



NATIONAL
IMMIGRATION
FORUM

Immigrants and the Importance of
**Language Learning for a
Global Society**



Introduction

Learning English is central for immigrants to the U.S. to contribute fully to the nation and help us reach our fullest potential.

Many immigrants already speak English when they arrive, but those who need to learn it face institutional obstacles. Among them is a lack of capacity in our educational and community institutions to deliver language instruction to all who need it and a lack of funding and political commitment to expand that capacity.

They also face personal obstacles. Many have an immediate need to work and support a family, and/or a schedule that makes it impractical to attend available classes.

At the same time newcomers to the U.S. are learning English, native-born Americans — young and old — are beginning to see the benefits of multilingualism as our economy and workforce globalize. More schools offer immersive language courses, and adults are seeking training opportunities in a range of languages.

This paper examines language learning both as it applies to newcomers learning English and to the increasing interest of the native-born in learning other languages. We focus on promising new strategies for teaching newcomers English that are immediately relevant to their ability to be economically self-sufficient in American society — English contextualized for the workplace and English combined with technical skills training.

These strategies create new opportunities to increase our collective ability to integrate America's newcomers. To deploy these strategies more widely, however, will require overcoming practical and policy obstacles. The paper makes policy recommendations to expand contextualized English language at the worksite; encourage partnerships among private, public, nonprofit and educational organizations to provide programs; increase funding for effective programs; and promote foreign language learning and retention.

The Language of Opportunity

Learning English may have a more significant impact than just about anything else for an immigrant starting a new life in the United States. With the ability to understand and speak English, immigrants can participate in the broader community, more easily understand American culture and make friends outside of their native language group. Understanding English boosts self-confidence and makes it easier to navigate the complex rules and procedures everyone must follow to obtain a driver's license, enroll a child in school, open a bank account and conduct the hundreds of interactions we take for granted. English also is an important gateway to economic opportunity in the U.S.

Learning English is central for immigrants to the U.S. to contribute fully to the nation and help us reach our fullest potential.

Proficiency in English translates to higher income. At all levels of educational attainment, those who are proficient in English earn more than those who are not. People who are English proficient and have a high school diploma or some college see the greatest advantage: They earn 39 percent more on average than those who are not proficient in English but have the same level of education.¹ Workers who are not proficient in English are clustered in low-wage jobs that do not require high levels of English proficiency.²

English Language Learners: Basic Facts

Who is “limited English proficient (LEP)”?” The definition for LEP comes from the U.S. Census Bureau, which asks whether a person speaks a language other than English at home and, if so, whether that person speaks English “very well,” “well,” “not well” or “not at all.” If a person marks anything less than “very well,” the person is considered LEP.

About 25 million people in the U.S. are LEP, or about 8 percent of the U.S. population. Most are immigrants, but nearly 20 percent are native born, most of whom are born to immigrant parents.³ Not all immigrants are LEP. About half of the U.S. foreign-born population speaks only English or speaks English “very well.”⁴

Despite the challenges immigrants face in learning English, research shows that immigrants on the whole do learn it over time. According to the Census, nearly two-thirds of immigrants who came to the U.S. more than 30 years ago speak English very well or speak only English.⁵ Third generation immigrants (U.S. born children with at least one foreign-born grandparent) are predominantly monolingual English speakers.⁶

Adult English Language Learners and the American Workforce

More than 19 million working-age adults (18 to 64 years old) have limited English proficiency.⁷ Stated another way, that is 10 percent of the overall working-age population in the U.S.⁸

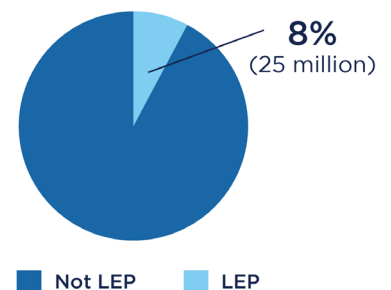
American employers increasingly will rely on immigrant workers. Virtually all of the growth in the U.S. workforce over the next 40 years will come from immigrants and their children.⁹ It is essential, therefore, that we provide these workers with opportunities to reach their full potential in the workforce and gain the skills American employers will need.

