they continue to make an impact on the lives of Latinos by offering a wide range of opportunities throughout the greater Boston area. With branches in Cambridge, Somerville, and Chelsea, and outreach programs that extend as far north as Lawrence and as far west as Framingham it serves more than 3,000 clients each year. All three branches of Concilio Hispano, Chelsea, Cambridge and Somerville, offer 6, 3, and 2 ESOL classes respectively, all of which are at no cost to their students. Classes each have between 12-15 students, and although the majority of the students are of Latino background, there are other immigrant populations represented as well. The adult education services offered by Concilio Hispano have existed for over 15 years, and the ESOL program has always been an integral part of these services.



The Welcome Project is a community-based initiative that began in the Mystic Public Housing Development of Somerville, Massachusetts in 1987. As new residents were arriving from Haiti, Central America, Viet Nam and other parts of the world, many were victims of discrimination and harassment by the surrounding Somerville community. The founders of the Welcome Project began as a dedicated group of tenants

and community members who came together to welcome and support new residents. Over the past fifteen years, the organization has evolved to meet changing circumstances and have strived to make the Mystic development a livable and safe place for all residents. The Welcome Project currently offers native language adult literacy tutoring, basic ESOL classes, and an ESOL citizenship class. ESOL classes are taught Tuesdays and Thursdays for two hours each, with both basic and advanced levels of English proficiency. These classes are a place where members both within the Mystic Housing Development and within the surrounding community can come together, learn English and share parts of their lives with other students, as well as with the current ESOL instructor, Ralph Hergert.



Established in 1981, Centro Presente is an immigrant-led, community-based organization. Centro's mission is to develop the capacity of the Latino community in New England to determine its future. Centro Presente accomplishes its mission through community education and development, adult education programs, youth leadership development, and immigration legal services. The Department of Adult Education at Centro Presente helps over 500 students every year to improve the quality of their lives by providing ESL, Literacy and Citizenship classes. There are many different levels of ESOL classes and they require a fee of one hundred dollars for 36 weeks (two and a half months) of ESOL classes. There are four different cycles of classes every year: January

to March, April to June, the July Intensive cycle, and September to December. Classes are held in the morning, evening, and on Saturdays.

**Somerville Center for Adult Learning Experiences**  
**SCALE**  
Where Knowledge Blooms



The English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program at Somerville Community for Adult Learning Experiences (SCALE) was founded in 1974. The center is located next to Davis Square on Holland Avenue and has historically always been dedicated to teaching ESOL classes to immigrants of the community that wanted to learn English. SCALE has approximately 350 students enrolled in the 22 ESOL classes (all levels included) at any point in time.

There are four different levels of basic beginner to advanced classes held in the mornings, along with two levels of literacy classes. In the evenings, there are five levels of classes and three levels of literacy classes. Literacy classes involve educating students in their native language, as many have not had the opportunity to receive an education in their sending country. Once literacy in the native language is achieved, it allows an easier transition into English acquisition. Each class, regardless of the level, meets for eight hours a week, and there are approximately 17 students per class, with slightly fewer students in the literacy classes. The program began through funding from both the city of Somerville as well as the State Department of Education and funding has continued to come from both of these sources. The ESOL sector of SCALE accounts for approximately sixty percent of the programming, including twenty-six staff members involved in just the ESOL department.

## **Other Opportunities**

### *St. Benedicts Church:*

St Benedict's Church offers English classes to adults two days per week. The teachers of these classes are Latinos from the organization, Concilio Hispano, and come from multiple countries in Latin America including Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador (Martin-Cooley, 21).

### *Family Literacy Programs:*

CAAS Head-Start Family Literacy Program

Community Action Agency of Somerville, Inc.

66-70 Union Square #104, Somerville, MA 02143

Phone: 617-623-7370

**Contact (Boston): Sandra Darling**

## **Up & Coming programs**

### **Tufts University ESOL Program**

Every Saturday for 2 hours, Tufts students volunteers interact in a on-one-one tutoring environment with members of the Tufts custodial staff to aid in their English acquisition. There are two classes that are offered, an English introduction class as well as a more advanced grammar class. The work in these classes ranges from reading newspaper articles, playing games, group activities, and practicing conversation skills. The program is in its relatively early stages of development and those involved hope to see it expand

and serve more people seeking this type of opportunity within the surrounding communities.

