



## **English for New Citizens: Contributions of a Learner-Centered Vocational ESL Framework**

As immigration reform is on the table for the first time in two decades, proposals are being made involving a path to citizenship for the 12 million undocumented immigrants now in the country. This article suggests that, in addition to helping these immigrants meet the English-language requirement for citizenship, comprehensive immigration reform provides the field of TESOL with another opportunity to contribute to equality for the undocumented community by helping these new citizens obtain the language skills necessary for social and economic mobility. This article argues that vocational ESL, or VESL, is well suited for working with this population. A brief review of the history and underpinnings of VESL is followed by a more extended discussion of how VESL fits the specific characteristics and needs of these new citizens as language learners. The final section offers suggestions for expansion, advocating for close partnerships between VESL courses and students during all phases of the educational program. Learner-centered VESL for new immigrants constitutes adult education as a tool for social change, emphasizing the importance of social justice to the field of TESOL.

**E**ver since the results of the 2012 presidential election were announced, media pundits, politicians, and researchers have emphasized the role of the Latino electorate in handing sweeping victories to Democrats and defeating numerous virulently anti-immigrant candidates (Pew Hispanic Research Center, 2012). Perhaps as a result of the increasing visibility of this constituency, immigration reform has been placed on the national legislative agenda. On June 27, 2013, the Senate voted 82 to 15 to pass S.744, The Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act. This

comprehensive immigration-reform bill, along with increased border security measures, also includes a path to citizenship for the estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants now living in the United States (O'Keefe, 2013).

This bill continues the trend of past immigration legislation, most recently the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, which all include provisions specifying that those immigrants wishing to obtain US citizenship must demonstrate English-language proficiency to be considered eligible (California Tomorrow, 1989; Ramsey & Robyn, 1992). The wording of S.744 states that undocumented immigrants will be eligible for legalization only if they “demonstrate understanding of the English language,” including reading, writing, and speaking (Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act, 2013, §2102, 24C, b4). While debate on the Senate bill seems to have slowed in the House, it is possible that immigration reform may be implemented in this legislative cycle. In the very near future, therefore, the field of TESOL may be faced with the challenge of how best to provide effective English instruction to 12 million prospective new citizens, many of whom have nevertheless lived and worked in the US for many years.

Given the likelihood that any such reform will include an English-language requirement for potential new citizens, the field will need to continue providing such citizenship-directed instruction. Indeed, such programs will need a considerable investment of resources to manage 12 million new students, since English-for-citizenship programs are already struggling to meet existing demands (Crandall & Sheppard, 2004). While recognizing the importance of these citizenship classes, this article suggests that the possibility of immigration reform presents the field of TESOL with another opportunity for contributing to equality for the undocumented community. Helping students pass their citizenship exams is a first step, but we can go beyond this to help these new citizens gain the language skills necessary to move out of the shadows of economic exploitation and social marginalization.

In this article, I suggest that vocational ESL (VESL) is a model that is well suited to helping these new citizens gain the English proficiency required for economic and social mobility. After an overview of the field of VESL, I turn to an analysis of how this framework fits the characteristics of this community and can thus meet their socio-economic needs. I then discuss some suggestions for productively expanding the VESL model, emphasizing the importance of student engagement for developing VESL curricula that build on students' existing labor-market experience for greater effectiveness. While a VESL

approach would most likely appeal to students who have successfully obtained citizenship, I argue that a learner-centered VESL curriculum would in fact build on citizenship classes by helping to prepare students for participatory citizenship. Developing such VESL programs to serve the needs of our new citizens would thus help the field further address critiques of existing citizenship curricula as being caught up with replicating passive models of citizenship (Derwing, 1992; Fleming & Morgan, 2012; Morgan, 2002). Learner-centered VESL, offered to new citizens, is ultimately a model that engages adult education as a tool for social change (Guo & Sork, 2005), emphasizing the importance of social justice to the field of TESOL.

### **Vocational ESL: Principles and Characteristics**

Since its inception in the mid-1970s, VESL has been an important framework for adult language instruction (Crandall, 1979a, 1984; Gillespie, 1996; Murray, 2011). VESL involves the teaching of English-language skills that allow the learner to “survive in a vocational education classroom and on a job” (Friedenberg & Bradley, 1984, p. 3). As such, it fits within the broader category of English for specific purposes (ESP), which provides language instruction to learners with more specific and definable needs than general ESL (Friedenberg, Kennedy, Lomperis, Martin, & Westerfield, 2002). However, while ESP often tends to meet the needs of those involved in professional careers such as medicine or law, VESL places a particular emphasis on providing language instruction for nonprofessional careers such as those often taught through vocational-training programs (Friedenberg & Bradley, 1984; Johns & Dudley-Evans, 1991).

