

Growing and Diversif



Learning Apprenticeships: A Partnership Approach to English Language Instruction

by | Thomas Pfundstein, Ph.D.

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An international union has found success in offering community classes, preapprenticeships and adapted apprenticeship programs that integrate English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) instruction. These training models may offer valuable lessons for other organizations.

As recent private and public sector investments in clean energy, manufacturing and infrastructure create demand for workers among its signatory contractors, the International Union of Painters and Allied Trades (IUPAT) is welcoming new members and upskilling journeyworkers to meet the need. Whether at work on bridges, water treatment facilities, clean air energy infrastructure or semiconductor fabrication plants, IUPAT's 140,000 members require extensive training on the most current technologies and techniques, as well as on fundamental concepts of safety and worker rights. The union's education and training arm, the International Finishing Trades Institute (iFTI), provides instruction through IUPAT's 33 district councils (DCs) to more than 15,000 painter, glazier, drywall finisher and floor coverer apprentices and 100,000 journeypersons each year.

In addition to training on the technical skills of the finishing trades, IUPAT DCs are identifying a growing need to teach English language skills to immigrant members. As demographics shift in many communities, highly skilled workers hail from all corners of the world, and IUPAT welcomes them in union jobs and apprenticeships without requiring English fluency. But English language proficiency is essential for career advancement and for daily life in the United States, not to mention for ensuring safety and effective communication on the jobsite. Many members learn English from peers at work, and some DCs provide bilingual

instruction and translation services to facilitate communication and learning. Recently, IUPAT has deepened its commitment to offering avenues for members to develop their English ability. This additional union benefit encourages the retention of workers whose career prospects might otherwise be limited by the language barrier.

This article describes how IUPAT has leveraged the resources and expertise of the public adult education system to offer English language instruction to its members. Various models of union-based English teaching are detailed, along with lessons learned from implementing these training programs in partnership with adult education. These models may be adapted by other unions for the benefit of their members and signatory employers.

Training Partnerships With Adult Education

IUPAT instructors themselves are not formally trained in teaching English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), although iFTI offers workshops on supporting English learners in the apprenticeship classroom. To better address members' language needs, the union identified an opportunity for partnership between its DCs and local providers of adult education. The federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), Title II, also known as the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA), funds a system of adult education and literacy programs across the country. These programs teach literacy, ESOL, high school diploma education, career education and employability skills through classes offered at adult schools, community colleges and community locations. Publicly funded adult educators are motivated to partner with employers, unions and apprenticeship programs to deliver career-oriented classes and to connect their students to high-quality jobs and careers; however, most have limited experience pursuing these partnerships and are unaware of opportunities in their communities. When IUPAT DCs began knocking on the doors of local WIOA-funded ESOL providers, they were invited to explore what collaboration could look like.

Across the country, IUPAT's training centers have co-designed ESOL programs that tap the strengths of both the union and the local adult education provider. In some cases, these ESOL classes are offered tuition-free at the union training hall and open to the wider community, welcoming family members, new recruits and seasoned journeyworkers to learn English together. In locations where new member recruit-

takeaways

- The International Union of Painters and Allied Trades (IUPAT) and its affiliate training arm, the International Finishing Trades Union (iFTI), have partnered with the public adult education system to codesign English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) instruction for apprentices.
- This instruction takes various forms, depending on local needs. It has been offered as a community ESOL class or a preapprenticeship program or integrated in an apprenticeship program.
- These collaborative programs take time and effort to design, but they can benefit the union apprenticeship programs, employers, workers and adult education providers.
- Strategies for program success include collaborating with both internal and external partners, accommodating worker needs and challenges, and designing curriculum around workers' and supervisors' priorities. Organizations may benefit from the services of expert facilitators.

What Is Integrated Education and Training?

As defined in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) (Title 34 CFR § 463.35-463.36), integrated education and training (IET) is an educational practice grounded in adult learning theory that includes three required components delivered concurrently and contextually: (1) adult education and literacy activities, (2) workforce preparation activities, and (3) workforce training for a specific occupation or occupational cluster for the purpose of the adult learner’s educational and career advancement. These three components must be sufficient in intensity and quality; based on the most rigorous research available, particularly with respect to improving reading, writing, mathematics and English proficiency of eligible individuals (Title 34 CFR § 463.37); simultaneously occurring within the overall scope of the IET program; and using occupationally relevant instructional materials.

