



Creating a Workplace English Language Learning (ELL) Program

This toolkit is for anyone seeking ways to better serve foreign-born individuals as they navigate the workforce.



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The Need for Workplace English Language Learning (ELL)

The lack of English proficiency among workers has a direct impact on the future success of industries employing high levels of immigrants. Despite generating hundreds of thousands of jobs, American businesses still grapple with unfilled vacancies across different industries, a problem exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic¹. However, immigrant workers can play a crucial role in bridging this gap. Similarly, businesses can also contribute by investing in workplace training and education programs, particularly English language learning.

Lack of English proficiency poses significant barriers to employment and naturalization, especially for recently arriving immigrants, who are more likely to live in poverty and less likely to be well-educated in their native countries or speak English than immigrants who came before them.² The issue of English language literacy among the foreign-born is a shared concern among many institutions and groups, including schools and universities, employers, civic groups, elected officials, law enforcement, faith communities, immigration advocates, and literacy promoters.

Implementing a workplace ELL program can create a more diverse workforce with skilled and engaged employees. In return, employees gain valuable language skills that benefit their careers and personal lives alike. In addition to improved communication between staff and customers, implementing an ELL program can lead to greater employee retention, increased productivity, better customer service, and improved worker safety.

1 America Works Data Center, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Updated March 27, 2024. <https://www.uschamber.com/workforce/america-works-data-center>

2 Jeff Chenoweth and Laura Burdick, *A More Perfect Union: A National Citizenship Plan* (Washington, DC: Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc., 2007), 59-60.

Program Needs for Workplace ELL Programs

Implementing a successful workplace ELL program requires a collaborative effort and ongoing commitment from employers and employees, as well as careful planning and consideration of all necessary resources and materials for teachers, employers, and students. Below is a breakdown of the various program needs for teachers, students, and employers.

Teachers

- Classroom space
- Access to teaching supplies
- Curriculum designed to reflect employee and employer needs
- Support and commitment from the employer
- Interest and commitment from employees

Employers

- Knowledge of potential advancement opportunities for staff with limited English proficiency
- Resources to fund the program
- Support for employees while they are enrolled in classes
- Work with the instructor to develop a curriculum specific to the workplace
- Realistic expectations for student progress and language acquisition rates

Students

- Willingness to learn a new language
- Realistic expectations for language acquisition rates
- Commitment to the program
- Willingness to practice class materials at the workplace
- Good attendance rates

Planning for Your Workplace ELL program

When determining whether to implement an ELL program in the workplace, consider using a logic model. A logic model demonstrates the clear connection between resources, activities, outputs, and the desired outcomes. The framework helps secure stakeholder buy-in, track progress, and measure the program’s success. Review the sample logic model³ below.

<p>Inputs: resources, contributions, and investments that go into the program</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching staff and volunteers • Willing employees • Time and funding • Materials and equipment • Partners 	<p>Outputs: activities, services, events, and products that reach the targeted audience</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Activities</th> <th>Participation</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine knowledge and skills needed by employees • Design curriculum & materials specific to workplace • Market legal and language services • Assess language level and place students accordingly • Gauge customer satisfaction • Gauge employee language advancements </td> <td> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community businesses • Agency leadership • Teachers and volunteers • Workplace employees </td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Activities	Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine knowledge and skills needed by employees • Design curriculum & materials specific to workplace • Market legal and language services • Assess language level and place students accordingly • Gauge customer satisfaction • Gauge employee language advancements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community businesses • Agency leadership • Teachers and volunteers • Workplace employees
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Assumptions:

- Are there enough affordable and accessible English classes in your area?
- Would your program address a need? If so, how?
- Do you see increasing number of immigrants struggling with job advancement opportunities?
- Are employees interested in addressing the needs of employees with limited English proficiency?

Outcomes – Impact: the results or changes for individuals, groups, organizations, communities, and systems

Short	Medium	Long
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased client knowledge of workplace vocabulary • Increased employee ability to interact with native English speakers. • Increased employer awareness of employee needs • Awareness of best practices • Increased motivation to improve program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Job advancement for employees • Additional employees enrolling in courses. • Better informed agency decision making • Revised and improved curriculum and materials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased English language proficiency • Increased upward job mobility and stability • Workplace ELL program is institutionalized into business structure

External Factors:

- Is your program situated with a support community?
- Are there potential partners that would support this initiative?
- Is there enough need to create a new program?

3 Logic Model template provided by: https://fyi.extension.wisc.edu/programdevelopment/files/2016/03/LM_WorksheetTableformat.doc

Sample Workplace ELL Program

Below is a sample of how an organization can advocate and engage in outreach to identify potential employers that would benefit from implementing a workplace ELL program.

Immigrant Integration Agency (IIA) drafted a list of three employers to approach for possible partnership on a workplace ELL program. During the meetings with the employers, IIA described the program, outlined its goals, and explained the benefits and advantages of employer participation. IIA also explained the employer's responsibilities which included providing a designated class space, advertise the class to employees, provide financial support to sustain the program, and ensure that employees will be encouraged and allowed to attend.