As an approach to adult language instruction, VESL is informed by theories of acquisition and task-based instruction, as well as understandings of communicative competence and adult learning theory (Friedenberg et al., 2002). Within the field of TESOL, a focus on language acquisition (Krashen, 1982) has emphasized the importance of goal-directed learning that relies on authentic materials (Rogers & Medley, 1988) and active language use by learners (Ellis, 2003, 2005). In addition, Hymes’s (1972) seminal theorization of communicative competence has made the picture of language instruction more complex, moving away from a focus on grammatical or linguistic competency alone to include the skills of sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competencies (Canale & Swain, 1980). Implementing these theories in the classroom has led to the emergence of task-based instruction, in which students carry out actions through language and learn both the functions of this language use as well as contextual factors shaping its use and interpretation (Friedenberg et al., 2002). VESL

focuses specifically on job-related tasks, varying from more generalized interviewing skills to very specific technical operations. Finally, because it focuses on adult learners, VESL draws on theories of adult learning, emphasizing experiential, problem-solving learning, and the active engagement of learners in the pedagogical process (Friedenberg et al., 2002).

VESL programs have three principle characteristics that distinguish them from other ESL classes. First, VESL curricula emphasize job-specific vocabulary and grammar (Friedenberg & Bradley, 1984), in particular recognizing the importance of appropriate vocabulary in job contexts (Crandall, 1979b). Second, VESL courses use communicative learning activities that approximate the job situation as much as possible (Friedenberg & Bradley, 1984); the objectives of VESL are thus directly job related and rely on appropriate materials (Crandall, 1979b). Finally, VESL programs are embedded within broader vocational-training programs (Crandall, 1979b), with language instruction and job training provided simultaneously (Friedenberg & Bradley, 1984).

VESL students are thus engaged in two learning processes simultaneously, which raises issues about whether language skills or vocational skills should have priority. Many programs do not allow students to begin vocational training until they have reached an intermediate level of English proficiency; while this approach seems sensible, it is actually counterproductive in several ways. First, for immigrant students with immediate financial needs, delaying job training is simply not economically feasible. Moreover, general ESL courses often do not meet students' needs as effectively as VESL (Friedenberg & Bradley, 1984). Early research in this area demonstrated that beginning ESL students are receptive to and capable of simultaneous entry-level vocational training (Gage & Prince, 1982), and more recent scholarship has continued to emphasize the value of vocational training even for beginning language learners (Chisman, 2009).

The combination of language and vocational instruction presents challenges for ESL teachers, who must learn about the industry or company they are working with in order to provide effective language instruction (Parrish, 2004). Rather than having ESL teachers become experts in vocational training themselves, most VESL programs include some sort of collaboration. In many cases, this involves a partnership between the VESL teacher and a vocational instructor, who must coordinate their teaching efforts closely to provide effective and coherent instruction (Friedenberg & Bradley, 1984; Platt, 1993). Another common partnership is between the VESL program and the business community, whether these are particular industries, specific

companies, or groups of business leaders. In these cases, VESL staff and instructors consult members of the business community to determine what language skills they think their workers need. Research on these partnerships has demonstrated that the more local these partnerships are (i.e., the more closely they are connected to particular industries or companies), the more they are able to produce specific output that productively informs VESL curricula (Chisman, 2009; Stapp, 1998).

### **VESL for New Citizens: Contributions**

The past several decades of experience within the field of TESOL have shown that pedagogical approaches are most successful when they are carefully fitted to the characteristics of particular instructional contexts and the needs of specific groups of learners (Kumaraavadivelu, 2012). So, what are the characteristics of the undocumented immigrants who may become our newest citizens under immigration reform? In the following two subsections, I will discuss these characteristics, first with regard to the special needs of the undocumented community and then in connection to their needs as adult learners. In each case, I will discuss pedagogical considerations that emerge from these characterizations.

#### ***Characteristics of the Undocumented Community***

The vast majority of the undocumented immigrants now living in the US are native speakers of Spanish: 57% of undocumented immigrants are from Mexico, while 23% are from other Latin American countries (Passel, Capps, & Fix, 2004). The fact that much of this population shares the same language background may greatly facilitate VESL instruction, as discussed in more detail in the final section of this paper. Another major issue for success in language learning is student persistence rates, which are often quite low for immigrant populations who have many demands on their time (Passel et al., 2004). Recent research on VESL has demonstrated that this approach has higher persistence and completion rates (Chisman, 2009), suggesting that it may be a productive approach for this community.