**Committee of Refugees from El Salvador (CORES)**

Telephone: 623 -5322

One Summer Street

P.O. Box 1183 Somerville, MA 02144

Contact: Marcos Garcia/ Juliette Lizeray (Tufts University organizer)

### Listing of Programs

Program	Regist.	AM	EVE	Address	Town	Phone	Fee
Concilio Hispano	1 <sup>st</sup> Tues. 3 <sup>rd</sup> Th. or appt.	X		52 Broadway	Somerville	617- 661-9406	NO
Somerville Adult Evening Program	9/29, 30 10/1 – Late		X	Somerville H.S. 81 Highland Ave.	Somerville	617 – 628-1601	YES
Somerville Family Network (Residents w/ kids 0-3 yrs)	On-going	X	X	1060 Broadway	Somerville	617-625- 6600 (x6990)	NO
Welcome Project	T/Th eve. Various starting times		X	Mystic Activity Center, 530 Mystic Ave.	Somerville	617-623- 6633	NO
Cambridge Center for Adult Education	ASAP	X	X	42 Brattle Street	Cambridge	617-730- 6789	YES
Centro Presente		X	X	54 Essex Street	Cambridge	617-497- 9080	YES
Concilio Hispano	M-F 9-5 or 4 <sup>th</sup> TR 6-8	X	X	105 Windsor Street	Cambridge	617-661- 9406	NO
HAEDA/Cambridge Rindge & Latin	Call & leave msg.		X	459 Broadway, Room 227	Cambridge	617-349- 6257	NO
Medford Community Schools	ASAP		X	489 Winthrop St.	Medford	781-393- 2226	YES

**MASS ADULT LITERACY HOTLINE: 1-800-447-8844**

## **Part IV. Strengths and Weaknesses of ESOL programs**

These programs are what make the English acquisition process possible for the Latinos of Somerville. As expressed by the directors and instructors I interviewed, teaching English requires a great deal of skill and patience, and I, like the students of the community have an incredible amount of appreciation and respect for all those that make these classes possible. While every program previously mentioned is somehow different than the others, they all share a few important strengths and weaknesses that affect the community they are serving.

One of the main strengths common to all these programs is their ability to engage their students and provide them with the information that instructors find most pertinent in their lives. Many of these adults come into these classes with a very basic and often no knowledge of the English language. In order to aid these students in their lives outside of the classroom, it is crucial to provide them with the vocabulary and grammatical means to communicate with their bosses, the school systems of their children, the doctor, the bank teller, etc. The programs all focus on teaching practical English so that the students feel more comfortable in their environment as soon as possible.

An additional strength of these programs is the support and opportunities that are offered through other facets of the organization. Concilio Hispano, Centro Presente and the Welcome Project are all very successful in engaging their students and encouraging them to take advantage of the other opportunities made available by the organization. Through these classes, many Latinos are able to meet others from their community and interact in other settings outside the classroom. As articulated by Ralph Hergert, the ESOL instructor at the Welcome Project, “it’s really quite remarkable, the stories that

they bring to the table...and people feel pretty free, I think, to speak about themselves and their interests.”<sup>1</sup> There are clearly academic differences between the programs as well; for example, the SCALE program, as part of a greater Adult Education community, has more of an academic component than, for example, the Welcome Project. Ralph Hergert portrayed the classes at the Welcome Project as more social and more like the rest of the Welcome Project’s mission: to bring together people of different backgrounds and give them a comfortable and safe space to interact.

However, like all organizations and their services, there are obstacles encountered and limitations of the programs’ ability to serve the community in their goals of English acquisition. The most prominent and understandable of these obstacles is the notorious waiting list that accompanies almost every ESOL program without a required fee in the greater Boston area. Between the various programs, the waiting list encompasses the hundreds of adults patiently waiting for the opportunity to learn English in a classroom setting. While it is clearly not the fault of the organizations providing these classes that they simply do not have the financial means to offer more classes, it is quite disconcerting to hear about the many students who were once on a waiting list and all those that remain waiting for this opportunity.

