

Hello!

My name is _____

WHAT WORKS

English-Language
Learning in America

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Of all the ingredients of successful immigrant integration, none is more important than language. Becoming an American takes time and involves many steps—some objective, some subjective, from finding a first job to naturalizing as a citizen. But the common thread—the secret to success on most, if not all, the other dimensions—is language acquisition. It’s the key that unlocks all the doors. And there’s a world of difference between survival skills and the higher levels of proficiency that allow newcomers to live up to their full potential, not just surviving but thriving and excelling in the United States.

Abundant research demonstrates the benefits of learning English—for educational attainment, employment, earnings, homeownership, civic participation, and naturalization. The payoff is greater still in the next generation. The children of immigrants who speak English well or very well fare much better than those whose parents speak little English.

Public perceptions to the contrary, the U.S. is not facing an English crisis. Virtually all immigrants who arrive without English improve their proficiency over time. Their children fare even better. Some nationalities advance more rapidly than others. But across groups—Latino, Asian, and others—79 percent of those who speak a language other than English at home speak English well or very well. In the second generation, the figure is above 90 percent. Still, much more could be done to help newcomers acquire the skills they need, survival English as well as the higher levels of proficiency that allow a new American to excel.

English-language learners vary widely in age, educational attainment, and language ability. They want to learn English for different reasons—to get a job or a better job, to help their children in school, to become citizens, or simply to participate more actively in their communities—and they need classes designed to achieve these different ends. This paper focuses on adults, particularly those with the greatest need: the roughly two-thirds of newcomers who lack a college degree. Low-skilled, low-earning, and often residentially segregated, they face the greatest barriers in gaining access to English instruction.

The professionals who staff and study English-language programs are the first to admit that it’s a neglected field. Programs are underfunded. Quality is uneven. Demand far outstrips supply. The need doubled, tripled, and then quadrupled as the immigrant influx increased in recent decades, but most programs have been unable to keep up. Even now, with the flow much reduced since the Great Recession, capacity falls far short of what’s needed in quantity and quality. Many teachers are inexperienced. An alarming number of classes are taught by volunteers, and many programs neither offer nor require meaningful teacher training.

Perhaps two-thirds of existing English-as-a-second-language (ESL) classes are paid for by the government: federal money disbursed through the states and augmented by state contributions. But Washington treats English instruction as a redheaded stepchild, conflating ESL with continuing education for native-born adults—to the point that it is hard even to determine funding levels. Federal spending is faddish: priorities change frequently, often shifting away from successful programs on the ground. Reporting requirements are burdensome. Even so, there is inadequate information about the kinds of instruction available.

Improving the delivery of English-language learning will require change in many quarters—not necessarily an expanded role for government, but better, smarter policy and engagement by new players, including the private sector.

This paper examines some exemplary existing programs to derive suggestions for better policy. There is no silver bullet. The field is a vast, sprawling archipelago serving many kinds of customers, and there's no one-size-fits-all solution. But some basic principles apply across the board. The recent history of two expanding programs offers lessons about scaling—all but sure to be a priority if and when immigration reform is enacted in Washington, requiring immigrants seeking legal status to prove some level of proficiency in English. A round of competitive federal grants—a one-time infusion of performance-based funding—could spur badly needed innovation, particularly in programs that serve the least proficient English-language learners.

Taming a Chaotic Marketplace

A newly arrived immigrant eager to learn English is bombarded by outreach and advertising. There are private programs, public programs, online programs, church-basement programs, and community-college programs, among others, each teaching a different kind of English to students with a different level of educational attainment. The array is dizzying, and there's virtually no guidance to help would-be learners find the course that's right for them. This discourages many adults from pursuing English-language learning: no one wants to waste time in a class that doesn't fit their needs. Worse still, the chaos and lack of transparency make it hard for funding to reach the most effective, in-demand programs: no one knows what's out there or what works.

The first goal of reform should be to bring some transparency to this marketplace. The government can help by separating ESL and adult-education funding streams and deciding on a simple, common-denominator standard that applies to all English-language instruction, whatever the learner's purpose.

This would set the stage for the next step: creation of a database, or clearinghouse, that publicizes information about the instruction available, city by city and neighborhood by neighborhood. Programs should be sorted by category: what kind of learners they are designed to serve—what level of student and the reason they are learning English. Also critical: how the program ranks, using the new simple, standardized measure of quality. Who should maintain such a database: ideally, a for-profit company. Think of it as an Angie's List for English-language learners.

Incentives for Matching Funds

No one knows exactly how far the supply of English-language instruction falls short of demand. But virtually everyone agrees that the gap is huge, and government alone is unlikely to fill it. New technology may eventually help; a more transparent marketplace would make it easier for the private sector to step in. But Washington can and should prime the pump by creating more incentives for private and philanthropic funders to match and supplement government dollars. Among the institutions that could be doing more are employers, charter schools, for-profit schools, faith-based institutions, and education foundations.

More Flexible Federal Funding

If the history of the last few years teaches anything, it's a warning against faddish federal funding for English-language learning. There have been three major trends in recent decades: "basic skills" instruction in the kind of English needed for everyday life; "family literacy," or two-generation, programs, where immigrants and their children learn together; and occupational English courses that teach language in tandem with technical job skills. The next big thing will likely be ESL for immigration reform—programs focused on the English that one needs to know to pass whatever test Congress mandates for immigrants seeking to earn legal status. It will require a very different curriculum than most existing courses.

The danger is that when federal funding priorities shift to encourage adoption of the latest trend, many good programs using a different approach are forced to cut back or go under. Federal funding should be structured more like a smorgasbord, with more flexibility and more allowable uses for all federal money.

Higher Standards for Teachers

It's no secret in the profession that ESL instructors are underpaid, overworked, and often insufficiently qualified. Opportunities for professional development are woefully lacking, and requirements are not stiff enough. What's needed are more resources and tougher standards, linked to funding. The federal government should require states to raise standards. States should do the same for the programs that they support, whether at community colleges or community-based organizations. Among the higher standards to consider: that instructors have an M.A. or equivalent certification in language learning and that staff include enough full-time teachers to develop or vet curricula and set standards.

Scaling for Immigration Reform

Immigration reform will raise the stakes exponentially, throwing thousands, if not millions, of new students into the queue for English classes. Most will be poor and low-skilled, with little education. And they will want quick, efficient courses tailored to their highly focused language needs. The danger is that this will require a vast, rapid scaling up of the system, all but sure to create problems of quality control.

The experience of recent decades offers some guidance: two potential models—a proprietary company-run program and a foundation-driven approach—both scaled relatively rapidly and now available across America. Both programs meet specialized needs; neither would suit every English-language learner. But McDonald's English Under the Arches and the National Center for Families Learning both hold lessons for the U.S. as it ramps up English-language learning for immigration reform.

What the two programs have in common: the organizations behind them did foundational research and developed unique pedagogical models, then each organized a national network of service providers and supported them as they put the model into practice. McDonald's approach is highly structured, based on a detailed, lesson-by-lesson curriculum that leaves little to chance or local variation, and instructors craving autonomy and flexibility may chafe at such a standardized approach. But it has proved widely replicable: the more detailed the template, the easier it is for less experienced teachers and administrators to implement it. The National Center for Families Learning relies on a different set of stratagems to spread its teaching model: information sharing, networking, coaching, and professional development, backed by financial support. But it, too, has had success in spreading its ideas and encouraging a national network of service providers to adopt some version of its approach.

A Competitive Grant Program

Controversial as it was and arguably less effective than it could have been, the Obama administration's 2009 Race to the Top initiative for K–12 education points to what can be done to drive improvement in the world of English-language learning: a one-time infusion of competitive grants for exemplary programs in the states. The goal is to spur innovation—improvements not just in the few programs that succeed in winning grants but across the field and across the country, as states, schools, community groups, and partnering organizations step up their game to compete for federal money.

Programs applying for grants would have to meet a series of criteria scored with a point system. Among the criteria that ought to be included: past performance, promised matching funds, robust efforts to provide teacher training and improve teacher quality, plans to incorporate innovative technology, and data collection that feeds back into program improvements.

Sure to be controversial, Washington should not specify that programs applying for grants take a particular approach to English-language learning—the criteria ought to be neutral on the issue of basic skills versus dual-generation versus an occupational approach.

Where the government should take a stand, and this, too, is sure to be contested: it ought to give grants only to programs serving English-language learners with the greatest need. A potential cutoff point would be those who have not attended college and who speak English not well or not at all: beginning students and perhaps low-intermediate students.

The hardest problem is where to find funding for a new program. The money should not come out of existing ESL formula funding—it's too small as it is. There ought to be a "pay-for," a compensating cut in other federal spending. But with the right matching requirements, even a small program could make a big difference. The prospect, however distant, of immigration reform makes an initiative of this kind all the more urgent. Now is the time to find the funding to develop more effective models of English-language learning for low-level students, models that can be scaled rapidly when the time comes to meet the ESL requirements that are sure to be included in any reform.

Immigrant integration is rarely seamless or easy. The U.S. has a history of letting the process take care of itself; we spend far less on integration assistance than most countries with a comparable immigrant intake. But we neglect it today at our peril. Today's immigrants are tomorrow's workers, parents, and citizens. They are a core element of our human capital. America cannot expect to sustain the blessings that we take for granted—our standard of living or our global competitiveness—unless these newcomers live up to their full potential.

