

Preparing English Learners for Work and Career Pathways



This Brief

Introduction: Responding to a Changing World	1
Context: Adult English Learners, Work, and Careers	2
Key Considerations: Dual Needs—Education and Training	3
Considerations for Administrators ...	7
Conclusion	7
Works Cited	7
Additional Resources	9

Introduction: Responding to a Changing World

In the United States, as elsewhere, there is an increasing demand for a job-driven adult education system that teaches adults the skills needed for work in “good jobs.” As the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (2014) makes clear, adult education and training need to be more closely aligned to prepare students for employment in a reasonable time frame (Biden, 2014). In many cases, this calls for collaborative relationships between training providers, such as community

colleges that offer career pathways, and adult education programs focused on English language acquisition (ELA). Research suggests that “good jobs”—that is, jobs that pay family-sustaining wages—require at least some postsecondary education. For many low-skilled adults, including English language learners (ELLs),¹ a good option appears to be focusing on education and training for middle-skill jobs that require some postsecondary education but not a 4-year degree.

Issue Brief

A project of American Institutes for Research

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¹ An *English language learner* is defined as an adult or out-of-school youth “who has limited ability in speaking, reading, writing, or comprehending the English language—and whose native language is a language other than English; or who lives in a family or community environment where a language other than English is the dominant language” (Public Law 113–128, July 2014, Title II, Sec. 203[6]). This term replaces the phrase *individual of limited English proficiency*, which was used under the former law, the Workforce Investment Act.



This issue brief is a part of the LINCS ESL Pro suite of resources on *Preparing English Learners for Work and Career Pathways*. The purpose of this issue brief is to provide teachers and administrators with practical ideas and present a broad overview of considerations for connecting ELA to career pathways. It is intended to serve as an introduction to the topic of career-focused contextualized instruction that teachers and administrators can use as a springboard to additional in-depth resources on this topic. This brief describes program models designed to strengthen the alignment of adult education, employment, and skills training. The Instruction section outlines the skills that ELLs need to succeed at work and in postsecondary education and offers ideas for teaching practice.

Although this issue brief provides links to resources that help illustrate the current trend in career pathway services for ELLs, it is not intended to be used as an instructional guide. For more comprehensive, targeted information, refer to the two related resources below, available from the [ESL Pro landing page](#) of LINCS:

- *Preparing English Learners for Work and Career Pathways: Professional Development Module*
This online, self-access module includes an overview of contextualization concepts as well as units on program design, curriculum and instruction, and evaluation and learner assessment. The module provides in-depth information for teachers as well as administrators.
- *Preparing English Learners for Work and Career Pathways: Companion Learning Resource*
This practical, comprehensive instructional resource is written specifically for teachers.

Context: Adult English Learners, Work, and Careers

As the adult education field shifts to meet emerging needs, models that integrate basic skills with occupational skills are starting to emerge across the United States. Adult education programs are now working in collaboration with employers, members of workforce boards, and colleges to build services that allow for a seamless transition from training to career pathways. These pathways often start with industry-recognized certificates that can be obtained in less than a year—certificates that constitute the first rung in the career ladder in growth industries such as health care, information technology, construction, or transportation and logistics. Integrated instruction allows immigrants and refugees to participate in training for these job sectors while they are developing their English skills.

Efforts to transition ELLs to work and/or training are more likely to be successful if the knowledge and skills that students learn reflect the demands of employment in local industries. These efforts should reflect what students need to know and should be able to do in career pathway training designed to lead to family-sustaining employment. Because many immigrants face challenges in their lives related to work and family responsibilities and have limited resources of time and money, supportive services may be necessary. For example, several of the colleges that are part of Accelerate Texas employ a “student success advisor” or a case manager who helps vulnerable students persist and succeed in their transition

Career Pathway: A series of connected education and training strategies and support services that enable individuals to secure industry-relevant certification and obtain employment in an occupational area and to advance to higher levels of future education and employment in that area.

U.S. Departments of Education, Labor, and Health and Human Services, 2012



from ELA to postsecondary education and training.

