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IMPROVING US AND EU IMMIGRATION SYSTEMS

Improving Immigrants' Employment Prospects through Work-Focused Language Instruction

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By Margie McHugh and A. E. Challinor

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Executive Summary

Immigrants' employment prospects depend on both their underlying levels of education and technical skills as well as their ability to communicate as needed in the host-country language. Since host-country language skills are essential for advancement in most industries, and since basic language courses do not impart the language skills necessary for success in the workplace, many governments are eager to expand work-focused language training. Yet implementing effective employment-focused language systems is difficult, as policymakers must find ways to design cost-effective programs that are sufficiently tailored to the needs of a wide range of occupations and that take account of immigrants' underlying literacy skills and their financial and family circumstances.

A range of different approaches to providing work-focused language training has developed on both sides of the Atlantic. Among the most effective are those that: provide language instruction contextualized for the workplace (emphasizing, for example, customer service skills or vocabulary used in a particular occupation or work setting); simultaneously provide contextualized language instruction with formal skills training to help get immigrants into good jobs more quickly; share the burden of capacity building by encouraging partnerships among employers, unions, and teachers; encourage workplace-based instruction; and take into account the needs of nontraditional students (such as part-time students or parents). Suggestions for diffusion of best practices include rigorous evaluation of key program elements and alignment of funding and other incentives with program designs and instructional practices that have been proven effective.

Implementing effective employment-focused language systems is difficult, as policymakers must find ways to design cost-effective programs that are sufficiently tailored to the needs of a wide range of occupations and that take account of immigrants' underlying literacy skills and their financial and family circumstances.



I. Introduction

Any strategy to improve immigrants' employment opportunities and economic integration must address the central challenge many immigrants face in the labor market: acquiring proficiency in their host country's language. At any skill level, language proficiency is perhaps the single most important determinant of immigrant integration. It is also the factor that distinguishes immigrant-specific integration policies from employment and training programs for the general population.

Considerable research has examined the relationship between language proficiency and economic integration. Immigrants with greater host-language proficiency earn more and work in more skilled occupations than those with low proficiency, even after controlling for differences in education and skill associated with language abilities.¹ For the highly skilled, language fluency allows immigrants to practice the profession in which they are trained, rather than downgrading to less-skilled work. For those with low- to mid-level skills, language proficiency is the ticket to better-paying jobs and upward mobility.² Yet implementing effective employment-focused language policies is an enormous challenge, since policymakers must find ways to design cost-effective programs that are sufficiently tailored to immigrants' employment needs and underlying literacy skills, and that take account of their financial and family circumstances.

This policy memo describes the range of policies available to improve immigrants' economic integration through language acquisition, especially those focused on getting immigrants into jobs or moving into higher-paying jobs. It assesses promising models and practices from the European Union and North America, and provides recommendations for policymakers designing accessible, cost-effective, and tailored language programs.

II. Work-Focused Language Learning

Governments have a myriad of individual approaches to the funding and administration of language and vocation training. Generally, they rely on a range of nonprofit organizations, educational providers, and state authorities to implement their language acquisition policies. The United States, for example, has no overarching immigration integration strategy at the federal level, but has a diverse range of programs that provide language instruction through community colleges, local school districts, private educational institutions, NGOs, and businesses working with both private and public funds.³ In some countries, such as Germany, language classes are overwhelmingly administered by the ministry of the interior, and are coupled with a cultural, political, and historical orientation course.⁴

Most language programs provide "survival skills" classes that introduce immigrants to the host

