

# Evaluation of Skills and Opportunity for the New American Workforce: Year 2

## Executive Summary

July 2017

*Prepared under contract for:*  
National Immigration Forum

*Prepared by:*  
**Suyapa Silvia**  
**RTI International**  
3040 East Cornwallis Road  
Research Triangle Park, NC 27709-2194



## Introduction

This document summarizes the results of an evaluation of the second year of the Skills and Opportunity for the New American Workforce project. The evaluation was conducted by RTI International under subcontract to the National Immigration Forum. The Skills and Opportunity for the New American Workforce project is a contextualized English language learning model designed to help employed retail workers improve their worksite vocabulary and communication skills. The hybrid worksite course is structured to be 40 percent in person and 60 percent online. The 16-week program consists of 40 hours of class meetings (including time for tests, surveys, and graduation) and 53 hours of online learning through a custom-developed application available on desktop computers and mobile devices. Students were awarded a certificate of completion upon meeting requirements for class attendance, online learning, and participation in language testing and exams. All who participated were awarded a certification of participation.

The project was implemented in collaboration with three employer partners in major cities: Kroger (Houston, TX), Whole Foods Market (New York City area, NY and Houston, TX), and Publix (Miami, FL). Six local instructor partners supported the in-class course taught by experienced English language instructors: Lone Star Community College and Neighborhood Centers (Houston); Westchester Community College, LaGuardia Community College, and Bergen County Technical Schools (New York City area); and Miami Dade College (Miami).

The evaluation was guided by several research questions focusing on (1) English language gains for employees after the program; (2) participants' experiences with the program and benefits perceived for skill development, job performance, confidence, and motivation for career advancement; (3) benefits perceived by managers; and (4) a comparison of 2016 and 2017 results. Lessons learned will be used to inform similar efforts in the future.

Data sources for the evaluation included (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 administered by the project staff before and after the program; and (4) two-part (workforce background and employee ratings) manager surveys implemented online by RTI with managers after the program. RTI also conducted site visits to each site, observed classrooms, and conducted interviews with instructors and instructor partner staff.

## Key Findings

**A majority of enrolled participants were successfully retained in the program.** A total of 412 employees enrolled in the course, and 264 were trained through the program. The remaining 148 were unable to complete the training due to work schedule changes. Approximately 82 percent of students were retained in the English course (defined as having attended at least four classes), compared to 66 percent in 2016. Participants attended an average of 10 in-class sessions across sites (of 16 possible sessions). Participant retention and class attendance improved substantially from 2016.

**The updated curriculum and new online learning tool were well received by program participants and instructors.** A majority of instructors (82 percent) felt that the redesigned curriculum was improved from last year and that the online learning tool was useful and easy to use (70 percent). Most students found the online tool to be “somewhat simple and easy” or “simple and easy” to use. Students overwhelmingly reported that the online tool was very helpful for learning English (88 percent). Approximately half the students accessed the online learning tool successfully using both their cell phone and a computer, one-third used the tool on their computers only, and less than one-tenth used their cell phones exclusively.

**Module completion on the online learning tool was high and greatly improved over 2016.** Participants completed an average of 5 (of 6 total) modules in Miami, 4.5 modules in New York, and 3.2 modules in Houston. This was a great improvement over 2016, when only 2.5 modules were completed on average across sites. A large majority of participants (98 percent in Miami, 84 percent in New York, and 64 percent in Houston) completed at least two modules, the minimum number required for “satisfactory” program completion.

**Participants made gains in their English language skills as a result of the program.** Across the three sites, 42 percent of students demonstrated gains on standardized tests (RTI’s 2017 evaluation of a similar program that combined in-person and online learning found that 33 percent of adult participants in that program made language gains<sup>1</sup>). Among 2-year participants (the subset of 2016 program graduates who participated again in 2017), 57 percent achieved gains in language proficiency. All students in Houston and a majority of students in Miami (86 percent) and New York (74 percent) demonstrated progress in language skills by the end of the program on a custom assessment. Further, at least 90 percent of students at all three sites scored 80 or above (on a 100-point scale).

