

# Executive Summary of the **Evaluation of the Pilot Implementation of Crossroads Cafe**

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CROSSROADS CAFE is a 26-lesson video-based and workbook-supported ESOL course. The target audience is adults who are literate in their native language, and who have some very basic English reading, writing and listening skills. Such individuals might be described as being California Beginning High to Intermediate Low, NYS Place 3 to 4, or BEST SPL levels 4 to 6.

Each lesson consists of a half-hour video dramatizing the daily activities and relationships among a group of people who work at and visit a neighborhood restaurant called Crossroads Cafe. Two segments not part of the dramatization are inserted in each video: one—Culture Clips—provides an introduction to topics of relevance in United States culture (e.g., how to apply for a job, the roles of husbands and wives), while the other—Word Play—provides more didactic instruction regarding an English language function used in the dramatization.

A 16- to 20-page section of a workbook (which the course developers are calling a worktext) accompanies each video lesson. The worktext contains a variety of exercises—multiple choice, fill in the blank, sentence order, production of writing and more—all designed to support the teaching and learning of English.

The current evaluation asked students to work with four Crossroads Cafe lessons over a month-long period in fall 1995. The evaluation included both quantitative and qualitative measures. A member of the evaluation team administered cognitive tests and opinion surveys designed specifically for the course in a pretest-posttest design to ten groups of learners—two groups in each of five sites (Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami, New York and San Antonio). Native language evaluation assistants made weekly telephone calls to learners and asked a standard set of questions. A member of the evaluation team conducted a group interview with students at the time the cognitive posttest was administered.

Three methods of delivering the course were tested. Two of the ten groups of learners used Crossroads Cafe materials in their regularly scheduled ESOL classes. Five groups used the materials on their own at home. Three groups studied the materials at home, but came together once a week with a course facilitator who engaged the students in discussion about Crossroads Cafe. In all, there were 135 students at the specified target level who participated in the evaluation.

While results were quite positive (learning did occur and students were strongly positive when asked if they would like to take the entire Crossroads Cafe course), the evaluation did identify areas worthy of further consideration by the course developers and the state representatives who will implement the course. This Executive Summary provides brief highlights of the results arranged according to the questions the evaluation was designed to answer. The table below summarizes student reactions to the materials. A subsequent chart summarizes the findings for student learning.

| Evaluation Question  | Results for Total Group      | Comments                           |
|----------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Time spent studying? | 2-7 hours per week           | In class group most; at home least |
| Liked videos?        | A lot: 75%; Some: 22%        | No differences among groups        |
| Liked worktext?      | A lot: 69%; Some: 26%        | In class group most positive       |
| Take whole course?   | 65% definitely, 25% probably | In class group most positive       |

Readers are referred to the full report for a more complete description of the evaluation sample, procedures and results.

**How much time did students spend working on the course each week?**

The intent of the developers of Crossroads Cafe was that its primary audience would be adults not enrolled in ESOL courses, but rather willing to study English on their own at home. It is reasonable for those charged with implementing and supporting Crossroads Cafe in the states to wonder how much time such students engaged the materials.

In this test, it appears that most home study students spent between two and five hours per week on the course. Not surprisingly, the in-class students spent more time—five to seven hours per week (five or six of which were in class). The students in the hybrid model spent an amount in between the other two groups.

Just under half of the home study students watched each video three or more times in a week. The highest percentage of multiple viewings occurred with the last lesson, where 86 percent of the home study students said they had watched the video two or more times. Similarly, these students’ effort in the worktext increased with the passage of time. For the first lesson, about half of the students spent more than an hour per week on the worktext. By the fourth lesson, the proportion had increased to three-quarters.

Where Crossroads Cafe was used in a classroom setting, each lesson’s video was shown on the two days each week that the class met. But videos were available for students to take home to view again, and around half of them did view the same video three or more times—meaning that they must have taken the video home and watched it outside of class time. The hybrid model group watched the videos slightly less. The most common number of viewings

for that group was twice per lesson, although around a third of them did view the videos three or more times per lesson.

Turning to the worktext, we know that 100 percent of the in class students worked in the worktext over 90 minutes each week, because they spent more than that amount of time actually in class. In addition, though, 94 percent of the in class students reported that they worked on the worktext outside of class time. A little under half of the hybrid model students said they worked on the worktext more than 90 minutes each week.

It should be noted that, for all groups, attention to the course generally **increased** as the month-long test progressed. That is, with very few exceptions, more students watched the later videos three or more times and worked on the later lessons' worktext sections for over 90 minutes than they did with the earlier lessons. This is promising that students using the full series will spend increasing amounts of time studying as they become more familiar with the materials.