- 1 Juan Xi, Sean-Shong Hwang, and Yue Cao, "Ecological Context and Immigrants' Earnings: English Ability as a Mediator," *Social Science Research* 39 (2010): 652–61; Jeanne Batalova and Michael Fix, *Uneven Progress: The Employment Pathways of Skilled Immigrants in the United States* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2008), www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/BrainWasteOct08.pdf; Monica Boyd and Xingshan Cao, "Immigrant Language Proficiency, Earnings, and Language Policies," *Canadian Studies in Population* 36, no. 1–2 (2009): 63–86; Barry R. Chiswick and Paul W. Miller, *The Economics of Language: International Analyses* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2007).
- 2 Randy Capps, Michael Fix, and Serena Yi-Ying Lin, *Still an Hourglass? Immigrant Workers in Middle-Skilled Jobs* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2010), www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/sectoralstudy-Sept2010.pdf.
- 3 In 2006–07 over 1.1 million adults were enrolled in adult English instruction programs, most funded and administered by states in partnership with the federal government under a framework provided by the federal *Adult Education and Family Literacy Act*.
- 4 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *Jobs for Immigrants, Volume 1: Labour Market Integration in Australia, Denmark, Germany and Sweden* (Paris: OECD, 2007), www.oecd.org/document/40/0,3746,en_2649_33729_38796136_1_1_1_1,00.html.



language and attempt to foster some degree of conversational fluency. Yet research suggests that these umbrella language courses often fail to give migrants a tangible boost in the labor market.⁵ The content of classes is often not relevant to the occupations in which migrants work or aspire to work, failing to prepare immigrants for the type of interactions required on the job, or to provide them with the most appropriate vocabulary. Moreover, classes often combine students with vastly differing levels of language ability. In addition, language programs may not be sufficiently sensitive to the fact that immigrants are not traditional students: by contrast, many work in full-time jobs (sometimes with irregular timetables, especially in low-wage jobs); they tend to have limited financial resources, but as part-time students are often ineligible for grants that are only available to full-time students; and many have family and child-care obligations that create additional demands on their time. Finally, immigrants are not always aware of the resources and programs available to them.⁶

A number of immigrant integration strategies and language acquisition programs in Europe and North America now recognize these challenges and have attempted to overcome them in order to provide effective work-focused language training sensitive to immigrants' specific demands and circumstances. These programs often focus on ways to allow immigrants to learn while they are already employed, and may bring together language learning with other employment-focused programs such as job training and mentoring. This section provides a brief overview of the range of strategies used.

A. Promising Approaches to Work-Focused Language Training

Work-focused language instruction comes in various forms. Some programs combine language with courses of study for formal vocational certificates or qualifications that are recognized by employers nationally or locally, or as part of credential recognition and licensing procedures for technical occupations. Other programs provide noncredit training contextualized to specific occupations or industries, while some are based in workplaces and targeted to the needs of specific employers. This section draws on transatlantic examples, including some successful US models for delivering language instruction on the ground.

I. Language Instruction as Part of Broader Immigrant Integration Strategies

Many countries fund language learning as part of a national immigrant integration program. One benefit of such programs is that they can combine work-focused language training with other immigrant integration measures such as mentoring, job-search assistance, and cultural orientation.

Portugal provides language training alongside mid-level technical courses in the areas of hospitality, construction, beauty, trade, and civil engineering.⁷ One such program is a joint venture between the Portuguese Refugee Council and professional associations from the food sector. Its mandate is to integrate asylum seekers through vocational training in fields perceived to face labor shortages, such as hospitality.⁸ In Sweden, language classes group immigrants by education level and aim to include

5 Jens Clausen, Hans Hummelgaard, Leif Husted, Kræn Jensen Blume, and Michael Rosholm, *The Impact of the Introduction Programme on the Labour-Market Integration* (Copenhagen: Institute for Local Studies, 2006).

6 In 2009 Canada attempted to address the problem of insufficient proficiency by launching a pilot program that mailed vouchers for language training classes to 2,000 randomly selected "newcomers." The goal was to encourage the use of free language classes offered by the government, participation in which had been lagging. Interestingly, more than twice the number of immigrants who received vouchers signed up for the program, suggesting a disconnect between interest in language integration and information about the relevant programs available. Citizenship and Immigration Canada, "Language Training Vouchers' to help newcomers succeed," (news release, October 16, 2009), www.cic.gc.ca/english/department/media/releases/2009/2009-10-16.asp; Citizenship and Immigration Canada, "Vouchers Work: More Immigrants Enrolling in Language Classes," (news release, November 28, 2010), www.cic.gc.ca/english/department/media/releases/2010/2010-11-28.asp.