Survival English or advanced-degree English? Parents afraid to attend meetings with teachers or a generational leap in educational attainment? Isolated, impaired communities or one America? The choice is ours.

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WHAT WORKS

ENGLISH-LANGUAGE LEARNING IN AMERICA

Tamar Jacoby

INTRODUCTION

The fourth great wave of American immigration appears to be plateauing, if not tapering. After rising steadily for more than four decades to a combined peak, legal and illegal, of some 1.8 million entrants a year between 1995 and 2005, immigration is now sharply down—closer to 1 million a year.¹ But abated flows do nothing to change the challenges and opportunities ahead as the U.S. grapples with absorbing the generations that have arrived since the 1970s.

The 42 million immigrants now living in our midst account for 13 percent of the population and nearly 17 percent of the workforce.² Add their children, and the number nearly doubles: first- and second-generation immigrants together make up a full quarter of the U.S. population.³ These new Americans will create tremendous advantages for the U.S. in the decades ahead, starting with continued population growth that is the envy of developed nations around the world. But immigrant integration is rarely seamless or easy. Although the U.S. has a history of letting this vital absorptive process take care of itself—we spend far less on integration assistance than most countries with a comparable immigrant intake—we neglect it today at our peril. Today's immigrants are tomorrow's workers, parents, and citizens. They are a core element of our human capital. America cannot expect to sustain the blessings that we take for granted—our standard of living or our global competitiveness—unless these newcomers live up to their full potential, not just surviving but thriving and excelling in the United States.

Of all the ingredients that go into successful integration, none is more important than language. Becoming an American takes time and involves an array of steps, some objective, some subjective: everything from getting a job and finding that first apartment to naturalizing as a U.S. citizen and recognizing, often decades later, that the U.S. is finally “home”—you and your family finally “belong” here. These steps are not necessarily linked or linear. Many people take some steps and not others. They “advance” along one dimension but slide “back” on a second or third. Becoming more American is not always beneficial—not when it means more obesity, for example, or higher divorce rates. But the constant—the common thread and the secret to success on most, if not all, the other dimensions—is language acquisition. It’s the key that unlocks all the doors, and here, more than on arguably any other dimension, there’s a world of difference between survival skills and the higher levels of proficiency that allow a new American to excel.

Abundant research demonstrates the benefits of learning English. Most immigrants work, and many can get by on the job largely without speaking English. But those who are English-proficient earn considerably more: 14 percent to 46 percent more, depending on the study.⁴ They are more productive on the job. They pay more in taxes. Together, this reduces poverty, raises public revenues, and limits immigrants’ reliance on public benefits. Newcomers who speak better English are more likely to do well in school, stay longer in school, move up on the job, and take advantage of economic opportunities, including homeownership.⁵ In some, though not all, groups, they are more likely to become citizens. Among Spanish-speakers, 45 percent of naturalized citizens speak English “very well,” compared with 23 percent of foreign-born Spanish-speakers who have not naturalized.⁶ Immigrants who speak English are also more likely to engage civically, participating in their communities and getting to know their non-immigrant neighbors and coworkers.

The benefits for the next generation are even more significant. The children of immigrants who speak English well or very well fare much better than those whose parents speak little English. They do better at

school, are more likely to succeed in the workforce, and even have better health outcomes.⁷ It’s not hard to understand why: parents who speak English are better equipped to help their children prepare for school. They are more likely to be informed about educational opportunities. They find it easier to communicate with teachers, to help with homework, and to advocate for their children at school and elsewhere. Families where the parents speak English relatively well are also much less susceptible to the generational inversion that all too often undermines the immigrant home unit: the situation that arises when children who speak English better than their parents have to navigate for the family outside the home, undermining parental authority and opening the children to the competing, downward pull of a bad inner-city neighborhood.

The stakes could hardly be higher, and the benefits are not limited to immigrants and their families. This isn’t just about language ability. It’s also about job skills and upward mobility, growing productivity or lost productivity, the wealth of communities, and U.S. economic competitiveness.

Although it’s sometimes painted as urgent, the situation is not dire. Virtually all immigrants who arrive in the U.S. without English improve their proficiency over time. Their children fare even better. Research suggests that today’s new arrivals are learning English at the same rate or faster than earlier waves of immigrants.⁸ Some nationalities advance more rapidly than others. But across groups—Latino, Asian, and others—79 percent of those who speak a language other than English at home speak English well or very well, and in the second generation, the figure is above 90 percent.⁹

So America is not facing an English crisis. But that does nothing to diminish the payoff to doing better. Survival English or advanced-degree English? Parents afraid to attend meetings with teachers or a generational leap in educational attainment? Isolated, impaired communities or one America? The choice is ours.

This paper will examine a handful of models for delivering English-language instruction. English-language learners vary widely in age, educational

attainment, language ability, and why they wish to learn English—whether to get a better job, help their children in school, become citizens, or simply get more out of life in their community.¹⁰ Much attention, scholarly and other, is paid to English-language learning by children. This paper will focus on

English instruction hasn't come close to keeping pace with the growth of America's foreign-born population, which more than quadrupled since 1970, from 9.6 million to today's 42.3 million.

adults, particularly those with the greatest need: the roughly two-thirds of newcomers who lack a college degree.¹¹ Low-skilled, low-earning, and often residentially segregated, they face the greatest barriers in gaining access to English-language instruction.

Where and how do they learn English? Is there enough instruction to meet demand? What is the quality of the instruction on offer? Is the field changing to keep up with the innovation revolutionizing most other types of education in America today? Is the nation equipped to handle the vastly increased demand for English instruction that will occur if and when Congress passes immigration reform that grants legal status to illegal immigrants—reform that is certain to require that beneficiaries demonstrate some level of English proficiency? The answer to most of those questions is no, or not enough. This paper will examine why and offer some suggestions about how America can do better.

I. SUPPLY AND DEMAND

It's conventional wisdom among those who study English-language learning that demand for instruction outstrips supply by a wide margin. This is indisputably true, but the bottom line masks some complexity, and there's much that isn't known or understood about the nature of the unmet demand.

English instruction hasn't come close to keeping pace with the growth of America's foreign-born pop-

ulation, which more than quadrupled in size since 1970, from 9.6 million to today's 42.3 million.¹² It's a problem of scale but also of geographic mismatch. A hallmark of late-twentieth-century immigration was the way it spread across America, sending newcomers into cities and states that hadn't seen a foreigner in generations: the Southeast, the Mountain West, and the Great Plains states, with booming industries, such as construction and meatpacking, that attracted itinerant workers. Traditional immigrant gateways—California, Texas, New York, New Jersey, Florida, and Illinois—were used to welcoming newcomers and generally have programs in place to provide English instruction

and other services. Not so in Nevada, Georgia, and North Carolina, where the foreign-born population grew by more than 200 percent between 1990 and 2000.¹³

By 2006–07, as the fourth great wave of American immigration reached its peak, the need for English-language instruction seemed to be reaching crisis proportions. One much-publicized study surveyed 184 providers of adult ESL programs and found that six in ten had waiting lists ranging from a few weeks to more than two years.¹⁴ Another study demonstrated how unmet demand was blocking immigrants' chances of succeeding: 5.8 million legal permanent residents lacked the English skills required to naturalize as citizens; 6.4 million unauthorized immigrants would be unable to pass the English test likely to be required to earn legal status under immigration reform; and 2.4 million immigrant youth would need English-language instruction to begin postsecondary education without remediation.¹⁵

The supply, even the potential supply, doesn't come close to matching this demand. Federally funded English-language classes are not the only instruction available, but they account for the lion's share. Yet in 2006–07, just 1.1 million adults were enrolled in federally funded classes;¹⁶ in 2013–14, the number was fewer than 670,000.¹⁷ According to another estimate, even if programs that receive no federal funding reached as many students as government-funded courses—and no researcher thinks that they

have that capacity—that would still leave 10 million adult English-language learners without access to a classroom.¹⁸

It's an alarming shortfall, by any account. Still, the raw numbers can be misleading. In some ways, they also mask the real obstacles to providing adequate English instruction.

The standard measure of need—"limited English-proficient," or LEP—comes from the federal government. English-speaking ability is determined by the census. Respondents who speak a language other than English at home are asked to rank their English-speaking ability; the choices are *very well*, *well*, *not well*, and *not at all*. The problem is that researchers don't trust people's self-assessment. Among scholars, it's assumed that they overrate

for instruction, and many people who say that they speak English well could surely benefit from additional time in class. For many, it could make the difference between surviving and thriving. But the two estimates—based on the two cutoff points—paint very different pictures of English-language ability in America. Are 60 percent of immigrants English-proficient, or 80 percent? Does one in ten working adults struggle with English, or is it only one in 20?²¹ Perhaps most important, which group should we focus on as we step up to help, whether with federally funded instruction or some other kind?

Whichever set of calculations we use, immigrants need dramatically more and better English instruction. But the complexity goes deeper than government accounting. Another big part of the problem is that many immigrants who need help or could use it don't seek English instruction.

There are as many reasons for this as there are students, or missing students. Some are rooted in the reality of life as a less skilled immigrant: demanding work schedules, family responsibilities, lack of transportation. Many immigrants work

two or three jobs and take care not just of children but also of aging parents. Even when classes are available, they aren't always convenient. Schedules, location, cost, length, and intensity of the program often don't match what students are looking for. It's a lot easier to get to a class offered at the workplace just after working hours than one that takes place during the day at the local community college, a setting that can seem intimidating to immigrants with little experience of formal schooling.