Note that the IET approach is rarely applied by adult education programs in the context of preapprenticeships and apprenticeships, largely because of a lack of existing partnerships; however, IET can be used to deliver preapprenticeship instruction that prepares individuals for apprenticeship entry and success, or to integrate the teaching of basic skills and workforce preparation into an apprenticeship’s classroom instruction.



ment is a priority, the partners have designed preapprenticeships that incorporate ESOL along with introductory finishing trades curriculum and job-readiness training. Other DCs have integrated ESOL instruction within apprenticeship programs so that immigrant workers can be employed and learn technical skills while improving their language fluency.

These union–adult education partnerships are beneficial for all involved. The union fills a gap in its training offerings at no additional cost, while the adult education partner fulfills its mission to strengthen the basic skills and employability of working adults by directing its funds toward an eligible student population. For the workers themselves, gains in English proficiency can be life-changing and help to ensure that they are safe and advancing in their careers. The union’s signatory contractors also benefit from workers’ improved jobsite communication and productivity.

Three Model Projects

The following are descriptions of three effective IUPAT adult education partnerships, including a community ESOL class in Nashville, Tennessee; a preapprenticeship program in Atlanta, Georgia; and an apprenticeship program that integrates ESOL instruction in St. Louis, Missouri.

Nashville, Tennessee



In the Nashville area, IUPAT DC58’s bilingual, Spanish-speaking organizer encountered high numbers of nonunion, non-English-speaking workers in the trades who faced

exploitation and couldn’t defend their rights on the job. IUPAT welcomed these workers to join the union—at that time, two-thirds of entering glazing and painting apprentices in the Nashville area spoke a language other than English—but often communication and safety at the worksites was an issue.

The DC58 director of training teamed up with Workforce Essentials, a local nonprofit provider of WIOA-funded adult education, to design an evening ESOL class open to current and prospective workers, their families and friends. Offered at the union hall twice weekly, this free class is many workers’ first exposure to IUPAT. It provides an orientation to the union and a chance to improve their English before entering apprenticeship training. Though not all participants become IUPAT members, the ESOL class builds goodwill in the community and, for some, it is a critical bridge that equips them with the English language skills they need to succeed in apprenticeship classes and on the job.

Atlanta, Georgia



New member recruitment was a top priority in Atlanta, where DC77 designed a four-week preapprenticeship program to orient and prepare new glaziers. A pilot preapprenticeship program enrolled ten individuals, seven of whom successfully entered the trade and joined the union. Looking at replicating this successful program, the DC77 director of training engaged the Atlanta Public Schools adult education division to devise ways that it could be more accessible to applicants with limited English or other basic academic skills. Through

a series of meetings, DC77 and the school district reimagined the preapprenticeship program using the integrated education and training (IET) approach described in the sidebar on page 39. The preapprenticeship program now leverages school district resources to integrate basic digital literacy, math, job readiness and ESOL instruction as needed. Some class sessions are offered at the DC77 training center, while others take place in the school district's computer lab/classroom. The first joint preapprenticeship graduated seven glaziers who were prepared to enter the IUPAT apprenticeship.

St. Louis, Missouri



The apprenticeship instructor for DC58 in St. Louis was struggling to engage his painting apprentices who were not fluent in English and faced difficulty grasping classroom content. The DC58 director of training invited the St. Louis Community College (SLCC) to share its expertise as an experienced provider of ESOL and IET programs. Together, DC58 and SLCC developed an apprenticeship program that integrates ESOL instruction during apprenticeship classes for students who need it. On a typical training day, all apprentices complete one hour of class with the DC58 instructor, then English-learner apprentices spend three hours covering apprenticeship content and English skills with a community college ESOL instructor before joining their peers for hands-on training with the DC58 instructor in the afternoon. The ESOL classes are offered at three levels to accommodate the varying English skills of the apprentices. The pilot

session of these apprenticeship classes is now underway, and its impact on retention has been impressive: While it is not uncommon for half of a first-year apprentice cohort to drop out, this class has seen 95% of participants persist and succeed.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

The efforts made by IUPAT DCs to develop relationships with adult education and deliver collaborative English classes have not been without challenges, but the lessons detailed below may help other unions, apprenticeship programs, employers or education providers.

The Value of Collaboration

Partnerships take time . . . and can pay off. When IUPAT DCs reached out to their local adult schools or community colleges, they began a process of getting to know each other, exploring potential opportunities and designing something that was new to both parties. It took a series of meetings before each partner understood the other's mission and activities, capacity and resources available, and interest in working together. With patience, a clear focus on common goals, and an openness to doing things differently, each DC landed on a collaborative program model of its own design, as well as a lasting relationship with the public adult education system.

