REMOTE ESOL CASE STUDY:
Fully Remote Workplace ESOL
English at Work, National Immigration Forum
Washington, D.C.

ESOL Program: English at Work

Website: https://immigrationforum.org/article/english-at-work

Reach: National program with sites across the country

Number of ESOL students served per year: 500–550

Student population: Immigrant/refugee/asylum-seeking incumbent workers

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Photo: *English at Work students*

Program Description

English at Work is a national initiative that offers industry-contextualized English language training that helps companies in urban, suburban, and rural communities build stronger career pathways for their employees. The National Immigration Forum (Forum), a non-profit organization founded in 1982 to advocate for the value of immigrants and immigration to our nation, created the program. The initiative, now referred to as English at Work, is part of the of the Forum's New American Workforce program, which has engaged more than 400 companies that recognize the value of their immigrant workforce and partnered with them to offer tailored

services that meet the demands of operations and individual workers, resulting in contextualized training mindful of the needs of not only workers, but also employers' operational considerations. Since the inception, 70 cohorts have participated in the program, made up of 1,500 employees. Almost 550 workers are served per year.

English at Work has been implemented with employers in eight states. The program is currently focusing its work in California, home to more than 5 million limited-English-proficient workers, according to the U.S. Census. The program is rapidly scaling and expects to serve 1,000 workers per year and reach the milestone of 6,000 workers in five years. The program has multilingual staff to support its work, including capacity in English, Spanish, Haitian Creole, French, and others, which reflects the larger first-language groups of participants. English at Work offered distance education/blended learning well before March, 2020, launching in 2016. The program was designed as such and uses a unique instructional model consisting of 40 percent in-person instruction and 60 percent self-paced online modules accessible on desktop and mobile devices. The program is free to the student and is funded partly through employer investment (cost per student and number of students). The Forum has developed a strategic plan to diversify its funding model and created a tiered pricing model that incorporates employer investment and considering what the market would bear.

Notable, Innovative Practices

English at Work is a national initiative — designed for scaling — that offers industry-contextualized English language training that helps companies in urban, suburban, and rural communities build stronger career pathways for their employees. English at Work uses a unique instructional model consisting of 40 percent class group instruction — initially in-person but now also virtual/remote — and 60 percent self-paced online modules accessible on desktop and mobile devices. One notable practice is peer-to-peer student tech support — often in shared first languages — and collaborative problem-solving in technology-rich environments. When a learner, for instance, has an issue with audio or unmuting, then another learner will jump in to help. A second notable practice is providing a technical support person to every instructor during class, so that when the instructor is not able to focus on or solve a technical issue, this person jumps in right away.

Remote ESOL Program Design

English at Work started with Walmart Foundation funding to design and pilot blended, retail-contextualized English training to help workers develop their worksite vocabulary and communication skills. Services are offered to limited-English-proficient immigrant employees at low-beginning through high-intermediate ESOL levels. English at Work does not offer advanced ESOL, nor does it offer ESOL to employees who do not have or have only limited literacy skills in their first language. English at Work uses a unique instructional model consisting of 40 percent in-person instruction and 60 percent self-paced online modules accessible on desktop and mobile devices. Each site is partnered with a local community college or adult education program. This initial program delivery model and instructional approach have evolved into a fully remote model, which has been useful to secure continuity of services during COVID-19. In this model, 40 percent instruction is live remote classroom instruction, where the instructor and students connect live once a week, and 60 percent of learning is anywhere, anytime, independent, online learning. The fully remote model is helping the program to scale, minimize costs, and reach workers in wider and more remote geographies.

Student Onboarding and Persistence Supports

Student recruitment and onboarding are greatly facilitated by the worksite. The partnership agreement with employers is to provide ESOL learning opportunities to employees. Company leaders encourage employees to participate, welcome students at the beginning of the program,
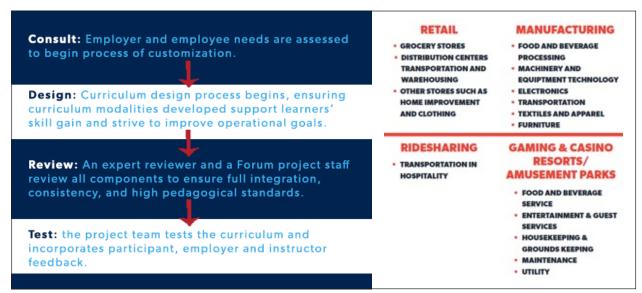
and recognize them with a worksite-based graduation. As online learning is on the students' own time, onboarding involves "behind-the-scenes" guidance and assistance from program staff — called the help desk — essential to increasing students' success with the technology. Instructors assist students with logging on to the learning management system (LMS) platform and learning to navigate the online modules. Program staff are proactive about providing support, doing individual outreach to get students on board. This simple step and initial outreach allow the team to catch any issues in advance of the first day of classes and to build a communication line/relationship with learners so that they feel comfortable asking for help and know who to contact. In addition to a user guide and technology orientation, program staff provide live support before, during, and after the remote sessions to ensure students are successfully onboarded and to support their persistence. Support focuses on making sure students — and staff — understand platform vocabulary and functions so they can successfully navigate, independently troubleshoot common issues, and actively participate in the virtual classroom.