Still another reason: lack of knowledge and mismatches between the programs on offer and what immigrants are seeking. People in need of instruction often don't know what's available or aren't able to assess its quality; they don't know if enrolling will be a good investment of their time.²² The most common mismatch traces back to why the newcomer wants to learn English. Someone looking for a class

Of all the ingredients that go into successful integration, none is more important than learning English. Immigrants who are English-proficient earn considerably more and pay more in taxes. This reduces poverty, raises public revenues, and limits reliance on public benefits.

their ability, although ESL teachers often say exactly the opposite. The federal definition of LEP attempts to counter this suspected misreporting by defining "limited English-proficient" as anyone who speaks English less than very well.¹⁹

In 2013, some 62 million people—or 20 percent of the population—spoke a language other than English at home. Of that group, 59 percent reported speaking English very well, 19 percent well, 15 percent not well, and 7 percent not at all. According to the federal definition, that's 41 percent who are limited English-proficient. But nearly half the people so labeled report that they speak English well.²⁰

Which is a more important line—between speaking well and very well, or well and not well? Should people who say that they speak English well be counted as part of the problem and in need of federal services? Nothing is gained by underestimating the need

to help study for the naturalization test doesn't want to enroll in a program devoted to English for parenting, and those looking to move up on the job can be even pickier—a class for limited-English health care workers won't help someone trying to get ahead in construction.

Yet another reason, perhaps the most widespread, why students who could benefit from instruction do not seek it goes back to the difference between surviving and thriving. Many newly arrived immigrants make an all-out effort to learn rudimentary English. You find them in courses across the country: 20- to 40-year-olds who arrived in the U.S. just weeks or months earlier, sitting in a classroom on a Saturday morning, while someone else takes care of their children, sweating out the difference between “I am” and “I was.” It takes drive and determination, and it's hard not to find it inspiring. But it's often short-lived. Most classes move slowly. They meet for only a few hours a week. Quality is uneven. Many students have trouble with the material. And many soon intuit what the research shows: it takes, on average, 100 hours to move up a level—from beginner to low beginner or high beginner to low intermediate. If you want to learn enough to enroll in community college, it takes 600 hours, according to one estimate.²³

If they don't make fairly rapid progress and see tangible results, many students eventually stop coming to class. They learn the rudiments of English grammar and usage. They gain confidence using what little they know. Often, the class lays a foundation for later learning on the job or from television. But once adult students have mastered survival English, other priorities often reassert themselves—students could be spending these hours at home with their children or working another job to supplement their paycheck.

Federal data bear this out. Most students enrolled in federally funded programs are clustered in low-level courses: more than half are beginners. In 2007, the last year for which a full set of numbers is available, just 39 percent of students learned enough to advance a level. Another 29 percent quit before achieving a gain, and 32 percent made no gain but

remained in class nevertheless.²⁴ By 2011–12, the number achieving a gain had improved but was still only 46 percent.²⁵ According to researchers, even the most successful students rarely progress more than one or two levels before dropping out—hardly long enough to gain the proficiency that they need to enroll in college or job training.

Meanwhile, the long-term benefits of mastery that goes beyond survival English can seem remote at best. Most students don't grasp the payoff to continued learning—they don't see the premium to advanced mastery—so they don't continue. One researcher explains: “Need doesn't always translate into people lining up for programs.”²⁶ This eases short-term demand, a boon for teachers, administrators, and government funding. But over the long term, it isn't good—for the immigrants or for America.

II. THE LAY OF THE LAND

A newly arrived immigrant eager to learn English is bombarded by outreach and advertising. There are private programs, public programs, online programs, church-basement programs, community-college programs. The array is dizzying. How is a bewildered immigrant to choose? The cornucopia of ads in the subway car or bus shelter offers few clues, and a Google search can be even more confusing. Worse—and it's a glaring symptom of the neglect that plagues the field—there's little guidance anywhere. Virtually no one who works in or studies English-language learning can map what's available.

The federal government is the single largest funder of English-language programs, disbursing money to the states through grants and formula funding. One estimate suggests that two-thirds of the backing for all ESL nationwide comes from state and federal sources.²⁷ But even this stream is surprisingly hard to track, largely because of the way the government bundles the money, conflating funding for English-language learning with adult education for native-born English speakers. Data collected by the federal government are often misleading or irrelevant and not separated to paint a clear picture of English-language learning.

In 2013–14, Washington spent \$564 million on adult education and family literacy, serving some 1.5 million adult students. Some 42 percent, 668,326 individuals, were studying English as a second language.²⁸ But this doesn't reveal how much was spent on English-language instruction because other forms of adult education are more expensive than ESL.

Adding to the complexity, several other types of federal funding can also be used for English-language instruction. The total appropriation for adult education includes a set-aside— \$71 million in fiscal 2013—earmarked for integrated English literacy and civics education (EL/Civics).²⁹ What's confusing is that this is not additional money. It comes out of the total adult-ed appropriation, and there is other money included in the appropriation that can be used for English courses. Meanwhile, several other federal programs not under the umbrella of adult ed also provide funding that can be used for ESL, adding to the total amount available. Among them are the Office of Refugee Resettlement, Head Start, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, and the Pell Grant Program. No one knows what the cumulative total is. Creative states learn how to find and bundle funds from many different buried streams.³⁰

States also pony up their own money. They're required to contribute at least 25 percent of the federal grants that they receive under the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, and many states add considerably more. Before the economic downturn, some were putting in as much as 80 percent–90 percent of their federal grants. In many places, this spending was cut back in recent years as the economy slowed.³¹ But this, too, is hard to track: what records exist are piecemeal and incomplete.

The great combined federal and state funding stream flows into many kinds of ESL programs in different settings. Because of the way federal statistics lump ESL with other forms of adult education, here, again, there are no good data. But by all accounts, most English-language programs are housed in community colleges, community-based organizations, and adult learning centers connected to K–12 public school systems. Other popular ven-

ues include libraries, museums, charter schools, and correctional institutions.

Relatively little is known about what actually happens on the ground in this vast archipelago. The last comprehensive study, the Adult Education Program Study (2001–02), conducted by the Department of Education and two private research firms, surveyed 3,100 federally funded programs. Among its findings was that 98 percent of adult-education programs are offered on weekdays only; just 2 percent held classes on Saturdays. Most learners attend for less than 100 hours over 12 months. ESL students are more dedicated than others: they attend, on average, 124 hours. But results were poor across the board. In 2001–02, just a third of students completed an educational level by the end of the year.³²

Still another source of confusion: many institutions that receive federal funding to teach ESL to cash-strapped, less educated immigrants run parallel programs for better-paying, more advanced students. Many community colleges, for example, run two kinds of English classes: a for-credit program for middle-class international students, generally higher-level and focused on the kind of English that one needs to succeed in college; and, on another floor or another building, a noncredit program subsidized by the government for less educated immigrants.

Even less prepared adults seek to learn English for many reasons. Once upon a time, they were all dumped into one classroom, and educators used to complain about ineffective one-size-fits-all programs that served no one well. That still happens today, but it's less common. In most cities, immigrants have a choice. Among the common options are “basic skills” English for new arrivals, focused on day-to-day survival; “family literacy” programs for parents whose primary need for English is to help their children succeed; English tailored for legal permanent residents studying to take the naturalization test; and workplace or vocational English, one of the fastest-growing, most promising categories. Then there's online learning—a category unto itself—also proliferating rapidly and largely uncharted.

The problem for a newly arrived immigrant is making sense of it all. Consider the borough of Queens,

in New York City. With more than 2.3 million people spread over an area some five times the size of Manhattan, Queens is an urban melting pot in a city with a long, storied history as arguably the quintessential melting pot. Majority minority, one-quarter Asian, and edging up on one-third Hispanic, Queens is now home to more immigrants than any other borough in New York. Nearly half the residents are foreign-born, and 57 percent speak a language other than English at home.³³

Newcomers seeking ESL classes navigate the best they can in a far from transparent marketplace, relying primarily on word of mouth. One of the best-known programs is run by Queens Library, part of its adult-education division. Free and open to anyone who applies, it relies heavily on federal funding but also state grants, city money, and private contributions.³⁴ The borough's community colleges also offer programs. The English Language Center at LaGuardia Community College claims to be the largest in New York City. At \$1,700 a semester, it's geared mostly to international students looking to study English intensively, in preparation for a college academic track.³⁵ The Global ESL Academy is a for-profit school, a little less expensive than LaGuardia but also aimed primarily at college students.³⁶ Other options in the area include senior centers, church-run programs, several branches of the YMCA, classes run by ethnic associations, and employer-provided programs, as well as more expensive private options, such as personal tutors.

There's nothing wrong with this crazy quilt of options—on the contrary. In theory, the variety of venues, formats, levels, and price points makes it more likely that an individual adult English-language learner can find a program that's right for him. The problem is the lack of information—a reliable way for students to know the range of what's available, to understand what's on offer, or compare across programs for fit and quality.