Another crucial characteristic of this population is its extremely high rates of labor-force participation. Undocumented immigrants come to the US in search of economic survival for themselves and their families (Barreto & Segura, 2013), and many start working the day they arrive. In fact, the labor-force participation of undocumented men, at 96%, is higher than any other group in the US, including citizens and legal immigrants. Labor-force participation rates are lower for undocumented women, about 62%, in part because of women's

responsibilities for childbearing and child rearing (Passel et al., 2004). However, this reported percentage very likely represents a significant undercount of the undocumented women who are working, with the undercount due to the prevalence of part-time and informal employment as caregivers in private homes among immigrant women (Baldassar & Merla, 2013). So even if undocumented women take time off work to meet their family responsibilities, the vast majority will engage in labor-market participation at some point during their lives.

In general, because of their lack of legal documentation and language skills, the undocumented community is concentrated in low-wage sectors such as agriculture, construction, food service, and housework (Barreto & Segura, 2013; Passel et al., 2004). Many of these immigrants settle in enclaves along with others from the same national or linguistic background, and their social lives remain largely segregated from the English-speaking world (Eyring, 2014). As research has shown, if immigrants do not use the target language in their everyday lives, they will most likely not gain proficiency (Van Caueren & Vleminckx, 2008). For this population of undocumented immigrants, therefore, work may be the one setting in which they interact with native English speakers; VESL methods are therefore ideally suited to mesh with the lives of these new citizens in ways that encourage English proficiency.

Finally, many undocumented immigrants have low levels of literacy in their native languages (Eyring, 2014; Van Caueren & Vleminckx, 2008). This can make traditional classroom methods of instruction challenging, both because learners struggle with reading and writing, but also because their own self-concepts may keep them from seeing themselves as successful classroom learners (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). The more task-oriented and hands-on learning of VESL is therefore better suited to the needs of this population (Gage & Prince, 1982; Van Caueren & Vleminckx, 2008). Finding effective means of language instruction for this population is an urgent local need: 27% of undocumented immigrants live in California, the largest share of any state. However, this issue goes far beyond local relevancy, because in recent years, most growth in undocumented populations has been outside of the six states, including California, that have traditionally received most of these immigrants (Passel et al., 2004). I have argued that VESL may be well suited to this population because of its high persistence rates, its connection to high labor-force participation rates, and its suitability for learners with limited literacy.

### ***Characteristics of Adult Learners***

In addition to providing strategies for meeting the needs of the

undocumented community, VESL is also well suited to immigrants' characteristics as adult language learners. Research has demonstrated that adult learners do extremely well with self-directed learning processes (Eyring, 2014), and that connections to work and career advancement are particularly important to adult learners (Knowles, 1980). For adult learners, time spent learning English is time taken away from busy lives with many responsibilities; this is particularly true for undocumented immigrants who often work longer hours to make up for lower wages and to support family back home in their countries of origin (Passel et al., 2004). For this population, studying English is often seen as an investment to increase future earning potential; VESL thus follows students' interests in developing work-related curricula.

Furthermore, student self-direction is intricately connected to learners' investment in the educational endeavor (Norton Peirce, 1995): For many immigrants, learning English is seen as a catalyst for economic success (Eyring, 2014; Parrish, 2004). These perceptions fit with research findings indicating that learning English is the greatest indicator of immigrant upward mobility (Chiswick & Miller, 2002). With immigration reform, the undocumented community would finally gain legal permission to work and thus have the possibility of moving out of marginalized employment. Connecting English language instruction to vocational training, as in VESL, would thus tap in to a powerful motivation for members of this population, helping encourage them to continue attending classes and thus working to address the problem of low persistence rates.

More broadly, second language learning is most successful when it connects to learners' identities (Menard-Warwick, 2004). For adults, work is often an important part of their identities, providing yet another reason why the VESL model may help motivate these particular learners. Finally, for learners to develop successful learning strategies, it is crucial that they have clear goals for the educational process (Donato & McCormick, 1994). Connecting English language learning to career advancement helps to provide such concrete goals, a factor that may be even more crucial for populations such as the undocumented community, whose members have low levels of literacy and may struggle with academic environments in general. Thus, despite the initial costs associated with expanding existing VESL programs or creating more such opportunities (Chisman, 2009), this model seems well suited to the characteristics of the undocumented population, as well as its needs as adult language learners. In fact, in the long term, VESL may be the most cost-effective approach to maximize the labor-force potential of these new citizens, as it would efficiently contribute

to getting these individuals engaged in the workforce in more productive ways (Chisman, 2009).

### **Expanding the Framework: Students as Partners**

In the previous section, I have argued that a VESL framework is the pedagogical model that best fits the needs of the undocumented community. In this section, however, I turn to a discussion of how the VESL model could be expanded to increase effectiveness. In its original conceptualization, VESL was intended to be a learner-centered program of instruction that built on the skills adult language learners already possess (Crandall, 1979b). In the intervening years, as the field of VESL has expanded, it has been taken in new directions; VESL programs across the country have built strong partnerships with businesses and specific industries. While these relationships are of course beneficial to the field, I would suggest that they have been developed at the expense of creating connections with the most obvious partner of all: our VESL students themselves, who have much to offer to an effective VESL model.