Instructors monitor students' weekly activities online and track assessment results and topics that need reinforcement. At sites where computer labs are available, instructors use these labs to help students troubleshoot before and after classes. English at Work, by design, integrates digital literacy skills development into instruction and activities, including development of key vocabulary, such as log in/log out, mute/unmute, microphone, headset, chat, and poll. One notable practice is peer-to-peer student tech support — often in shared first languages — and collaborative problem-solving in technology-rich environments. When a learner, for instance, has an issue with audio or unmuting, then another learner will jump in to help. A second notable practice is providing a technical support person to every instructor during class, so that when the instructor is not able to focus on or solve a technical issue, this person jumps in right away.

Instruction

English at Work staff are very intentional about their approach to curriculum and instructional materials design, understanding that the curriculum design process, as well as its adaptation to new sectors and modes of delivery, requires close collaboration between staff, workplace subject matter experts, and individuals with expertise in curriculum development and education technology. English at Work further includes a strong peer review process. This collaborative process ensures that the curriculum is highly customized, responds to the main learner challenges, and meets the training goals and other employer needs.

Curriculum Process Chart

Consult: Employer and employee needs are assessed to begin process of customization.

Design: Curriculum design process begins, ensuring curriculum modalities developed support learners' skill gain and strive to improve operational goals.

Review: An expert reviewer and a Forum project staff review all components to ensure full integration, consistency, and high pedagogical standards.

Test: the project team tests the curriculum and incorporates participant, employer and instructor feedback.

RETAIL
- GROCERY STORES
- DISTRIBUTION CENTERS TRANSPORTATION AND WAREHOUSING
- OTHER STORES SUCH AS HOME IMPROVEMENT AND CLOTHING

MANUFACTURING
- FOOD AND BEVERAGE PROCESSING
- MACHINERY AND EQUIPTMENT TECHNOLOGY
- ELECTRONICS
- TRANSPORTATION
- TEXTILES AND APPAREL
- FURNITURE

RIDESHARING
- TRANSPORTATION IN HOSPITALITY

GAMING & CASINO RESORTS/AMUSEMENT PARKS
- FOOD AND BEVERAGE SERVICE
- ENTERTAINMENT & GUEST SERVICES
- HOUSEKEEPING & GROUNDS KEEPING
- MAINTENANCE
- UTILITY

English at Work staff learned that the best way to address the operational needs of employers is to engage them in ways that are not straining employer capacity. One of these ways of engaging employer representatives focuses on customizing the curricula and instruction for each industry and job function or for a particular worksite by incorporating company training materials and company-specific tools and vocabulary. Some of this work involves nimbly adapting existing, blended learning content for new contexts, using a variety of resources to contextualize activities and instructional materials, including employer feedback, job descriptions, industry standards, online forums, and employee feedback. This curriculum design process addresses the need to develop a strong base curriculum and set of tools that can be easily adapted to different sectors and modalities of instruction. In addition, it has allowed English at Work to continuously optimize online learning for mobile platforms. The curriculum has since been adapted, with input from curriculum experts at World Education, Inc., and the Community College Consortium for Immigrant Education, for employers and worker students in various industries and subsectors. In the initial model, English at Work included a component of 40 percent in-person classroom instruction. As the model evolved, a 40 percent remote classroom instructional component was developed, which required instructors to rethink instructional strategies and materials.