That's only the beginning of the challenges facing the field. The professionals who staff and study English-language programs are the first to say that it's a field under stress. As demand doubled, tripled, and then quadrupled over the decades, most programs

failed to keep up. As they expanded, they often jerry-built on shaky foundations. Today, classes often mix adults from several levels, as in a one-room schoolhouse. Most programs—79 percent, according to the 2001–02 survey—allow students to come and go over the course of a semester, so there is no chance to form a stable or cohesive class.³⁷

Many teachers are inexperienced. According to one estimate, a full 50 percent work part-time.³⁸ An alarming number of classes are taught by volunteers—generally well-meaning people with a lot of heart but still, amateurs doing a professional's job. Opportunities for professional development can be few and far between; in many programs, relatively little training is required. Teachers do the best they can in the circumstances, but it's often difficult, and they don't generally receive much support.

This doesn't mean that there aren't great programs. There are, and this paper will document some of the best exemplars. Seasoned, long-serving institutions with deep roots in their communities help anyone who applies, filling a critical niche on limited budgets. New providers are stepping up, including employers, some with deep pockets. Local experimentation combined with growing concern at education foundations and elsewhere is driving change across the system. But improvement is slow, partly because there's no powerful constituency, left or right, demanding better English-language instruction. Few newly arrived immigrants are well-informed about the marketplace; most are grateful for whatever instruction is available. And most immigrant-rights activists are preoccupied with immigration reform.

The result is pockets of excellence, an array of fledgling experiments, a drive to increase the use of technology, and, perhaps most promising, a sharply increased effort to appeal to students and separate them on the basis of why they want to learn English. But there is still much to be done.

III. BASIC SKILLS ESL

For all the fragmentation of the field, teachers and administrators of ESL programs agree on one thing and have for many decades: learning must be “contextualized.” Students are learning English

for a reason—many reasons—and, depending on what that reason is, they want to learn a different kind of English. You need different vocabulary to speak to your child’s teacher than you need on the job as a janitor. And unless your English instruction engages you with scenarios that speak to you as a parent or a janitor, giving you tools you can use to navigate your particular situation in life, you’re not going to be very attentive in class, or return to class very often.³⁹

The result: no one today teaches old-fashioned primer English—reading, writing, grammar, and pronunciation in a vacuum. Every program, no matter how simple or unsophisticated, puts these rudiments in a context, focusing on a certain kind of vocabulary and a certain kind of life scenario. Different kinds of contextualization have gone in and out of fashion over the years. In the mid-1990s, family literacy was all the rage; 15 years later, the hot trend was occupational English. One way to view the array of ESL programs available today is to think of them as a series of archaeological layers, each layer representing a different passing fashion.

The oldest and probably still most common layer: “basic skills” or “life skills”—everything from how to get around your neighborhood to speaking to a doctor to making sense of a want-ad in the newspaper. Although some basic skills curricula seem old-fashioned today, some of the best-run, most venerable programs still focus on basic skills, including Queens Library and the Arlington Education and Employment Program (REEP).

Queens Library offers a telling window on how federally funded adult education plays out on the ground across America. In many states, the bulk of adult-ed funding flows to community colleges. In New York, the lion’s share goes to community-based organizations, such as Queens Library. It’s a vast decentralized network spread out across the borough: a central branch plus 61 community libraries. Seven adult learning centers—generally housed in bigger branches—and a number of smaller community libraries teach a gamut of adult-ed classes: from beginning ESL to high school math and computer programming. English-language instruction—the

library calls it ESOL, or English for speakers of other languages—is available weekday mornings, afternoons, and evenings, as well as on Saturdays. Offerings vary widely, from formal classes to volunteer-led conversation groups. Demand varies across the borough. Some learning centers have long waiting lists; others spend time and money recruiting in the neighborhood. But overall, across the borough, demand outstrips supply: in spring 2015, there were 1,567 applications for 1,088 seats. The library’s ESOL budget: \$335,000, or about \$250 per student, according to the president.

In many ways similar, and also a time-tested, respected program, REEP serves the immigrant-rich inner suburbs of Washington, D.C. Like Queens Library, it mixes funding from a variety of sources, relying heavily on the county as well as several federal programs. Classes take place in public schools and other venues run by the local school system, including a modern glass-and-steel building in an office park. Students look very much like the students in Queens, with some variation for country of origin. Some 70 percent are Hispanic. Roughly two-thirds have no education beyond high school. Most are prime working age, and roughly two-thirds are employed: the most common jobs are in restaurants, construction, building maintenance, housekeeping, and child care. Roughly half are in need of beginning English instruction; 40 percent seek an intermediate class. The program provides some 5,000 class seats annually. Neither REEP nor Queens Library asks students about their immigration status.

In the broad spectrum of ESL offerings, Queens Library and REEP have several things going for them. Queens Library classes are free. REEP charges a few hundred dollars per course—administrators say that it generates buy-in and commitment—but there are scholarships available. Both programs offer what one administrator calls “safe, neutral” venues in trusted neighborhood institutions, the public schools and the library, conveniently located and accessible by public transportation. Both pride themselves on their friendly, welcoming atmosphere: teachers are warm, engaging, and encouraging. Both offer counseling or case management and help con-

nect students with other services, including health workshops, financial-literacy classes, job placement, housing assistance, child care, domestic-violence counseling, and more. The goal in each case is to move learners along a continuum: from beginning

A newly arrived immigrant eager to learn English is bombarded by outreach and advertising. There are private programs, public programs, online programs, church-basement programs, community-college programs. The array is dizzying.

ESL through a GED or other high school equivalency certificate. For many students at both programs, these are lofty, ambitious aims.

The challenge for both programs starts with time: how to get their students through the 100 hours of instruction that many experts estimate are necessary to advance an ESL level. REEP's solution is intensive instruction: most classes meet ten to 15 hours a week for 12 semesters. The program also allows each class to vote on the units that it wants to study—choosing among time/weather, telephone, transportation, health, housing, work, and others—hoping to engage them more actively. Queens Library encourages students to supplement classes with volunteer conversation groups, homework, and practice at work. At Queens Library, 53 percent of students advance a level annually. REEP aims for 55 percent—and this year, it is on track to reach more than 60 percent. Both results are impressive in comparison with the federal average, 46 percent.

A second challenge is quality control, of curriculum and teacher quality. Teaching ESL is more art than science; a warm, engaging, motivating teacher can be as important as the pedagogy he uses. Still, many also agree that the field suffers from a lack of professionalism. The all-too-common assumption, according to one researcher: “I speak English, therefore I can teach it.” Many instructors are untrained volunteers. There is little opportunity for teacher training and fewer requirements. Even paid

teaching staff are generally part-time, poorly remunerated, and often juggling several jobs. Unlike in most public K–12 classrooms, curriculum is rarely prescribed. Teachers often chart their own course, and results vary widely.

Queens Library and REEP struggle to cope with these challenges. Queens Library requires teachers to have a B.A. and likes to see a TESOL certification from New York State. REEP prefers an M.A., if possible, and also seeks experience. But both programs rely heavily on volunteers. REEP employs some 45 professionals and 120 volunteers; Queens Library, 45 paid teachers, 11 teaching assistants, and 49 volunteers. Though

both programs do what they can, neither has the resources that it would like to have for training teachers or volunteers.

When it comes to curriculum, REEP instruction is more structured. Unlike many ESL initiatives, the program has developed its own curriculum: lesson plans, instructional guidance, assessment tools, and other resources, all updated regularly and maintained on a central website.

Students purchase textbooks. Teachers follow a road map for each class at each level and report regularly on students' progress. Still, it's understood that what's provided is just a framework, and teachers have a good deal of leeway. At Queens Library, there's even more of a premium on flexibility and autonomy for teachers. The program provides resources and a “chart of work” but knows that many teachers do not use them. What many administrators seem to prize most is what one called “interactive, relational” teaching.

A final set of challenges, felt intensely at both programs, is funding and bureaucracy. Both REEP and Queens Library are chronically short of money. Both struggle to supplement federal funds with city, county, state, private, and foundation giving. Queens Library's biggest concern is its waiting list, and it would use new funding to eliminate it. REEP would like more resources to pay teachers better and upgrade the quality of its instruction.

But the problem goes beyond funding levels: administrators at both programs also complain about shifting government priorities and burdensome bureaucracy. Federal ESL funding priorities change frequently, often following the latest fashion in contextualization, and programs like REEP and Queens Library struggle to keep up. Funding cuts can decimate instruction: one recent shift of emphasis at the state level caused Queens Library to trim its ESOL offerings by one-third. Each funding stream, including federal and state programs, has different rules and reporting requirements. Even what seem like light requirements can be a burden in a setting like REEP or Queens Library. One federal form requiring students to state their learning goals in English is so intimidating and time-consuming for beginners that, according to one administrator, it discourages the program from using federal funds for beginning students.

Programs like REEP and Queens Library face a daunting task on shoestring budgets and do the best they can against difficult odds. What's striking at both programs is the spirit of the place: the warmth, the energy, and the encouragement offered by instructors, along with the aspirations of the students. One recent Saturday morning in Queens, students waited outside in the rain for the library in Long Island City to open its doors. Once inside, the beginning ESL class met in a portion of a vestibule cordoned off by whiteboards; all the regular classrooms were occupied by other students. An energetic volunteer led the beginner group through a series of improvised exercises—the hardest involved the difference between up, down, across, and through. Students were rapt, declining after several hours to take a break. Struggling as they were, unaccustomed to being in a classroom, often embarrassed by their pronunciation, and wrestling with material that would be easy for their children, they were grateful to the library for whatever it could offer.

