

WORKPLACE ESOL GOES DIGITAL: EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

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This article describes an innovative workplace English initiative that aims to improve access to English language instruction for immigrant workers. Developed by the National Immigration Forum, Skills and Opportunity for the New American Workforce (SONAW) is a first-of-its-kind, blended training program comprising 40% face-to-face instruction and 60% online learning. In 2018, the EdTech Center @ World Education worked with the Forum to develop and scale new delivery models that support anytime, anywhere mobile learning. The article shares learnings from testing a fully remote model, where instruction was delivered through live, synchronous virtual classrooms. An external evaluation of SONAW found it to be a highly effective solution for workers across industries who sought to build workplace English skills but faced barriers enrolling in traditional face-to-face learning opportunities. The model benefits both workers seeking to boost English proficiency and employers seeking to enhance workers' skills and retain and promote a diverse workforce.

Keywords: workforce development, ESOL, mobile learning, workplace English, workplace ESOL, digital literacy, virtual classroom, immigrant workforce

Full integration for immigrants in the U.S. requires economic, civic, and linguistic integration. *Linguistic integration* refers to immigrants developing the English language proficiency and cultural knowledge needed to engage in work and civic life (Kallenbach et al., 2013). Without linguistic proficiency, working immigrants often cannot fully communicate at work and, therefore, experience challenges that hinder their success and advancement to better paying jobs. Though immigrants work hard to learn English, and it is an important element of their successful integration, it is often not a ticket to integration. Communication and comprehensibility are a two-way street, so immigrants can face barriers built by the English speakers around them. A native speaker's past experience and comfort listening to English learners impact their comprehension (Kennedy & Trofimovich, 2008). Additionally, the way that immigrants feel they are perceived by those native speakers can negatively impact their facility with the language skills they already possess (Douglas et al., 2019). Added to this tension is the fact that an estimated 1 out of every 10 working-age adults (approximately 19.2 million people ages 16–64) in the United States have English language-learning needs, and these adults typically earn 25% to 40% less than their more English-proficient counterparts (Wilson, 2014). Despite these tensions, we argue that English proficiency provides the promise

of greater mobility and economic opportunity for immigrant workers in the United States when employers, educators, and policy makers create welcoming, flexible, and technology-rich opportunities for learning and when this learning can lead to more opportunities at work.

By creating opportunities for employer-supported workplace English language learning, the National Immigration Forum and its partners found that both employers and workers benefit when immigrant workers increase English language proficiency. Employers benefited from increased work productivity, smoother operations, and a more skilled, capable workforce. Workers experienced increased job satisfaction, retention, wages, and promotions (Murray et al., 2019). Done well, these contextualized and technology-rich language-learning opportunities can support confidence and proficiency for English use and learning outside of work.

THE PILOT: SKILLS AND OPPORTUNITY FOR THE NEW AMERICAN WORKFORCE

Motivated to support language-learning opportunities for working immigrants, the National Immigration Forum in 2016 launched the Skills and Opportunity for the New American Workforce (SONAW) initiative, with the goal of bringing industry-contextualized English instruction to workplaces. To this day the blended course consists of 40% face-to-face instruction and 60% self-paced online modules, including gamified activities accessible on desktop and mobile devices. At the core of the SONAW initiative, now called English at Work, is the goal of helping immigrant workers build the language skills they need to be successful at their jobs, such as providing customer service and communicating with coworkers or supervisors, and ultimately, creating opportunities for personal and professional growth.

Workplace English Goes Digital

When SONAW was first implemented, it was clear that even the most supportive employers found it challenging to meet the learning needs of immigrant workers. Common barriers to participation included limited availability (i.e., a course offered only a few times a year), conflicting schedules, lack of childcare, and time and location of workplace learning (i.e., before or after work shifts, requiring employees to stay long hours). In 2018, the EdTech Center @ World Education worked with the Forum to develop, test, and scale new delivery models that, leveraging the flexibility afforded by digital technologies, would support anytime, anywhere mobile learning and reduce some of the traditional barriers to accessing workplace English training. During the past 2 years, the program has piloted and tested several delivery models, as shown in Figure 1.

In the fully remote model (see Row 2, Figure 1), the program adapted 40% of the face-to-face instruction for remote instruction delivered through live, synchronous online classrooms (referred to as “virtual” in Figure 1). Instructors followed a redesigned curriculum to fit the online classroom while ensuring that learners with limited or no experience using a web-conferencing tool felt comfortable and could participate. This was accomplished through frequent outreach to learners and via proactive, high-touch technical support to both learners and instructors during the onboarding period, which we will detail in subsequent sections.

The remaining 60% of self-paced activities could be completed anytime, anywhere and were also accessible offline. The online classroom and self-paced activities were optimized for mobile access, enabling workers to attend classes and complete exercises using their personal mobile devices.

Both the remote pilot (SONAW) and current implementation (English at Work) have used Moodle, a free and open-source learning-management system (LMS), to host the online self-paced learning, launch the online classroom, share instructor tools, and collect participant data. The companion technology used to support the synchronous learning and instruction was and is currently BigBlueButton (BBB), the online classroom. BBB is an open-source web-conferencing platform, developed by Blindside Networks, that supports full integration with Moodle. Since the SONAW remote pilot, BBB has been fully integrated into the online-learning portal/mobile app; once logged on to Moodle, learners join the online classroom with a click of a button to connect with their instructor and classmates in a web browser, without having to download an additional app. Its use in the pilot and yet today represents improved integration and use of a web-conferencing tool. Engagement in the online classroom has also been supported by easy-to-use features that replicate live interactions commonly found in a physical classroom, such as pop quizzes, working in pairs or groups, writing on the board, or participating in a role-play.

