



Central Minnesota Occupational English Project Summary of Findings

Overview

Purpose of this project

Demographic and economic forecasts indicate a need to maximize the available labor force in Central Minnesota, including English Language Learners (ELL). This project is intended to result in a plan for increasing the region's capacity to fully include limited English speaking residents as part of the community, through Occupational English and other employment education and support services.

Identified stakeholders for the Occupational English Project are: limited English speaking individuals, employers, workforce development organizations, educational institutions, and other agencies serving English language learners.

The intended geographic area for this project is the St. Cloud Labor Market area, although results will be shared broadly.

The project is funded through a planning grant from the Otto Bremer Foundation.

Project Goals

Goal 1: Connect and mobilize already-existing community groups that have an interest or need related to Occupational English. Help them identify and build on existing assets to design a common vision for systems change: provision of needed language and job skills training for English language learners, and gainful employment for these residents.

Goal 2: Develop a plan to build limited English speaking residents' assets and increase their self-sufficiency/independence, through job preparation, placement and support, language skills training at work, and links to other needed services.

Goal 3: Create strategies that will address the business community's need for limited English-speaking employees who have the language skills necessary to perform the work, helping them create a more supportive work environment for English language learners.



Project Work Group Membership

Prior to receipt of the planning grant, many organizations that provide English classes and other employment-related services to immigrants and refugees met for over a year to begin discussion about how to better meet the needs. During 2006, the following organizations have been involved in the Occupational English Work Group:

- Adult Basic Education Literacy Consortium—Districts 742 and 47
- Bremer Bank
- Central Minnesota Jobs & Training Services
- Great River Regional Library
- Hands Across the World
- Flexwork
- Language Solutions, LLC
- St. Cloud Refugee Collaborative—LSS, SASSO, & Hands Across the World
- St. Cloud Somali Learning Center
- St. Cloud State University—Intensive English Center and Continuing Studies
- St. Cloud Technical College—ESL and Door 15
- Stearns-Benton Employment & Training Council/Minnesota WorkForce Center—St. Cloud (convener and fiscal host)
- United Migrant Opportunity Services (UMOS)
- UpFront Organization Development Consulting (facilitation)

Two employers who contributed significantly to this project by recruiting English language learner employees, supervisors and group leaders for focus groups were Gold'n Plump (Cold Spring Plant) and Stearns Inc. Electrolux also arranged an ELL employee focus group, and Casa Guadalupe recruited and hosted a focus group of limited English-speaking individuals who work for various employers.

Individuals from the business community, who shared their expertise in panel presentations focused on employing English language learners, are:

- Kelly Fleming, Labor Relations Manager for Electrolux
- Janelle Kasperek, Human Resource Manager for Gold'n Plump
- Jill Magelssen, Franchise Owner for Express Personnel Services
- Loretta Trulson, Director of Human Resources for Stearns Inc.

Other business representatives who participated in planning are:

- Lori Glanz Gambrino, Sprint
- Cathy Town and Autumn Ross, VA Medical Center

We also appreciate the support, interest and opportunities provided by the Central Minnesota Society for Human Resource Management (CMSHRM) to survey its members, promote employer sessions, and provide us the opportunity to present project findings and share the expertise of employers in panel presentations.



Research conducted for this project

Multiple methods have been used to gather information and insights from various groups:

Focus group research

Focus groups were conducted in July through September 2006, with employed and unemployed English language learners, and with supervisors and group leaders who work with English language learners. The purpose of this research was to help identify the needs of immigrants and refugees in finding jobs, keeping jobs and moving into better jobs; and to understand employer needs as they consider hiring English language learners.

Surveys

Human resource managers were surveyed through CMSHRM in Spring of 2006, to understand their current status in employing English language learners as well as their practices, resources and needs related to hiring, training and promoting these individuals.

As part of the quarterly St. Cloud Area Business Outlook Survey of area employers Rich McDonald, Center For Economic Education at St. Cloud State University, included three questions about employment of English language learners in the August 2006 survey.

At a presentation of the Occupational English Project to CMSHRM members in January 2007, attendees completed a brief survey.

