

THE WAITING LIST MYTH

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The Waiting List Myth

When discussing the state of assimilation in the United States today, many point to the staggering numbers of immigrants on waiting lists for English classes as evidence that current generations are on the road to becoming Americans. The length of these waiting lists, often given in the thousands, has been the subject of newspaper articles and talk shows, and some have seized upon it to declare that we need to put a nationwide focus on English classes above all.

There is no shortage of motivation to learn. Instead, the extreme demands for ESL services far exceed the available supply of open classes. Eager students join thousands of others greeted by lengthy waiting times that range from 12 to 18 months for the largest ESL providers in Albuquerque and Phoenix, up to three years or more in Boston and other northeastern cities [1].

In my own State of Colorado, as I look at some of the statistics on the number of people who are waiting in long lines to learn English, it is an incredibly long line. In the five-county Denver-Metro area, adult ESL programs working with the Department of Education have 5,000 people enrolled in those programs. They have a waiting list that is up to 2 months, because there are so many people in the Denver metropolitan area who want to learn English [2].

Sen. Ken Salazar, debate on Amendment 4064 to S. 2611, 18 May 2006

No person familiar with the issue can deny that English classes are necessary in the United States. In a nation where more than 10 million people speak English not well or not at all, some level of funding for language classes must be available. Demand is exceeding supply in many U.S. cities, and the issue of language acquisition must be addressed.

However, the use of the waiting list as a concrete example of the shortage of English classes is not the trump card that many people make of it. In fact, upon examination of the issue, the existence of waiting lists for English classes can hardly be seen as problematic. In *The Waiting List Myth*, we take a look at some of these facts in the hope that a fleshing out of this subject will allow us to concentrate on the more important issues at hand.

Scenario

Imagine that a couple wants to go out to dinner one evening. They call their favorite local restaurant, only to find that reservations are not available until 9 p.m. They are disappointed by the late time, but make the reservation because it will hold their place.

Even with that reservation made, its inconveniences drive the couple to consider other options. They call another restaurant, and when they find out that an 8 p.m. reservation is available, they seize this opportunity too. Still, they do not cancel the first reservation, leaving their options open and keeping alive the chance to go to their first choice in dining.

At 6 p.m., after a long day of working around the house, the couple decide that they are too tired to go out to dinner and too hungry to wait until 8 p.m. They pick up something locally and call it a night.

Plenty of Americans might call and cancel the reservation, but many more will not, as evidenced by the standard airline practice of “overbooking” flights. If this is how Americans fluent in English behave, it is likely that those who are limited English proficient will be even less likely to cross their name off of a waiting list. This creates two waiting list issues; “perpetual waiters,” and “multiple waiters.”

Perpetually in Waiting

When immigrants determined to learn English approach prospective programs, it is likely they follow the same path as the couple seeking a restaurant reservation. The student will visit one location, put his name on the waiting list, try the next location, add his name again in the hope of getting into the program with the quicker opening, and so on. In the end, the student will be on several waiting lists, or he might find a available class and still be on several waiting lists. Even as time goes on, those waiting lists remain. The person may have gotten into another class, left the area or lost interest, but their name will still appear on the waiting list.

Given the funding and staff levels of most English teaching programs, it is highly unlikely that program directors will expend time or effort to determine final outcomes of the persons on the wait list. Furthermore, the short nature of the classes make it highly likely that the only follow-up will be a reminder about the next registration period, not news of a class opening.

One Person, Multiple Lists

The example above also demonstrates how, in the case of a widely available commodity, one couple can appear on multiple lists, even if they eventually choose another option altogether. Absent a cost and requiring only the most basic of personal information, the couple in the story have filled four spots on a “waiting list” at two local restaurants. Yet in the end, they use none of them.

Examples of this are not limited to restaurants. Each year, millions of high school seniors apply to multiple colleges, even though it is impossible to attend more than one at the same time. State University will receive thousands of applications, accept some, wait list some and reject some. University of State also will receive thousands of applications, accept some, wait list some and reject some. These lists are by no means mutually exclusive.

For English classes, which can take place at the local university, the community center, the church, and many other locations, it is incomprehensible to think that a determined English learner is going to try one place, then be satisfied with being on the waiting list solely at that location. If the desire to learn English is strong, the immigrant will continue to seek available opportunities, much like Americans continue to seek the dinner reservation that meets their needs.