IIA chose an employer to host the classes and handled recruiting for hiring an ELL instructor. After a few weeks, IIA hired an instructor who was qualified to teach workplace ELL. IIA helped the teacher set up a meeting with the employer to discuss what topics the employer wanted the employees to learn in the ELL class. The instructor also learned where and when the class would take place, what materials would be available, and information about the employer's limited English proficient employees.

Using the information provided by the employer, the teacher designed a 12-week curriculum with realistic goals and objectives related to work activities. This curriculum was approved by IIA's project manager. The teacher provided an information session for interested students, who then enrolled in the course by letting their employer know of their interest. The employer sent a list of students to the teacher.

The teacher began the 12-week session, meeting with students for a total of four hours each week (two, 2-hour classes). The teacher gave students a pre-test at the beginning of the session to gauge their current knowledge and a post-test at the end of the session to determine what they learned. This data was provided to the employer. At the end of the 12-week session, the teacher gave the employer a link to a brief, online survey to obtain feedback on the workplace ELL project experience and encouraged the employer to complete it. The teacher also gave the students a survey to determine student satisfaction.

Now, the teacher is preparing for the second 12-week session of classes. The employer is funding the cost of the teacher, the materials, and the staff time spent in class. The same students are enrolling in the course, and the teacher will meet with the employer to decide what, if any, changes need to be made to the curriculum.

Examples of Workplace ELL Programs

The companies below are real life examples of businesses that have had successful ELL programs in addition to other employee training.

- **Tyson Foods** collaborated with Guild to expand its existing Upward Academy, a program aimed to help team members develop important life skills, offering free and accessible classes in English as a Second Language, High School Equivalency, U.S. citizenship, financial and digital literacy. Tyson Foods has also committed more than \$1 million to support many of its immigrant employees through its Tyson Immigration Partnership which serves 40 Tyson facilities in 14 states and helps provide legal services needed to acquire U.S. citizenship.
- **Amazon** launched its Career Choice Program in 2012 and has since expanded to include English language classes as well as GED and high school diploma programs. About 8,000 employees in the United States have

participated in the English language proficiency programs. Recently Amazon launched Welcome Door, a program that provides immigration support for refugee and humanitarian-based immigrant employees in the United States. Welcome Door gives employees access to tools and resources navigate immigration related questions and connect with immigration experts.

- **McDonald's** offers employees the English Under the Arches program, a nationally recognized workplace ELL program that provides English language instruction using a combination of technology and in-person instruction. McDonald's developed the program after realizing that many staff members held great potential for workplace advancement yet lacked the language skills to fully compete for the positions. English Under the Arches provides training on vocabulary and skills specific to the job requirements of the employees. The classes are free and are paid for by individual franchises. English Under the Arches has received national recognition for its innovative workplace ELL program.
- **Fairfax County Office of Adult and Community Education** in Northern Virginia has contracted with area employers — including restaurants, hotels, banks, construction companies, and landscapers — to set up worksite English classes since the mid-1980s. The classes, which meet twice a week for 12 weeks, are customized for each employer's needs and focus on vocabulary required for the job. Employers pay the county for the classes, purchase any necessary books, and pay their employees to attend. Approximately 25 to 30 employees participate in the program each year. Employers who have participated have reported better employee morale, improved safety, and better communication skills on the part of employees.
- **Wegmans Food Markets** — a chain based in Rochester, New York, with locations in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Virginia, and Maryland — has offered English classes at store sites for years. Through partnerships with Northern Virginia Community College and a Penn State affiliate campus, Wegmans was able to overcome the language gap by introducing similar services at their retail service centers for Spanish-speaking employees. The program has been a great success and while the program was originally available on site, the program has expanded to include a virtual option, allowing employees at other locations to participate regardless of their primary language.

Sample Cover Letter to Prospective Employer

This sample cover letter can be edited to send to a prospective employer that would be interested in creating an ELL workplace program.

Your agency's letterhead

Date

Name and Address of Employer

Dear Mr. or Ms. [Name]

Thank you very much for taking the time to meet with [name of agency] to talk about a workplace English Language Learner's (ELL) program. We believe this project is valuable to the community, and we are very excited to begin planning it.

One of the goals of the workplace ELL program is to promote immigrant integration through workplace English language classes. Many immigrant workers arrive in the U.S. with limited knowledge of English. They want to learn English but face barriers to accessing classes such as long waiting lists, limited time outside of work to study, and transportation issues. Many immigrants seek to become active and engaged in their communities.