LEARNINGS AND PROMISING PRACTICES

This new remote learning model was first piloted with Whole Foods Market employees in 2019 in a program that enabled workers to participate in workplace English classes remotely. The success of the pilot generated insights on how best to integrate and scale this new instructional model.

Ease of Access and Simple Navigation

Ease of accessing and launching the live, online classroom for learners on both computer and mobile was one of the most important factors in deciding which video conferencing platform to use. The English at Work model, as it stands today, has prioritized solutions that support full integration with their learning portal to minimize additional steps and applications required. The team removed nonessential text or features that made it confusing and difficult for English learners to navigate the platform. In addition to removing unnecessary text, essential text and features were made more prominent in size and/or color. Similarly, the initiative strived to reduce the number of steps required for learners to access content. Each additional step or click represented an additional hurdle for learners navigating digital learning tools for the first time. This underscores why it was critical to have the online classroom solution (i.e., BBB) integrated into the same Moodle mobile app interface. Managing and alternating between different applications to learn, particularly on a mobile device, requires a higher level of digital literacy skills, which learners who have enrolled in the courses likely have not yet developed.

Supporting Digital Literacy Skills Development

For all models, but especially the fully remote model, it has been particularly important for the project team and learners to understand platform vocabulary and functions in order to successfully navigate, independently troubleshoot common issues, and actively participate in the online classroom. Course developers integrated digital literacy skills development into live instruction and integrated key vocabulary, such as *log in/log out*, *mute/unmute*, *microphone*, *headset*, *chat*, and *poll*, into instruction and activities. Students practice logging in and out, muting and unmuting, using the chat box to brainstorm and share comments or questions, and responding to poll prompts. This practice is supported by real-time troubleshooting and coaching by the training help desk, as needed. Such intentional practice, when coupled with activities to build awareness of and proficiency using the vocabulary that describes the skills and tools required, can build digital literacy and comfort in online learning (Vanek, 2017).

Proactive Tech Support

Another successful practice has been the incredibly proactive tech support initiated by the English at Work help desk. Staff does not wait for tech support calls, texts, or emails to come in, but tech staff initiate active outreach to each learner before the program starts, provide log-in information, ask a series of questions, and offer their help with technical questions. They also share key numbers that learners can call or text if they have any trouble during the remote, online class. Together this simple step and the initial proactive outreach allow the team to catch any issues in advance of the first day of class and establish a line of communication and positive relationships with learners so that they feel empowered and comfortable asking for help throughout the course.

IMPACT AND IMPLICATIONS

In spite of the participants' initial learning curves observed in the fully remote model (e.g., trouble muting and unmuting their microphone and joining a breakout room), their commitment to learning and growth in language as measured by the pre- and post-assessments has been comparable to those of fellow learners using the original model with 40% in-person instruction. This demonstrates that the new fully remote model maintained instructional efficacy.

The fully remote pilot also created new contexts for learners to build and apply collaborative problem-solving, communication, and digital literacy skills. For example, when a learner experienced a common technical issue with audio or unmuting, another learner would jump in and try to help. This generally happened when learners knew each other in the workplace. The other learner would quickly identify the problem and provide steps to troubleshoot, sometimes using a shared first language. Through the exchange, both learners deepened their digital skills and comfort using and talking about them, skills and comfort that can be applied as they wrestle with technology challenges both in the workplace and in their daily lives.

Gathering employer perspectives, particularly from supervisors and managers, has been essential to the ongoing development and enhancement of the English at Work program. Feedback provided by managers in the initial pilot was based on direct observations of

improvement in employees' language skills, which supported both communication and other key requirements of their jobs. When managers were asked to assess the progress made by their employees on different job-related dimensions, more than 90% of the ratings indicated moderate or significant progress in several areas: employees' understanding of safety guidelines and processes, morale and job satisfaction, and confidence on the job. Approximately 90% of the manager ratings also 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 (Murray et al., 2019). Nearly all managers agreed that contextualized English classes were beneficial to the employee and to the company; nearly all would recommend these classes to other employers.

Finally, an important benefit observed for workers participating in the program was the building of a connection with the community colleges that provided the high-quality, accredited instruction. Managers, instructors, and program staff noted a growing appetite for continuing education among learners after a course was completed, and with the added value of increased technology skills, the learners can expand their opportunities by enrolling in distance learning and other types of digital learning.

CONCLUSION

The English at Work model has made it possible for participating working immigrant learners to improve English language proficiency and key communication, customer service, and technology skills. These new skills can translate into improved job performance and productivity, increased safety on the job, as well as increased employee job satisfaction, retention, and promotions.

By working with companies that are committed to supporting their foreign born and/or English learner workforce and connecting learners to community colleges working in support of immigrant education, SONAW and now English at Work have opened new opportunities for immigrant workers. English language learning, digital literacy, and improved access to educational opportunities are key to better participating in the workplace, opening career pathways, and ultimately realizing their full potential and integration in the U.S. ✂

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Figure 1

Technology-Rich Models to Extend Learning Opportunities

Training Model	 40% In-person Instruction	 40% Live, Virtual Instruction	 60% Anywhere, Anytime Online Learning
Original Blended Model (community college instructor and students meet weekly in person)	✓		✓
Fully Remote Model (instructor and students connect live virtually, once a week)		✓	✓
Corporate Trainer Model (corporate trainer trained by Forum delivers instruction in person)	✓		✓