The other major limitation of these programs is that despite placement tests and various levels of classes offered, there is still a diversity of students in terms of their native language, their literacy in their native language, and their educational background. Thus, teaching such an amalgamated classroom of students requires a great deal of skill, sensitivity and patience. It also means that, particularly for the elementary levels, there can be difficulties in explaining a concept using only English because there are students

---

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Ralph Hergert, 11/13/03

of various nationalities and language backgrounds. While certain programs are more centered on the Latino community (Centro Presente and Concilio Hispano) other classes, such as those at SCALE and the Welcome Project, include adults from all over the world speaking a wide variety of languages. This issue becomes infinitely more complicated once the educational background of the students is taken into account, for even those that don't know a word of English are more inclined to learning the language if they have been exposed to grammar and syntax in their native language. However, many of the immigrants that make up the Somerville community were not able to attend elementary or secondary schools in these sending communities as a result of the political, economic, and social turmoil in their native countries. Despite these concerns, it is essential that deference and gratitude be shown for the generosity and incredible services that are provided through these ESOL classes and the organizations in which they are based.

## **V. English Acquisition:**

### **Motivations & experiences of a community**

Throughout the process of interviewing members of the Latino community in Somerville regarding their experiences with ESOL classes, I focused a lot of the time within each interview in discussing the motivations that people had to take English class. When asking in interviews why these community members decided to take English classes and what motivated them to do so, some of the narrators were somewhat confused by the apparent simplicity of the question. “Bueno, inglés es la lengua de los Estados Unidos,” [English is the language of the United States] they answered. “Sí, inglés es bien importante,” [English is very important] they answered.<sup>2</sup> However, I was convinced that there is more to the decision to enroll in English classes. There are parts of their lives that they want to improve or alter in some way and see English as a means to achieve this change. There are of course the more obvious daily life activities that become easier and more comfortable because of the breaking down of language barriers, and keeping one’s dignity and respect as an adult. As one of my interviewees, Maria Escobar, commented, English is important for everything: “por ejemplo, para ir a doctor, para hablar con los maestros de mis hijos, para todos se necesita inglés...porque cuando uno no sabe ingles y esta tratando mal...hay mas discriminación si alguien no entiende el idioma.” [For example, in order to go to the doctor, or to speak with my children’s teachers, you need English for everything, and when someone doesn’t know English and speaks incorrectly...there is more discrimination if someone doesn’t understand the language.]

---

<sup>2</sup> Interviews with Maria Escobar (10/15/03) and Edith Sanchez (10/24/03)

All of the students participating in the Urban Borderlands project have heard members of the community discuss the language barriers they have encountered and how language complications and alterations can completely change someone's life. Through this research and recording of oral history, I was able to delve further into understanding the changes that occur and the way one's lifestyle is affected by English acquisition within this diverse Latino community. After reviewing the stories and experiences that my interviewees shared with me, I was able to identify sectors of the lives of these community members that were somehow affected through their English language acquisition. These sectors included their jobs and desires relating to their occupations, citizenship and dependency issues, community interaction, and last but certainly not least, the effect English acquisition has on their family life. It is important to reiterate that each of the community members come from very different backgrounds, and thus, the generalizations I was able to make are based on what was presented to Yesenia, Sidia and me during the interview, often without a great deal of background knowledge in terms of the person's social, economic and educational history from their life in their sending country. However, there were clear links between all of the Latino community members that I interviewed and those general principles, motivations and experiences are what I would like to present in this report.

### On the Job

Many of the Latinos I interviewed expressed the way learning English has changed their work situation. This was true for Jaime Vargas, a student in one of the Concilio Hispano classes and his ability to communicate with his boss. "Me ayuda en el

trabajo...me siento mas abierto, como tengo poder con mi destino...y puedo hablar más con mi jefe porque el habla mucho conmigo y a veces me quedo [en silencio]...que no sé como con contestarle, pero ahora me siento un poquito mas suelto.” [It (English) helps me at work...I feel more open, capable and in control...and I can communicate more with my boss because he speaks to me a lot and sometimes I remain [frozen]...I didn’t know how to answer him, but now I feel a little bit more at ease].<sup>3</sup> Language barriers completely change a person’s sense of comfort and capabilities, and even having slight knowledge of the language after a few months of classes, Jaime, and others are able to improve their relationships with their employers.