### **Did students like Crossroads Cafe?**

Almost all the students seemed to enjoy Crossroads Cafe. When students were asked on a survey whether they enjoyed the videos, 75 percent said they enjoyed them "a lot" and 22 percent said they enjoyed them "some." When asked the same question about the worktext, 69 percent said they enjoyed it "a lot" and 26 percent enjoyed it "some." There were no differences among the students in the three delivery modes in terms of how well they liked the videos, but the in class students seemed to enjoy the worktexts more than the other two groups of students. Even those two groups, however, were solidly positive about the worktext, with around 60 percent saying they liked it "a lot."

Responding in group interviews conducted at the time of the posttest, learners provided more insights into their reaction to the materials. They particularly liked the didactic inserts in the video: Word Play and Culture Clips. In fact, many students (and teachers, too) felt that Word Play was especially valuable and would like to have seen more of it.

Students also liked the worktext very much, according to their comments in the interviews. They found the exercises easy to understand. They appreciated the variety of tasks; this helped maintain their interest. They liked the use of photos, because this helped them figure out the storyline for the videos.

Perhaps the most irritating thing for all students and teachers alike were the errors in the worktext and answer key. But students were dealing with beta versions of the worktext that were rushed into production to meet the needs of the evaluation. Presumably all errors will be caught in the final version of the worktext.

As a group, the only students who seemed less positive about the course were the Polish learners in Chicago. Their major complaint was that the course wasn't challenging enough—

or, at least, that there was a mismatch in the degree of challenge between the video and the worktext. For the amount of effort they put into the course, many of them did not feel they received commensurate benefit. The Polish students' feelings were in the minority, however.

Students were asked if, having studied four lessons of Crossroads Cafe, they would like to study the entire 26-lesson course. A strong 65 percent said they definitely would. Another 25 percent said they probably would. This is yet another indication that students enjoyed their involvement with Crossroads Cafe.

### **Did students feel they learned from Crossroads Cafe?**

Two survey questions asked students how much they felt they had learned during the course, in terms of both English and "how to do things in the U.S." Over half of the in class students, a third of the home study group, and a bit over a quarter of the hybrid model students said they thought they had learned "a lot" of English.

Responding to the question about learning how things are done in the U.S., the in class and home study groups were very close in their responses. Sixty-three and 59 percent, respectively, said they had learned "a lot" about the U.S. The hybrid model group, on the other hand, was noticeably different from the other two groups. Only 28 percent of those students said they had learned "a lot."

Frankly, the evaluators cannot hypothesize an explanation for why the home study and hybrid groups were so different in their response to these questions. It would have been logical to expect the two groups' responses to be quite similar since, for all intents and purposes, the real "studying" for the course took place at home for both groups. The fact that the home study group is substantially more positive than the hybrid group is puzzling.

During weekly telephone interviews, native language evaluation assistants asked students an open-ended question related to what they had learned from the lesson that week. Usually about half of the students replied that they had learned new vocabulary. Around a third usually said they learned content related to the topic of that week's lesson (for example, what it takes to run a restaurant, what it's like to be in a hospital). Ten percent or so said they learned grammar, and between five and ten percent said they improved their writing skills.

### **How much did students actually learn?**

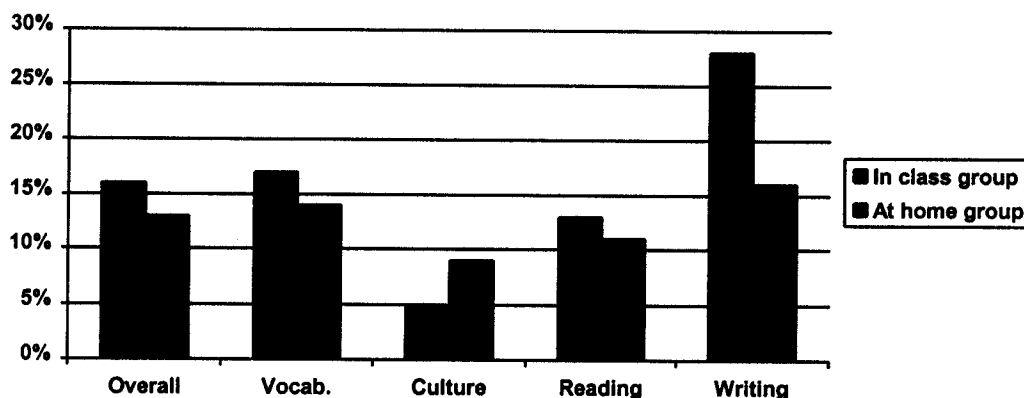
While it is certainly desirable for students to enjoy the courses they are taking and feel they are learning from them, the bottom line for Crossroads Cafe is whether it succeeds in teaching students English. In this study, Crossroads Café did have a positive effect on adult students' English reading and writing skills.

Students took a 20-item cognitive test at the beginning of the month-long test, and an identical test at the end. All tests were administered by one of the evaluators. The items were written to specifically measure the content of Crossroads Cafe; they were not general English

skills tests. Vocabulary, cultural context, reading in context (e.g., medicine labels) and writing items comprised the test.