**Instructors’ ratings of participants indicated improvements in work-related competencies.** At the end of the program, instructors rated each student on eight competencies associated with two skill areas: work-related conversations and language skills. Among the

---

<sup>1</sup> Silvia, S., McCaskill, L., & Dempsey, T. (Internal report to the client). RTI International, 2017.

competencies associated with work-related conversations, participants were rated highest on their use of language to greet and assist customers. Among competencies associated with language skills, participants were rated highest for “use of work-related vocabulary” and “ability to assist customers” and lowest for “comfort/ease in speaking English.” Across sites and competencies, participant ratings ranged from 3.7 to 4.6 (on a 5-point scale), indicating above-average improvement in all areas.

**Participants self-reported improvements in work-related language skills and use of technology.** Over half the participants self-reported that they had “improved a lot” as a result of the program with respect to feeling more comfortable using the store’s technology; feeling more comfortable using English; increased vocabulary; and understanding spoken English. Slightly less than half reported that they had “improved a lot” in the areas of reading/writing and speaking English. Participants at all sites reported considerably less difficulty with work activities associated with English language skills at the end of the program compared with the beginning of the program in daily communication with customers, daily communication with coworkers, following instructions, and understanding safety guidelines. Participants also reported increased use of technology at the end of the program, including sending texts or chats, using social media, looking for information on the Internet, and using e-mail.

**Participants reported additional work-related benefits.** Across cohorts, the 30-day job retention rate was 100 percent, except for a cohort in Houston, where a participant reported no longer being employed. Job promotions were reported for 40 percent of participants in Houston, 34 percent in Miami, and 37 percent in New York. The job promotion rates for 2017 are higher than those reported in 2016: 19 percent in Houston, 20 percent in Miami, and 11 percent in New York. At least 92 percent of employees at each site reported being “somewhat” or “very satisfied” with their job at the end of the program.

**Managers perceived benefits for their employees and businesses.** Managers’ ratings of their employees on various job performance areas indicated that at least 80 percent of employees made moderate or significant progress across all categories. In particular, over 90 percent of the ratings indicated moderate or significant progress with employees’ understanding of safety guidelines and processes, morale and job satisfaction, and confidence on the job. Nearly all managers agreed that contextualized English classes are beneficial to the employee and to the company. Nearly all would recommend these classes to other employers.

## Lessons Learned and Recommendations

The findings from the second year of the project suggest several steps that can guide future efforts to expand and enhance the program.

- (1) **Although the implementation of the new online learning tool on both computers and mobile devices was a success by several measures, local variation in computer resources should be taken into consideration to accommodate site needs.**

The online tool was easy to use and useful for learning English, according to a majority of participants. Students also completed a larger number of online learning modules in 2017 than in 2016. Further, participants successfully used a combination of computer and mobile devices to access the online tool. The challenge for sites was not with the online tool itself but with the availability of a computer lab or other computer resources to facilitate provision of technical assistance to students. A number of instructors were able to overcome this challenge by asking students to bring their mobile devices to class. Before the start of the course, instructors should assess the resources available to the class and to individual students and develop a plan for how they will accommodate the technical assistance needs of students. The plan should also include how instructors will support students with low levels of computer literacy skills, for example, by meeting students before or after class. The curriculum already includes a workshop at the beginning of the course to orient students to the online learning tool.

- (2) **A few key strategies may improve the absent, tardy, and dropout rates and their potential impact on program dosage.** Adult English language programs commonly experience issues with absent or tardy students because adult students are more likely to face conflicts at work or at home that make it challenging to attend class on a regular basis. This often leads to total hours of instruction per student that fall below the recommended hours of instruction needed to demonstrate gains on standardized tests. To mitigate this effect on program dosage, the project could boost the available program hours either by increasing the amount of time per session or by adding modules to the online learning tool and increasing the requirement for the minimum number of modules to be completed for a “satisfactory” grade. A second strategy for addressing this issue is to work closely with the managers to ensure that work schedules do not conflict with the course schedule so that students do not have to miss class. A final strategy for mitigating the effect of high dropout rates on the class size is to enroll larger numbers of students at each location, using the “retained” rates previously achieved by sites to approximate how many students should be enrolled at the beginning of the program. For example, if a site typically retains half its participants, it is recommended to enroll twice as many students in the program to achieve the desired class size.