

# English Language Training in the Workplace



## A Report on Pilot Workplace-based Classes, Summer 2017

### General Background/Objectives

The Montgomery Coalition for Adult English Literacy (MCAEL) has initiated a project to bring English classes to the workplace, in working toward its mission of **strengthening the countywide adult English literacy network to support a thriving community and effective workforce**. MCAEL coordinates resources; provides capacity building for providers of adult English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes; organizes training workshops for ESOL instructors; and works to increase access to quality classes. There are an estimated 130,000 Limited English Proficient (LEP) adults in Montgomery County. Many adult learners find it difficult to regularly attend classes due to limited time and/or limited access to affordable and reliable transportation and/or childcare. Last year, about 13,000 adults attended available classes. MCAEL's Board and staff recognize that bringing English training to the workplace can mitigate these challenges. Further, this work aligns with County priorities.

- ⇒ For working adults whose first language is not English, limited English skills can be a hindrance to effective communication with supervisors, colleagues and clients, as well as to being promoted and accessing career pathways that may otherwise be open to them.
- ⇒ For employers, this can affect client satisfaction and productivity, as well as employee retention.

**MCAEL** is currently developing a model that can be utilized to design and coordinate delivery of classes that meet the needs of both employers and employees, through a series of pilot classes. Workplace-based English training is not a new concept; MCAEL is working to coordinate with and build on the experience of employers and other providers who currently offer or in the past have organized worksite English classes.

#### Pilot Classes

Human resources professionals at Montgomery County healthcare providers had noted to MCAEL that many frontline employees who interact with patients and residents have the empathic and caregiving skills needed to do the job, but could benefit by enhancing their English language skills to improve client satisfaction, reduce miscommunications that might cause mistakes or accidents, and be better prepared to access career pathways in the healthcare field.

Therefore, as a first step MCAEL piloted two ESOL classes in the summer of 2017 in partnership with Asbury Methodist Village and Adventist Healthcare, drawing upon its expertise, experience, and connections in the ESOL field. MCAEL will utilize lessons learned from these pilot classes to inform further pilot classes and its strategy to expand workplace-based programs.



## Pilot Classes At-A-Glance

June-August 2017	Asbury Methodist Village	Adventist Healthcare (Shady Grove Medical Center)
Session Duration	8 weeks / 16 classes	8 weeks / 16 classes
Time of class	TTh 2:30 – 3:30 pm (refreshments provided)	TTh 11:30 – 1 pm over lunch (boxed lunches provided)
Participating Departments	Housekeeping	Various depts
Scheduling relative to work hours	At end of shift	At lunch hour
Class size	15	Started with 10, ended with 5
Participant English levels	High beginning	Low to high beginning
Focus of class	Sentence structure with basic grammar concepts	Conversational Skills

## Program Implementation Roles

This chart illustrates the roles played by the employer, the instructors, and MCAEL in implementation and management of the classes. This division of labor proved to be quite effective. It also was helpful at AMV that department managers participated in all planning and evaluation meetings.

Employers	Instructors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identified employees interested in participating</li> <li>Paid participants for the time they spent in class</li> <li>Provided space for class and lunch boxes at Adventist</li> <li>Sent reminders to participants about class times</li> <li>Liaised with instructors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conducted in-person interviews with participants to assess English ability prior to beginning of class</li> <li>Developed curriculum based on assessed level of students and selected appropriate/relevant teaching materials</li> <li>Provided instruction for 60-90 minutes twice a week over 8 weeks</li> <li>Developed and administered learner survey</li> </ul>
MCAEL	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provided funding for instructor time</li> <li>Worked with employers to clarify objectives and focus for class</li> <li>Recruited experienced instructors</li> <li>Provided initial coordination between the employer and the instructor</li> <li>Provided support to instructors in identifying instructional material as needed</li> <li>Conducted mid-point class observation</li> <li>Checked in with employer at the mid-point, to see if any course adjustments were needed</li> <li>Convened final debrief meeting with employer and instructor after end of class</li> </ul>	

## Program Highlights

**From June to August 2017**, an 8-week class was held for associates in the Housekeeping Department at Asbury Methodist Village (AMV) and for employees of various departments at Adventist Healthcare's Shady Grove Medical Center (AH). By the end of the eight weeks, learners had improved their speaking and writing skills and expressed increased confidence in using these skills.

### Planning process

In May 2017, building on previous discussions, MCAEL staff worked with human resources staff at each of the two organizations to:

- ⇒ Define the objectives each had for the pilot English class (to determine the approach the curriculum would take);
- ⇒ Determine what degree the class content should focus on employment-related topics or general, daily living English (critical for determining the type of instructor needed);
- ⇒ Identify which employment units would likely be participating;
- ⇒ Decide the best timing to hold the class each week, as well as the length of each class; and
- ⇒ Work out a reasonable monitoring and check-in schedule.



Based on these discussions, MCAEL developed a job description for the instructors, and recruited for the positions through advertising on the MCAEL website and distribution to its network of adult ESOL providers. MCAEL was able to hire two highly qualified individuals for the jobs, both with healthcare backgrounds and experience. Once the

instructors were hired, MCAEL brought together human resources staff and the instructor chosen for each site, to work out the remaining details of curriculum focus and logistics.



### Timing, length of class meetings

Based on the amount of funding available for this project, MCAEL determined that it could support two pilot classes of 8 weeks each, meeting twice a week.

The employers determined the best timing of their respective classes, as well as the length of the class period, based on the schedules of the employees attending, and how much time the employer was willing to contribute to the learning of English.