7 Questionnaire for National Contact Points for Integration, Portugal.

8 Vias de Interculturalidade na Área do Asilo (VIAAS), "Actividades da Acção 1," <http://vias.refugiados.net/a1.html>.



occupation-related instruction. The integration program's goal is to ensure that immigrants are introduced to the Swedish language and workplace concurrently, in order to get immigrants into jobs quickly after their arrival.⁹ Finally, Canada's Enhanced Language Training program provides job-specific language training combined with job placements and mentoring for immigrants with low (but not *no*) language proficiency.¹⁰

2. Combining Vocational Certification and Language Instruction

For occupations that require the certification of technical skills, policymakers and program administrators face the challenge of combining technical and language training for adult immigrant learners. Many countries use separate systems to provide these types of training, but there is a need for program models that effectively combine the two. In the United States, Washington State's Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) program provides more than 140 such programs which lead to formal skill or education certification, through the state's 34 community and technical colleges.¹¹ These courses provide workforce training and English language or adult basic education instruction simultaneously in order to speed the progress of adult learners in acquiring marketable workforce skills and occupational certificates. The program also recognizes that adult language learners are nontraditional students, and provides additional services such as financial support for part-time learning, assistance with transportation, and child care. Outcomes for adult students enrolled in these combined literacy and workforce skills programs are far better than for those enrolled in English training classes alone.¹²

3. Noncredit Contextualized Language Instruction

Promising models also exist for language training contextualized for a variety of workplaces. These address both specific occupations as well as more generic workplace skills, such as those related to interacting in an office environment or providing service to customers. For example, LaGuardia Community College's Center for Immigrant Employment and Training (CIET) created a successful program to assist immigrants in advancing their careers in the hospitality industry. It is well known that workers with limited English proficiency in the industry are concentrated in low-paying "back-of-the-house" jobs — e.g., as hotel maids or dishwashers — jobs which generally do not pay a family-sustaining wage.¹³ However, opportunities for "front-of-the-house" jobs — such as housekeeping supervisors, waiters, and banquet managers — require advanced English skills. CIET's Hotel T.E.A.C.H. curriculum was specifically designed for workers who are already employed in the hospitality industry and seek to move up to positions that involve more customer interaction and responsibility. Unique aspects of the curriculum include embedded technology lessons, career counseling that focuses on the "soft skills" of good customer service (such as empathy and active listening), the identification of transferable skills (building from what students already know), and the use of an Internet classroom, which allows working students to catch up on any missed class time.¹⁴

9 Georges Lemaître, "The Integration of Immigrants into the Labour Market: the Case of Sweden" (OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers No. 48, 2007), www.oecd.org/dataoecd/28/8/38164205.pdf.

10 Citizenship and Immigration Canada, "Enhanced Language Training," July 24, 2008, www.cic.gc.ca/english/department/partner/elt-spo.asp; see also Boyd and Cao, "Immigrant Language Proficiency, Earnings, and Language Policies;" and Kristan Wolfe, "Language Training for the Workplace," *Canadian HR Reporter* 18, no. 11 (2005).

11 Fields of study include architecture/engineering, automotive/engine repair, corrections/law enforcement, early childhood education/child care, health care, manufacturing/trades, and office support/technology.

12 Davis Jenkins, Matthew Zeidenberg, and Gregory Kienzl, "Educational Outcomes of I-BEST, Washington State Community and Technical College System's Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training Program: Findings from a Multivariate Analysis" (CCRC Working Paper No. 16, Community College Research Center, New York, May 2009).

13 Laura Chenven, *Getting to Work: A Report on How Workers with Limited English Skills Can Prepare for Good Jobs* (Washington, DC: AFL-CIO Working for America Institute, 2004), www.workingforamerica.org/documents/PDF/GTW50704.pdf.

14 LaGuardia Community College Center for Immigration Education and Training, "Hotel T.E.A.C.H. Project Description," February 10, 2009, www.lagcc.cuny.edu/CIET/workforce_TEACH.aspx.