This is also true of the interaction many Latinos have with their coworkers. Faustino Delacruz commented on his English-speaking friends at work and how things have changed with them since he began learning in the Concilio Hispano ESOL class: “Ellos hablan y yo escucho, y antes yo no entendí ninguna palabra...nada! Pero ahora, ya entiendo más, unas palabras, un por ciento del lo que los dijeron.” [They talk and I listen, and before I didn’t understand any of it, not a single word! But now, already I understand more, some words here and there, a percentage of what they are saying].<sup>4</sup> A few of the interviewees, particularly the men I interviewed, commented on the fact that not speaking English keeps them from getting better jobs. Faustino felt that people were discriminated against because they couldn’t speak English and employers would not hire them even though they might be people that are qualified. Diego Lopez, at age 19, had a very direct and honest attitude. When I talked to him about his job and what he saw for himself, he said very matter-of-fact: “todo el mundo que no aprende inglés tiene que ir a

---

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Jaime Vargas (11/25/03).

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Faustino Delacruz (11/21/03)

trabajar en la cocina, trabajar en la limpieza....pero yo quiero mejorarme.” [Everyone who doesn’t learn English has to go to work in the kitchen or as a janitor...but I want to improve myself]. Diego was very candid, but also very determined, and felt that by learning English, he could study other things and eventually work in a field that he has studied, perhaps in the university setting.

Although the men were more perhaps more vocal about the improvements they saw for themselves in their work as a result of English classes, the women I interviewed also seemed very intent on finding better jobs or using their English skills to make sure the job that they have now is done successfully and that they are able to communicate in their work surroundings. The younger interviewees appeared to have higher expectations for finding a better/different job that they may have not been qualified for before having learned English. Perhaps this is merely a matter of age, and these younger Latinos may have felt less settled in their employment situation, or saw an opportunity for change in the future. Regardless, every member of the community I spoke with was clearly affected in a positive manner by their relatively new English language skills within their work environment.

### Independence

Many narrators felt a difference in their ability to rely on themselves to ask for whatever they need and this independence is something they attribute almost solely to their English skills. For example, Faustino Delacruz noted the difference he felt in even a short period of time in the classes; “Antes no sabía a preguntar en las calles y no podía decir nada. A veces no sabía como comprar algo, una comida...no podía! Por eso quiero

estudiar...ya entiendo mas palabras, me gano mucho de las clases.” [Before I didn’t know anything about asking for help from people that I met and I couldn’t say anything.

Sometimes I didn’t know how to buy something, or find something to eat...I couldn’t do it! This is one of the reasons I wanted to study [English]...I already understand more words and I have learned a lot from the classes].<sup>5</sup> Generally, I felt that through all of my interviews, the students viewed learning English as a tool they can use to be their own person. English was a key in reaching their full potential as independents and even those who were hesitant about their English skills demonstrated a clear correlation between English and their comfort and capabilities to do what it is they needed to accomplish on a daily basis.

### Citizenship

The issue of citizenship was at times a difficult one to discuss throughout the interview process, reasonably so as it can certainly be a sensitive issue for those who are or were previously undocumented. However, several of the interviewees that have been naturalized expressed an important connection between their ability to become citizens and their English language classes. The realization of citizenship and being able to defend oneself were articulated by Rosa G. Medrano E.; “Ahora puedo defenderme por mí propio...yo soy una ciudadana Americana y estuve en una entrevista con inmigración cuando me llegué a ser ciudadana Americana...y todo fue en ingles..la historia y todo fue en íngles y pasé el examen” [I am now able to defend myself independently...I am an American citizen, and I the interview I had with immigration services in order to be naturalized was conducted fully in English...the history parts and everything was all in

---

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Faustino Delacruz (10/21/03)