VESL instructors know that their classroom instruction needs to be informed by the needs of the vocational context, and research has demonstrated that the more closely fitted this information is, the more pedagogically useful it becomes (Chisman, 2009). Indeed, some scholars have argued that actual observation at the work site is crucial to developing the language content for VESL curricula; through observations, VESL instructors can learn about how language is used at the workplace (Svendson & Krebs, 1984). While such observations may be valuable, this framing ignores the expertise already present in our VESL classrooms: the vast technical and vocational knowledge brought by our students. In the case of the undocumented community, the majority of whom have years of experience in US workplaces, this expertise is particularly important, and VESL programs would do well to capitalize on this knowledge. Working to place existing student expertise at the center of VESL curricula is also crucial because employers may be loath to lose these low-wage workers and may be less likely to collaborate with language teachers. Learner-centered programs are thus particularly important in working to meet the needs of these new citizens.

In advocating for the recognition of existing learner knowledge, I align with researchers who have studied everyday communication at workplaces and have emphasized the substantial language learning that occurs in such settings, even in imperfect L2 conversations (Cooke, Brown, & Zhu, 2007; Firth 2009). Such scholarship highlights the importance of recognizing learners' existing communica-



tive competence; however, I would suggest that, in addition to general communicative skills, undocumented language learners have specific vocationally related knowledge about language use that they can contribute to VESL programs. Specifically, adult VESL learners should be actively involved in curriculum planning through discussions of what tasks they would need to complete, and thus what English language skills they would need, in order to succeed in a given career path. Such pedagogical conversations would most likely need to happen in learners' native language; in the case of the undocumented community, this is greatly facilitated by the fact that about 80% of this population shares the same language background. VESL instructors who are bilingual in Spanish and English would be crucial at this planning stage.

Several specific strategies come to mind in thinking about how to actively involve students in VESL curriculum design. One model is that adopted by Santa Barbara City College, in which a needs assessment of the community was conducted to determine the primary industries in which adult English language learners worked. This needs assessment then formed the basis for several different VESL tracks (Bailey, 2013); students separated into these tracks could then be consulted for the tasks and skills they wish to master. Such an approach could allow students to gain the language skills necessary to move up in industries they are already familiar with, for example, moving from busboy to cook, waiter, or maitre d' within the food-service industry. Another model is the free courses that the organization Restaurant Opportunities Centers United provides for food-service workers. While not focused on language specifically, these courses help workers in entry-level positions to gain the occupation-specific knowledge required for career advancement (ROC United, 2013). Other models for engaging students include offering VESL classes through community-based organizations (Literacy BC, 2009; Sowa, 2001) or through community-service projects (Glicker, 2006).

On a theoretical level, engaging language learners as partners in the development of VESL programs has the potential to bring together functional and critical approaches to pedagogy, which have often been separated in adult ESL. With its emphasis on specific, practical goals and real-life learning, VESL is most closely associated with functional pedagogies, while critical pedagogy values learners' goals and moves from students to curriculum (Eyring, 2014). The engaged VESL model that I have advocated for would bridge these two frameworks; by drawing out students' existing expertise, such an approach makes the functional VESL approach more empowering, and by emphasizing skills that will help students improve their immediate lived realities, this approach makes critical pedagogies more practical.

Indeed, the foundation of an engaged VESL framework recognizes that empowering individuals to change their lives for the better necessarily challenges oppressive structures that work to marginalize groups such as the undocumented community, thus tapping into the role of language as a symbolic tool of empowerment (Lantolf, 1994). Engaging our students as partners in the learning process and valuing the expertise and knowledge they bring to the table is a crucial means by which the field of TESOL can reemphasize the importance of equity and social justice in our work (Platt, Harper, & Mendoza, 2003), a dynamic that is particularly important in working with this marginalized population. Showing such learners that their voices are valued in educational contexts may well have profound impacts beyond language learning, modeling and encouraging engaged citizenship in other arenas of life. Such a project is crucial to helping the undocumented community come out of the shadows and move into the mainstream of civic life in the US.

### **Conclusion**

This article has addressed the question of providing English language instruction to a potentially large group of new citizens who have nevertheless lived in the US for a long time. This situation presents a real potential of future challenge to the field of TESOL, and I have argued that a vocational ESL framework has much to offer. Specifically, I have shown that VESL meets the needs of this group of learners, both in their characteristics as an undocumented community and their needs as adult language learners. Moreover, I have argued that more actively engaging students in the pedagogical design of VESL programs can greatly increase the effectiveness of these models. As we face a future of immigration reform and its implications for the field of TESOL, it is my sincere hope that we take seriously the immense potential that a VESL framework has to offer.

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