Secondary research: Literature review

We completed and have continued to update a review of the literature focused on Occupational English and employment of English language learners. In March 2007 more resources were added specific to the developing strategic plan, on advanced Occupational English, particularly in the health care and manufacturing/production business sectors.

Mapping of assets focused on Occupational English & other work skills

With input from organizations that provide English classes for immigrants and refugees, as well as other employment training and skill-building opportunities and services, we have created a map of these community assets. The map and accompanying list of class and service opportunities will be updated regularly, and is available electronically on the [WorkForce Center—St. Cloud website](#). Work is underway to include links from the map to provider websites so that information about resources is easily accessible for English language learners, for service providers, and for employers and others who can help individuals locate needed resources. In addition, results of an on-line survey of area Occupational English service providers describes what courses they provide or will add.

Brief reports of the above research are in the appendix to this summary. Full reports of each research project are available on request.



Key Findings

Area employers of English language learners

Forty-two percent of area employers responding to the Business Outlook Survey indicated they have employees who are English language learners. All except one are businesses with over fifty employees; most are manufacturing, but also include health care and social assistance organizations, administrative support, retail, real estate and education services. The human resources survey also revealed 42% of employers currently have English language learners on their work force.

Employers report that in assessing English proficiency before hiring:

- Interviewing is the most commonly used assessment (by two-thirds of employers according to human resource personnel.)
- Most other organizations use no assessment of English skills, while a smaller percentage use a combination of testing and interviewing.

Employer's English and math proficiency requirements:

- Most business executives say they require employees to have intermediate or advanced English and math proficiency on entry. However, most of the employers who have English language learner employees respond that no proficiency or basic proficiency is required.
- Most human resource managers indicated "basic proficiency" for a new hire. However, to continue as a successful employee, they say, a higher level of English proficiency is needed.
- For customer contact positions, advanced English skills, communication and customer relations skills are needed before employers can hire an employee.
- Many employers have a time-frame of seeing the new employee be proficient at the job within six to nine months, so the window for skill-building once employed is small.

Lessons learned from ELL workers

For English language learners (focus groups), major obstacles in seeking work include

- Their limited English skills, impeding the job search and application process
- Lack of recent job experience, especially in the U.S.
- Fears about discrimination and harassment
- Transportation and child care to support employment.

Focus group quotes:

"There are employers who have a question (on the job application) about race. We are afraid if we circle "black" we will not get a job offer."



“It’s very frustrating, when you know you can do the job, if the trainer can’t explain safety rules and hazards, how parts work or won’t work... very frustrating.”

“It’s important to learn English so when we have a problem we can speak about it before it gets bigger.”

English language learners agree their greatest need is to learn enough English to become employed, and to advance to a better job. Ideal opportunities for learning English are:

- Classes offered at multiple levels—beginning, intermediate and advanced.
- Classes offered at the worksite for limited English speaking employees.
- Community classes near home or work: 3 hours, 3-5 days/week

“I think three hours, 2 or 3 times a week is best so you keep learning and don’t forget it.”

“I would like class four to five days a week, three hours a day. We are not learning fast enough. We want to learn spelling and writing too.”

Ways that English language learners suggest employers can be helpful include:

- Allow English language learners (ELL) to get help with the application process.
- Be patient, respectful, and always fair.
- Listen and communicate often; repeat instructions, encourage questions.
- Use interpreters; translate materials (including task descriptions).
- Offer English classes on-site with a focus on workplace terminology.
- Hire employees in groups who speak the same language.
- Offer cultural diversity training.
- Offer opportunities for advancement.

Best practices of employers who hire ELL workers

According to employers (in focus groups with supervisors and groups leaders, plus human resource manager surveys), key benefits that make hiring English language learners worthwhile are:

- Their strong work ethic, dependability, good attendance and efficient work skills
- Their willingness to work in production jobs
- The opportunity to learn about other cultures.

Focus group quotes:

“They (English language learners) are very hard working. Attendance is no problem. They push themselves beyond what they should.”

“It gives you a different perspective...a different cultural perspective. It broadens you ...how they learn and how they work.”



The greatest challenge in having employees who are English language learners is communication. The language barrier affects understanding of work processes and policies as well as communication between the English language learner and the work team and supervisor.