English and I passed the exam].<sup>6</sup> Citizenship issues were much more infrequent topics of conversation in the interviews, and it was not often mentioned as a motivation for taking English classes. Ralph Hergert, instructor of ESOL classes at the Welcome Project also mentioned that he felt this was not as much of a motivating factor for his students as he would have predicted.<sup>7</sup>

After reviewing the experiences I have had with the various community members, I realized that this seemingly absent piece of the puzzle I had formulated about the Latino community's experiences with English and taking classes can be attributed to a few factors. Firstly, perhaps the feat of becoming a citizen appears too overwhelming or impossible for some, and therefore they would be irrational to include it as a motivation to learn English. It is also possible that issues of transnationalism are at play and that while American citizens may egocentrically ask, "why not?" immigrants, despite expressing interest in remaining in the United States, may have stronger ties to their sending countries.

The other plausible line of reasoning is that, I, as a White American, have misread and misinterpreted both the goals of many of the Latinos that I have met, as well as assumed that this community views learning English as a qualification and/or requirement for becoming a U.S. citizen. While it is true that it may in fact be easier to become a citizen with English language skills, as Rosa mentioned, it is most likely not impossible to be naturalized without being bilingual. Thus both my conjectures regarding citizenship issues linking with English acquisition, as well as the notions that Ralph Hergert also expressed regarding citizenship being a motivator for learning English are

---

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Rosa G. Medrano E. (10/15/03)

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Ralph Hergert (11/13/03)

uncertain, and it would perhaps require a great deal more research to have a clearer sense of what role citizenship plays in the thoughts and determination of the Latino English language students I interviewed.

### Reaching Out to the Community

Feeling a part of the community is based on being able to communicate with others and many of the narrators expressed language as a barrier to this, despite many of them living in a community like the Mystic Housing Development, which has a significant number of Spanish-speaking immigrants. Rosa Medrano mentioned during her interview that just a trip to the store was a way to interact and it was easier if you can speak English.

Not only was learning English a way to improve one's ability to communicate and interact within the community, but actually just going to class was at some level a chance to participate in an educational program as well as have the time and opportunity to socialize. This is especially true in the lives of people that work so hard to support themselves and their families. Ralph Hergert expressed how just attending the ESOL classes was a way to relax and enjoy social interaction with others seeking the same situation:

For most people this is a time of real freedom from their other responsibilities...we have a couple of women who say to me, you know, I really like being here because I get up at four in the morning, cook for my family, go to my job, come home from my job, take care of my family” and I think to myself, well no wonder you want to come to ESL class. They can just sit and relax. You know that it's certainly true that I learn as much as other people in the class learn...its tremendously educational to spend time with people so that we are both in a learning position, we spend time together and people talk about their lives, it's a real gift for people to do that, for them to tell you about their lives, so, you know, it's a real mutual situation, it's not like I'm standing in front of a group, pouring knowledge into them as if they were empty vessels,

it's genuine reciprocity, which I think is true in most adult education if you really think about it.<sup>8</sup>

Ralph's view as an instructor was obviously different than the students of the class, however after attending part of the classes and becoming familiar with the Welcome Project, it was apparent that the English acquisition sector of community building and adult education is vibrant and growing within the Mystic Housing Development's community.

Edith Sanchez also shared with me an insightful point about learning English, and while it is somewhat individual, it is a skill like any other that she felt could be shared with the community: "Si yo sé una cosa, yo quería compartirla con los demás, y así los demás pueden aprender, y aprovecharlo."<sup>9</sup> [If I know something, I want to share with everyone, and that way everyone else can learn and take advantage of what I know.] Through all the interviews, and within interviews of other Urban Borderlands projects, language barriers was an obstacle in community building, but it seems that despite this, the Latino community of Somerville has found ways to reach out to their community and interact both through the ESOL classes and just learning English in general.

