

Inglés Para Ti: Helping Hispanics Learn English

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Received: April 16, 2014 Accepted: April 28, 2014 Published: April 28, 2014

doi:10.5296/ijele.v2i2.5540 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5296/ijele.v2i2.5540>

Abstract

Mexican-born immigrants are the leading migrant group in the United States, and 71% of are limited English proficient. Because estimates suggest an increase in the influx of adult English language students in the next decade, and employers will seek to hire these individuals, it is important for language-minority adults to learn English. Inglés Para Ti, an English language school in Dallas Texas, employs a unique English teaching method reflective of students' real-life situations. Focused primarily on conversation, students gain practical skills useful in their personal and work lives. Inglés Para Ti students have experienced great success from gaining English proficiency. Many have been able to acquire their first job or have been promoted in their existing professions. Most students have gained the confidence to venture outside of their communities and join the larger community by eating in restaurants and shopping in stores outside of their Hispanic neighborhoods. Inglés Para Ti students have reported experiencing less discrimination as they gained English proficiency. Many have gained the English proficiency to become American citizens.

Keywords: Hispanics, English as a Second Language, Hispanic Immigrants

1. Inglés Para Ti: Helping Hispanics Learn English

Each year, thousands of educated and talented individuals immigrate to the United States seeking work opportunities and a better quality of life. The United States leads the world as a destination for immigrants. Batlova and Lee (2012), noted that 13% of the total U.S. population is comprised of foreign-born. According to Motel and Patten (2011, para 4), “the foreign born include those persons who identified as naturalized citizens or non-citizens and are living in the 50 states or the District of Columbia.” Since 1965, with the passing of border-opening legislation, approximately one half of all immigrants came from Latin America. In 2010, Mexican-born immigrants comprised approximately 29 percent of the near 40.4 million immigrants living in the United States, making them the leading migrant group in the country. The number of Mexican immigrants residing in the United States sharply increased between 1960 to 2000 almost tripling in the 1970s and doubling in the 1980s and 1990s, reaching 30% in 2000. With the onset of the economic recession in 2007, the number of Mexican immigrants has stabilized.

Batlova and Lee (2012) noted that in contrast to other immigrant groups in the United States, Mexicans are less likely to enter as refugees; have family who are U.S. citizens making them more likely to seek lawful residence, are more apt to enter the United States illegally; and have inadequate English ability. According to the U.S. Census (2011), in contrast to 51% of all immigrant groups who have limited English proficiency, approximately 71% of Mexican immigrants are limited English proficient (LEP). Bliss (1990) defined Limited English Proficiency (LEP) as inadequate English listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Limited English proficiency is a significant obstacle preventing Mexicans from obtaining employment to support themselves and their families.

2. Hispanic Immigrants in the Workforce

Hispanics represent a primary segment of the U.S. workforce numbering 24 million in 2012 (Batlova & Lee, 2012). For the majority of these individuals, the most significant employment barrier is inability to speak English. More than two in five Hispanics age 25 and older are foreign born, speak little or no English, have not graduated from high school, and lack basic occupational skills. According to Greenberg et al. (2001), English proficiency is a core employment success factor for Hispanics. A recent U.S. Census Bureau (2011) indicated that one out of every five U.S. residents do not speak English at home, and Spanish is the most wide-spread language spoken with 28 million speakers in the United States. Because Hispanics have limited English proficiency, they have difficulty finding and keeping employment and are the most likely segment of the population to live in poverty. Van Duzer et al. (2003) stated that individuals who speak only their native language are less likely to maintain ongoing employment and earn less than their English-speaking counterparts. Burt (2002) suggested that learning English in the work context improves limited English proficient (LEP) employees' work and language skills simultaneously, but few employers offer English language courses.

2.1 *The Hispanic Workforce Initiative*

Recognizing the needs of the emergent Hispanic worker population, The U.S. Department of Labor in partnership with the U.S.- Mexico Chamber of Commerce created a Hispanic Worker Initiative to examine the workplace barriers facing Hispanic employees with limited English proficiency. The U.S.-Mexico Chamber of Commerce assembled focus groups in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Houston, Texas; Dallas, Texas; Chicago, Illinois; and Irvine, California to gain employers' perspectives on Hispanic workers' most significant workplace barriers. A total of 161 employers from the United States Department of Labor's fastest growing industries (manufacturing, construction, hospitality) participated in focus groups and executive interviews. According to English proficiency: What employers need for their Spanish speaking workforce (n.d.), focus group and interview data revealed the following:

- Employers in the hospitality and construction industries employed the largest number of LEP Hispanic workers.
- Hispanics comprised more than 90% of the total workforce in the construction sector, and 70% had limited English proficiency.
- Manufacturing employers in food-processing hired large numbers of LEP Hispanic employees, but employers in other manufacturing sectors did not hire non-English speakers requiring that employees read, write, and speak English.