Key Considerations

ELLs often have dual needs: the need for English instruction and the need for occupational skills training. Yet, traditionally, the training and education systems have worked in silos, making it difficult for providers to offer services that address the multiple skill demands of modern society (Parrish & Johnson, 2010). These include oral and written communication skills along with the occupational skills and credentials valued by employers. They may include marketable skills certificates as well as noncredit and credit certificates in areas related to health, information technologies, or manufacturing. ELLs also need the work-readiness skills necessary to obtain and retain employment and advance to jobs beyond the entry level. But basic skills and technical knowledge may not be enough for today's world: Employers have also consistently stressed the need for soft skills—skills often used in team participation, problem solving, and decision making (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.). Several websites offer excellent suggestions on how to prepare students for work, including the U.S. Department of Education's site outlining an Employability Framework (<http://cte.ed.gov/employabilityskills>).

Programming efforts that connect adult education to employment in high-growth industries follow an approach that focuses on preparing adult learners for work and career pathways. These approaches are often jointly developed through community partnerships with workforce boards, employers, and colleges, and they focus on transition to jobs and training opportunities available locally. Instruction is contextualized to either specific jobs or career clusters, enabling students to develop the language and literacy skills necessary for the next step in their careers. (For a discussion of contextualization, see also Johnson, 2002; Mazzeo, Rab, & Alssid, 2003; Perin, 2011.)

Responding to the Language and Literacy Needs of English Learners

The United States is home to more than 25.3 million individuals with limited English proficiency, including both foreign-born and U.S.-born individuals (Whatley & Batalova, 2013). The pressing need to move beyond life skills–oriented ESL instruction is felt quite keenly by ELA program² administrators and instructors, who are aware that the majority of ELLs are far from earning the middle-class wages envisioned in the Ready to Work report (Biden, 2014); instead, many are employed in entry-level, low-wage jobs. This is true not only of low-skilled immigrants with little education but also for immigrants and refugees with professional degrees, who tend to be underemployed as well (Spence, 2010; Wilson, 2014). Both groups are employed at a higher rate than U.S.-born adults but are overrepresented in the low-wage workforce (Capps, Fix, & Lin, 2010).

Given the pressures to find work and support a family, few learners new to English have the time or resources to persist through a sequential ELA program that moves them from the beginning to the advanced levels of English proficiency required for certificate training in high-demand jobs in fields (McHugh, 2014; Wrigley, 2009). Concerned about these realities, President Obama's administration (White House, 2015), working with key federal departments, has suggested alternative models to accelerate the transition to job skills training and to allow students with different experiences and backgrounds to participate effectively in a changing labor market.

A federal report jointly developed by the U.S. Departments of Labor, Commerce, Education, and Health and Human Services (2014) entitled *What Works in Job Training* also highlights models that build partnerships between education and workforce institutions. These models reflect a new skills paradigm designed to move youth and adults into good jobs that are ready to be filled.

2 An *English language acquisition program* is defined as “a program of instruction designed to help eligible individuals who are English language learners achieve competence in reading, writing, speaking, and comprehension of the English language; and that leads to attainment of the secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent; and transition to postsecondary education and training; or employment” (Public Law 113–128, July 2014, Title II, Sec. 203(6)). This term replaces the formerly used phrase *English as a second language*, or adult ESL.

Connecting Adult English Language Learners to Work and Training: Practical Strategies

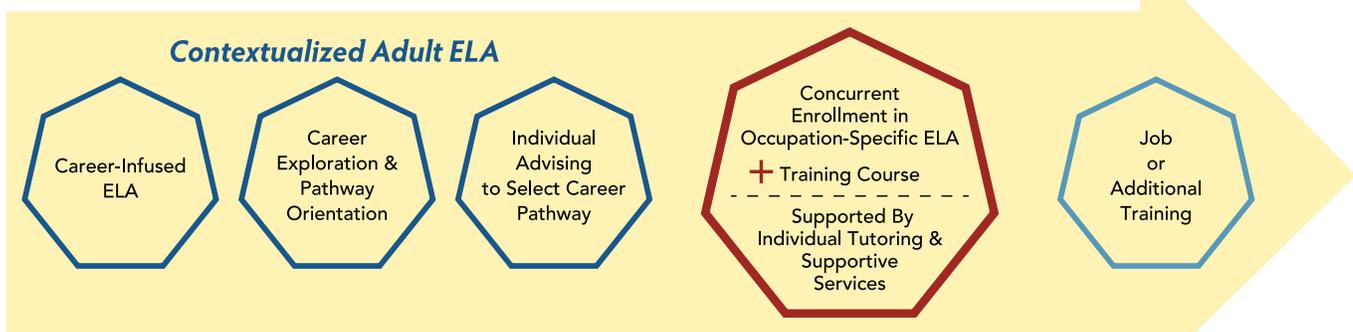
Adult ELA programs serving students who are looking for work or looking to advance in their current jobs might consider shifting from general ELA to one or more contextualized ELA classes focused on workforce preparation. These classes often integrate a career awareness component to help students identify both the skills they have and the skills they need to qualify for jobs that pay family-sustaining wages.