In the end, the immigrant may be happily enrolled at the English class at the Springfield Cultural Center. Yet at the same time, his name still appears on the “waiting list” at four churches, three private programs and one community center.

The Benefits of a Waiting List

Though customers may despise being on a waiting list, the existence of such a list is the sign of healthy business. There can be little doubt about the financial health of a restaurant where customers are always clamoring for a table. Similarly, the existence of a wait list at a university indicates that it has its pick of the best students.

The popularity of a program resulting in a wait list means that customers can be urged to make purchases and enrollment decisions immediately. Whether it is football tickets or concert tickets,

prospective buyers can be pressured to “Buy NOW!” or “Be there early for the best seats!” In the end, the business benefits from quicker income generation and fewer hours required to generate that income.

For those programs which seek government and private funding, such as education classes, the existence of a wait list is concrete proof that they need additional assistance. A smoking cessation program that always has enough space to accommodate interested students is going to have a much harder time requesting more funding from government and private sources than a smoking cessation program with a waiting list of 50 persons. While the former must explain new programs or new developments in order to justify the extra expense, the class with the waiting list need only to point to a roll of names. It benefits these type of programs to have as long a list as possible, and in an arena with many additions and few subtractions, long lists are easy to grow.

The Growth in Waiting Lists

And grow they do. Here are several published examples of waiting list numbers from across the United States:

- In Boston, 3,500 adults were on waiting lists for English classes in 2004, according to the Massachusetts Department of Education. The same agency says that 17,000 people are on waiting lists statewide [3].
- In Arizona, the Arizona Department of Education found that 5,009 adults were on a waiting list to get into English classes and that an additional 5,686 were turned away in 2004 [4].
- In 2003, the three largest programs in the Houston area had a combined waiting list of 12,000, according to Federico Salas, assistant state director of Texas Learns, the state office of adult education [5].
- In May 2006, there were 2,200 people on waiting lists for English-language programs in Montgomery County, Md., according to the County’s Council.[6].

Something Is Askew

These numbers are high, and fittingly, they are meant to propel us to act. Yet if we step back and consider the numbers, we may have more questions before proceeding.

- In June 2006 testimony before Congress, Dr. James Thomas Tucker of the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials Education Fund told a committee that there were 16,725 adults on ESL waiting lists in Boston [7]. Yet less than two years earlier, the Boston Globe announced that there were 3,500 adults on waiting lists in Boston, and 17,000 in the entire state [3].
- In 2004, the Massachusetts Department of Education said that 17,000 people are on waiting lists statewide [3]. Nine years earlier, the same agency said that there were 15,000 people on waiting list for English classes statewide [8]. The increase of only 2,000 on the ESL waiting list is surprising, since the state’s foreign born and limited English proficient population increased by more than 75,000 people over this period [9].
- In 1995, 68 volunteer literacy organizations reported a statewide waiting list of 1,846 people for English classes in Illinois. That same year, the waiting list in Colorado was 2,000-3,000,

and was 6,000 in Dallas. According to the U.S. Census, there were roughly 800,000 limited English proficient persons living in Illinois, 200,000 in Colorado and 300,000 in Dallas at this time [10].

In defense of the varying numbers, the wide range of programs offering English lessons, their small staff size, and informal record keeping play a major role in the failure to come up with concrete numbers. Yet if the data record is woefully incomplete, it is inexcusable to mention these eye-popping numbers without issuing strong reservations about their validity.

Everybody Waits

There is little doubt that demand for English classes outstrips supply, and there is ample proof that wait lists exist across the United States. However, while we may sympathize with those who cannot get what they want right away, waiting is by no means a crime. It is part of life.

When Americans call up their doctor for a physical, they often wait weeks for an appointment. High school seniors who are wait listed for college know what it is like to be in a holding pattern. Then there is the most famous waiting list of all – the one for sports tickets.

According to various published sources, the New York Jets have a season ticket waiting list of 10,000 names. The Denver Broncos have a list of names exceeding 24,000. For the New England Patriots and Washington Redskins, the waiting list is 50,000 names. The longest list, that of the Green Bay Packers, have a season ticket waiting list that exceeded 70,000 names as of August 2006. On this long list, the estimated time between entering a name on the list and receiving tickets is 40 years [11].

