

## **RIFLI Research Project on Reading Packets Fall 2008**

**Program name:** The Rhode Island Family Literacy Initiative (RIFLI)  
**Program type:** Library-based  
**Service types:** ESOL, Family Literacy, Citizenship Preparation, Computer Literacy  
**Program size (adult education students served per year):** 245 in FY09  
**Location:** Urban  
**Enrollment:** Managed enrollment (cycles of 14-16 weeks in length)

### **The Issue**

The Rhode Island Family Literacy Initiative (RIFLI) is a statewide library collaborative based in five urban public library systems in Rhode Island. In FY09, RIFLI offered seventeen classes at thirteen library branches and community centers. Classes are offered in the mornings, evenings and Saturdays and generally meet three times a week for two to three hours each with one intensive offering of four mornings a week. Most classes enroll between ten and twenty students. Classes are offered from September through June with a summer session. RIFLI has an average waiting list of 225 students.

In its program design goals over the past three years, RIFLI has been moving toward development of more self-study options for students. This is for three main reasons: (i) to increase the time that students spend practicing English; (ii) to accommodate students who may miss class or need to “stop out”; and (iii) to build a culture of lifelong learning. Many of the students in the Auburn Branch and William Hall Branch Library programs in Cranston could only attend a portion of the offered class hours because they had to leave early to go to work at restaurants. The teachers of these classes, Chris Bourret and Kim Libby, recognized the need for these students to have greater continuity in their learning outside of class – students also expressed an interest in doing so. The learners’ classroom learning time was greatly affected by the work schedule barrier and needed a learning option that was portable and could be done independently.

As a result, teachers developed take-home reading packets that included copies of Easy English News and its accompanying quiz, readings with activities tailored to student reading levels, a graphic organizer to record reaction to a reading, and a time log. In Spring 2008, the class session completion rate for Hall students remained about the same as before the packets were introduced, while Auburn’s class session completion rate increased nearly 50%. The goal attainment rate increased dramatically for both groups.

Building on the positive outcomes, RIFLI wanted to see what would happen to student persistence and student achievement when supported take-home reading packets were implemented consistently throughout the Fall 2008 semester. Students at Hall and Auburn were chosen for the persistence action research project since returning students would be familiar with the project and because those students can only attend a portion of the offered class hours. Kim decided to offer the packets to the students in her other class at the Rochambeau Branch Library in Providence as well.

Several lessons from the spring informed how the new project was developed and implemented. They include: focusing on high beginner and intermediate level ESL learners, the need to do a series of learning activities before, during and after the introduction of the packets that explicitly focus on a variety of self study skills and strategies, basing the packets on the RI Reading Standard of Encouraging Life Long

Reading, continuing the use of Easy English News and ESL Library readings, paying attention to the amount of work in the packets to keep them fairly brief and not overwhelming, focusing the packets on reading and vocabulary-building tasks, building a classroom “community” or “support system” around the packets, making clear to students that they can get help with the packets before and after class from the teacher, and ensuring that the packets are on topics that are enjoyable and interesting to students and are targeted at their reading level.

The theory of change was that by working on high interest materials at their own level and pace, students would commit more hours to their own learning and persist longer as a result of this engagement. Also, it was hoped that self study would provide a powerful bridge between periods of persistence, increasing the number of students who feel welcomed to return to class and thereby increasing persistence and learning gains overall. Finally, it was hoped that supported self study would help learners realize literacy gains and achievement of their goals.

## **Implementation**

For the Fall 2008 semester, reading packets were developed and provided to Hall, Auburn and Rochambeau students throughout the semester. As students finished and handed in each packet, the teachers corrected and returned the material, recorded the hours and replenished the packet.

It was expected that returning students would immediately “be on board” with the packets, having experienced them last year. The challenge was to incorporate new students into using the packets. Just as last year, teachers needed to model the use of the packets, to lead students in a discussion of how to improve language skills and the rationale behind the packets, and to encourage the students to provide feedback on the packets. Through discussion and classroom activities, teachers helped students realize that learning English requires work outside the classroom, and since most students don’t have much chance to practice speaking and listening to English outside of the class, fun and interesting readings offered the best option for improving their English language skills.

Other challenges for teachers included creating a “library” of level appropriate and engaging readings for student use and designing the packet so that it could be corrected quickly. The goals were for students to not feel overwhelmed by the packets and for teachers to not be burdened with too much time on correcting the packets. It took much thought to design the packets so that teachers could identify how students were engaged with the texts.

The most important part of introducing the packets to students was to review Easy English News in sections and do sample graphic organizers as a class. The teachers’ goal was to have students get comfortable using the newspaper, which can be intimidating for some readers due to its size. Teachers walked students through the sections, pointing out the smaller articles, student letters page, and idiom corner in an effort to have students realize that they weren’t responsible for reading the entire paper if it felt like too much. They could read a small item and describe it on the provided organizer. Teachers also modeled the graphic organizer with students, to increase their comfortable with it.