An example of contextualized training in more general office skills is found at the English Center, based in Oakland, CA. The center provides intensive English training programs that emphasize vocational English, computer literacy, and career-readiness skills. A core set of courses for beginner to advanced English learners is scaffolded with appropriate computer and career activities that also teach English skills, such as training in the use of the Microsoft Office Suite, Internet browsing, e-mail, HTML, word processing, and desktop publishing. More than 80 percent of the English Center's Career Advancement Program graduates are placed in jobs or higher education programs each year.¹⁵

4. Employer-Relevant and Workplace-Based Instruction

Given the many demands on the time and resources of adult immigrant learners, workplace-based English instruction programs that eliminate travel time to classes and are aligned with employer needs are of great interest to those seeking to promote immigrant integration.

An interesting example of such an initiative is the McDonald's Corporation's English Under the Arches program, which aims to help McDonald's employees gain job-relevant knowledge, skills, and confidence. The company partnered with national language instruction experts and local community colleges to create and enact a tailored curriculum. It uses an innovative scatter-site model, allowing workers to participate simultaneously from their own restaurants through the use of web-conferencing technology that connects them with their instructor. Students also meet face-to-face and have the opportunity for independent study via an e-learning component. In its three years of operation, the program has trained 500 students at 14 locations, and has seen an 85 percent graduation rate, with 96 percent of graduates going on to receive wage increases.¹⁶

Similarly, partnerships between employers and professional educators to design and implement work-focused language curricula are central to Germany's Deutsch am Arbeitsplatz ("German at Work") program, which teaches "professional" German to migrants. Among other initiatives, the project works with employers to develop language curricula for use at the workplace.¹⁷ It also makes use of online technology through a web platform that offers information and networking tools for teachers, employers, and labor unions interested in supporting local second-language training efforts.

B. Financing Language Instruction Programs

A persistent problem faced by language integration programs is meeting costs. Classroom instruction is expensive, and in countries with substantial immigrant populations, even programs with significant funding may barely meet projected needs for instruction. In the United States, for example, despite combined federal and state expenditures on language training that, for much of the past decade, have reached \$1 billion per year, billions more dollars would be needed to provide the estimated 3.5 billion hours of adult English instruction necessary to bring immigrants' language skills to the level needed for communicating about everyday subjects in English.¹⁸

Given concerns about cost, it is perhaps not surprising that language program funding — alongside funding for general immigrant integration measures — was targeted for cuts during the recent period of fiscal austerity. The United Kingdom has substantially reduced support for immigrant integration, including language learning and job training.¹⁹ The Netherlands will see a nearly 90 percent reduction

15 The English Center, "Mission," accessed May 25, 2011, www.englishcenter.edu/about-mission.html.

16 Migration Policy Institute, "E Pluribus Unum Honorable Mention: McDonald's Corporation English Under the Arches - Oak Brook, IL," www.migrationinformation.org/integrationawards/honorablemention2010.cfm.

17 Deutsch am Arbeitsplatz, "Site Abstract: German at the Workplace" (2008), www.deutsch-am-arbeitsplatz.de/wir_ueber_uns.html.

18 Margie McHugh, Julia Gelatt, and Michael Fix, *Adult English Language Instruction in the United States: Determining Need and Investing Wisely* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2007), www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/NCIIP_English_Instruction073107.pdf.

19 Public subsidies for language courses are now available only to unemployed individuals who receive benefits as active job seekers. In practice this means that funds target longer-term migrants and those who are not in the United Kingdom as



in its language and civic integration budget by 2015, while Spain's budget will fall by nearly one-third in 2011.²⁰

Even before the global economic and fiscal crisis, some governments sought to manage the cost of language instruction by restricting eligibility to long-term residents or to the groups considered most needy (such as refugees or the unemployed). Several have also tried to encourage employers and migrants themselves to contribute financially. A 2004 change to French labor law, for instance, encourages employers to count language instruction as part of the 0.5 to 1.6 percent of their payroll companies are obliged to spend on training.²¹

While an expanded employer role in language instruction is an attractive notion, policymakers will likely need to develop a variety of targeted incentives and supports if they hope to meaningfully expand the amount of work-focused and/or workplace-based language instruction their systems offer. The recommendations discussed in the next section include a variety of measures to build the capacity of language integration systems to provide high-quality, work-focused language instruction that will result in a tangible pay-off for both immigrant workers and their employers.