Compared to these cases, the waiting list for ESL classes is far shorter. According to the testimony to Congress provided Dr. James Thomas Tucker of the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials Education Fund, here are some of the wait times that prospective ESL students face:

- Two weeks to two months to enter ESL classes provided by seven schools in the Denver Area, according to the Colorado Department of Education
- Two weeks to six months in Seattle
- An average of one to three months in Newark, N.J.
- One to twelve months in Philadelphia, where only half the providers recorded any waiting list at all
- One to twelve months in New Haven, Conn.
- An average of two months in Las Vegas
- Up to six months in Chicago

If this is the evidence of problems with long waiting lists, it is hardly a cause for concern. With tax refunds on a turnaround time of at least two weeks, passport renewals requiring a wait time of six weeks and naturalization processes that can take years, a 60-day wait for an English class is not evidence of a severe problem.

Especially When It's Free

Outside of the oft-discussed English classes, many of the items that involve waiting come with a cost. A college or university puts a student on a waitlist despite the knowledge that the institution stands to gain tuition income (and likely, future alumni gifts) if the student is accepted. Passport renewal requires six weeks even though the Department of State requires payment at the time of application. Considering that there are thousands of football fans just waiting to pay thousands of dollars for season tickets, it should hardly come as a surprise that there are thousands of people waiting for free or low-cost English classes.

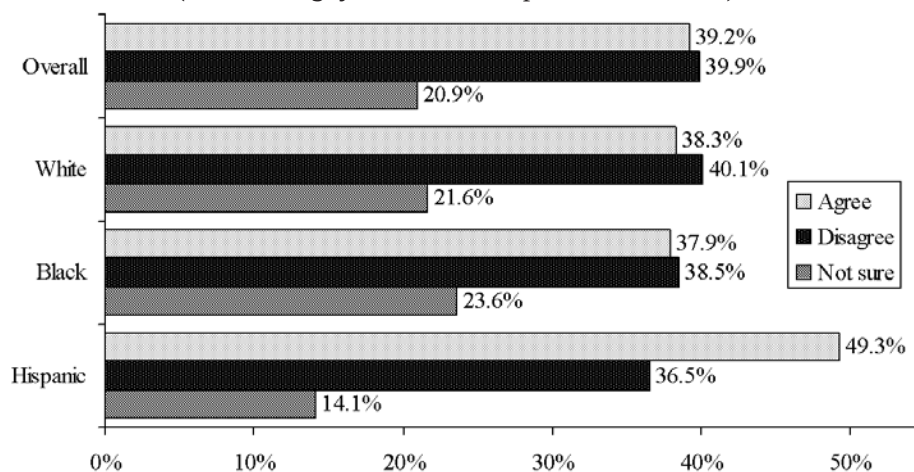
Such is the case with any reduced price offering. When a certain ice cream company offers “free cone day,” that company’s stores are likely to experience longer customer wait times than its competitors. Certain online retailers offer free shipping on purchases over a specified dollar limit, but this option is only available with the slowest method of shipping. Goods that are needed sooner must be paid for at the faster shipping rate. It follows that English classes which have lower costs are going to have longer waiting lists.

Cost is hardly the only issue, however. Flexibility – both in location and time – also plays a major role. Convenience determines cost in many ways, as evidenced by the price differences between gas stations conveniently located on the highway and those a few miles off the main strip, or the price of bread at the corner convenience store and the supermarket on the edge of town. However, this flexibility also plays into the determination of waiting time.

Are There Enough English Classes?

While many reports on the state of English learning in America call for an increase in the number of English classes offered by the government, the American public is less certain. A 2006 poll of American adults conducted by Zogby International found that only 39.2 percent of Americans believe that the U.S. government does not do enough to help immigrants learn English, while a nearly equal percentage disagreed. Even in the case of Hispanics, where 49.3 percent believe that more needs to be done to assist immigrants with English learning, the number of people in support fell short of a majority.

*Agree or Disagree? The U.S. government does not do enough to help immigrants learn English.
(source: Zogby International poll, March 2006)*



Prospective English students who have transportation are more likely to be able to find an open English class than those that are limited to those available via public transportation routes. Additionally, those who can take classes during the morning and afternoon hours are also more likely to find openings than those who are limited to the evening hours.