One hospitality focus group member representing restaurants and hotels, categorized employees into *front-of-the-house* and *back-of-the-house* positions. Employees in the front-of-the-house interact with hotel guests and must speak English. These employees are more likely to achieve career advancement than employees who do not speak English. Employers in manufacturing reported using advanced technologies making English-language proficiency mandatory. Employers in the construction industry noted that LEP Hispanic workers often misunderstand simple safety cues which could result in serious injury or jeopardize a company's competitive advantage due to worker's compensation costs. Most participating employers believed that investing in LEP employees to improve English proficiency was critical to their continued business success, since these employees represent the base of their future management pool. Many participating employers offered LEP employees English language resources, but most believed they did not have the right resources to help them. Because estimates suggest an increase in the influx of adult English students in the next decade (Pew Hispanic Center, 2008) employers believed "language-minority adults" (Greenberg et al., 2001, p. 7) are best served by attending Adult English as a Second Language (ESL) or English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programs that specialize in teaching English as a second language. According to The National Center for ESL Literacy Education (2003), these programs assist individuals in developing the English proficiency to join or advance in the workplace, increase their education, and enhance their personal lives.

3. Methods for Teaching English as a Second Language

Language instruction has evolved as a profession warranting research and further study. Central to the profession is the study of teaching methods. According to Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011), language instruction includes a range of methods from teacher prescribed techniques and drills to dynamic exercises with a variety of interpretations. The following methods denote common approaches for teaching English in colleges, universities and private language schools.

3.1 *The Grammar Translation Method*

As the name implies, at the heart of the Grammar Translation method is teaching grammatical structures and translating from a speaker's native to the second (or target) language (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). Since the focus is on structure not on conversation, instructors teach classes in learners' native language and do not emphasize correct pronunciation in the target language. Teaching strategies include learning grammar rules, reading and writing in the target language, completing fill-in-the-blank exercises, and answering comprehension questions. The Grammar Translation method represents the primary method used to teach foreign languages in colleges and universities (Richards & Rodgers, 1986).

3.2 *The Direct Method*

According to Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011), the primary focus of the Direct Method is to encourage students to think and speak in the target language. The teacher instructs in the target language, and students may not speak their native language or translate from their native language. Teachers use props to teach content, and students learn grammar inductively as they learn the subject matter. An example of the direct method might involve teaching students about different types of food. The focus is not on verbs or vocabulary but the context provides students with exposure to these structures.

3.3 *The Audio-Linguistic Method*

The United States involvement in World War II underscored that the grammar-translation method was insufficient in teaching people to effectively learn a foreign language (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). At the request of the United States government, universities developed foreign language programs to teach students to speak conversationally which gave rise to the Audio-Lingual method. The fundamental principle of the Audio-Lingual method is that language is verbal so students should learn to speak before learning to read or write. The emphasis is on memorizing a series of dialogues using rote structures, then practicing the dialogues. The teacher guides and manages the dialogues. Teachers correct students' errors and reinforce correct responses to help students develop good habits. After students practice and memorize dialogues, they substitute other words into the structure. For example, after practicing the *restroom* is over there, students substitute other words such as *park*, *office*, etc. to eventually form more elaborate sentence structures. A major premise of the audio-lingual method is through practice, students will be able to speak the target language (Richard & Rodgers, 1986).

3.4 The Communicative Method

According to Scrivener (2005), the communicative method evolved from educators and linguists who believed that traditional teaching methods did not encourage real-life learning or the ability to authentically speak in the target language. The communicative method emphasizes real-world communication. The teacher creates situations learners are liable to encounter in their daily lives and creates live, experiential exercises. Unlike the prescriptive audio-lingual or grammar translation methods, the communicative approach is dynamic and varies based on student replies. Students' incentive to learn emanates from their goal to competently communicate about everyday topics in the target language.

3.5 The Task-Based Method

According to Ellis (2012), task-based language learning originated as an outgrowth of the Communicative Method. Linguists and language educators embraced task-based teaching in response to increased understanding of how individuals learn a second language. With more traditional methods, teachers presented language concepts in a sequential order of steps from basic to advanced. For example, instructors would teach present tense before teaching past and more complex tenses. Students had to master each step before advancing to the next step. The task based method evolved to encourage authentic language learning indicative of real life, rather than mechanized instruction with little connection to real-life situations. Task-based learning provides students practical extra-linguistic skill-building by having them communicate about familiar tasks like going to the doctor, going shopping, etc.