Digital Learning Supports

The original design of English at Work offered only a desktop-accessible platform for online learning, which resulted in lower-than-expected participation online. The pilot showed the need to increase accessibility of online learning by making the platform accessible on smartphones and tablets, in addition to computers, given that almost half (46 percent) of participants had low or no computer literacy, but 100 percent indicated they use a smartphone or tablet to communicate with friends through text messaging and social media. Therefore, the Forum set out to redesign its digital modules to be smartphone- and tablet-accessible and added a digital literacy module to its curriculum. By integrating digital literacy with contextualized English instruction, the Forum adopted a best practice in adult education that builds vocabulary, provides a natural context to practice language, and develops an essential job skill. Part of the support for students is to have a robust LMS infrastructure. The Forum selected the World Education EdTech Center to conduct the audit of its LMS and online content, as well as identify the key LMI (Local Management Interface) requirements that would address the onboarding and project management challenges of the pilot year. English at Work subsequently built its own LMI that met its requirements. The requirements included: ease of management and access to student progress and assessment reporting data; adaptability/ability to easily customize interface, site content, navigation, and overall look and feel; affordability; mobile-optimized, user-friendly platform; and security and longevity, with a preference for an open-source solution. Based on these key LMS requirements, the team selected Moodle, an open-source platform to host the online learning, launch the virtual classroom, share instructor tools, and collect participant data.

Support for Students' Basic Needs

The English at Work model helps employee–students solve challenges ESOL students typically face: availability, affordability and scheduling of classes; work schedules; unfamiliarity with college systems and enrollment processes; and lack of childcare and transportation. Students can also access services and resources at the local partner community college and adult education provider campuses, including use of computer labs, as well as administrative expertise and support in program implementation and troubleshooting. The program staff's multilingual capacity has been helpful throughout. Staff seek out language support as needed to support learners who speak languages other than those for which the program has internal capacity.

Support for Teachers and Staff

English at Work has successfully recruited and employed qualified ESOL instructors — mostly community college instructors — who embrace new teaching models and are comfortable teaching in a nontraditional, off-campus classroom environment with a focus on oral communication and job competencies. English at Work provides teachers with several orientation sessions and gives them time to practice. The organization provides handbooks and clear, step-by-step directions in an instructor manual. English at Work also supports an instructor "Community of Practice" for discussing instructional challenges, sharing best and promising practices, and providing timely instructor feedback. Topics have included training delivery, curriculum, teaching techniques, technology tools, and administrative processes. The Community of Practice also builds a sense of camaraderie among instructors. English at Work further supports instructors through a fully digitized instruction repository, including a train-the-trainer module. Instructor training and support is offered exclusively via webinar to increase efficiency and minimize costs. These sessions are recorded for future reference.

Partnerships

There have been many strategic partnerships over the lifetime of the program. During the early stage of the program, the Forum partnered with Miami Dade College and the Community College Consortium for Immigrant Education (CCCIE) and successfully trained nearly 1,000 retail workers at employer partners, including Publix in Miami, Kroger in Houston, and Whole Foods in the New York City area and Houston. The Forum also engaged local instruction partners — predominantly faculty at community colleges — across the country to deliver the training in each region at the worksite or on campus. The partnerships between English at Work and community colleges were critical to the successful launch, evolution, and, ultimately, the scaling and sustainability of English at Work. Many of these partnerships were facilitated by CCCIE, English at Work's key partner.[1] A critical partner on the educational technology side was World Education, which assisted in the process of selecting an appropriate LMS and provided guidance around digital literacy issues the program wished to address. The Forum's collaboration with these partners has translated into training excellence and provided the specialized expertise and validity of accreditation that employers value.

Leadership

English at Work was created as a result of a strategic decision made by the Board and Executive Leadership of the Forum related to two priorities: immigration reform and workforce needs; and integration and citizenship. The former focuses on shaping the policies necessary to make the U.S. immigration system meet the needs of the economy, workers, and their families. The latter focuses on creating the opportunities necessary for immigrants to succeed and contribute to the growth and prosperity of America. The Forum's leadership sought and found the resources to pilot and subsequently grow the initiative. The program was designed well before COVID-19, and it was designed for scale. The commitment of the Forum's leadership is further illustrated by its active participation in the national DigitalUS coalition working to ensure that all of us have foundational digital skills to thrive in work and life by 2030.

Indicators of Effectiveness

English at Work has a comprehensive approach to measuring success that focuses on more than measurable skills gains on test scores. It uses multiple data sources to look at performance, outcomes, and impact, including ongoing instructor feedback, test data from customized pre- and post-program student assessments, various standardized tests used by the community colleges and other adult learning provider partners, and employer surveys.

Some key achievements/results to date include:

For workers:

- 87 percent of students across all retail cohorts demonstrated language gains on the custom assessment developed for the retail curriculum and 42 percent demonstrated language gains on the standardized tests used (i.e., CASAS [Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems], BEST Plus, and TABE [Test of Adult Basic Education]);

- 37 percent were promoted and many had increased likelihood for promotion after participating and gaining confidence in English and digital literacy; and

- 73 percent were on track for wage increases.