Immigrant workers need assistance to learn English, develop relevant vocational skills, and integrate into the businesses and communities where they work. Workplace ELL classes can be offered in a variety of ways. Each employer has the flexibility to offer the classes in a way that is comfortable and convenient for the individual workplace. Additionally, workplace ELL classes work best when the curriculum is designed with both employer and employee needs in mind. Therefore, the employees will have the opportunity to learn the skills immediately applicable to the day-to-day operations of the company. Employers benefit greatly when workers improve their English skills. Businesses that sponsor workplace English classes have reported lower employee turnover, improved worker safety, enhanced communication skills, and better customer service, among other benefits.

We hope that you will consider partnering with us on this exciting new project. Enclosed you will find further information about our organization and our community's immigrant population. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at [phone] or [e-mail].

Sincerely,

Executive Director or Board Chair

Workplace English Language Learner (ELL) Survey for Teacher

This survey could be given to the course instructors, the sponsoring agency, or anyone involved in working on the ELL program. This information can be shared with the employer and instructors when developing the next session of classes.

1. Please summarize the results of your post-class assessment.

- What percentage of your students demonstrated an increased ability to communicate effectively in English?
- What percentage of your students reported a positive impact of the classes on their job performance?
- What percentage of your students reported a positive impact of the classes on their job promotions and advances?
- What percentage of your students reported an interest in continuing to attend workplace ELL classes?
- What percentage of your students reported they intended to become U.S. citizens after the class?

2. What were the biggest changes or advances that you saw in your students at the conclusion of the ELL classes?

3. What did you find most helpful about meeting with the employer to plan the curriculum?

4. What do you think would encourage more employers to offer workplace ELL classes?

5. What were the greatest challenges that you found in working on this project?

6. If you could change anything about this project, what would that be?

7. Any other comments/feedback:

Workplace English Language Learner (ELL) Survey for Employers

This survey could be given to potential employers and partners. The information can help assess the current workplace environment as it relates to employees with limited English proficiency.

1. What percentage of your workforce is Limited English Proficient?

0-20% 21%-40% 41%-60% 61%-80% 81%-100%

2. How does Limited English Proficiency affect your employees? (Check all that apply.)

- It limits employees' growth potential in the workplace.
- It increases employee turnover rates.
- It limits my company's growth potential and/or competitiveness.
- It negatively impacts production rates.
- It negatively impacts worker safety.
- It negatively impacts customer service.
- It causes communication difficulties amongst staff.
- It has no impact on my business.
- Other: _____

3. Did the workplace ELL class curriculum meet your specific needs?

- Yes
- No

4. What was the impact of the ELL classes in your workplace? (Check all that apply)

- Increased ability to communicate effectively with workers who took the classes.
- Increased employee growth potential.
- Improved worker safety
- Increased company growth potential and/or competitiveness.
- Improved worker retention.
- No impact.
- Other: _____

5. Do you intend to continue offering ELL classes to your employees at your workplace?

- Yes
- No

6. Are you willing to financially support future ELL classes at your workplace?

- Yes
- No

7. If you answered yes to question 6, in what way would you be willing to finance the ELL classes? (Check all that apply)

8. Teacher pay.

- Paid class time for employee.
- Class materials.
- Other: _____

9. If you answered no to question 6, what would convince you to finance the ELL classes? (Check all that apply)

- Proven need within your company for increased English language skills.
- Proven results for workplace ELL classes in your location or other locations.
- Matching funding from an outside source.
- Employee contribution to attend the class.
- Nothing would convince me.
- Other: _____

10. Would you recommend workplace ELL classes to other employers?

- Yes
- No

11. Any other comments/feedback: _____

Additional Workplace ELL Resources

Below are additional resources that may be helpful when implementing a workplace ELL program.

USCIS Citizenship Resource Center

<https://www.uscis.gov/citizenship>

English Classes Help Retain Immigrant Workers

Debra Cope

Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM)

February 2021

<https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/news/all-things-work/english-classes-help-retain-immigrant-workers>

Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating Workplace ESL Programs

Allene Guss Grognet

Center for Applied Linguistics

Project in Adult Immigrant Education (PAIE)

June 1996

<https://www.cal.org/adultesl/resources/digests/planning-implementing-and-evaluating-workplace-esl-programs.php>

English That Works: Preparing Adult English Language Learners for Success in the Workforce and Community

Brigitte Marshall

Oakland (California) Adult Education July 2002

http://www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/digests/Englishwks.html

Issues with Outcomes in Workplace ESL Programs

Miriam Burt

National Center for ESL Literacy Education January 6, 2004

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228555458_Issues_with_Outcomes_in_Workplace_ESL_Programs

Center for Adult English Language Acquisition 2007

http://www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/faqs.html#twenty

Contextualized Curriculum for Workplace Education: An Introductory Guide

Jenny Lee Utech

Massachusetts Worker Education Roundtable June 2008

http://www.umass.edu/roundtable/projects/Integrated%20curr_guide%20p1.pdf

Programmatic Guidelines

A More Perfect Union: A National Citizenship Plan Catholic Legal Immigration Program (CLINIC)

January 2013

<http://cliniclegal.org/resources/more-perfect-union-national-citizenship-plan>