4. Inglés Para Ti – English for You

According to the Pew Hispanic Center (2008), more than 6,000,000 Hispanics live in

Dallas-Fort Worth Texas making it the sixth largest U.S metropolitan area for Hispanics. Hispanics in Dallas-Fort Worth comprise a range of nationalities, but 85.5% are Mexican. The majority of Hispanics born in the United States learn Spanish before they learn English, consider English their second language, and speak Spanish at home. Terrazas (2010) noted that three-quarters of Mexican immigrants have limited English proficiency. According to the Pew Center (2008), Hispanics repeatedly cite English proficiency more often than income, education, or immigration status, as the reason for discrimination against them. For this and a variety of reasons, many Dallas-Fort Worth Hispanic residents want to learn English.

Inglés Para Ti (English for You) is an English language school in Dallas, Texas committed to teaching English as a second language. Established in 2009 by owner Sandra Vega, a Mexican-born immigrant, Inglés Para Ti offers intensive English conversation classes from beginner to advanced language levels. Although courses are available to all students regardless of native language, the majority of students are Mexican-born, and courses are geared to help Spanish speakers quickly learn conversational English. Inglés Para Ti offers class schedules and tuition rates to support Mexican students who often have more than one job and limited income making it difficult for them to attend class. Not only are tuition rates lower than competing schools in the Dallas area, after paying their initial tuition, students can attend an unlimited number of classes per week, free of charge, to practice their English skills.

It is not unlikely to see students attend class every day; sometimes twice per day. It is important to Sandra to ensure an optimal learning experience by offering small classes, hiring committed and qualified instructors, and using a method she knows works, based on her own experience as an English language learner. The faculty understand that students have limited income, and it is not uncommon for teachers to offer private lessons, free of charge, to assist struggling students.

The atmosphere at Inglés Para Ti reflects Hispanic cultural behaviors and values. Clutter and Nieto (n.d) noted that Hispanics maintain strong family bonds with immediate and extended family. At Inglés Para Ti students, faculty and staff act as an extended family. Sandra knows that many parents do not have childcare, so she allows parents to bring children to school. She allocates extra classroom space for children to play while their parents are in class, and there is always adult supervision. Each Mother's day and on major holidays, she hosts a grand fiesta for students and their families with traditional, live Mexican music and food. In keeping with the Hispanic greeting of a hug and a light kiss, students and teachers (American and Hispanic) greet each other at the start of each class session in customary Hispanic style; with a hug and a light kiss on the cheek. Inglés Para Ti offers a unique, encouraging, instructional environment geared toward student success. The school does not advertise heavily to generate enrollment. Enrollment is primarily referral based.

4.1 A Method that Works

Inglés Para Ti employs a variety of language teaching strategies adapted from the Direct Method, the Audio-Lingual method, and the Task Based Method. What makes Inglés Para Ti unique is that every teacher employs the same teaching strategies and follows the same course structure so students, no matter what class they attend, know what to expect and can follow the sequence. Since students can attend an unlimited number of classes per week free of charge, they can easily join any class and follow the class structure making the homogeneity of the Inglés Para Ti teaching strategy advantageous for students. In classes using sequential grammatical structures, students who miss one class miss critical information in the sequence making it difficult for them to catch up. Another distinctive characteristic of Inglés Para Ti instruction is that encouragement, fun, and laughter is imbedded into the curriculum. In contrast to instruction focused on sequenced grammatical structures, Inglés Para Ti classes emphasize dynamic interaction and encouragement which motivates students to learn. Zoltan (1998) noted that motivation is a primary factor influencing the success of second language learning. A large majority of Inglés Para Ti students attended English classes at community colleges and competing local language schools. These students reported withdrawing from class because the instruction did not mirror their real-life experiences, focused too heavily on grammar vs. conversation, and increased their stress levels.