ENGLISH PROFICIENCY HIGHER INCOME

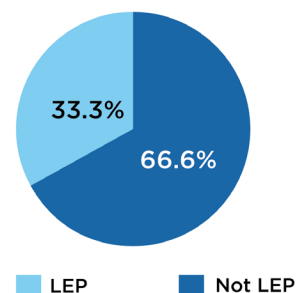


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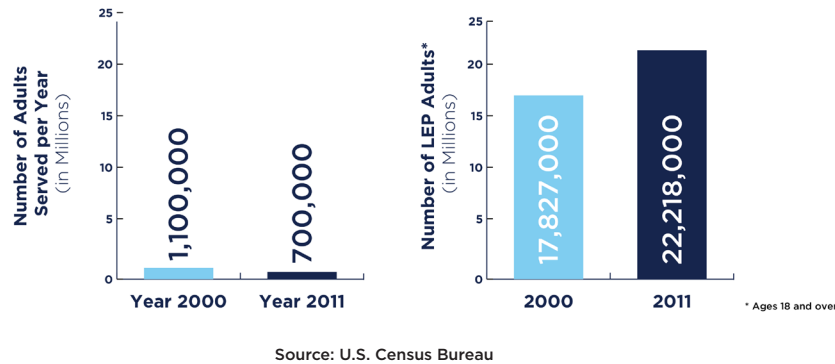
LEP INDIVIDUALS IN U.S. POPULATION



ENGLISH PROFICIENCY OF IMMIGRANTS WHO CAME TO THE U.S. OVER 30 YEARS AGO



RESOURCES FOR ENGLISH INSTRUCTION INSUFFICIENT TO MEET DEMAND



Traditional English Classes May Not Meet the Needs of Workers or Employers

The traditional picture of immigrants learning English is in a classroom where people of various backgrounds learn how to read, write and converse. The problem with this picture is that many cannot be in it, for a number of reasons.

> **Resources are insufficient to meet demand:** Immigrants' desire to learn English far outstrips the resources being allocated to teach them English. The primary source of federal funding for adult English instruction is the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (Title II of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, or WIOA, formerly the Workforce Investment Act). Since 2000, federal funding for adult English instruction has been about \$250 million per year. Another \$700 million per year had been provided by the states, until many states cut their budgets for adult education and for English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) to make up for budget shortfalls during the Great Recession beginning in 2008.¹⁰ As a result of these budget cuts (and inflation), the number of individuals served dropped from about 1.1 million in 2000 to about 700,000 in 2011.¹¹ Meanwhile the number of LEP adults grew from about 17.8 million in 2000 to 22.2 million in 2011.¹² Surveys of education providers have revealed that many programs across the country have waiting lists for adult education and ESOL classes.¹³ For example, in Massachusetts in 2014, public and private English programs had 13,000 immigrants waiting for a slot in English language classes offered by the state's adult basic education program.¹⁴

> **Traditional English class schedules may not accommodate the schedules of working immigrants:** Language classes may not be a practical option for immigrants who have untraditional work schedules, such as night shifts or multiple jobs, or for immigrants whose family responsibilities preclude class attendance.

> **Traditional language classes may not be the most efficient path to economic integration.** Traditional language classes focus on developing a basic level of fluency with English, in the process teaching "life skills" important for navigating our society — opening a bank account, enrolling a child in school, finding a place to live, finding a doctor, shopping, etc. However, the content of these traditional language classes may not be relevant to the jobs the immigrants are seeking, as they may not include vocabulary relevant to the immigrant's workplace.¹⁵

> **The traditional path to gaining language competency and technical workplace skills is sequential and thus very time-consuming.** In the normal course of language and workforce training, immigrants will learn English first. After gaining a certain level of competency, they may take classes in basic skills (including, for example, basic job skills such as how to look for a job, presenting oneself in the job market, and how to act in the workplace). Industry-specific training may follow the basic skills training. The process may take years to complete. In the meantime, immigrants are unable to meet their full potential at work.

Promising New Strategies Can Accelerate Economic Opportunity

New strategies eliminate the sequencing of English and workplace training. They accommodate an immigrant's circumstances and provide English language training relevant to the workplace.