IV. THE TWO-GENERATION MODEL

No approach to English-language learning has benefited or suffered more from the faddishness that tends to shape the field than family literacy, or the two-generation model. Popular in the 1990s, spread

rapidly to all 50 states by federal funding mandates, family literacy fell out of favor a decade or so ago. But it's now coming back into vogue again, albeit under the new name of dual-generation learning.⁴⁰

The family literacy approach takes the concept of contextualization to a new level. Indeed, most students enrolled in dual-generation programs aren't there to learn English at all: their goal is to help their kids succeed in school. In a classic program, parents and children both attend school—during some hours, in the same classroom; at other times, in separate rooms. Parents studying English as a second language learn in tandem with their children, sometimes covering the same subject matter—colors or numbers or how to tell time—and sometimes learning how to use English skills to help their children learn, for example, reading to them or communicating with their teachers.

The model emerged first in the 1980s in Appalachia as a response to intergenerational cycles of poverty; the first parents who participated were native-born English speakers who couldn't read or write. The ESL component was introduced later as programs were implemented in cities with large immigrant populations. Today, virtually every large institutional ESL program, including REEP and Queens Library, has a class or two that it calls family literacy. The courses vary widely—faithful exemplars of the original model as well as highly diluted versions. The English-language instruction also varies, from cursory to exemplary. Does it matter that most students are enrolled for another reason? In theory, it could be an advantage. After all, many adults get distracted from learning English by the demands and pressures of child rearing. It ought to be possible to harness those pressures as a way to keep the parents in English class.

Briya Public Charter School in Washington, D.C., adopted the two-generation model over 20 years ago and still hews fairly closely to the original concept. Some 400 parents attend class two and a half hours a day, Monday through Friday. Their children—infants, toddlers, and preschool—receive free day care or attend free preschool onsite while the parents are in class.

The adult instruction starts with ESL—beginning, middle, and advanced. Some students graduate out of ESL to high school equivalency courses; others learn computer literacy; still others pursue occupational training to be certified as medical assistants. But all the courses, no matter what the content, are linked back in an ongoing and intentional way to what the adult student’s child is learning. Thus, a beginning ESL student doesn’t just learn how to count in English. She also receives instruction in how to talk to her children about numbers—for example, counting out the teaspoons of flour or cups of milk that she uses in the kitchen—so that when a child begins school, he is already familiar with counting. The principle behind this approach, widely accepted by K–12 educators, is that support at home is one of the most important factors, perhaps the most important, in student performance.

The classic family literacy model, implemented sometimes with preschool children and sometimes in elementary school, has four components: classes for children, classes for parents, parenting education (more counseling and discussion than instruction), and PACT (parent and child together) time. Dual-generation advocates view PACT time as the most important element: parents spend time in the child’s classroom, learning what goes on in class, reading with their children, participating in storytelling, and observing the teacher’s teaching techniques and disciplinary tactics.

Critics of family literacy complain about what they see as the condescension in this approach: educated middle-class Americans telling poor immigrants how to raise their children. Defenders argue that parents who grew up in homes where no one knew how to read not only don’t think to read to their children—even if they can read, they don’t know the little tricks of making bedtime reading educational, such as talking about the book cover and title before you start or pointing to the words as you read. For parents learning English, it’s the best kind of homework—practicing what they’ve just learned in English class while doing something highly pleasurable and meaningful.

Critics also question the efficacy of the dual-generation approach. Defenders say that it’s based on ample research and that a much-publicized evaluation casting doubt on the model was poorly done, an accident of history. The concept of dual-generation learning burst on the scene in the late 1980s, pioneered first in rural Kentucky. The federal government renamed it Even Start and expanded it dramatically, using dedicated funding to encourage rapid adoption by other states. Supporters say that the program ballooned too fast—funding grew exponentially through the 1990s—and that many schools failed to implement it properly. Whatever the reason, a series of evaluations in the 1990s found mixed results.⁴¹ Parents and children gained in literacy and on other measures but did not outperform a control group, and many parents seemed to lose patience, dropping out of their part of the program before the year was up. Driven largely by this research, federal funding was cut back sharply, and programs across the country ground to a halt.

As for the ESL component, there’s frustratingly little evaluation. Studies tend to focus on children’s educational outcomes, how much reading and writing is done at home, and how well parents read and write—not how much English they’ve learned. Still, in the right hands, family literacy ESL can be strikingly effective. At Briya, a full 70 percent of adult English-language learners advance an instructional level every year.

Whatever its value as pedagogy, the history of family literacy teaches two other critical lessons with implications for the future of ESL: one about how to replicate and scale up a teaching model, the other about faddish, prescriptive federal funding.

Even as family literacy rose and fell out of favor in Washington, there was another, privately driven push to spread the model to schools and other organizations around the country. The National Center for Family Literacy, now renamed the National Center for Families Learning, was the brainchild of Sharon Darling, a former teacher and education official behind the original Kentucky experiment. The initial money came from Toyota, and Toyota funding still sustains the center. The company has con-

tributed some \$46 million since 1991. Darling and her staff have leveraged that funding many times over, spending close to \$250 million to support nearly 300 family literacy programs in 30 states. The center, based in Louisville, combines generous grants to schools, school districts, community-based organizations, and other education providers with what Darling describes as “virtually unlimited” in-kind support—training, counseling, guidance, connections, and moral support.

Briya was an early beneficiary of this backing. In the early 1990s, when the Washington school was developing its two-generation program, a team of coaches and trainers from Louisville visited three or four times a year, often for two or three days at a time. The experts brought best practices and benchmarks. They sat in on classes and offered feedback. Briya also sent staff to Kentucky for training and coaching—as many as ten teachers for three or four days every year. Louisville provided the school with teaching materials, backup research, evaluation, and just about anything else Briya needed. That kind of intensive training and mentoring is no longer necessary, but Briya teachers and administrators still attend the national center’s annual conferences and are avid consumers of its research.

Not everything Briya does comes from Louisville. The national center offers parenting curriculum for English-language learners but little straight-up ESL curricular material or teaching guidance. Briya has borrowed that from elsewhere—notably, the California nonprofit CASAS, a national leader in English-language instruction and assessment. Still, there’s nothing haphazard or accidental about the Briya approach. Instructors are encouraged to be creative, to pay close attention to their students, and to structure learning around students’ needs and interests. But Briya teachers also draw on developed methods and prescribed curricular material; there’s a tested structure and framework behind everything they do. This balance of structure and freedom is arguably the key to the school’s success.

The other lesson in the history of family literacy points back to Washington. By the standards of Eng-

lish-language learning, the two-generation model is expensive: estimates start at \$2,500–\$3,500 per student per year. Briya, among other schools, spends considerably more than that. And the idea never would have spread as it has without top-down funding, first from Washington and then Toyota. But neither Washington’s sudden embrace nor its abrupt loss of interest was good for the concept. The embrace spread the idea too far, too fast, and the loss of interest killed dozens of programs just as they were getting going. Those that have survived have done so primarily by bundling several funding streams—federal, state, and other.

Although the feds no longer provide dedicated funding for family literacy, it is an “allowable” use of money distributed to the states through a variety of other federal programs, including Head Start, adult education, and various titles of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Creative school districts combine that government spending with private and foundation funding—a stream growing again today as a new generation of antipoverty researchers takes a new interest in the two-generation model. And many family literacy programs are thriving, despite massive federal cuts. The question for the future: might not more flexibility—a smorgasbord of options and more adaptable, no-strings funding “allowable” for different educational purposes—be a more effective approach for the federal government?

V. OCCUPATIONAL ENGLISH

Probably the most popular model of English-language instruction today—this era’s most fashionable form of contextualization—is occupational English: teaching English-language skills in the context of job training.⁴² The concept isn’t new: courses combining ESL instruction and vocational training date back many decades. (The old term is “vocational English as a second language,” or VESL.) But just over a decade ago, a now-celebrated pilot program in Washington State updated and refined the old idea and demonstrated its efficacy, and the new approach quickly took off across the United States.

Integrated Basic Education Skills and Training (I-BEST) was pioneered in 2004–05 at ten Washing-

ton State technical and community colleges. Initial results were stunning—students were 15 times more likely than a control group to complete workforce training—and the idea was implemented statewide the next year. Several national education foundations embraced the concept and began encouraging replication in other states. Teachers and education officials from across the U.S. were soon trekking to Seattle to see how it worked in practice. It wasn't long before the federal government jumped on the trend, spurring adoption with new funding mandates and a steady stream of grants.

The rationale for the I-BEST approach is not to improve ESL outcomes or help more people learn English. On the contrary, as with dual-generation English-language learning, language is often a secondary concern. The goal is better, faster, more effective job training. But the two aims aren't necessarily incompatible.

I-BEST arose in response to a bottleneck: many people enrolled in ESL and remedial adult basic education programs never graduate to job training or enroll in college. As every English teacher knows, ESL is a long, hard road. Many students give up after just a semester or two. Instructors are often as frustrated as students: “Do we really have to wait until they're fluent in English before we allow them to enroll in a welding class?,” asks one former ESL teacher, now committed to the I-BEST approach. The idea behind I-BEST is to accelerate this progress: to help students make the transition earlier by combining career training with ESL and other adult-ed instruction—two teachers in each classroom, one a technical instructor, the other focused on helping students with basic reading, writing, math, or English-language skills.