### Life at Home

Family life was very much a factor in various narrator's English acquisition experiences and motivations. Language changes the home environment a great deal, and many parents discussed their relationships with their children being based on their children's knowledge of Spanish. Despite the fact that some of the mothers disliked the

---

<sup>8</sup> Transcription of L.Lessner interview with R. Herget 11.13.03

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Edith Sanchez, 10.24.03

way their children spoke English amongst themselves and on the phone, they were understanding of the compromises made with a bilingual lifestyle. The most common concern of a few of the community members was ensuring the academic success of their children. The mothers I interviewed expressed their desire to help their children in school and being hard pressed to do so when they lacked English skills. Thus many depended on older siblings or friends to help guide aid in the academic lives of younger children within the community. Edith Sanchez voiced her concerns about the education of their children and her lack of English skills, stating: “Me preocupo mucho, y siempre los padres son preocupados con el futuro de los hijos, por ejemplo, cuando mi hija tiene problemas en una materia, no podía ayudarle....yo pienso que si los padres nos preparamos un poquito más, puedo participar más en sus [vidas de sus hijos]...nuestros niños son los niños del futuro.”<sup>10</sup> [I worry a lot, and parents always worry about the future of their children, for example when my daughter has a problem in some subject, I couldn't help her...I think that if we as parents prepare ourselves a little more, we can participate more in the lives of our children. Our children are the children of future.] While these parents may be viewed as uninvolved by the outside community prone to discrimination, the Latinos I interviewed were the exact opposite and were merely seeking ways to best educate and help raise their children.

The parents were all interested in raising their children bilingually and promoting their education in every way possible while still maintaining strong family and cultural values. From the dedication Faustino Delacruz had for making sure his son had money to attend the university in Peru, to Rosa Medrano and Maria Escobar's insistence that their children speak Spanish with them to make sure they retain their bilingual abilities,

---

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Edith Sanchez 10.24.03

education is an important part of the home in the Latino community of Somerville. The ESOL adult education classes that these Latinos attend are an extension of this aspect of the community and the respect given to learning and improving oneself.

I noted in my research that interviewees with children, particularly women, seemed to comment more on family life being a big part of their motivations. This could be a result of the fact that two of the men I interviewed either didn't have a wife and children (Diego Lopez) or didn't have them present in the United States with them, and thus wouldn't be affected or motivated by any aspect of family life. The women I interviewed all had families and children and thus were motivated by the positive effects it could have on their family relationship and being able to provide the best that they can for their children.



ESOL class at Concilio Hispano's Somerville Office  
(Jaime Vargas: center left; Diego Lopez: center right)

## **VI. Bilingualism through the Eyes of the Future:**

### **The young adult perspective**



First and foremost, the students I met with to discuss issues of bilingualism were incredibly mature and perceptive in their insights. There were a few key aspects of bilingualism that became very clear to me throughout the discussion. Perhaps the most important thing I understood from the students is that they take great pride in their bilingualism. While they had very diverse thoughts about what connected them to their Latino culture, they all shared with me the way they see speaking both English and Spanish as a virtue and a skill, many of them commenting that they would very much like to incorporate their Spanish skills into their future professions.

One of the main topics of conversation was the affect of bilingualism in their school life. We discussed at length the issue of bilingual education, and I found their responses somewhat startling. Most of the students there thought that kids took advantage of the program, and the lack of structure made it easy for people to be in the bilingual program with their friends and not take it seriously. A few students commented that the program was not very well organized and that it made for an unproductive learning

environment. When I raised the question of whether one year of bilingual education is enough assuming that the program is structured, the students, being the perceptive young adults that they are, remarked with confidence that it was silly to think that children of all ages and all different backgrounds will learn English the same way and that it can always be only a year. We discussed the amount of Spanish that they spoke in school, and they all differed greatly. When I questioned this stratification of answers many of the students remarked that it had a lot to do with who was in your class and the general attitude towards Spanish within each classroom. This is to say, if there were many Spanish speaking students in the class, it did not seem to phase anyone if something was said in Spanish. However, if Spanish speakers were clearly in the minority, the environment was very different and speaking Spanish during the school day was much less common in these classrooms.