Tying It All Together

In 2005, Georgetown University waitlisted 1,901 prospective students. The University of Virginia waitlisted 1,809 [12]. A year earlier, Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh waitlisted 2,700 high school seniors even though the entire freshman class was slated to be 1,360 students [13].

By no means was an appearance on the wait list a guarantee of an opening. In 2003, Cornell University waitlisted 2,000 students and admitted four [13]. Of the 1,896 students who were waitlisted at Columbia University in 2000, six eventually enrolled [14]. Of the 604 students waitlisted at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 2005, exactly one enrolled [12].

If wait lists were such a crime, there would be nationwide outrage, led by angry parents who declare that colleges must increase the size of their student body so that their children can get an education. But such protests have yet to materialize.

Like English classes, a university education is a desired outcome, but not a birthright. Like prospective English students, prospective college students may encounter a wait list in their pursuit of greater knowledge – and more often than not, fail to rise to the top of that wait list. And like waitlisted English students, waitlisted college students have two options – try elsewhere or give up trying. Those serious about the effort opt for the former.

Final Words

It is clear that the current use of the “waiting list” as a concrete example of a problem that needs fixing is much like pointing to a patch of yellow grass and declaring a drought. Waiting lists, a natural by-product of a popular, yet low-cost program, cannot be seen as a definitive indication of the number of people looking to attend English classes. The ease of entry onto the list, combined with the ease of opportunity to find other options have left us with numbers that fail to correlate with the populations they claim are underserved. Moreover, it is clear that many of these wait periods fall within reasonably expected norms. These wait times may be inconvenient, but cannot be described as out of the ordinary.

Just as waiting lists at restaurants are not indicative of mass hunger and waiting lists at colleges fail to correlate to hordes of woebegone teenagers, waiting lists for English classes do not mean huddled masses of immigrants outside the local community center. As such, the limited English proficient population should not be pictured as hopelessly standing in line.

Few would disagree that English classes remain an important channel through which immigrants can make strides toward becoming Americans, even as Americans remain divided as to the funding sources for these classes. However, this debate on funding and need has become muddled up in a discussion of “waiting lists,” a discussion which poorly correlates with the actual demand.

Footnotes:

- [1] – Congressional Hispanic Caucus, “Letter to the Subcommittee on Education Reform of the Committee on Education and the Workforce,” 26 July 2006
- [2] – Senator Salazar (CO). “ Debate on Amendment 4064 to S. 2611.” Congressional Record 152:62 (18 May 2006) p. S4767
- [3] – Monica Rhor, “On a Waiting List for the American Dream,” Boston Globe 19 Sept 2004
- [4] – Daniel Gonzalez, “Immigrants jam English classes,” The Arizona Republic 26 July 2005.
- [5] – “Want to Learn English? Get in Line,” Associated Press 22 April 2006.
- [6] – Montgomery County [Maryland], “Praisner, and Perez Move to Eliminate Adult ESOL Waiting Lists (Rockville, Md., 1 May 2006)
- [7] – Dr. James Thomas Tucker, “Waiting Times for Adult ESL Classes and the Impact on English Learners,” Protecting Voting Rights, 30 June 2006 <<http://renewthevra.civilrights.org/resources/details.cfm?id=45000>>.
- [8] – Center for Adult English Language Acquisition, “ESL Resources – The Waiting Game” 12 Sept 2006 <http://www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/waiting.html>
- [9] – U.S. Census Bureau; “200 Census of Population and Housing;” generated by Rob Toonkel; using American Fact Finder <<http://factfinder.census.gov>>; (17 September 2006)
- [10] – Center for Adult English Language Acquisition, “ESL Resources – The Waiting Game” 12 Sept 2006 <http://www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/waiting.html>
- [11] – Mike Dyer and Josh Pichler, “Waiting List Years Long Elsewhere,” The Cincinnati Enquirer 23 June 2006.
- [12] – “Waiting Room,” The Cavalier Daily 5 April 2006.
- [13] – Anya Sostek, “College Waiting Lists Get Even Longer;” The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette 27 April 2005.
- [14] – Amy Argetsinger and Jay Mathews, “On College Waiting List? Don’t Pack Yet,” The Washington Post 2 May 2002

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