Combining the two tracks in this way could lead to two possible outcomes for English-language learning. It could short-circuit and shortchange ESL instruction. After all, in a combined course, there might be less time and less attention devoted to strictly English-language lessons. Or, the alternative possibility, combining the two could enhance English-language learning by motivating students, sharpening their focus, and increasing the number

who stay in class to complete ESL courses—an all-important variable that educators call “persistence.”

What's frustrating: as with dual-generation ESL, because learning English is not the primary goal of I-BEST, students' English-language gains are rarely assessed or reported. One early evaluation that compared I-BEST trainees with students in traditional, stand-alone ESL classes found mixed results. Students in some Washington I-BEST programs, particularly those given supplemental English instruction, did better than the control group. Others did worse. On average, the two groups, I-BEST and traditional ESL, were almost indistinguishable.⁴³

That evaluation and subsequent studies confirmed a range of other benefits associated with I-BEST. Students in the Washington State program earn many times more college credits than their peers in traditional adult-ed classes. They are much more likely to earn an occupational credential. They are more likely to be employed, for more hours per week, and they earn considerably more money.⁴⁴ None of these measures is directly linked to their English-language ability. But educators in Washington and other states notice marked increases in student persistence, which does link back to English-language learning. Occupational English programs are also widely popular—it's hard to exaggerate the hope and enthusiasm among practitioners.

Now in its second decade, the I-BEST approach comes in many shapes and sizes, some fairly true to the Washington original, some diluted, and some hoping to surpass Washington—second-generation I-BEST. Consider two telling and very different experiments: one at Maryland's Montgomery College, a two-year institution in the state community college system; the other at the noncredit arm of the San Diego college system, San Diego Continuing Education.

The Montgomery College program is small—a handful of classes prepare students for certificates to be geriatric nursing assistants and apartment building-maintenance technicians. But administrators convinced that they are improving on the model describe it as I-BEST 2.0. As in a traditional I-BEST

program, the core component is team teaching. An ESL teacher and a technical instructor plan the curriculum together and work to braid the two subjects into a seamless whole. It's not English, then nursing; it's both subjects simultaneously. Both teachers are present in class for most of the instructional hour. Montgomery College requires intensive commitment from students, who attend full-time for 12 weeks, a total of 300 hours. Though it's free for students, administrators estimate that the course costs the college four times as much as standard prep for a nursing or technician certificate.

What Montgomery College adds to the mix: an array of precursor ESL courses, supplemental ESL courses, and wraparound support services, including relationships with potential employers. The precursor courses are ESL contextualized for three occupational fields: health care, customer service,

No one today teaches old-fashioned primer English. Students are learning English for a reason; depending on what that reason is, they want to learn a different kind of English.

and building trades. Although far less technical than I-BEST, these precursors introduce students to occupational vocabulary, expose them to technical writing, and—as a subject of English-language conversation and drills—help them confirm that they are genuinely interested in the field. Once students graduate to I-BEST proper—rigorous screening eliminates more than half the applicants—they spend several hours a day in a supplemental ESL class. Wraparound services include extensive counseling and help with job placement: career fairs, internships, practice interviews, and real interviews with local employers.

Montgomery College is well connected and, by the standards of the field, relatively well funded, with grants from several foundations and the U.S. Department of Labor. San Diego Continuing Education's I-BEST course for personal-care assistants operates on a shoestring, fueled mainly by the in-

ventiveness of a tiny staff who market it with hand-made flyers and rely on a personal Facebook page to gather data on outcomes. Still, the staff from both programs sound remarkably similar when they describe the process of integrating ESL and nursing instruction—the challenge at the heart of the I-BEST model, but also its biggest payoff.

Although each school developed its own course content, they take the same approach. A module on asking about symptoms is an occasion to step back and drill students in the simple present tense. (“Does your stomach hurt now?”) A class on preparing for a job interview brings up questions about the present perfect. (“Have you ever worked in a hospital?”) When the nursing instructor demonstrates bedside manner and interpersonal skills, the ESL teacher introduces vocabulary for expressing sympathy and regret. Throughout the course, the ESL instructor schools students in basic English and study skills: reading comprehension, listening, pronunciation, note-taking, and the like.

Neither Montgomery College nor San Diego Continuing Education collects definitive data on English-language outcomes. But staff in both places think that their results resemble the early assessments from Washington State. I-BEST students do about the same or slightly better than students in stand-alone ESL courses. But—and this is the all-important payoff to occupational English courses—both programs say that persistence and motivation increase sharply among I-BEST students. Students who might otherwise have dropped out of English-language instruction or never enrolled in the first place continue, often with intensified interest, because of the way it's linked to job training.

One other thing occupational English staff and administrators agree on: I-BEST and programs like it are much harder to implement than standard ESL. Staff need to be better trained. Montgomery College, like many other schools, insists on an M.A. and significant previous experience. In most classes, curriculum is planned to a tee; it has to be, if two instructors are going to work from it. Ongoing teacher training is a must. “This isn't something you

teach or learn in two Saturdays,” says Anson Green, state director at the Texas Workforce Commission, who has implemented an I-BEST program and I-BEST precursor courses in his state.

Green and others see a challenge looming: how to build capacity for widespread adoption of I-BEST programs. In Green’s view, occupational English is a dramatic departure—not just the latest shifting fashion in how to contextualize English-language learning, but something new and different that will require far-reaching adjustments. Among the needs are curriculum development, much more extensive teacher training, and technical assistance for the implementation of new programs.

Texas is taking steps on all three fronts. The Texas Industry Specific English as a Second Language (TISESL) curriculum is a standardized I-BEST precursor program—lesson plans, teacher training, assessment tools, and more—developed by the state a decade ago and now in use in many schools. An online service, something like Angie’s List, connects experienced trainers from across the country with school systems seeking to launch I-BEST courses. The Texas Workforce Commission brokers mentoring relationships between institutions that already have occupational English programs and others just starting out. Still, Green says, much more is needed. Along with the other benefits of I-BEST—sharply increased student engagement and persistence—new expectations for training and professionalism would pay off across the field.

VI. EMPLOYER-PROVIDED ESL

Who will pay for new capacity for English-language learning? In an era of bulging deficits and revenue-neutral budgeting, it’s not likely to be government, state or federal. And if the training is occupational, many people will naturally look to employers. In fact, a number of employers, large and small, already offer ESL instruction to employees. One of the best of these programs is McDonald’s English Under the Arches, developed almost a decade ago and dramatically expanded in 2015.⁴⁵

The primary motive for English Under the Arches isn’t altruism or corporate social responsibility.

On the contrary, the main driver is business necessity. Demographic and educational trends have combined in recent years to shrink the traditional fast-food workforce—high school students seeking part-time jobs—leaving brands like McDonald’s to rely increasingly on immigrant workers. The company estimates that up to 20 percent of its employees are foreign-born; in some locations, the share is considerably larger. The challenges for day-to-day management start with communication among employees and between crew and managers. But the issues don’t end there. McDonald’s managers—at corporate-owned stores and franchises—want to retain employees as long as possible. This helps minimize training costs. They also prefer, whenever possible, to promote from within. Employees who don’t speak English make both retention and promotion harder.

McDonald’s began to grapple with this challenge about a decade ago. The company developed an online ESL curriculum. Franchisees in cities where the problem was particularly acute hired instructors for small-scale ad hoc experiments. But no one was satisfied. Few employees stuck with the training long enough or learned enough to make it worthwhile. So in 2007, the company took a dramatic step, convening a team of experts to develop a new approach. The group included ESL and adult-ed experts, technology and e-learning people, an instructional designer, and two McDonald’s franchisees. The team labored for 12 weeks to design a program that was then piloted in a handful of restaurants. Within a few years, it was winning national awards.

The developing team had three key insights, now the hallmarks of English Under the Arches. The first, still new in 2007, was instruction contextualized for the workplace. The curriculum engages McDonald’s employees with English that they want to know because it will help them move up on the job. The core focus: how to talk about food and cleanliness and customer service. The two other breakthroughs involved delivery: when and how to offer English instruction to get the most uptake and engagement. McDonald’s answer is to offer it on the job, during working hours, making it as easy as possible for employees and minimizing conflicts with work and

family. Finally, also critical, the program stretches the value of classroom time by combining it with distance learning—additional classes conducted like webinars on telephonic conference calls.

McDonald's made important changes in 2015. Initially, English Under the Arches was only for managers and would-be managers: promising employees whom a franchise wanted to promote but who were being held back by their lack of English. And until 2015, franchisees paid to participate, \$200 to \$375 for every employee. The instruction was free to workers, and they continued to draw a paycheck while they were in class. But some franchisees hesitated, put off by the extra wage costs and the fee. In January 2015, McDonald's eliminated the fee and expanded the program. Now franchisees can send any employees—ordinary crew as well as potential managers.

Caspers Company is the largest McDonald's franchisee in Florida. A family-run firm that goes back three generations, it owns and operates 53 McDonald's restaurants in Tampa and Tallahassee and was one of the first franchises nationwide to implement English Under the Arches. HR vice president Edward Shaw was skeptical in the beginning. Courses ran from eight to 12 weeks, usually five hours a week. An employee who went through all four courses in the program—Shift Basics, Shift Conversation, Shift Writing, and Conducting Performance Reviews—could take two years or longer. McDonald's corporate would find and pay the teacher, often a community-college English instructor with some extra time on her hands. But Caspers would have to find a venue for classes, provide computers for web-conferencing, and cover the extra wages. Taken together, it seemed like a lot to swallow.