ENGLISH CLASSES FOR THE WORKPLACE

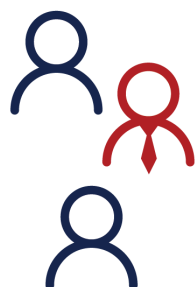
One strategy is to provide language training that includes vocabulary relevant to the workplace. Classes provide vocabulary specific to a particular industry or employer. An example of this strategy is a program developed by LaGuardia Community College's Center for Immigrant Education and Training designed for workers in the hospitality industry who are looking for opportunities in positions that are supervisory or that require more customer interaction. The program includes classroom and online instruction.¹⁶

Another example comes from Seattle. Ready to Work is designed for adults who do not have the level of proficiency needed to qualify for I-BEST (described below). This program combines contextualized English instruction with exposure to a wide range of careers for participants, many of whom have not completed high school. Classes are four days a week, three hours a day. Frequent field trips involve site visits to area employers and public institutions. Participants receive other support, including case management (that continues beyond graduation from the program) and a stipend for public transportation or gas. The program's goal is to prepare students for the next level of training — whether it be college or industry-based training.¹⁷

New strategies eliminate the sequencing of English and workplace training.

COMBINING ENGLISH CLASSES AND TECHNICAL SKILLS TRAINING

Another strategy is to combine technical skills training — including for occupations that require technical skills certifications — with language training. This accelerates the acquisition of technical skills or certifications that boost employment opportunities. Perhaps the best-known program in the U.S. is Washington state's Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) program. More than 140 programs combine workforce training with adult basic education or English language instruction, leading to formal skill or education certification. Child care and financial and transportation support help address the practical challenges adult learners face.¹⁸ The I-BEST program shortens the traditional path for these adult learners, which would be to complete a set of basic skills and literacy courses *prior* to job training. Instead, basic-skills and professional technical instructors team-teach courses. I-BEST students are more likely to improve their basic skills and



IMPACT OF ENGLISH INSTRUCTION AT THE WORKPLACE

- ▶ Increased Employee Loyalty
- ▶ Reduced Turnover Training Costs
- ▶ More Motivated Employees in Classroom Settings

earn college credit or obtain a certificate compared to students of traditional basic skills or English as a second language (ESL) courses.¹⁹

ENGLISH INSTRUCTION AT THE WORKPLACE

In the above examples, immigrants must still take the time and make the effort to attend classroom instruction. Moving contextualized English language learning programs or combined language and technical-skills instruction to the workplace can reduce or eliminate the extra time and expense of regularly scheduled classroom attendance for busy adult learners. When the instruction takes place during the shift or during break time, it reduces the need to schedule additional time outside of work hours.

Workers often are more motivated in classes provided at the worksite, where they know their employer is observing their participation. Also, the workers know that the skills they gain may impact their career directly by providing opportunities for advancement within the company.

For employers, contextualized English language training for current employees is an investment that provides returns in a more productive and engaged workforce. Workers are more likely to stay with the employer and be promoted internally, cutting down on the cost of training new workers associated with turnover.

Worksite training models can be more challenging to implement than models in which learning takes place in a traditional institution of learning because they typically involve partnerships that include the employer, the language education provider, the skills trainer and one or more intermediaries to facilitate the program, especially when none of the partners have worked together previously.

Contextualized English for Retail Workers

An example of a program with English contextualized for the workplace is Skills and Opportunity for the New American Workforce, a project of the National Immigration Forum. For this program, a customizable curriculum was developed by ESL experts and Miami Dade College together with the National Immigration Forum and the Community College Consortium for Immigrant Education, a national network of community colleges. The curriculum consists of contextualized English language instruction for retail workers using vocabulary and concepts relevant to the employment context — including customer service, store safety, technology and team communication.



IMPACT OF SKILLS AND OPPORTUNITY FOR THE NEW AMERICAN WORKFORCE

A vast majority of participants demonstrated an **increase in English language skills**, as shown by test scores beforehand and afterward.

