

***English--No Problem!* and the Changing Needs of ESL Workplace Education**

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Introduction

The workplace in the United States is changing, and so are the skills that adult ESL learners must have in order to succeed in it. Today's workplace demands not only a good command of the English language but also an understanding of our culturally based thinking and decision-making processes. Modernized technology, participatory management, and tighter production schedules also require a new kind of worker: a worker who has leadership skills and knows how to learn. These skills were previously considered supervisory qualities, but today, even entry-level employees are expected to have these skills, as well as some ability to manage self and time. "One might even say that a new kind of American worker is being ordered up, a worker who will be expected to have a broad set of skills that were previously required only of supervisors and managers." (Carnevale, Gainer, and Meltzer, 1990, p. 4)

Background: Impact on Adult ESL

The 21st century emphasis on lifelong learning requires a new approach to adult education and a new type of ESL curriculum. The 21st-century approach to success requires adult literacy programs that foster critical thinking and teamwork skills as well as basic skills. Sondra Gayle Stein contrasts the traditional learning system with the twenty-first century system in *Equipped for the Future* (1997; see table1).

Most adult ESL programs have been developing the necessary focus on basic skills oriented to the workplace for some time. Remedial reading, writing, and math activities were the first skill areas to appear in workplace education materials; but increasingly, skills such as problem solving, active listening, knowing how to learn, as well as teamwork, self-esteem, leadership, goal setting, organizational skills, and creative thinking, are also viewed as essential in the curriculum and in instructional materials suitable for use in workplace education.

English--No Problem! and Changing Workplace Needs

English—No Problem! uniquely meets the changing needs of ESL workplace education programs. The series provides a theme-based, performance-based curriculum designed to help adult ESL learners succeed in the home, in the community, and in the workplace. This curriculum draws on findings from both SCANS (Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills) and *Equipped for the Future* (EFF). The series utilizes effective adult learning strategies such as the problem posing approach, cooperative learning, and extensive use of schematic mapping and other graphic organizing techniques. Basic skills are embedded in all instructional activities. *English—No Problem!*, however, goes beyond English language basics and life-skills. The instructional activities are structured to foster essential skills for the workplace of the future. The activities require learners to draw on skills for planning and organizing time and resources, to learn to make decisions, to take leadership roles, and to focus on adapting to new and diverse situations.

English-- No Problem! carefully integrates these emerging workplace skills into instruction organized around the following global themes:

- Life Stages: Personal Growth and Goal Setting
- Making Connections
- Taking Care of Yourself
- Personal Finance
- Consumer Awareness
- Protecting Your Legal Rights
- Participating in Your New Country and Community
- Lifelong Learning
- Celebrating Success

Specifically each unit approaches a core issue from these global themes and examines it in light of each of the EFF roles: community, work/school and home. Unit Openers use the problem posing approach to develop critical thinking, activate prior knowledge, and develop interest in the theme. Goal-setting activities give learners a personal commitment to the learning that will come in the rest of the unit. In each Opener and throughout the unit activities, group and pair discussions and graphic organizing techniques are used to gather thoughts and organize information. Cooperative learning activities, tasks, and group projects require and help develop organizational, leadership, and teamwork skills.

By integrating basic skills and these higher level skills key to the 21st-century workplace, *English--No Problem!* aims to provide adult ESL learners with an opportunity to gain the life-long learning skills and attitudes they need to be successful in the workplace. For the short term, *English—No Problem!* is the first step towards successfully entering the US economic community. For the long term, *English—No Problem!* offers learners a vision and plan for the next step—moving up into the high-skills/high-pay workforce.

Bibliography

Anthony P. Carnevale, Leila J. Gainer, and Ann S. Meltzer, A.S. Workplace Basics: The Essential Skills Employers Want. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. 1990.

Table 1. ADULT EDUCATION AND LIFELONG LEARNING *A New Approach to Success*

CURRENT SYSTEM	21 ST CENTURY SYSTEM
Education only happens when you're young, and is preparation for action in life.	Education <u>is</u> action; it happens throughout life, preparing for changing needs and interests.
Adult education is remedial, making up for inadequate preparation in the past.	Adult education is preparation for the future, enabling people to meet the demands in their lives today and in the future.
Adult education focuses on key academic disciplines, as in K-12 education.	Adult education focuses on what adults need to know and be able to do to succeed as parents, citizens and workers. It integrates core skills and knowledge, with their application across contexts.
Content of education is provider-driven, based on school-based notions of what is important.	Content of education is customer-driven, shaped by what adults say they need to know to succeed in the world.
Specific competencies are the highest order of achievement.	Generative skills and knowledge are the highest order of achievement.
Progress is measured in relation to grade levels or isolated skills.	Progress is measured in relation to capacity to organize experience and perform real-world tasks.
Adult education is primarily cognitive.	Adult education is developmental as well as cognitive.
Adult education prepares students for present time and present knowledge.	Adult education prepares students for the present and the future, expanding their ability to explore new knowledge.

Sondra Gayle Stein. *Equipped for the Future: A Reform Agenda for Adult Literacy and Lifelong Learning* (pg.7). National Institute for Literacy; 1997.