Strategies employers use to effectively reduce the language barrier are:

- Coaching, demonstration and using visual signs and cues.
- Pairing a new hire with an experienced employee, ideally one who speaks the same language.
- Using interpreters, the Language Line, and translated materials.
- Offering English classes on-site, custom-designed for the workplace.

“We all use the buddy system and partner new employees. We’ve done it for years, because we will lose them if we don’t do it and if they don’t have anyone to ask questions. They’re scared to ask the supervisor. They’re overwhelmed. They need help to find their way around.”

“I had one worker attend the class. He was one of the better workers but spoke little English. After the class, he was promoted. He was more confident. It definitely helped him. It takes a special person who wants to learn.”

Other insights shared during employer discussion sessions and panel presentations:

- A major challenge to offering work-site or community Occupational English education is the capability and financial support to offer classes at multiple skill levels. English language learners get frustrated with their slow progress if they are held back due to level of coursework. Many employers don’t have enough ELL employees to fill multiple classes, so it is not economically feasible. Suggested options for resolving this:
 - Employers could offer classes together, transporting employees to a site.
 - Employers can offer tuition reimbursement for employees who complete English language classes offered in the community.
 - Employees who complete English classes can tutor later classes.
 - Encourage all employees to mentor limited English speaking employees.
- Be aware that some refugees are illiterate in their own language, so they face a greater hurdle when trying to learn English.
- Providing opportunities for an ELL to shadow a current employee before completing a job application can be very helpful for both the ELL and the employer in determining whether there is a good fit.
- Word of mouth among a cultural/language group is the best way to spread the word about job openings.
 - Once an individual is hired, he or she will encourage other ELL to apply.
- Referrals provide another source for successful recruiting.
 - Contact service providers like the WorkForce Center, LSS, Hands Across the



World, St. Cloud Area Legal Services, SASSO (Somali contacts), Adult Basic Ed.
— Contact employment services, since many are placing limited English speaking individuals.

- A support network at work is important; hiring more than one employee speaking the same language can increase the employees' comfort, and they can mentor each other in English skills. This increases employee retention.
- Be intentional as you review hiring and work policies, looking at those that may discourage English language learner applicants and employees, and recognizing that many potential changes would help English-speaking employees as well.
 - An example is policy around family needs, being able to accumulate vacation for a longer absence to travel to their country of origin, taking unpaid leaves.
 - Decide which policies are essential, and which can be more flexible.
 - Let organizations working with ELL know what is absolutely required, so they can better prepare individuals for jobs in your organization or industry.
 - Review employment advertising and postings for abbreviations that will make the description difficult to understand.
- Recognize that individuals within one cultural group may have different cultural beliefs. Barriers true for one individual may not apply to another, e.g. handling pork, prayer times.
- Needs will also be different from one generation to another; employers need to plan accordingly. While many current immigrants and refugees lack English skills, the next generation will learn English in school, and adapt to the local culture.
- Besides general English skill testing, an employment agency uses a bilingual interpretation test for bilingual positions.
- For interpreters, using employees who know the language for simple interpreting can work, although some do not want to interpret—it may be a compensation issue, or a cultural barrier.
 - Use external interpreters or Language Line for serious or private conversations.
 - Interpretation and Transportation Services (ITS) asks that employers and health care providers be open to using more than one service provider.

Employer needs

The greatest needs businesses indicated they have for outside assistance (from human resource manager survey responses and discussion sessions with employers):

- More workplace and community Occupational and conversational English classes at multiple levels
 - Help applicants and employees increase their English skills to give them higher-level job options.