Percentage of students who showed improvement:

91%
Houston

83%
Miami

67%
New York

In addition, portions of the training are contextualized for the company operations of the participating employer partners.²⁰ The National Immigration Forum manages the project, recruiting business partners and instructors, who come from local community colleges. The Community College Consortium for Immigrant Education facilitates partnerships with community colleges that have solid experience in adult ESL instruction.

In its pilot phase, the project partnered with three large grocers: Whole Foods in New York, Publix in Miami and Kroger in Houston. The project provides instruction both at the workplace and on college campuses. This model uses face-to-face instruction (about 40 percent of the time) and online instruction (about 60 percent of the time).²¹ Funding comes from the Walmart Foundation.

For the retail workers benefiting from training provided in Skills and Opportunity for the New American Workforce, work-contextualized English training is leading to more confidence and better productivity, as workers' ability to understand customers and supervisors improves. A vast majority of participants demonstrated an increase in English language skills, as shown by test scores beforehand and afterward: 91 percent of students showed improvement in Houston, 83 percent in Miami and 67 percent in New York City.²²

Percent of participants receiving promotions after completion of the pilot ranged from 20 percent in Miami to 11 percent in New York.²³ In a survey taken after the completion of the pilot, 53 percent of participants reported they "improved a lot" in their understanding of spoken English.²⁴ Almost all participants reported being on track to improving communication skills at work and outside of work (90 percent) as well as toward doing their job better by improving their English skills (95 percent).²⁵

Meanwhile, employers reported lower turnover at participating worksites. In a survey following the training, 88 percent of managers reported improvement in store productivity as a result of increased employee language skills, improved quality of work, and reduced time per task.²⁶ A recruiter at one participating employer mentioned another benefit: The skills training can be presented as a perk of employment with the company, which may persuade some prospective employees to join the team.

Contextualized English Combined with Manufacturing Skills Training

In the manufacturing sector, Woodfold-Marco Manufacturing in Portland, Oregon, implemented a different approach. Workers learned English contextualized for the industry and were trained in the principles of lean manufacturing.²⁷ Project partners included the Center for Business and Industry

at Portland Community College (PCC), which developed the “lean ESL” training, introducing English language learner employees to concepts in lean manufacturing. The Oregon Manufacturing Extension Partnership (OMEP) designed the lean manufacturing curriculum. Teachers from PCC provided the language training onsite and during paid work hours. After students completed the ESL course, the college ESL instructors attended and supported the lean manufacturing training OMEP offered.²⁸

The Northwest High Performance Enterprise Consortium was an intermediary. It provided manufacturing companies with access to the OMEP and PCC training. Funding for this project came from a variety of state and federal sources.²⁹

Once they completed their training, workers were more productive and possessed better communication skills and understanding of the manufacturing process. They were able to make suggestions for productivity improvements, and the training provided workers with multiple advancement opportunities within the company.³⁰

Manufacturing companies are dependent on a skilled workforce in order to remain competitive. They can implement new manufacturing techniques only if workers can learn new skills and learn to operate new machinery quickly. Proficiency in English is a prerequisite. Manufacturing companies such as Woodfold-Marco see English language instruction as an essential part of their competitive strategy.³¹ Investment in ESL instruction that is relevant to the particular industry makes sense from a business perspective because it increases worker productivity. However, in research conducted by the National Association of Manufacturers, employers had little interest in providing their employees with traditional ESL instruction. Without business content, employers felt these classes had little positive impact on productivity or profits.³²

English for Building Maintenance Workers

In unionized workforces, English contextualized for the occupation, combined with relevant workplace training, can be negotiated in a union contract. These labor-management partnerships (LMPs) have existed for a long time — in some cases decades — and provide a variety of skills training.³³ Building Skills Partnership (BSP), operating primarily in California, is a nonprofit partnership that includes the Service Employees International Union, the Building Owners and Managers Association of Greater Los Angeles and more than 75 janitorial companies.³⁴ Other partners in the program include several California community colleges and universities.

Among the offerings BSP provides is the ADVANCE program, which offers English classes tailored for building maintenance workers. Courses are 50 to 100 hours long and are conducted during paid work hours.

Once they completed their training, workers were more productive and possessed better communication skills and understanding of the manufacturing process.