III. Recommendations

Policymakers designing work-focused language programs on both sides of the Atlantic face a range of shared challenges. Funding is often insufficient to meet demand, or is not cost-effective in its use. Time and monetary constraints often dictate whether immigrants work or take language courses, even as an inability to speak the language hinders the ability to become employed. One-size-fits-all, traditional language courses do not address the diverse abilities and needs of migrants, while creating work-focused courses requires instruction tailored to the needs of particular industries and to the needs of learners at different levels of proficiency. Many jurisdictions have yet to resolve questions of how to align their adult education and workforce-training efforts with the skill needs of employers. Because of this, program providers' knowledge about employer and workplace skill needs is often weak and insufficient for designing and scaling up effective work-focused language training. Furthermore, adult migrant learners often need language and skills training, yet established programs often meet only one or the other need; indeed, policy and contracts for the two are often handled by separate government entities.

But there are examples of successful programs and policies, as discussed in this brief. These point to several overarching recommendations.

Expand language instruction contextualized for workplace use. While generic language training programs that provide language "survival skills" for everyday interactions serve an important purpose, language training that is contextualized for workplace use is essential to the long-term self-sufficiency and economic success of many migrants and of the businesses that rely on their labor. Language training programs for general workplace skills (e.g., customer service, routine office interactions) or specific industries (e.g., hospitality, health care) have demonstrated success with adult migrant learners, as have curricula that focus more intensively on specific occupations, from taxi drivers to nurses and doctors. However, generic language training programs remain the norm in most countries, in part because contextualized curriculum models are relatively new and teachers are unfamiliar with them, and also because it can be difficult for local language training programs to consistently enroll a sufficient number of students in classes that are contextualized for a particular industry (and to further

employer-sponsored visa holders (since recently arrived and economic-stream immigrants are less likely to be eligible for job seekers' benefits). Elizabeth Collett, *Immigrant Integration in Europe in a Time of Austerity* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2011), www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/TCM-integration.pdf.

20 Collett, *Immigrant Integration in Europe in a Time of Austerity*.

21 OECD, *Jobs for Immigrants, Volume 2: Labour Market Integration in Belgium, France, the Netherlands and Portugal* (Paris: OECD, 2008).



differentiate those classes in order to provide beginning, intermediate, and advanced instruction).

These challenges can be addressed through coordinated development and dissemination of effective curricula, training of teachers in use of contextualized curricula, funding or contract incentives that push programs to build their capacity to deliver contextualized instruction, local system design efforts that encourage specialization by particular providers in industry-specific language training, and publicity directed to migrant populations in order to increase demand.

Combine language and skills training. Many migrants may be eager to acquire additional industry-specific work skills in addition to contextualized language training. Yet, too often they receive such training sequentially rather than simultaneously — a process that can take many years to complete, especially for migrants who are working full-time and/or raising families. Unfortunately, language training and workforce skills training are often delivered by separate programs that themselves may be administered by separate government authorities, and these authorities may only require or reimburse one aspect of training. In addition, entry requirements for workforce-training programs may be established with only the needs of host-country natives in mind — requiring, for example, high school completion and high school-level host-country language skills as a condition of enrollment.

The integrated instruction model pioneered by Washington State's I-BEST programs shows the great potential for success in combining workplace-focused language and formal skills training. The creation and expansion of such programs rely on education and training policies that allow for integrated language and workforce skills instruction, capacity-building efforts to develop necessary curriculum models and teacher skills, and in some cases changes in per-student funding formulas to allow for team teaching of students receiving integrated instruction. Labor unions could also play an important role as providers of integrated instruction, since they are well positioned to understand the skill needs of particular job titles and may have an easier time achieving the scales of enrollment needed to support courses providing differentiated levels of instruction in a variety of occupations.