Still, as the workforce in Tampa grew increasingly Hispanic, Shaw knew that he needed an answer and decided to give the program a try. Within a year, the course was so popular that it was turning workers away. Managers noticed the difference almost immediately, and not just in reduced turnover. "We do this because we're selfish," Shaw now says, with a smile. "Happy employees make for happy customers." The company also finds it easier to promote

from within: 26 percent of Caspers managers are Latino, not far behind 28 percent of its employees. The company long ago opened its ESL classes to crew as well as managers. Most weeks of the year, the firm has two or three classes running, with a total of 30 to 60 workers.

As with any ESL class, a lot depends on the teacher. The course is highly structured: nothing is left to chance, and every McDonald's employee who goes through Shift Basics learns the same topics in the same order at the same pace as every other student anywhere in the United States. That's how the company maintains quality control. But different teachers do more and less with the same syllabus, and in the right hands, it can be very effective.

Most students come in with sharply limited English, afraid to speak. But they engage quickly with the occupational content: it's easy to talk about what you know. A good teacher expands upon and enriches the work-related drills. A lesson about a broken french-fry machine becomes an exercise in pronunciation, then an excuse to run through some basic grammar, and then a chance for role-play or to tell a story. Students gain confidence quickly. They're the first to explain: the course is focused on workplace English, but their new confidence applies across the board. Many talk about being able finally to speak to their children's teachers and communicate with doctors, in addition to moving up on the job. The web- and phone-based classes can be more challenging: it's noisy in a restaurant break room and harder when you can't see the teacher. But the structured curriculum helps, and a good instructor can make it work.

The outcomes of English Under the Arches are striking, with impressive gains for franchises and front-line workers. The normal turnover rate at Caspers is close to 90 percent a year. For employees who complete an English course, the number drops to 17 percent. McDonald's corporate would like more franchisees to adopt the program. There are generally about 20 classes running nationwide; 2015 is the first year that the program is cost-free, and some 800 workers will participate by the end of the year. But managers who give it a try are almost always

satisfied. When asked how likely they are to recommend it to another franchise, the average answer is 9.6 on a scale of one to ten. As for English-language learning, 84 percent of English Under the Arches students improve enough to move up a level—compared with 46 percent of students in federally funded ESL programs.

VII. IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

Improving the delivery of English-language learning will require change in many quarters—not necessarily an expanded role for government, but better, smarter policy and engagement by new players, including the private sector.⁴⁶

Queens Library, REEP, Briya Public Charter School, I-BEST and its progeny, English Under the Arches: the exemplary programs profiled in this paper hold a number of lessons for policymakers and others concerned about the state of English-language instruction. There is no silver bullet. The field is a vast, sprawling archipelago serving many kinds of customers, and there's no one-size-fits-all solution. But some basic principles apply across the board.

An immigration overhaul will raise the stakes exponentially. Reform is stalled for now by lingering voter opposition and political paralysis in Washington, but some kind of relief is likely to pass eventually—or a Democratic White House may act unilaterally, as Barack Obama attempted to do in 2014. Either way, any reform package is certain to include requirements that legalizing immigrants show some level of English proficiency, throwing thousands, if not millions, of new students into the queue for English classes. Most will be poor and low-skilled, with little education. And they will want quick, efficient courses tailored to their highly targeted need: passing whatever English test is mandated by Washington.

But this is far from the only reason the system needs revamping, and the need for scaling and improvement will not end with classes to prepare people for the legalization test. Many students who complete immigration-reform ESL will want to graduate to a next level. Once they are authorized to work in the U.S., they will put down deeper roots and in-

vest more heavily in themselves and their children. Many will also want better jobs, spiking demand for occupational English classes. And if anything, Americans should want to see increased demand, including from legal immigrants, for all forms of English-language instruction. The thousands of newcomers who stop at survival English, learning just enough to get by but not excel, aren't just shortchanging themselves; they're also shortchanging the nation.

Much existing hope for reform focuses on innovative technology. The marketplace is flooded with options and experiments: computer software, instructional websites, social networking sites, and more. The federal government maintains a website, USA Learns, online since 2008: videos, practice activities, interactive drills, and other materials meant for students learning at home, not in a classroom setting. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has invested heavily in an approach piloted in Seattle, now rolling out nationwide, that combines online learning with in-person coaching. Many online options are run by for-profit companies, and as with K–12 and postsecondary education, investors are circling, waiting for the breakthrough innovation to emerge. The next frontier: cell phones, for millennial English-language learners. Online learning holds great promise for reducing the cost of English instruction and making it more widely available to more students. Still, no matter how exciting, online instruction alone is not a cure for all that's wrong in the field of English-language learning.⁴⁷

Change will not come quickly or easily. The field is so neglected and in such disrepair that even if significant new funding were available, money alone is no more likely than technology to solve all the problems. And it's going to take more than government. The private sector, private philanthropy, and for-profit innovators of the kind transforming K–12 and postsecondary education all have a role to play. A number of reforms are needed to tame the chaos rampant in the world of ESL, culminating in a new federal effort—an infusion of performance-based competitive grants—to spur innovation, particularly in programs that serve English-language learners with the greatest need.

Taming a Chaotic Marketplace

A newly arrived immigrant eager to learn English is bombarded by outreach and advertising. There are private programs, public programs, online programs, church-basement programs, and community-college programs, among others, each teaching a different kind of English to students with a different level of educational attainment—and there’s virtually no guidance to help would-be learners find the course that’s right for them. This discourages many adults from pursuing English-language learning; people don’t want to waste time in a class that doesn’t fit their needs. Worse, the chaos and lack of transparency make it hard for funding to reach the most effective, in-demand programs—no one knows what’s out there or what works.

The first goal of reform should be to bring transparency to this marketplace. The government can help by separating ESL and adult-education funding streams and collecting separate, more appropriately tailored information on programs that receive money to teach English. This alone will transform our understanding of what instruction is available, who’s using it, and how effective it is. A second critical step, also probably a job for Washington, is deciding on a simple, common-denominator standard, or standards, that apply to all English-language instruction, whatever the learner’s purpose.

The most common metric in use today is “level gain”—do students move up an instructional level over the course of a program? It can be measured by any one of several government-approved tests. But many educators don’t like it. Among other reasons, they point to the diversity of ESL instruction available today and question using tests designed to measure basic-skills ESL to assess students enrolled in dual-generation or occupational English courses. It’s not just the vocabulary that’s different; so are students’ motives. It’s no accident that few dual-generation or occupational English programs keep track of students’ ESL level gain. A growing number of teachers say that there is no metric that applies across the board.

One possible alternative to existing tests would be a new, simpler, common-denominator standard—

persistence, perhaps, or student satisfaction. Another option would be to offer a choice among a handful of different measures, allowing each program to pick its own yardstick from a short list of approved alternatives: level gain, transition to work, transition to an occupational training program, and perhaps one or two others. The common-denominator metric, or set of metrics, should be simple and easily understood, a meaningful indicator of quality, and applicable to an array of programs, including those, such as dual-generation learning and occupational English, that don’t generally measure ESL level gain.

Angie’s List

Deciding on a simple, universal standard would set the stage for the next step in taming the marketplace: creating a database or clearinghouse that publicizes information about available ESL programs, city by city and neighborhood by neighborhood. Immigrants seeking classes and the counselors advising them need better information and rankings. Canada maintains a website, though it’s not very sophisticated and lists only government resources. A better model for the U.S. would be Angie’s List or Glassdoor.

A useful website would include several key elements. Programs should be sorted by category: basic skills instruction separated from dual-generation programs, with both distinct from immigration-reform ESL. The categories for occupational English courses would have to be even more finely drawn. Is it an I-BEST program designed for committed, middle-skill students, or a precursor class for those still exploring possible careers? The more sophisticated the program, the better the listing would have to be: Will this course prepare a student for a patient-centered health care job—or non-patient care, in an office?

What level of student is the program designed for? What kind of preparation do students need, academic and otherwise? How effective is the instruction, according to the new universal metric? All this information should be presented crisply and clearly—enough detail to distinguish and judge programs without being overwhelming. The site should be designed by web professionals and should look

and function like Amazon, not something created in a government office. Who should maintain such a database: ideally, a for-profit company.

A trusted, informative ESL clearinghouse might eventually open the way to other kinds of information sharing, including mechanisms, formal and informal, for ESL providers to trade ideas and technical assistance. Educators are divided on the need for a clearinghouse for curricula. Some feel it would be useful: Why should every program have to reinvent

There isn't enough English instruction.

What exists is uneven in quality. It often fails to match students' needs. Many who could benefit don't look for classes. And immigration reform—when it inevitably occurs—is all but certain to overwhelm capacity.

the wheel, crafting a new version of occupational English for nursing students, for example? Other instructors are more skeptical—they say that they wouldn't trust someone else's syllabus, or that they doubt that the best providers would be willing to share free of cost. Still others say that curriculum is not the hard part—there's plenty of curricular material available. What's hard is implementing it, and what they need from a clearinghouse is information about additional supports: teacher training, technical assistance, institutional mentoring, and the like. There are many possibilities and plenty of room for experimentation. But mechanisms of this kind could prove particularly useful if and when immigration reform drives demand to multiply exponentially.

