

The Women's Building/Mujeres Unidas ESL Program Description

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Introduction

The ESL program is a partnership between Mujeres Unidas y Activas (MUA) and The Women's Building (TWB) and aims to integrate the instruction of English around their organization missions of supporting women leadership and participation within the community to create a more just world.

The ESL program offers multi-level English classes within 10 week sessions that meet 2 days a week for 2 hours for a total of 40 hours instruction each session. The class primarily serves Latina women, but is free to all low-income ESL immigrants with all levels of English proficiency,

Student voices about the ESL TWB/MUA ESL Program

"The projects in the class helped me become a better speaker"

"Aunque no lo pronuncié exactamente bien me siento mas segura de mi misma y quiero seguir aprendiendo." *Although I don't pronounce English perfectly, I feel more sure of myself and I want to continue learning.*

"Mas importante es que ya me defiendo un poco mas al momento de hablar o saludar a los personas que hablan English." *Most importantly is I now know how to defend myself when speaking and meeting people who speak English.*

"Me gustó (la clase) porque hay tres grupos y siento que aprendemos juntos." *I liked the class because there are three groups and I feel that we are learning together.*

"La manera que enseñaron (los maestros) el ingles es muy adecuado para cada nivel." *Their way of teaching English is very appropriate for each level.*

"Lo (mas importante) que aprendi fue cuando hicimos el curriculum o resume porque es muy importante para mi vida encontrar un trabajo." *The most important thing I learned was when we did our curriculum vitae or resume because it's very important for me to find a job.*

"(The most important thing I learned) is make a presentation in English, write my story, the numbers, the calendar and many other things."

Context and rationale

Though open to all low-income ESL immigrants, the class is entirely composed of Latinos, nearly all mothers. Proficiency levels rang from low beginner to intermediate. This population faces certain issues that marginalize them and impact their learning negatively in ways that may not be true for other ESL students, such as:

- Low native language literacy and little formal education
- Racism and anti-immigrant sentiment
- Undocumented status
- Being isolated with few opportunities to use/learn English

The dominant teaching approaches in most ESL programs are less effective in addressing many of these issues. Grammar-based approaches are not well-suit with students who lack formal schooling and understanding of grammatical terms while competency-based approaches may not address issues of disempowerment and alienation that the students face (See Auerbach).

For that reason, the teaching approach of the TWB ESL program is based on constructivist and critical pedagogies. Not only is this approach more aligned with the partnering organizations and their missions of supporting active member participation, It also helps address issues of power and support immigrants in claiming the right to speak (See Norton-Peirce). This participatory teaching approach supports students in taking leadership roles in the classroom, in their community and towards their own learning. It also addresses student isolation by connecting learning to the community.

Norton Peirce, B. (1995). Social identity, investment, and language learning. *TESOL Quarterly*, 29 (1), 9-31.

Auerbach, E. R. (1986). Competency-based ESL: One step forward or two steps back? *TESOL Quarterly*, 20(3), 411-429.

Distinguishing features

- Research project-based curriculum
- Developing leadership skills
- Highlighting student stories and voices
- Assistant teacher internship
- Student portfolios

Research project-driven curriculum



“Soon after immigrating to the US from Puerto Rico knowing very little English, I had a conflict with my landlord and went to a tenant support organization for help. Learning what my rights were and using English was one of my first self-empowering experiences in the US.”

Teresa Mejia, the director of the Woman's Building, related this story to me soon after I was hired to create the ESL program. Her story is a powerful testament to the roles that learning English and carrying out research have in promoting immigrant participation and empowerment.

The project-based curriculum for the TWB ESL program strives to connect learning English to leadership and community through integrating the following: 1) learning English, 2) carrying out and presenting research, 3) and developing leadership skills. The instruction of English is contextualized around critical issues that immigrant women face and then supports them in using English to investigate them and educate others in order to transform their lives and communities.

The Spring 2011 session ended with a culminating class research project on gang violence with the students presenting their findings to a public audience. For the Fall 2011 graduation, the students presented on bullying. To see the student power point presentations, go to <http://jeffmc.mayfirst.org/student-writing>.

Leadership development

In supporting the common visions of MUA and TWB, the ESL program integrates the practice of leadership skills into its ESL curriculum. ESL lessons and assessments are developed and implemented that support students in developing, practicing and evaluating their leadership skills. The various ways students have practiced leadership skills in the class involve the following:

- Students are supported in expressing their agreement, disagreement and opinions on important issues they are studying in the class.
- Students and teacher jointly create and agree on class rules and codes of conduct.
- Students make decisions about the class through majorities or consensus.
- Students take part in determining the curriculum with the teacher.
- Students are supported in evaluating the class periodically and then formally at the end of the 10 week session.
- Students carry out groups research projects and present their findings to the class.
- Students carry out a final class research project on an important community issue class and present findings to the public on their graduation day.
- Students organized and carried out a fundraiser to raise money for the class during the Fall 2011 session.
- 2 students are chosen and interned as teacher assistants each session.

Exploring student stories and voices

The ESL program strives to make the students' lives and experiences the heart of the curriculum. One way to achieve this is to support students in telling their stories and then developing lessons around these stories. Stories written by students serve as models for other students and often reveal common tensions and conflicts that can be explored in the class. Furthermore they can be transformed into pronunciation, fill-in-the-blank, and comprehension exercises as well as launching pads for discussions, analysis and reflection. Writing your own story and reading other students' stories can also be very motivating for the students and can provide the teacher insight into student lives and issues. For their public presentation at the end of the spring session in 2011, the students wrote stories around their experiences with gang violence which were collected together in the presentation handout. To see example student stories go to <http://jeffmc.mayfirst.org/student-writing>.

Assistant teacher internship

In the Spring 2011 session a student assistant internship program was initiated . The purpose was not only to help the higher level students develop their leadership skills and earn some valuable work experience, but also to assist the teacher in teaching a multi-level class. All intermediate level students in the class were invited to apply. Two students, Raquel Alvarez and Viridiana Millan were selected based on their thoughtful written responses, their previous volunteer experience and also because they both had goals to work as teachers. Student interns assist the teacher by leading activities with the beginners and serving as group leaders on projects. They also receive two teaching trainings provided by the teacher.



Raquel working with Sandra

Assistant teacher responsibilities are

- be a part time teacher and a part time student
- help the teacher manage the class
- help the beginner students in small groups and 1 on 1
- meet with the teacher for 10 minutes once a week
- participate in 2 trainings with the teacher
- carry out special homework assignments

Assistant teacher benefits are

- receive a student teacher assistant internship certificate
- receive a letter of reference as an intern
- be able to include the internship as work experience on a job application or resume
- receive teacher trainings

Student portfolios

Each student graduates with their own portfolio. Throughout each session students collect texts in a binder that they have written or acted on to demonstrate successfully what they have learned, researched, presented and accomplished in the class. The binder may include:

- Written tests
- Perform-based/role play evaluations
- Presentation evaluations
- Reference letters
- Graduation certificate
- Texts and data that students have researched
- Presentation handouts
- Resumes
- Student stories
- Homework assignments