Workers learn vocabulary and phrases that help them understand tenant requests and handle issues specific to building maintenance. At some sites, participants are paired with volunteers from client corporations for one-on-one tutoring. Graduates have better opportunities, including promotions to higher-paying daytime cleaning positions and supervisory positions.³⁵

For building owners, the payoff from the training BSP provides is more productive workers, greater customer satisfaction and greater compliance with building operating procedures.³⁶

Funding for BSP programs is provided by corporate and community foundations,³⁷ as well as a fund that includes employer and employee contributions negotiated in a collective bargaining agreement.³⁸

Practical and Policy Obstacles

Language training contextualized for the workplace has shown promise in providing greater economic opportunity in a shorter time frame for language learners. But several obstacles stand in the way of widespread adoption of these kinds of programs.

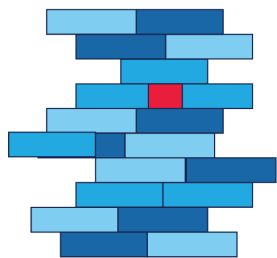
Practical barriers include a lack of knowledge of employer needs and effective practices. In many areas, the providers of language instruction do not have a good understanding of the particular skill and workforce needs of area employers. Their ability to design effective language training programs contextualized for employer needs is therefore limited.³⁹ English language instruction contextualized for the workplace is a relatively new field, and knowledge about which curricula and practices are most effective for workers and employers is limited.

Even when the needs of employers are known, it can be difficult to design and properly scale English instruction that is targeted to a particular industry or employer while at the same time taking into account learners who are at different levels of proficiency and education.⁴⁰

Regardless of whether a curriculum includes English contextualized for a particular industry, if the course is offered in a traditional classroom setting with traditional scheduling practices, it may not be accessible to workers — including immigrants — who may have nontraditional work times, whose child care responsibilities may preclude the extra time away from home or who may struggle to pay for course materials or transportation costs.

For courses designed for the workplace, there may be barriers related to economies of scale. Some companies may have many worksites with just a few workers in need of language training at each. In such cases, providing worksite training at each site may not be feasible.

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BARRIERS

Among those served by the adult and dislocated workforce training programs funded by Title I of WIOA,

ONLY 2% ARE LEP

while 10 percent of the workforce is LEP.

Employer perceptions may be another obstacle. Adoption of courses designed for the workplace ultimately will be limited if the employer does not foresee a direct benefit to the business.

Finally, even if an employer is willing to provide training, the employer must make a connection to a partner or partners who can design a curriculum that is relevant to the employment context.

Policy and institutional barriers exist as well. In the adult education world, the mix of adult learners to serve is so broad that the focus on English language learners may fall short. Among those served by the adult and dislocated workforce training programs funded by Title I of WIOA, only 2 percent are LEP, while 10 percent of the workforce is LEP.⁴¹

Language programs and workforce skills training may be funded by separate government agencies with separate rules governing what content they may fund. Workforce training programs may require a certain level of basic skills and language proficiency (requirements that may reinforce the model of sequential language/basic skills training followed by work skills training).⁴²

When training at a workplace is provided by publicly funded instructors (for example, from a community college), questions may arise about the use of public funds to train the employees of private-sector employers. How much of the cost should the public shoulder, and how much should the employer bear?⁴³

The recommendations below offer some suggestions for overcoming these barriers.

A Growing Need for a Bilingual Workforce

While learning English is critical for economic advancement in the U.S., native English speakers may find advantages in learning (or retaining) another language. Our economy increasingly depends on exports, which have been responsible for half of our economic growth since the Great Recession. In the future, our global customers increasingly will be non-English speakers, so there will be an increasing premium on foreign language skills.⁴⁴

Employers are interested in bilingual employees and have been for some time. One survey of representatives of large corporations from the early 2000s found that 80 percent believed they could expand their sales if they had more internationally competent staff.⁴⁵ A 2014 article based on a sur-



PENALTIES

LOSING PRIMARY LANGUAGE AND EARNINGS

One study found that children of immigrants who lost their primary language suffered an earnings penalty of approximately **\$5,000** per year.