To engage students in an authentic and encouraging language learning experience, all Inglés Para Ti courses adhere to a prescribed class structure: color chart, vocabulary, repetition, and role play. Each classroom contains a *color chart* with the English phonetic alphabet. At the start and end of each class, students review the color chart to practice pronunciation. The

teacher points to each letter on the color chart, and the students, as a group, orally pronounce the letter. Next, students learn new vocabulary. To introduce new vocabulary, the teacher uses the color chart to teach correct pronunciation. If the vocabulary word were *horse*, for example, the teacher would point to h, then or then s on the color chart. If the word were *table*, the teacher would point to t, ā ,b ũ l, and the students would pronounce the word phonetically. After introducing the word on the color chart, the teacher defines the word by giving examples, using props and drawing on the board. For example, if the vocabulary word were *house*, the teacher would explain the definition of house and would draw a picture of a house on the board. Teachers always speak English and never speak Spanish in the classroom. Next, the teacher asks each student to give an example using the vocabulary word in a sentence, and every student provides an example. As each student provides an example, the class applauds to offer encouragement. The teacher coaches and guides often reverting back to the color chart to reinforce correct pronunciation. After each student provides an example using the new vocabulary word, the teacher begins repetition. Adapted from the Audio-Lingual method, and as the name implies, students repeat sentences from a short dialogue. For example, if the first sentence of a dialogue is “Hi, my name is Rosa,” each student, one at a time, says “Hi, my name is Rosa,” repeating the process for each sentence of the dialogue. After every student repeats each sentence of the dialogue, the teacher invites two students at a time to role play the entire dialogue in the front of the class. In *round 1*, students reproduce the dialogue exactly. In *round 2*, students improvise the dialogue substituting words and phrases they have already learned. Students are usually eager to participate in the role plays because they gain practice and the confidence to speak English outside of class. After each dyad performs the role play, the instructor and class members applaud, and students seem to embrace the encouragement. Because students have memorized and practiced useful dialogues, they are able to use these dialogues in real-life situations without experiencing stress or having stop to translate from their native language. Since students experience immediate success, they are motivated to continue learning.

For most Inglés Para Ti students, learning English is a personal choice. Although many students live in areas that mirror their culture and country of origin, most want to communicate and be part of the larger community. Inglés Para Ti students enjoy learning English and voluntarily attend class. Never has a student reported that he or she *had* to learn English. Current and past Inglés Para Ti students have experienced great success from gaining English proficiency. Veronica and Karina worked “in the back of the house” at the lowest starting wage, but as they gained English proficiency, were promoted to customer facing positions with commensurate pay increases. Veronica worked as a dishwasher in the kitchen at a local restaurant. She spoke Spanish with her non-English speaking co-workers. After one year of classes at Inglés Para Ti her supervisor asked her if she wanted to become a cashier. As a cashier she would be a touch point for customers by taking their orders, making food recommendations, and taking payment. Her manager said that with her English proficiency and friendly personality, she would be an asset to the restaurant in a customer facing position. Veronica accepted the position and shared with her Inglés Para Ti teacher that not only does she enjoy the position, she has many opportunities to speak and practice English. Karina worked as a technician in a cell phone repair center for eight years. Although

she was technically skilled, she was not English proficient and worked in the back office with other non-English speaking technicians. Karina enrolled in the Beginner 1 class at Inglés Para Ti. Within two years she began working in the retail division of the company where she interacted with customers. After six months, she was promoted to supervisor. One of the most touching accounts is of Anna whose nine year old daughter was repeatedly bullied at school. Prior to attending Inglés Para Ti, Anna would have been unable to communicate with her daughter's teacher about the bullying. After just one year of English classes, she is a grateful English speaker who recently had a meeting with her child's teacher and school principal. Not only has the bullying stopped, the principal asked Anna if she would like to become a "classroom mom." Anna enthusiastically accepted. She said she had always wanted to be involved in her daughter's school, but feared discrimination because she could not speak English

Most Inglés Para Ti students feel that by learning English they are able to communicate and can join the larger community. They feel more confident conversing in stores and in restaurants and can communicate with non-Spanish speaking family members. Students have also reported that since learning English, they have experienced less discrimination. Many have gained the English proficiency to become United States citizens.

5. Conclusion

Inglés Para Ti, an English language school in Dallas Texas, employs a unique English teaching method reflective of students' real-life situations. Focused primarily on conversation, students gain practical skills useful in their personal and work lives. The owner is exceedingly committed to student learning and allows students to attend an unlimited number of classes per week free of charge, for additional English practice. Because of the homogeneity of the Inglés Para Ti teaching strategy, students can join any class, at any time, regardless of instructor and easily participate and follow the class structure. Many Inglés Para Ti students have reported withdrawing from competing language schools and community college English classes because of the focus on grammar versus practical conversation and speaking skills.

Inglés Para Ti students have experienced great success from gaining English proficiency. Many have been able to acquire their first job or have been promoted in their existing professions. Most students have gained the confidence to venture outside of their communities and join the larger community by eating in restaurants and shopping in stores outside of their Hispanic neighborhoods. Inglés Para Ti students have reported experiencing less discrimination as they gained English proficiency. Many have gained the English proficiency to become American citizens.

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