Along with school we of course discussed the home-life of the students and how Spanish/English affected daily activities and their relationships within their family. It was interesting how the majority of the students said that they speak only or mostly Spanish with their parents, but mostly or only English with their siblings. Those with younger siblings commented on how they know Spanish better than the younger members of the family, and one student noted how she specifically spoke only Spanish with her younger brother in order to make sure he learns enough of the language to communicate well within the family and with relatives. Even those with parents who understand English relatively well still said that they speak Spanish with their parents because it feels “normal” and “comfortable.” With friends, many of the students commented that if they started a conversation in Spanish they continued in Spanish and likewise with English,

but that it didn't really matter what language they were speaking. Most were conscious of who was around and spoke in English if any of their non-Spanish speaking friends were present.

Much like their parents, these students definitely want to remain in the United States. Many would like to go back and visit, but they all ready feel that the way they live here is so different that it would be difficult to lead a life in El Salvador or any other country "like that," especially because people would be able to tell that they were American from the way they talk and dress and they would never be fully accepted into society even if they were in fact born in that country. It was quite apparent to me as the listener and the mediator of the discussion that these students are very aware of cultural ties, stigmas and though different, found a link between them because of their bilingual background and commitment to preserving their culture.



## **VII. Concluding Thoughts & Further Research**

The project, while an extensive part of my life this semester, is in reality a twelve-week project, and as I have stated numerous times, it would be inaccurate and unfair to assume I have acquired all the knowledge or research to fully represent the Latino community in presenting their English acquisition motivations and experiences. However, I feel that it is beneficial and informative to digest and draw conclusions from what we, as investigators of the issue, have learned throughout and as a result of the research. These are voices of members of the community, and only through their determination and inspirations can the community be understood.

### Conclusions

One of the most obvious conclusions I was able to make after concluding my research was that there is clearly a demand for English classes that is not being met. There are incredible numbers of Latinos in Somerville that are seeking the opportunity to learn English and are unable to do so for economic and logistical reasons. It is often a process of organizing and reorganizing responsibilities in order for classes to fit into one's life schedule. To call and be told that there is a waiting list and you may need to wait a period of six months, a year, or perhaps even longer until you can begin classes must cause endless frustration and grief. This is not to say that the organizations and ESOL programs are deficient, but rather that there is insufficient funding for these programs, and in order for the Latinos of Somerville and everyone else on the waiting list to be educated, the local, state-wide and national government will need to prioritize this demand within the budget much the way the Latinos of Somerville have prioritized learning English in their

personal lives. The expansion of existing programs, creation of additional English acquisition opportunities, and acknowledgement of the importance of ESOL classes will, perhaps, narrow the gap between the availability of English classes and the demand for them within immigrant communities such as the Latino community of Somerville.

The community members I interviewed regarding their experiences with English acquisition were very willing to share their experiences with me and explain their life situations. It is through them that I learned exactly how difficult it can be to find the time and means to take English classes, and even once they are in the classes, it is an incredibly difficult task to learn the language. I do have some experiences learning languages and can relate to the relative difficulty of understanding the grammar, syntax and pronunciation of another language. However, the situation that the Latinos of Somerville face involves a very different context for acquiring English language skills.

Once we acknowledge the inherent difficulty of learning English, it is then essential that the Latino community be shown the highest level of respect and support for their continual contributions and efforts within the community. As described earlier, community members learn English for many reasons, but many with the intent of helping others, be it their children, friends, or the community as a whole. The individuals I interviewed created opportunities for upward social mobility both for themselves and for others affected by their language skills. Thus, common stereotypes and discrimination towards immigrants whom are not fluent in English, claiming that these people don't care to learn, are clearly challenged and disproved in the case of Latinos in Somerville. Not only are these community members learning English despite waiting for months to be

allowed the opportunity to learn, but they are also using their acquired skills to better their situations and the lives of others in their community.

Another important insight I gained through the research I conducted was the value and importance placed on education and preservation of culture and language within the community. The interviewees that had families and children expressed their desire to raise the children bilingually and make sure that the children could speak Spanish fluently in order to maintain communication between relatives and have a cohesive sense of family in the home. As a student at Tufts University, which requires a six semester language requirement for all Liberal Arts students, I find this pride and focus on bilingualism very inspiring. Language carries culture and communication with it, and the ability of the majority of children within this community to be completely bilingual before the age of 18 is utterly impressive. In addition, the perspective of the students in ESOL classes demonstrated a desire to improve themselves as people. Having knowledge of English carries many benefits, but one of the ones that seemed to underlie the motivations of community members was simply becoming a more educated person. It is important for this to be recognized and used in analyzing this Latino community.