New program development requires both internal and external collaboration. While a lot of energy was invested in reaching outside the union to partner with adult education, the success of ESOL programs also depended on collaboration across departments within

the union. Each DC's training division bears responsibility for the design and delivery of training programs, but this important work cannot be done in isolation. To determine demand for new members and define the English communication needs at worksites, union employees who focused on engaging employers and members provided critical links to employers and members. And union organizers heard directly from apprentices and potential new members about the need for English skills in their professional and personal lives. By working together across departments, the union was better positioned to partner effectively with adult schools and serve the learning needs of its members.

Expert Facilitation Helps

Because the union was new to ESOL instruction, preapprenticeship design and public education partnerships, iFTI worked with High Road Alliance, a consulting firm, to help interested DCs identify their needs for ESOL and other foundational skills training, contact local adult education providers and codesign training programs that would be suitable to the local context. The firm also documented best practices

learn more

Education

Designing Curriculum to Close the Skills Gap July 22-23, Brookfield (Milwaukee), Wisconsin

Visit www.ifebp.org/skills-gap for more information.

Online Resource Apprenticeship Toolkit

Visit www.ifebp.org/toolkits for more details.

across the DCs to inform the *Gateway Program Workbook*, a tool to guide the union’s development of similar programs.

Consider Worker Needs and Challenges

Across the DCs, recruitment for and retention in classes was a challenge when attendance demanded traveling across town, giving up potential paid workhours and fitting in class time at the end of a long and physically exhausting day. Unlike traditional high school or college students, apprentices and journeyworkers are employed full-time, and many juggle family commitments, long commutes and particularly tiring work.

To facilitate and incentivize ESOL class attendance, IUPAT DCs offered the programs at central locations, either immediately after workhours or on Saturdays. Preapprenticeships were offered on an intensive, four-week, full-time schedule aligned with the start of apprenticeship classes to ensure a seamless transition to paid work. Apprentices most consistently attended ESOL classes integrated into the apprenticeship program schedule, since the apprentices were already showing up for classes on designated days, and when ESOL class hours contributed toward fulfillment of required apprenticeship class hours.

Design Curriculum Around Workers’ and Supervisors’ Priorities

To understand the challenges faced at jobsites when language is a barrier, IUPAT surveyed both workers and supervisors. The surveys confirmed that safety is a top concern in these trades, where following directions and hazard warnings can be a matter of life and death. Apart from this, effective communication at work is of great importance, affecting professional relationships, productivity, morale and longevity on the job. ESOL teachers in

bio



Thomas Pfundstein, Ph.D., is the director of curriculum and instruction at the International Finishing Trades Institute (iFTI). He manages curriculum development and delivery for IUPAT’s 33 District Councils and their training programs, as well as iFTI’s instructor training program at the organization’s headquarters in Hanover, Maryland, which is accredited by the Council of Occupational Education (COE). Pfundstein has published and presented widely on topics such as innovations in vocational training and distance learning technologies. He can be reached at tpfundstein@ifti.edu.

IUPAT classes listened to workers’ needs and responded to them with practical vocabulary, useful expressions, role play scenarios and classroom interaction for speaking practice. ESOL teachers also used the IUPAT apprenticeship curriculum as the basis for lessons on safety and basic skills of the trades to better prepare new members and apprentices for training and work.

Conclusion

IUPAT continues to learn from its attempts to build ESOL classes for its members—by listening to immigrant workers, understanding communication needs at worksites, establishing relationships with adult education providers and designing programs that meet local needs. Clearly there is no one-size-fits-all design: Each DC has devised a unique solution, whether a community ESOL class, a preapprenticeship program or ESOL integrated with its apprenticeship program.

Partners have had to adapt as they go by adjusting schedules, developing new curriculum, involving instructors and employers in program development, and hearing from members about how classes could be more responsive to their needs. In all cases, the relationship between the union and the adult education system has leveraged public resources to benefit workers whose heightened English skills will help advance their careers and secure their well-being. Perhaps a message for other unions and employers facing similar language skills gaps is to not go at it alone. Rather, seek out a nearby adult school or community college and begin to explore what could be a fruitful, collaborative relationship. 🎯

Following are additional resources for recruiting and retaining non-English-speaking apprentices.

- *Growing & Diversifying Union Membership: An IUPAT/iFTI Gateway Program Workbook.* www.kellyhost.com/fti/lms/GatewayProgramWorkbook_2024.pdf.
- *Building and Growing Apprenticeship With Equity in Mind: An Equitable Apprenticeship Toolkit.* <https://growapprenticeshipca.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/GAC-Equitable-Apprenticeship-Toolkit-final-1.pdf>.