Particularly important for immigrants and refugees are components that increase awareness of career ladders and the hourly wages associated with each step on the ladder. Students from poorer families can often benefit from gaining a broader perspective that illustrates how investing in longer-term opportunities might benefit a family financially in the long run. Other options include: **bridge courses** that prepare students for the next step in their careers, whether employment or skills training; the **concurrent enrollment model** (see Exhibit 1), which allows students to co-enroll in a technical class and an English support class; and the **I-BEST (Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training) model**, an approach, supported by research evidence (Zeidenberg & Jenkins, 2010), which uses team teaching. In the latter model, a technical instructor and an adult basic education or ELA instructor work side by side in the same classroom, interweaving basic skills and occupational skills. Many of these programs also provide advising and other supportive services to make it possible for students to persist and succeed in the long term.

Blended learning models that combine online learning with face-to-face group instruction can help to accelerate learning at any level. However, while higher-skilled students may be able to learn independently using computer-mediated systems (with some guidance), lower-skilled students new to technology may need a great deal of support and assistance in using new media for learning. (For additional information, see the issue brief and in-depth, online training module on *Integrating Digital Literacy Into English Language Instruction*, available from the [LINCS ESL Pro landing page](#).)

Contextualization for English language acquisition: A process of providing language and literacy services contextualized to the skill demands of work or career and technical training. Instruction is offered in a supportive environment and uses authentic materials gathered from workplace and technical training.

Exhibit 1: ELA career pathway model that includes concurrent enrollment with supportive services



Example of a pathway model that moves students from contextualized ELA to career exploration and individual advising to concurrent enrollment in an ELA and a training course.



Engaging Employers to Support Adult Career Pathways Programs

Employer engagement can significantly contribute to the success of a program's career pathway efforts. For example, employers working in collaboration with ELA and training providers can be asked to identify the language and literacy demands of specific jobs, provide input on curriculum, and describe current and future work opportunities in their sectors. They may also help determine which industry-recognized certificates should be created for specific pathways. Some companies, including hotels, restaurants, and custodial staff in school districts, are collaborating with ELA programs to help design customized training programs with an eye toward employee advancement.

Employers can also be asked to coordinate their on-site training with opportunities afforded by local providers, and they can offer internships or other work-based learning opportunities. Many employers are willing to participate in career days and conduct mock interviews with students. Fully engaged employers may offer release time for classes or provide other incentives and supports to help workers persist and complete a course.

Employer Engagement With Adult ELA: Case in Point:

One such initiative, built in collaboration with ELA experts and delivered by ELA instructors, is McDonald's *English Under the Arches*,³ a language program operating in 41 sites across the United States. Since 2008, the program has served more than 2,500 ELLs (all management trainees and assistant managers) through a blended learning model that includes virtual classes taught by an adult ELA instructor from a local community college. Students also meet regionally face to face to get to know each other and learn the technology they will use. Instruction is contextualized to the technical training the company provides. Program components include face-to-face classes at a local site, independent e-learning, and on-the-job practice with coworkers and customers based on structured assignments (Aspen Institute, 2014). Other companies, such as Marriott and Walmart, offer their employees opportunities to improve their English by participating in an online course. (The companies buy licenses and access is free to employees.) Additional ideas on building partnerships with employers can be found at <http://lincs.ed.gov/employers> and <http://UpskillAmerica.org>.

³ The U.S. Department of Education does not endorse any particular model.