For employers:

- 93 percent of students reported improved job performance;

- 89 percent of managers reported increased productivity as a result of increased language skills, increased quality of work, and reduced time per task;

- 86 percent of managers noted improved interactions with customers;

- More than 90 percent of managers indicated moderate or significant progress with employees' understanding of safety guidelines and processes (safety on the job), morale, and job satisfaction;

- 91 percent of managers reported increased employee confidence on the job;

- Between 80 percent and 90 percent of manager ratings indicated moderate or significant progress with increased self-esteem; working through language challenges; interactions with customers; participation in worksite orientations, training and workshops; and communication with colleagues and supervisors;

- Nearly 100 percent of managers would recommend to other employers to offer ESOL classes to their employees; and

- 30-day retention of employees was 100 percent.

For the program:

- After implementing the new LMS, online participation doubled from an average of 2.5 modules completed in Year 1 to an average of 5.5 modules of 6 completed, thanks to the customized mobile app.

- Course retention has been more than 80 percent across all employers.

English at Work contracted with RTI as the third-party, independent evaluator of the initiative. RTI issues an independent evaluation report after each round of training. The external evaluation focuses on measurement of learning outcomes through standard and custom pre- and post-testing; a rubric for assessing industry-specific soft skills (i.e., Participant Progress Assessment Rubric developed with project partners) and tracking course completion, grades, in-person attendance, and participation in online learning; measurement of employment outcomes and

business ROI (Return On Investment) through manager surveys (productivity, communication on the job, confidence and morale, and customer satisfaction) and participant surveys (job retention, promotion, wage increases, and employee satisfaction); and analysis of the pedagogical models and curriculum suitability through weekly instructor surveys, classroom observation, and developer and partner interviews. The key associated evaluation questions RTI articulated to guide the evaluation are: What are the English language gains for employees as a result of the program? What are participants' experiences with the program and what benefits do they perceive for skill development, job performance, confidence, and motivation for career advancement? What are the benefits perceived by managers? What lessons have been learned to inform future efforts?

RTI designed the specific evaluation tools that would generate the data to answer these questions including (1) administrative and test data provided by the project managers (e.g., attendance, online module completion, 30-day retention, promotion, employee demographics, test scores, grades, and instructors' ratings of students); (2) instructor surveys (at the end of the program) and an instructor log (weekly) administered online by RTI; (3) employee surveys before and after the program; and (4) two-part (workforce background and employee ratings) manager surveys implemented with managers following the program. RTI has also conducted visits to each site, observed classrooms, and conducted interviews with instructors and instructor partner staff. To monitor project implementation and improvement, The Forum leads internal formative and summative evaluations of English at Work processes, guided by project work plans. Quantitative and qualitative project data are kept in a database. The database is being accessed by all project partners, who have specific roles in maintaining it.

Additional Documentation

https://immigrationforum.org/article/upskilling-new-americans-innovative-english-training-for-career-advancement

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[1] CCCIE is an intermediary organization that supports a national network comprising more than 50 community colleges and other organizations that have joined forces to increase educational opportunities for immigrant students. ge resources, including qualified and trained ESOL instructors, a key element of the English at Work model.

ABOUT THE REMOTE ADULT ESOL PROJECT

This case study is part of the Remote Adult ESOL[1] (English for Speakers of Other Languages) Project led by World Education, Inc. The project's goal is to document and disseminate viable remote adult ESOL program models and practices so that ESOL instruction can be done at scale efficiently and effectively in a variety of settings. The impetus for the project was to identify strategies for meeting the current interest and unmet demand as well as meeting potential demand prompted by English language requirements for U.S. citizenship under immigration reform. During winter and spring of 2021, the project investigated selected ESOL programs' and learners' needs, experiences, and promising instructional and learner support practices that rely predominantly on technology-rich strategies and tools deployed remotely.

This case study is one of eight full program profiles selected for its innovative program design and promising practices. The eight case studies of programs from across the U.S. are complemented by:

■ *Policy and Practice Brief* that presents policy considerations and recommendations;

■ *Creating Equitable Access to Remote ESOL and Supports in Multiple Contexts and for Distinct Populations and Purposes*, a cross-case analysis of remote adult ESOL delivery through the lens of the varied organizational settings in which they operate and the supports needed to engage distinct ESOL populations; and

■ *Promising Remote ESOL Practices,* a document that highlights specific practices and innovations of selected, nominated programs from onboarding to instruction, digital skills development, and student and teacher supports.

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[2] We use the term English for Speakers of Other Languages or ESOL rather than English as a Second Language (ESL) out of recognition that many English Learners already speak more than one language, just not English.