- Interpreters and translation services
 - Including low or no-cost interpreters for job application process.
- Training/assistance in
 - How to begin and effectively recruit, train and retain English language learners
 - Effective ways to screen and test applicants
 - Finding bilingual individuals to hire
 - How to get current employees and managers to accept and embrace limited English speaking employees—overcoming the language/communication barrier and increasing understanding of cultural differences/diversity training
 - Effective coaching for limited English-speaking employees
 - Linking area businesses with employment agencies and other community organizations that provide English classes and employment services.
- Bus line expansion to ensure employees can reach work.
- An Occupational English curriculum package with materials that address common employer needs. Suggestions offered in employer sessions and HR surveys:
 - A list of employer responsibilities, what English language learners will need to support them on the job.
 - Life skills and work ethic training: attendance, attitude, etc.
 - A list of steps the ELL can take to get ready for a job, how to prepare.
 - Understanding cultural customs, and American workplace culture
 - Training for ELL and for other employees and supervisors
 - Teaching English skills at all levels, including an advanced level for proficiency in customer service and analysis of customer needs.
 - List of key terminology in each industry, with definitions/descriptions.
 - Customer service/customer relations training.
 - Basic math skills training—employers can teach advanced skills
 - For retail, understanding cash, charges, operating a register.
 - One-to-one and team communication skills training
 - Effective teamwork (for English language learners and other employees)
 - Compensation and safety training—fairly universal, using real-life examples from local employee manuals.
 - If computer-training modules are offered, provide them in labs where social interaction can also be encouraged, to facilitate speaking English.
 - Even without a teacher present, a designated facilitator can help ensure the learning is fun and productive.
 - Provide a list of interpreters.
 - Provide a list of local recruitment sources for limited English speaking applicants.



Local assets available for Occupational English and work skills training

In a survey of area organizations that offer Occupational English and work skills training (11 organizations responded) we learned additional information about immigrants and refugees who seek those services, and about the types of services currently available, as well as potential additions by each organization. Key findings are:

- Most English language learners coming to these providers for classes are at the basic level of English proficiency (58% on average); 26% are at an intermediate level; 11% advanced; and 4% higher—advanced academic/near bilingual. All providers identify proficiency level through interview and testing or assessment. Most use CASAS or Accuplacer.
- Nearly half of English language learners are working at time of class enrollment.
- More than a third are trained in other jobs/careers than the one they work in now.
- 80% of providers offer basic English instruction; 60% offer intermediate level; 50% offer advanced; 20% offer academic/near-bilingual classes.
- 70% of providers currently include Occupational English in basic level classes; 50% include it in intermediate; 30% in advanced; 10% in academic/near-bilingual classes.
- Of those providers who do not currently teach Occupational English at a particular level, nearly all feel ready/able to teach those levels, except for advanced academic/near-bilingual.
- English proficiency outcomes are assessed by 80% of providers, often with CASAS post-test or Accuplacer.
- Workplace topics offered by a majority of Occupational English providers:
 - Seven in ten providers offer: Understanding cultural differences; Life skills and work ethic; Communication—one-to-one, and team; and workplace safety.
 - Half offer Understanding American workplace culture.
- Fewer providers currently offer other topics listed in the survey (and suggested by employers), but some providers are willing to add them.

Next steps—to move Occupational English forward

At the close of employer discussion sessions in November/December 2006, these suggestions were offered as next steps for the community to take in moving Occupational English forward:



- Continue to educate the community about cultural diversity and richness
 - United Way’s seminar on Somali culture, for example, was very beneficial.
 - Offer more panel presentations by cultural groups.
 - Market cultural events so more of the community attends.
- Continue to help employers connect with potential employees, and provide Occupational English support to ensure ELL is ready to fill available jobs.
- Continue to work on providing a welcome center for newcomers to the community. (School District 742 has convened many community organizations and leaders to plan how to create a welcoming community. A welcome center is being considered in that discussion.)
- Consider development of a small business collaborative for recruiting, testing and training ELL, to share the risk and cost. Occupational English classes could be part of it.
- Provide a centralized resource in St. Cloud that employers can contact to ask about availability of an ELL with the needed skills for an open position.

Many of these suggested next steps, along with the other learnings and suggestions from primary and secondary research cited throughout this summary, have been incorporated into the strategic plan for implementation of the Occupational English Project.

Appendix

Brief summaries of research conducted during this Occupational English planning project are attached:

- Occupational English Focus Groups: Key Points
- Excerpt from Human Resource Manager Survey: Employing English Language Learners
- Special questions in St. Cloud Area Business Outlook Survey
- English Language Learner Community Assets Map
- Description of Occupational English resources, for Community Assets Map
- Occupational English provider survey summary, with profiles

Complete reports, including the Project Strategic Plan, are available from Stearns-Benton Employment & Training Council/WorkForce Center—St. Cloud, on the web at http://www.mnwfc.org/stcloud/pages/about_us.htm