This research has taught me a great deal about the strength and drive that exists within the Latino community of Somerville. Their mere willingness to devote some time out of their extremely busy schedules to contribute to this research demonstrated that there is an inherent desire to give back to the community and be accepted as valid contributors within Somerville and American society as a whole. Learning English is just one of the steps they must take to achieve this goal and these students along with all those still waiting for the opportunity should be encouraged by the surrounding community to

remain motivated and continue moving forward. These students have the support of one another, especially the individuals and organizations involved in this project. However, they deserve to have the greater Somerville community is behind them 100% in their determination to achieve complete English acquisition.

***Some Concluding thoughts from my partners...***

Yesenia Portillo contributed the following insights to the project's summation: "While working on the projects based on Latinos in Somerville, I had many enjoyable experiences. One thing the project helped me realized was how hard all Latinos around Somerville work to learn English. After attending a few interviews, I concluded that the age of an immigrant when he or she arrives influences their purpose for learning. For example, if one is a young adult or a child, the motivation to learn English is more likely to be that he or she wants to find a well-paying career and live a successful life. However, if when an adult with a family arrives in the United States, their main goals would be to find any type of job that could provide the money they need to support their family and also provide money for remaining family or communities from the community that they left from. Learning English for adults was more about being able to understand their coworkers or having the ability to communicate with people in the community. What I found most interesting was how important Latinos are to Somerville. The Latino communities work hard each day, opening up businesses and restaurants and contributing what they can. Instead of anyone ever discriminating, I believe everyone should show their appreciation for the hard work and effort Latinos put into their environment each and every day."

Sidia Escobar also added her thoughts on the research we conducted:

“In interviewing some adults from the community, I learned that most come to the United States due to economic problems in their country. In the interviews we discussed their background and how they learned or are learning English, but also why English was an important part of their life. All the interviewees were unique in their own special way but also had some important things in common. The reason why the people wanted to learn English varied among them, but some of the common goals were having a better job, and being able to do the daily activities without the need of translation. The group discussion with the Somerville High School students was also very informative. Everyone was very open-minded and ideas and opinions among the students varied. As one of the students in the discussion, I thought that everyone would generally agree about issues such as bilingual education and speaking Spanish with friends and at home, but this assumption was not true. The students disagreed about bilingual education laws in Massachusetts and I had a very different opinion than others that were there. However, overall, I felt we found out a lot about how and why adults learn English and the Latino community here [in Somerville].”

### Further Research

As I stated briefly in the introduction, this project is merely a first step into understanding the community’s experiences with English acquisition. While each and every Latino community member that I interviewed was extremely insightful, their experiences are inherently personal and unique. Thus, further research in the field and developing more in-depth knowledge of English acquisition and the role of language for

Latinos of Somerville is essential to understanding the community as a whole. A greater base of knowledge could be achieved by simply interviewing and learning more about more people within the community.

Again, as I stated as part of the limitations of the project, background knowledge provides a greater context for the issues encountered among Latino immigrants. As Yesenia pointed out, research based on country of origin, age, gender, and social class will also help determine if there are differences among these groups and their motivations to learn English. By increasing this database of knowledge and identifying potential distinctions that were not apparent in my research, one would be able to then compare the experiences of the Latino community of Somerville with those of other communities. As a result, a greater overall understanding of English acquisition within immigrant communities could be achieved. One could potentially use this anthropological research as a basis for influencing budgets and policy-making by local, state and national governments. For example, re-examining the bilingual programs, or including more family literacy programs within the English immersion options that have been adopted in Massachusetts public schools could greatly improve the involvement of parents in their children's academic lives as well as aid these adults in their English acquisition. The programs provided by employers could also be expanded and require companies to pay their employees during the hours in which class is attended in order to create a more respectful and encouraging environment for those who work many hours and cannot enroll in classes offered by organizations such as Concilio Hispano or SCALE. These potential policy changes would provide more sufficient aid to these dedicated communities in their efforts to learn English.