For the group as a whole, the average pretest score was 52 percent correct. The average posttest score was 64 percent correct. This translates to an effect size of .66—two-thirds of a standard deviation. This means that if we assume that the Crossroads Cafe students were “typical” adults in need of ESOL classes at the time of the pretest, half of the population they were drawn from would have scored above this group’s pretest score and half would have scored below it. But by the posttest, only about a quarter of the population would have scored higher than these students did.

Looking at changes from pre- to posttest for various subgroups of students, particularly impressive is the fact that the home study students learned almost as much as the in class students, according to the cognitive tests (a 13 percent gain for the at home group versus a 16 percent gain for the in class group). These data are shown in the chart below. The hybrid model group showed only an 8 percent gain, an anomalous result which the evaluators are still investigating. There were no significant differences in the amount of learning based on students’ ethnolinguistic background.



In looking at the various item types, there are marked differences in the success of Crossroads Cafe. Gains in the writing scores from pre- to posttest are particularly noteworthy. The in class group, which would have received the most feedback on the writing they produced for the worktext, exhibited a 28 percent increase in scores from pre- to posttest. But the students who worked alone at home exhibited a 16 percent increase in scores. This is quite an accomplishment for what is probably the most difficult English skill included in Crossroads Cafe.

Vocabulary and reading in context items were comparable in terms of their gain scores, and fell in the 10 to 15 percent range across the various subgroups. The culture in context items showed the least change from pre- to posttest; they were in the 2 to 10 percent range for the various subgroups. These results provide support for comments received during the posttest

interviews implying that, even though students liked Culture Clips, they had difficulty understanding the segments because they were short and had a lot of information packed in them.

Note that the paper and pencil test used in this study assessed changes in only a limited range of reading and writing skills. Given the scope of the evaluation, it was not possible to conduct a more comprehensive assessment. Furthermore, possible effects of Crossroads Café on listening and speaking skills were not assessed. However, keeping these limitations in mind, there is clear evidence that learning did take place.

In summary, the following interpretation might be placed on these findings. One might hope for a better performance on vocabulary and culture questions from the students in the study. On the other hand, the measures of reading in context and writing are the most important goals for Crossroads Café. These are truly difficult tasks that require integration of learning from the many different elements that comprise the course. The results after four lessons are quite good. We think performance on these outcomes would reasonably increase with engagement of the remaining 22 lessons.

## **Conclusions**

Most students clearly enjoyed the opportunity to study Crossroads Cafe, and cognitive test results show they learned from the course. Given the severe shortage of classroom space and instructional staff available to teach ESOL students, the strong performance of the home study group in this evaluation is particularly noteworthy.

While the findings are quite positive, a number of cautions need to be made. They are made in the spirit of an evaluation intended to help designers adjust this fledgling product for maximum impact when the full 26-lesson series is released.

While by no means a certainty, the audience that will hear about Crossroads Cafe next fall may be less interested than the audience that participated in this evaluation. The students in this study may have been motivated at least somewhat by the stipend they received for participating fully in the evaluation—spending several hours completing questionnaires, studying hard for four weeks, and responding to weekly phone calls. When judging the results, the implementation team needs to adjust downward some of the estimates of time spent, or they must identify ways to add incentives to entice learners to stay engaged with the materials for an extended period of time.

Additional efforts may be needed to provide guidance to instructors and others in a position to help learners engage Crossroads Cafe. No teacher thought the teacher guide was ready for widespread distribution; all said it was wordy and arranged inefficiently. Further, there were no special instructions for the facilitators who worked with the hybrid model groups. It was clear that even experienced ESOL program staff needed such assistance.

Out of fairness to the course developers, however, two points need to be made. First, the primary audience for Crossroads Cafe has always been home study learners, not in class students. As a result, a teacher guide was not part of the originally envisioned set of materials to be evaluated; the version that was developed for the evaluation suffered from the speed with which it was put together.

Second, the hybrid model was conceptualized just six weeks or so before the evaluation was begun. In fact, it was proposed only as a result of discussions about the evaluation design itself. There was almost no time to develop materials for the instructors who served as the facilitators for those groups. There is no question that the lack of guidance impeded the quality of the experience for the hybrid model students. Given the circumstances of when the model was suggested and when it was implemented, however, there was little alternative.

The full evaluation report details several facets of the worktext that, while innovative and commendable from a pedagogical point of view, did not work as well as the developers had hoped. These include the multi-difficulty levels of exercises on the same page in the worktext (while students liked it, they didn't really seem to understand the distinctions); and the "practice with a partner" and the "go into your community and find a particular document" instructions (time limitations and cultural norms prevented most students from doing those things).

In summary, though, one would have to conclude that this month-long test of Crossroads Cafe showed the course to be quite promising. It will be interesting to continue observing the impact of the lessons when they are a complete 26-unit course.