Teachers also introduced journal writing to students this year as part of the project so that students could practice their writing skills in an enjoyable way. The journals were introduced at the same time as the packets but were not connected to each other. Students were encouraged to write about anything they chose throughout the semester. This gave them an opportunity to practice both reading and writing at home this semester.

## Findings

### 1. Quantitative:

The attendance rate for each class in this Project had an overall upward trend for the three consecutive semesters that the packets were utilized. The attendance rate trend was significant (+10, +15 and +23). The completion rate also had the same upward trend for the three consecutive semesters that the packets were utilized. The completion rate trend was also significant (+6, +38 and +12). The learning gains rate increased for one of the three classes over two semesters. However, the bulk of testing occurs in the mid to end of Spring (while the Fall testing occurs at the end). The comparison between a Spring and Fall semester is not entirely accurate – some gains from the use of the packets may not be realized until the following semester. One hundred percent of students used the packets in Spring '08 while 75% of students used the packets in Fall '08. The amount of time spent on using the packets decreased in the Fall. However, the Fall semester is approximately 3 ½ months long while the Spring semester is approximately 5 ½ months long.

				Round 1			Round 2		
	Fall '07 Hall	Fall '07 Auburn	Fall '07 ROC	Spring '08 Hall	Spring '08 Auburn	Spring '08 ROC	Fall '08 Hall	Fall '08 Auburn	Fall '08 ROC
	NF07 H=17 A=13 R=16			NS08 H=19 A=7 R=19			NF08 H=17 A=13 R=18		
Attendance rate	37%	57%	51%	43%	60%	47%	47%	72%	74%
Completion rate	82%	54%	88%	84%	100%	79%	88%	92%	100%
Learning gains rate	N/A	N/A	N/A	53%	29%	48%	14%	31%	22%
Number of students who used packets	N/A	N/A	N/A	19	7	N/A	15	13	8
Of those who used packets, average hours each student spent on packet	N/A	N/A	N/A	34hrs	33hrs	N/A	17hrs	15hrs	5hrs

% attendance rate = # hours available/# hours utilized

% completion rate =students who complete the semester/# enrolled

% learning gains rate=increase in CASAS test scores for students who were pre & posttested

Number of students who used packets as reported by teacher

Of those who used packets, average time spent on packet as indicated by student log

### 2. Qualitative:

In the Fall of 2008, there were returning and new students in the classes – some had used the packets in the Spring of 2007 while for others the packets were completely new. This proved beneficial at Hall because the returning students helped the teacher introduce what we now call the “packet culture” to the new students. “Packet culture” is the expectation from the teacher and students that pleasurable reading and accompanying activities - outside of regular classroom work - is a consistent and regular part of class.

Colorful two pocket folders filled with Easy English News newspapers, simple graphic organizers, the monthly quiz for the paper, and stories from interesting readers - copied to meet individual students' reading levels, were ready for the Hall class on the first Monday after summer vacation. Returning students immediately started a conversation about the packets and the teacher led a whole group activity on what the packets were and asked returning students to explain the packets to the new students. The returnees were able to talk about what was in the packets, why they were doing them and how reading a little bit each day can help improve your English. Without prompting, they told the new students that the packets were only out-of-class work and that the teacher would correct them and give them back.

The teacher then said that we would create packets with interesting readings every week if students were willing to do them. The class reviewed the graphic organizer and the sections of Easy English News. In approaching the packet in this manner, the teacher wanted the lower level students to see that there were smaller articles they could read such as the student letters' page and events of the month page. The teacher also modeled using the graphic organizer after reading a small newspaper entry.

Students went through their packets to see what stories the teacher had chosen for them and they asked a few questions. The most important question that the teacher heard was "Do I have to do the quiz, the story with activities, and the graphic organizer?" The teacher responded that the more they read the better, but students were free to do whatever they felt like. In fact, the class talked about the word "optional" and how the whole packet was optional. The class also discussed how reading outside class, if it is fun and at the correct level, can improve student vocabulary, reading skills and overall English skills.

The next day, students came to class with questions about the readings to check if they were doing things correctly. Within two days, three students had completed and handed in packets! That seemed to get students motivated even more, and in a week's time fourteen students out of seventeen returned packets. Most students had done all the work, with two or three doing just the story and the graphic organizer. The teacher kept up his end of the bargain and within a few days time had given back students their corrected work and new stories to read and extra graphic organizers they could use. Some students wanted two more graphic organizers to do, not just one.

In addition to the reading packets, both teachers decided to introduce dialogue journals as well. Journals were implemented at Hall in October, with modeling, samples from previous years, and a conversation about the reasons to write outside of class. Students now practice reading and writing independently with the packets and journals at home. The student reaction to the journals has been as intensive as with the packets. Students write in their journals every week. Many students started their journals by writing a few sentences or a paragraph, but by the second week were writing one to two pages.