vey of more than 280 California businesses in a variety of industries and of varying sizes reported that 66 percent of employers said they would hire a bilingual job applicant over an equally qualified monolingual one.⁴⁶ The Partnership for a New American Economy found that in Massachusetts between 2010 and 2015, the number of job postings for bilingual workers increased by more than 150 percent.⁴⁷ One-third or more of online job postings sought bilingual candidates in some of the state's large employers, including Bank of America (35 percent), Community Healthlink (38 percent), CSG Incorporated (71 percent) and Radio Shack (71 percent).⁴⁸ In Georgia, between 2010 and 2014, the number of job postings seeking bilingual candidates increased 84 percent.⁴⁹

Several studies of students whose primary language is not English have shown that those who retain their native language and become bilingual earn more than those who lose their native language entirely. One study found that children of immigrants who lost their primary language suffered an earnings penalty of approximately \$5,000 per year.⁵⁰

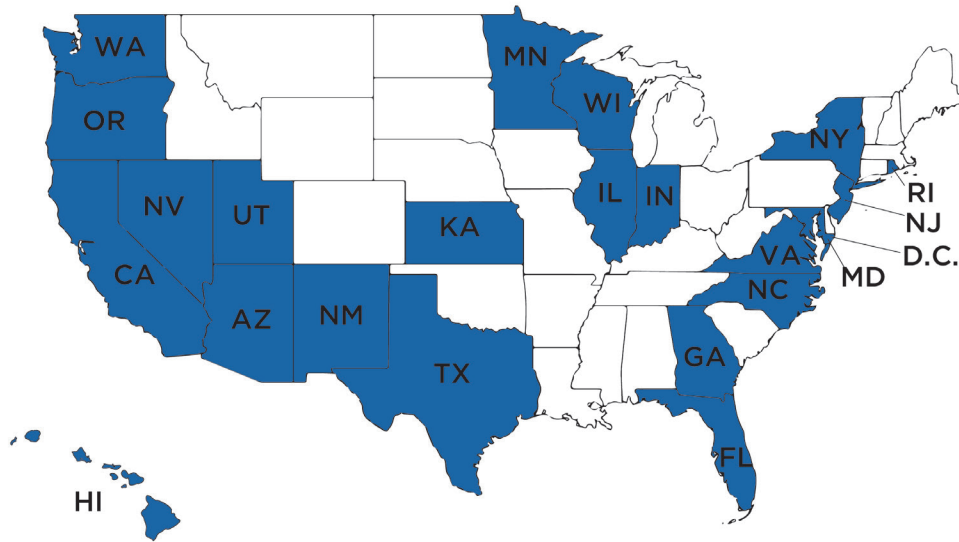
Despite the increasingly important economic advantages of bilingualism, our educational system's commitment to foreign languages has been weak. The percentage of U.S. primary and middle schools offering foreign language courses declined between 2002 and 2012. While most high schools offer foreign language courses, they usually are optional, and there is no national assessment for foreign language competency. In contrast, in most other developed countries, foreign language training begins early and is mandatory.⁵¹

The U.S. could capitalize on its enormous reservoir of foreign language speakers — immigrant students or the children of immigrants who already speak another language. However, relatively few of these students have access to bilingual or dual-language programs, and most of these programs serve as a bridge to English. As students become proficient enough in English, they are transitioned away from their native language.⁵²

A GROWING INTEREST IN DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNING

Interest in the U.S. in learning another language is growing. Around the nation, a surge of interest in dual language schools has occurred, and demand is far greater than supply. Waiting lists for these schools are long, and one school in Washington, D.C., recently had 1,100 applicants for 20 slots.⁵³ Whether parents are thinking about the eventual economic benefits of sending their child to a dual language school or not, studies have found that dual language learners perform better in all subject

STATES WITH SEAL OF BILITERACY APPROVED



areas compared to their monolingual cohorts. These findings apply equally to English language learners and to English speakers learning another language.⁵⁴

States and school districts around the country are increasingly realizing that bilingualism is an asset for their students, not an obstacle to be overcome. To date, 22 states plus the District of Columbia have adopted the Seal of Biliteracy concept. The Seal of Biliteracy is an award for students who have attained proficiency in two or more languages by the time they graduate high school. The seal appears on the student's diploma and can be shown to potential employers or college admissions offices.⁵⁵ More states are considering adopting the Seal of Biliteracy.⁵⁶

Students leaving school with the Seal of Biliteracy on a high school diploma are likely to be more attractive to employers. When the Seal of Biliteracy was explained to employers in a survey, respondents overwhelmingly said that holders of the Seal of Biliteracy would have an advantage in their hiring processes.⁵⁷

Recommendations

The following recommendations would address barriers that adult language learners face, encourage increased language learning and support development of effective programs.