Encourage partnerships and work with employers. Tailoring language instruction to migrants' occupational needs requires up-to-date knowledge of the skills employers are seeking as well as substantial investment in curriculum development, teacher training, and evaluation. Partnerships between public and private organizations, employers, labor unions, community colleges, and civil-society organizations represent a promising way to increase capacity to respond to these specific needs — and to ensure that the training provided to migrants is aligned with current industry needs. Since most employers do not have the interest or skill set to become education providers, industry organizations, mid- to large-size employers, and labor unions should be encouraged to partner with education and skill-training entities to ensure that they understand specific, industry-based language and skill needs that can then provide the basis for curriculum development. These partnerships can be encouraged through policies that either require employer participation in the design of adult education and workforce skills programs, or through contracting procedures that give incentives for programs that provide evidence of such partnerships.

Encourage workplace-based instruction. Mid- to large-size employers with a high proportion of migrant workers and whose industry or workplace requires fluency in the host-country language are the most likely to see a value in providing work-focused language courses. Improved language skills will arguably enhance their workers' productivity and enable them to draw on a wider internal talent pool.²² From the perspective of busy adult workers, worksite-based programs can be a boon, saving them the time and expense of traveling after work hours to an off-site training provider who may not understand the needs of their workplace.

Assuming employers can be convinced of sufficient return on their investment in creating a language training program, several challenges remain. Primarily, they need a cost-effective or cost-neutral

22 Amy Beeler and Julie Murray, "Improving Immigrant Worker's Economic Prospects: A Review of the Literature," in *Securing the Future: US Immigration Integration Policy*, ed. Michael Fix (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2007).



means to provide instruction. This can be accomplished through provision by a local education agency or a qualified instructor who is able to teach a curriculum relevant to the employer's workplace or industry needs. In such cases the employer may simply provide the space for instruction that occurs onsite during nonwork hours or during work hours with paid release time for employees. Another issue is achieving economies of scale in order to reach the workforces of businesses or business sites that are distant from one another, and where a number of students sufficient to warrant investment in a training program is not present at any one site. Programs that use technology to connect students from numerous worksites — for example, using the scatter-site instructional model implemented by the McDonald's Corporation — can address this need.

Those interested in expanding workplace-based instruction may first need to address questions surrounding the use of public funds for private business purposes if their program model depends upon partnerships between publicly funded education providers and private businesses. Where public funds are used to support employer-based instruction, standards could be developed to guide program partnership decisions — favoring, for example, partnerships with employers that pay a share of the teacher's salary or that provide paid release time for their workers who participate in classes. To encourage employers to adopt workplace-based language training programs with relatively little public funding, governments can create a variety of supports, including access to free professional development for workplace-based teachers, technical assistance and skill-building programs for corporate training directors who create and manage onsite programs, and a clearinghouse of curriculum and technology resources for use by those who seek to create or expand language training at their worksites.

Take into account the needs of nontraditional students. Successful language integration programs take account of their students' circumstances, including busy schedules, limited financial resources, and child-care obligations. At the most basic level, programs and courses must fit immigrants' often hectic schedules by offering evening and weekend classes or worksite programs scheduled around or during work hours. This can pose challenges to providers, since teachers and administrative staff are often more accustomed to working daytime hours and a traditional work week. Additional support in the form of child care, help with transportation, or financial aid to cover the cost of textbooks or other materials, would improve access to courses, particularly for female immigrants with children. The increasing use of technology to enable remote classroom access and self-study provides language instruction and practice free from classroom scheduling constraints.

Evaluate programs; share and support effective practices. Finally, work-focused language instruction is an evolving field, and is developing within a larger language instruction field that itself is undergoing important changes as new thinking and practices related to contextualized and differentiated instruction take root. Mechanisms should be put into place to test the impact of work-focused programs and teaching models and to evaluate the importance of key design elements. These could include tracking student proficiency gains on nationally recognized tests or the employment and earnings of participants in different types of language training programs that use different curricula or instructional models. Capacity-building measures should be undertaken such as sharing effective policy, program, and instruction models and — perhaps more important — providing technical assistance to program managers and teachers interested in implementing language training programs contextualized for work and differentiated across student skill levels. Policy and funding measures can gradually be aligned to target support to the most effective models of instruction, while capacity-building measures will support the spread and continual improvement of effective programs.



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