By the end of the semester, sixty percent of Hall students were doing the packets at least once a week, and eighty percent did them monthly! Hours have been recorded for the packets but not for the journals. However, the amount of extra commitment to English outside class using the journals and packets has been astounding. It is an integral part of the Hall class now. New students are engrossed in packet culture, and returning students, who last year shied away from the newspapers because they thought they were too hard, are getting a lot out of the student letters page and attempting the quizzes often for the first time.

There has been a lot of positive feedback from students which gives the teachers more and more evidence that the packets and writings have had a great impact. Margarita, a student who has been with the Hall program for two and a half years said one day "Oh this year, I have TOO much work, reading and writing, but I LOVE it." She said she really wants to improve her English to find work as a teacher's aid and to be able to help her grandchildren - when they get older - with their English homework. Some days, Margarita can't attend class because of work, but she will come in to hand in her packet and journal and

to pick up the next reading (as well as any class work she has missed.) Mery, another student who started the same time as Margarita, told her teacher “Teacher this year class is excellent. I think the reading and writing is perfect for me.” Mery usually asks for two readings instead of the usual one.

Very often, Hall students will not only hand in their packets at the end of the week, but will ask weekend work. Students often talk to each other about the stories they have read and mention them in class. For example, the idea “to have a passion for something” came up in one class, and several students could relate that to a story they had read about a young Chinese artist. “Oh like...who has a passion for drawing. We read that in our packets.” Another beginning student at the start of class wanted to talk about how she had had an experience similar to that of one of the student letters in the newspaper. In addition, the teacher sees students talking to each other at the start of class about what they have read and asking each other questions about how to do a certain task. There is clearly collaboration going on among the students fostered by the packets and journals.

Another student, Yi Ping, a student in her third year with RIFLI, surprised the teacher with a story. She is not a confident student and is shy to speak in public. She told of how she was overcharged at a CVS store and how she had gone back to see a manager and eventually got a gift card from the store for her trouble. At the end of the story she said, “Yesterday I told my husband this year the teacher gives us readings and journals and this helps my English so much. I am learning more and more and I can understand more.”

Margarita and Yi Ping’s stories show how the packets can build motivation and, more importantly, self-efficacy. Students like Yi Ping feel successful and that begins to translate to success in other language skills and abilities (such as speaking in a public place or checking a book out of the library) that aren’t really addressed in the packets and journals.

The implementation for the first time at Rochambeau has been much slower than at Hall and Auburn. While the Rochambeau teacher also taught at Auburn, it is clear that the “packet culture” takes time to develop. Kim tailored the Rochambeau packet to what she thought would be best for her group of students. She viewed them as quite motivated, a supportive class with available free time. In this light, she made the packet denser than the ones used at Auburn. This was overwhelming to the Rochambeau students and many packets were not completed.

## **Analysis**

The amount of time spent on the packets at Hall far surpassed expectations. Students spent an average of seventeen hours on outside reading which is in addition to classroom time and class homework. The completion rate at Hall has climbed every semester since packet implementation but, of course, many other factors could be influencing that, including improved intake procedures, continued improvements in class leveling, teacher instruction, etc. Nonetheless, students found the take home materials interesting which may have provided them with the extra motivation to come to class on a regular basis.

Teachers were surprised at how receptive Hall and Auburn students were to the reading packets. Students were able to increase the amounts they read as the semester wore on and many students who shied away from the newspaper were completing the quiz by the end of the semester. The packets did not have much effect on standardized test results, but this isn’t surprising since the reading material was not geared towards testing material at all in this round.

The results at Rochambeau were surprising as there is a strong student community in the class with students with much free time out of class. It was thought that these conditions would be a good environment for the packets to take hold. Given that the same teacher was at both Auburn and

Rochambeau with vastly different results in using the packets, it is not surmised that this attributes to the difference in usage. The pattern that is emerging is that it takes time to develop a “packet culture.” Having now two semesters of the packet intervention, it is clear that the students with more exposure to the packets are continuing to increase their interest, demand and completion of the packets.

On the other hand, the data also doesn’t demonstrate or measure student attitudes to the packets, as indicated in the Qualitative section above. The fact that some students indicated that enjoyable reading gave them more motivation, built self-efficacy and affected their other language skills, gives evidence of improvement beyond standardized test results. The speed with which they read the passages and did the accompanying work increased. By the end of the semester, many students were handing back finished packets just days after getting them, requesting additional graphic organizers and asking for more difficult readings. All of this indicates that the increased reading is having a positive effect on attitudes toward learning, which in the long run should help on the standardized test scores. For example, the amount of recognizable vocabulary has surely increased among the students, and this will help them as they are asked to do more cognitively challenging reading tasks in the future.

The packets address a lot of the aspects of persistence research. They relate to duration, intensity of hours, self-efficacy, and sense of achievement, among other things. There are also questions raised by the results. This includes what would happen if the packets were aligned more to class work and will stop out students continue with packets when they leave. Would students not connected to class for a length of time still feel the same sense of achievement that students going to class felt?