Instruction: Addressing Learner Needs

Although general program models may look similar for all adult basic education students, the instructional opportunities offered to ELLs preparing for work and training must be quite different both in design and execution. New immigrants and refugees may be unfamiliar with the culture of the U.S. workplace or the culture of training. They may have little experience in learning technical skills in a classroom setting and might need information, support, and guidance in making career choices and selecting appropriate training opportunities. The following list outlines some of the key skills that a contextualized ELA program might address, along with strategies for strengthening these skills.

- **Speaking and Listening Skills:** Unlike native speakers, ELLs may not be familiar with the social and technical language used in modern workplaces and training. There is a great need for functional language associated with asking for information, making requests, providing explanations, discussing problems, or making amends when things go wrong.
 - » **Bright Ideas:** A needs assessment to identify the language demands of certain job sectors can serve as a framework for instruction. Role plays and simulations (e.g., turning the class into a make-believe computer repair shop for a day) offer opportunities for practice. Asking students to pay attention to the language they hear around them at work, in stores, or at social service agencies builds language curiosity and language awareness, both of which are important for ongoing learning beyond the classroom.
- **Academic Listening Comprehension Skills:** The skills needed to understand and respond to lectures are particularly important in training, whether they are part of workplace training or part of an occupational skills course offered in a career and technical program. ELLs at all levels need experience listening to academic presentations. They must gain proficiency in both global listening—to get the main point of an explanation—and listening for important details that need to be remembered. Because the technology used in both work and training is rapidly evolving, the skills necessary for each increasingly include the use of software-based training modules that require “problem solving in technology-rich environments” (see also Survey of Adult Skills, Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and



Development, 2013). This can be a challenge for many ELLs who have not participated in distance learning.

- » **Bright Ideas:** Hearing a mini-lecture on a topic related to careers (e.g., The 10 Skills Employers Want) gives students practice in listening for a main idea and identifying examples. It also supports note-taking skills. (For more information on teaching academic skills, see the online training module *Meeting the Language Needs of Today's Adult English Language Learner*, available from the [LINCS ESL Pro landing page](#).) This module includes examples of online how-to videos that give students a chance to practice both note-taking and listening skills.)
- **Written Communication:** The writing that ELLs must do at work and in training courses is quite different from the personal narratives that are common in many ESL programs, particularly at the beginning levels. ELLs preparing for careers are expected to become proficient in document and informational literacy (Parrish & Johnson, 2010). Expectations for work-related written communication now go far beyond simply filling out print forms or jotting down information in a note. Workers and trainees increasingly need to access information contained in company and training websites and are expected to use e-mail on a regular basis. Increasingly, they must request time off, check schedules, clock in and out, and report problems online. Communication regularly flows via e-mail, and in most training courses, students are expected to download readings and upload completed assignments.
 - » **Bright Ideas:** Integrating a computer literacy component into ELA classes and offering hands-on practice in electronic communication will help students be competent and confident in using new tools. Learning about social media and the etiquette that governs its use can forestall potential problems as students transition to college. Students can also be asked to generate and answer questions via e-mail, use Twitter to give their opinions on an issue, create a LinkedIn page that highlights their job experience and skills, or use a spreadsheet to analyze answers to an interview they conduct as a class.
- **Technical Language and Vocabulary.** The language used in job skills training tends to be quite different from the everyday language that ELLs hear and read in conventional ELA classes. Vocabulary may be a challenge as well. ELLs who want to succeed in training will need to acquire thousands of new words to understand lectures and textbooks, participate in discussions, and pass exams. The terminology used in technical classes may represent the academic language of a profession or industry, but it often includes *subtechnical vocabulary*, terminology that native speakers tend to know but that may be unfamiliar to ELLs (e.g., *cardiac arrest*, *blueprint*, *reboot*, or *spreadsheet*).
 - » **Bright Ideas:** Using image-rich materials written for both lay people and specialists can afford exposure to new forms of discourse. Selecting a few sentences of dense, jargon-free text and deconstructing them with a class can offer experience in finding the meaning behind the words (e.g., in tightening a Phillips head screw, care must be taken not to strip it). Magazines on health, popular mechanics, and automobiles can help make learning relevant to students' interests while introducing new vocabulary to be studied. Asking students to bring their favorite tools to class, discuss their use (and misuse), and research their history engages students while building background knowledge as well as new vocabulary. Building on what students know and what they are interested in takes advantage of the background knowledge that ELLs possess and is likely to deepen learning.
- **The Culture of Work and Training:** Immigrants and refugees who are still learning English and have been in the United States for only a relatively short time may need a great deal of guidance on how to navigate the U.S. workplace or how to succeed in a training course at an academic institution (Wrigley, Richter, Martinson, Kubo, & Strawn, 2003). Cultural knowledge may include the skills associated with high-performance workplaces and career and technical training, such as problem solving, decision making, and working in teams. ELLs may likewise be unfamiliar with the language used in social interactions, such as communicating with supervisors or instructors and collaborating with fellow workers and students. ELLs may also need to know about workers' rights and learn more about social and legal issues related to sexual harassment and discrimination.