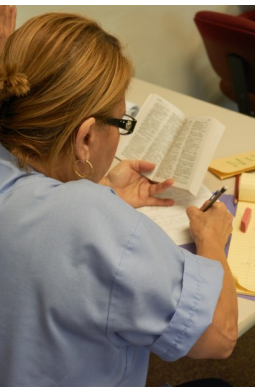
- AMV identified Tuesday and Thursday, 2:30 – 3:30, which coincided with the last hour of the housekeeping shift.
- For AH, it was more challenging to identify the best class meeting time, given the participation of employees from different departments; the class met during lunch hours, from 11:30 am to 1:00 pm on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Timing the class at a lunch hour worked well -- managers were more willing to allow staff to attend during their shift, and AH provided boxed lunches.

### Participant Recruitment – two approaches

The two employers took different approaches with regard to identifying participants for the classes.

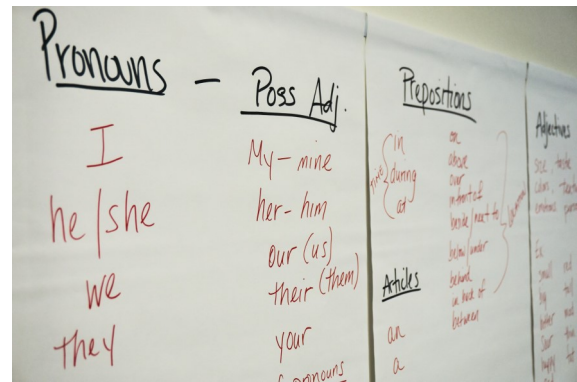
- AMV offered the class to employees of one unit, the Housekeeping department, which was large enough for other staff to be able to cover the two hours per week that 15 participants were in class. This made the class easier to schedule, and involved only one pair of supervisors.
- At AH participants were recruited from several departments at the Shady Grove Medical Center. With this approach, participants had the chance to interact with colleagues whom they would not necessarily have met otherwise. However, although leadership was very supportive and encouraged staff to sign up, summer vacation plans made it harder to recruit participants who could commit to attending class.

### Curriculum and instructional materials



Both organizations chose to focus the classes on daily English rather than strictly work-related issues. Instead of using a textbook, each instructor developed a curriculum they felt would best meet the needs of the participants. The instructor for the AMV program saw the need for learners to work on grammar and sentence structure, and writing skills, and made this the focus of her

teaching. In contrast, AH employees requested working on improving their conversational skills.



While the classes focused on English for daily living, both teachers found ways to successfully incorporate activities and language useful for employees' daily jobs. For example, at AMV, the instructor asked learners to complete a workplace incident report writing assignment. At AH, the instructor helped employees improve upon their "AIDET," an organization-wide required statement when meeting new people or interacting with a patient.



## Successes & Challenges



**At the end of the AMV class, Human Resources, participating staff and colleagues who helped cover shifts so others could take the class, celebrated together.**

**Pictured left: Participants in AMV class with their certificates of completion.**

Following is a sampling of successes and challenges encountered during the two pilot classes:

### *Aspects that worked well*

- Leadership staff was very supportive
- Use of teaching materials specific to participants' needs rather than using one textbook
- Integrating work-related issues into the curriculum -- framing lessons and exercises around work-related issues and practices kept learners engaged
- Group and pair work in class, which increased learners' opportunities to use their communication skills.
- Provision of lunch or refreshments at class time
- Sparked participants' interest in attending ESOL classes held at Montgomery College and elsewhere

### *Aspects for further consideration and improvement*

- Secure buy-in of line management prior to the launch of the program
- Implement additional marketing strategies to ensure that employees who could benefit from the program are aware of it.
- Allow more planning time to assess learner proficiency and needs, in order to better determine what level class is needed
- Conduct needs assessment to understand the needs and expectations of all stakeholders to identify the type of classes are needed, preferred schedules and determine any barriers to be addressed.
- If possible, class meetings should be a minimum of 1.5 hours.
- Offer the class at times of the year other than summer, when many employees schedule vacation.\*
- Session duration should be longer than 8 weeks.\*

*\*MCAEL administrative constraints affected these aspects in the first pilots*

## Recommendations For Future Pilot Classes

Following are the main recommendations for MCAEL and its partners to take into consideration when developing the next generation of pilot classes:

- Involve Human Resources leadership as well as department managers early in the class planning stage to develop understanding of how program will benefit staff and to obtain input on class content.
- Identify an appropriate standard instrument to assess English proficiency level of participants prior to class, particularly when there is a wide range of abilities. If employer feels would be helpful, MCAEL can work with employer to conduct English proficiency needs assessment of employees in select departments prior to development
- Set clear outcomes indicators to measure learner progress at the outset of the program; these should include measures of specific English skills gained as well as measures of improved performance on the job after the conclusion of the class. Being able to show data on learner gains to department supervisors is very important.
- Provide guidance on structure of program, based on examples found elsewhere in county and state.
- As preparation for their teaching, instructors should have an understanding of the work environment/culture and of what is expected of employee learners, by participating in an employee orientation, if possible, or having a chance to ask questions of HR staff/department managers.

### **Innovating to create more learning opportunities**

In 2017-2018, MCAEL will continue to develop and refine a workable model for workplace-based programs to meet the needs of employers and workers alike, and build on the pilot programs organized with health care providers, as well as in other industries where workers are seeking English skills to help them advance.

There are opportunities in many industry areas; for example, in 2016 Denizens Brewing Company recognized that its line workers had idle time between the lunch and dinner rushes; with MCAEL assistance, they hired an instructor to come during that time and offer an English class to those workers.