> **Expand contextualized English programs at the worksite.** These programs have shown promise in expediting learning that will have a more immediate economic impact. Employers need to better understand the benefits of these types of programs. From the employer perspective, traditional ESL classes do not have a positive impact on productivity or profits. Worksite ESL classes will be sustainable only if employers see a positive impact on their business. More research should be conducted to better understand what will motivate employers to offer language training for their workers.

> **Encourage the use of technology.** In situations where employees are scattered over many worksites, technology can bring language and skills training to workers onsite. One example of this strategy is the “English Under the Arches” program the McDonald’s Corporation employs, part

of which involves the use of web conferencing technology to bring workers at separate worksites together with an instructor.⁵⁸ Support for computer literacy is necessary for this kind of approach to be successful. Technology can also help solve some of the barriers posed by traditional English classroom settings.

> **Encourage partnerships.** Partnerships can increase awareness about and capacity to respond to the skills needs of an area's employers and workforce, as well as the language training needs of area workers. Partnerships between public, nonprofit and private educational providers (especially community colleges), employers, labor unions, business associations and community organizations will facilitate the development of programs and curricula for adult learners that are aligned with the needs of employers.

> **Support intermediary organizations.** Business- or community-based organizations can play an important role in starting and sustaining contextualized English programs at the worksite. Intermediaries can help employers access funding for worker training; link employers with training providers; connect employers with community resources for their workers; and aggregate employer demand for a particular type of training. Federal, state, and local governments and philanthropy should provide more support to intermediary organizations.

> **Increase federal and state funding for adult education programs.** From a policy perspective, the greatest need is increased federal and state support for adult education and English instruction. Support has been declining in recent years, and demand far exceeds supply. Federal and state support for these services must increase to align with demand. Federal funding under Title II of the WIOA, at a minimum, should be fully funded at the authorized level.

> **Promote innovation at community colleges.** Because community colleges serve so many immigrants and English language learners and have a track record of serving these communities well, we should encourage community colleges to continue to develop innovative strategies that make connections between adult education and career and technical education programs, provide more flexibility in class scheduling, provide blended learning opportunities, and develop curricula that respond to student and employer needs.

> **Address practical barriers to attending classes.** To be successful, language and workforce training programs must take into account the needs of working adults, including students with child care responsibilities or job schedules that make it difficult to attend classes. Courses should be offered at times that fit into the schedules of these students, and providers should offer supplemental services such as child care and help with the cost of transportation and course materials.

> **Conduct more evaluation.** Federal and state agencies should conduct more evaluation to determine which programs are most effective. Information about promising programs should be shared broadly for replication by other jurisdictions, organizations and employers.

> **Promote foreign language learning and language retention.** We should ensure that Americans learn other languages and that new Americans do not lose their native language. Rather than losing their home language completely, first- or second-generation immigrant students should be encouraged to be proficient in English and their home language. Multilingualism will be only more important as our economy is increasingly tied to the global economy. The federal government and states should increase their support for foreign language learning. Such support has declined in recent years.⁵⁹ Also, the federal government should develop a plan for increasing language skills so that our workforce will include a sufficient number of workers with knowledge of languages critical for American competitiveness. Programs such as the 1 Million Strong initiative, which seeks to increase the number of K-12 students in the U.S. who are learning Mandarin to 1 million,⁶⁰ should be replicated with other languages essential to American competitiveness. Moreover, localities should expand the number of dual language learning schools, and expand the implementation of the Seal of Biliteracy to formally recognize proficiency in more than one language among graduating high school seniors. Already, 22 states and the District of Columbia have adopted this award for students, and other states are in the process of adopting it.

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