» **Bright Ideas:** Scenarios depicting “sticky situations” at work or in training can offer a jumping-off point for discussion on “how things work” in the United States. Asking students how they might respond to a critical incident and discussing options and consequences as a group provides language practice and offers opportunities for cross-cultural comparisons. (Scenario example: One of the expensive tools you had to buy for the class is missing. You think one of your co-workers/fellow students took it, but you are not sure. What do you do? What do you say?) Employers and training instructors often have many examples that they can share.

Considerations for Administrators

As the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education report *Making Skills Everyone's Business* (U.S. Department of Education, 2015) makes clear, the trend toward implementing career pathways offers program managers in adult education unprecedented opportunities for collaboration at the local level. Working with community colleges and community-based service providers allows administrators to build a continuum of services that includes the support that ELLs might need not only to access programs but also to persist and succeed. Through partnerships with workforce boards and by engaging employers, program administrators get a chance to highlight the diversity of ELLs who reside in their communities and to emphasize their strengths. These partners can also identify growing occupational areas that offer expanding opportunities for work in the local area. In discussions with those outside the ELA field, ELA administrators can explain how the approaches that support less educated learners may need to be adjusted for higher-skilled, foreign-educated students who can benefit from accelerated learning. Finally, advocating for and implementing high-quality professional development specifically focused on this new trend offers administrators a chance to become leaders in the area of connecting adult ELLs to career pathways through contextualization.

Conclusion

ELA programs that actively prepare students to access the employment and training services related to career pathways contribute to immigrant integration (see also the Networks for Integrating New Americans (NINA), Kallenbach et al. 2013). Contextualized programs fill an important gap in the field. They allow ELLs time to build their language and literacy skills while increasing their knowledge of concepts and terms used in an occupational area, at work or in training. Building programs that offer instruction contextualized to work and careers helps create pathways to self-sufficiency and offers access to quality jobs for immigrants and refugees who may be underemployed or educationally underprepared and whose English is still a work in progress. It also creates opportunities for economic integration (Kallenbach et al., 2013) and helps ELLs see that “getting good jobs with good wages” is an attainable goal.

Contextualization models and instructional approaches designed to meet the needs of ELLs are addressed in more detail in resources available from the [LINCES ESL Pro landing page](#), including a companion learning resource that illustrates best practices in action and an in-depth, online training module.

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Additional Resources

Recommended Websites

- **LINCS Career Pathways Collection:** This collection includes resources, adult career pathways newsletters and webcasts http://lincs.ed.gov/collections?keys=&field_rcis_topic_areas_value%5B0%5D=Career%20Pathways
- **Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education.** This page provides an overview of the changes in the 2014 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/AdultEd/wioa-reauthorization.html>
- **Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST).** This site includes videos, an explanation of the model, research that supports the model, and planning resources. (Washington's I-BEST is a nationally recognized career pathways model.) http://www.sbctc.ctc.edu/college/e_integratedbasiceducationandskillstraining.aspx

Curricula Available Online

- **Hotel T.E.A.C.H.** LaGuardia Community College Hospitality Curriculum developed in partnership with the Sheraton Hotel http://www.lagcc.cuny.edu/ciet/work_health.html
- **Occupational Prep Curriculum** from Hubbs Center for Adult Basic Education (St. Paul Public Schools). This site includes contextualized adult basic education curriculum for a variety of occupations. http://hubbs.spps.org/occupational_prep.html
- **Integrating Career Awareness Curriculum.** This is part of the LINCS collection of resources. <http://www.collegetransition.org/publications.icacurriculum.html>