Incentives for Matching Funds

No one knows exactly how far the supply of English-language instruction falls short of demand. But virtually everyone agrees that the gap is huge and government alone is unlikely to fill it. Immigration-reform legislation may come with a small, one-time increase in funding, or Washington may find a way to use fees collected from immigrants to pay for reform-related ESL. But public ambivalence about

immigration, concern about the deficit, and desire to limit the growth of government will all surely block any significant new spending for English-language learning.

Where will additional funding come from? New technology may help, lowering the price per student for instruction. A more transparent marketplace would make it easier for the private sector to step in. But Washington can and should prime the pump by creating more incentives for other funders to match and supplement federal dollars. Among the institutions that could be doing more: state and local governments, employers, charter schools, for-profit schools, faith-based institutions, and education foundations.

As is, states are required to match 25 percent of federal adult-education funding. But this leaves

out an array of other federal-funding streams that can be used for ESL. The states vary widely in how much they contribute, from the minimum 25 percent to 75 percent or more. Washington should close these loopholes and consider incentives to encourage the states to do more. Still other incentives, at the federal and state level, could encourage private and philanthropic funders. Several states offer tax incentives to employers who provide workforce training or collaborate with community colleges to train workers. Most of these credits are relatively small and inexpensive for the state. But many employers aren't aware of them—and ESL is rarely included.

More Flexible Federal Funding

Recent history illustrates the danger of Washington's faddish approach to ESL funding. Immigrants in need of instruction could not be more diverse, from those who have never held a pencil and don't know the alphabet in their own language to professionals with Ph.D.s whose main concern is technical terminology. Not everyone wants or needs family literacy. Not everyone wants or needs occupational English. And even if 4 million or 10 million legalizing immigrants need ESL to benefit from immigra-

tion reform, it would be a mistake to skew federal funding in a way that squeezed out other options.

The danger is that when federal funding priorities shift to encourage adoption of the latest trend, many good programs using a different approach are forced to cut back or go under. The family literacy programs getting by now in the wake of massive spending cuts by bundling “allowable” federal funding point to a better option: federal funding should be structured more like a smorgasbord—with more flexibility and more allowable uses for all federal ESL spending. Also needed: more help for states seeking to bundle funds.

Higher Standards for Teachers

Another urgent priority is teacher quality. It’s no secret in the profession that ESL instructors are underpaid, overworked, and often insufficiently qualified. Opportunities for professional development are woefully lacking, and requirements are not stiff enough. What’s needed is more resources and tougher standards, linked to funding. The federal government should require states to raise standards. States should do the same for the programs that they support, whether at community colleges or community-based organizations. Among the higher standards to consider: that instructors have an M.A. or equivalent certification in language learning and that staff include enough full-time teachers to develop or vet curricula and set standards.

Scaling for Immigration Reform

Immigration reform that drives a vast, rapid scaling up of the system is all but sure to create problems of quality control. The experience of recent decades offers potential solutions. Both English Under the Arches and the two-generation model scaled relatively rapidly and are now available across America. Both programs meet specialized needs; neither would suit every English-language learner. But their successes and failures hold lessons for the U.S. as it ramps up English-language learning for immigration reform.

What the two programs have in common: the organizations behind them did foundational research and developed unique pedagogical models; then each organized a national network of service pro-

viders and supported them as they put the model into practice. McDonald’s approach is highly structured, based on a detailed, lesson-by-lesson curriculum that leaves little to chance or local variation, and instructors craving autonomy and flexibility may chafe at such a standardized approach. But it has proved widely replicable—the more detailed the template, the easier it is for less experienced teachers and administrators to implement it. The National Center for Families Learning relies on a different set of stratagems to spread its teaching model: information sharing, networking, coaching, and professional development, all backed by financial support. It, too, has had success in spreading its ideas and encouraging a national network of service providers to adopt some version of its approach.

Who could drive the scaling up of programs needed in the event of immigration reform, funding the basic research, developing curriculum and a replicable delivery model, and then organizing a national network of service providers and supporting them as they put the model into practice? It could be a job for a foundation, or a group of foundations.

A Competitive Grant Program

The Obama administration’s 2009 Race to the Top competitive grant program for K–12 education was highly controversial and arguably not as effective as it could have been. But it points to what can be done: how to use federal funding to drive innovation in the states.

Here is how it would work for ESL: as with Race to the Top, Washington would create a new federal funding stream, separate and distinct from the formula funding that currently supports English learning, and use it to pay for performance-based grants to exemplary programs in the states. This shouldn’t be a permanent program; it needn’t grow the federal government. It’s a one-time kick in the pants—two or three rounds of relatively small subventions. The goal is to spur innovation—improvements not just in the few programs that succeed in winning grants but across the field and across the country, as states, schools, community groups, and partnering organizations step up their game to compete for federal money.

Programs applying for grants would have to meet a series of criteria scored with a point system. Among the criteria that ought to be included are past performance, promised matching funds, robust efforts to provide teacher training and improve teacher quality, plans to incorporate innovative technology, and data collection that feeds back into program improvements. The matching requirement will be particularly important because grants are sure to be small. There should be points for matching state funding and even more points for private-sector matches. But no single criterion should count for so much that programs that perform well on other measures are discouraged from competing, and excelling on one dimension—say, use of innovative technology—should not be enough to win a grant.

Sure to be controversial, Washington should not specify that programs applying for grants take a particular approach to English-language learning. The criteria ought to be neutral on the issue of basic skills versus dual-generation versus an occupational approach.

Where the government should take a stand, and this, too, is sure to be contested: it ought to give grants only to programs serving English-language learners with the greatest need. A potential cutoff point would be those who have not attended college and who speak English not well or not at all: beginning students and perhaps low-intermediate students.

CONCLUSION

None of this will be easy. The current system is shamefully inadequate. There isn't nearly enough English-language instruction. What exists is uneven in quality. It often fails to match students' needs. Many who could benefit aren't even looking for classes. And the system is all but certain to be

There are many reasons to focus on this group. They are least equipped to integrate successfully in the United States. Their children are at the greatest disadvantage. They count for the greatest drag on U.S. competitiveness and potentially, over their lifetimes, on the federal fisc. Perhaps most compelling to policymakers, the ESL programs that serve them are among those most in need of improvement. I-BEST and other exemplary programs for more advanced learners are driving an exciting wave of innovation and upgrading. They hold great promise for the future, and their funding should not be cut to pay for a competitive grant program. But the biggest need for change is at the low end of the ESL ladder, and that's where a grants initiative could have the biggest payoff.⁴⁸

The hardest question is where to find the funding for a new program. The money should not come out of existing ESL formula funding—it's far too small as it is. And there ought to be a "pay-for," a compensating cut in other federal spending. But with the right matching requirements, even a small program could make a big difference: even \$40 million–\$50 million would go a long way toward improving ESL for the least proficient students. The prospect, however distant, of immigration reform makes an initiative of this kind all the more urgent. Now is the time to find the funding to develop more effective models of English-language learning for low-level students, models that can be scaled rapidly when the time comes to meet the ESL requirements that are certain to be included in any reform.

overwhelmed by the demand unleashed by immigration reform. There are many things needed and many technical problems to address. But the solution starts with political will. It's time to recognize that America will only gain if more Americans speak English well.

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⁴⁶ Many conversations with many kinds of experts—in English-language learning, education policy, and immigration policy—contributed to the thinking behind these policy recommendations. Among those who were most helpful were Heide Spruck Wrigley, Anson Green, and Donna Kinerney; also Margie McHugh, dir. of National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy, Migration Policy Institute; and Harry J. Holzer, prof. of public policy, Georgetown University.

⁴⁷ Information in this section is drawn from “English Innovations,” OneAmerica, <https://weareoneamerica.org/english-innovations>; “English Innovations,” OneAmerica (presentation), <https://docs.gatesfoundation.org/Documents/innovation-esl-education-mobile-learning-technology.pdf>; “Innovation in ESL education: Mobile-Learning Technology,” Parthenon Group (presentation for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation), Mar. 2008, <https://docs.gatesfoundation.org/Documents/innovation-esl-education-mobile-learning-technology.pdf>; interview with Juan Romero, CEO, Metro Latin America, July 16, 2015; interview with Sharyn Ronis, CEO, Kuepa US, Aug. 19, 2015; interview with Arianne Garden Vazquez, English Innovations project mgr., OneAmerica, Sept. 10, 2015; interview with Wrigley; interview with Gabriel Sanchez Zinny, pres., Kuepa, June 25, 2015; and USA Learns, <http://www.usalearns.org>.

For a range of for-profit online options—some well-established, some just taking off—see Rosetta Stone, Pearson ELLIS, LiveMocha, and Kuepa: “ELLIS: A Digital Learning ELL Curriculum,” Pearson Education, <http://www.pearsonschool.com/index.cfm?locator=PSZu72&PMDbSiteId=2781&PMDbSolutionId=6724&PMDbSubSolutionId=&PMDbCategoryId=1662&PMDbSubCategoryId=&PMDbSubjectAreaId=&PMDbProgramId=32507>; “ESL English course,” Kuepa, <http://www.kuepa.com/us/ESL>; LiveMocha, <http://livemocha.com>; and Rosetta Stone, <http://www.rosettastone.com>.

⁴⁸ For discussion of which English-language learners would benefit most from more and better instruction, see “Innovation in ESL education,” Mar. 2008; and Wilson, “Investing in English Skills.”

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