

# UC Berkeley

## The CATESOL Journal

### Title

Teaching Workers: Learner-Centered Instruction for English Acquisition and Social Change

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0gc2z6cp>

### Journal

The CATESOL Journal, 16(1)

### ISSN

1535-0517

### Authors

Licht, Ellen

Maher, Beth

Webber, Alison Ascher

### Publication Date

2004

### DOI

10.5070/B5.36372

### Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed



## Teaching Workers: Learner-Centered Instruction for English Acquisition and Social Change

- This paper explores a learner-centered approach to ESL instruction with immigrant workers. Staked in three different ESL contexts—community-college noncredit, union-based, and workplace settings—the authors discuss three components of the learner-centered approach: instructors taking an inquiring stance with their students, students' lives and experiences as material for the class, and community-building in the classroom. They explore how this approach simultaneously works to enhance language learning as well as to provide the skills required to navigate and change for the better the power and cultural structures in which our students live and work. Specific classroom examples are given to illustrate the three components. Finally, common obstacles to this approach are discussed along with strategies for overcoming them.

### Scenario

*It is time for class to start. The ESL instructor has planned to continue a grammar lesson started the day before. She has her book marked on page 38 and additional exercises for her students to practice in class. As she walks in, the room is abuzz with students talking to each other in Spanish. While making their way to their seats, the students are still talking, intensely whispering in Spanish. It is Thursday, the end of the school week, and she is anxious to embark on her lesson plan.*

*What does she do next? Does she follow her lesson plan and ask students to turn to page 38? Does she ask the students what they are talking about? And if so, what does she do with this information?*

*On this day, if the instructor inquired, she would find out that everyone is asking the others whether they plan to work the next day, December 12, 2003. Her students would explain that the 12th is a day of religious observance in Mexico when people don't work, but instead go to a special Mass early in the*

*morning for La Virgen de Guadalupe. She would learn that this year all the Spanish radio stations have been announcing a statewide work stoppage throughout California on this day in support of drivers' licenses for undocumented immigrants and to point out the massive contribution Latinos make to the economy. They would tell her that most of them are considering whether to participate in the boycott. If they do participate, they will risk the consequences of not showing up to work. They also won't take their children to school that day, spend any money, buy gas or food, or send money to Mexico.*

*After taking 5 minutes of class time to ask what was on the students' minds, the instructor now faces another difficult decision. Does she now go back to her lesson plan on the future tense or does she continue the discussion of the planned boycott? Does she make this decision alone, or does she ask her students how they want to spend class time? Whose agenda does she follow?*

### **Introduction**

A learner-centered approach to ESL instruction turns traditional instruction on its head by asserting that the students have important contributions to make toward the decisions concerning what and how they should learn. In the boycott example, an instructor working from a learner-centered approach would first recognize that students were eager to talk about something. He or she would then ask students to share and explain the reasons for the boycott and then decide as a class whether or not to use the topic of the boycott for language practice. If students agreed, the instructor could practice future and modal tenses as they discuss what they “will” and “won’t” do on that day and what “might” or “could” happen if they participate in the boycott. On a content level, they could discuss the purposes of the boycott, immigrant contributions to the California economy, and what their rights and resources are if they do participate.

Work is why most of our immigrant students came to this country—to work, to send money back to their families, and to create opportunities for their children. But to do all the things that are vital to work—apply for a job, ask for a raise or promotion, stay safe on the job, ask for help, request time off—our students need to develop and improve their English language skills. However, it is not just the language functions they need. They also need to understand the contexts and structures in which such work communications take place. In addition, the work our students perform is often the hardest work for the lowest pay in a society whose economy depends on them completely, yet whose dominant culture fails to *see* them. They are, for the most part, invisible. And yet, if we remove the veil of invisibility, we learn, for example, that they are not paid for overtime, or sometimes not paid at all, or they are denied medical attention when injured, or they are urged by the boss to tell the doctor they were not hurt on the job. A learner-centered approach to instruction with immigrant workers views them as whole (visible) people, respects their rich experience, values their contributions. and brings the real conditions of their working lives into the classroom.

The authors of this article teach ESL in Northern California in three distinct settings: noncredit community college, work sites, and unions. Licht teaches working students in noncredit classes at Santa Rosa Junior College. Maher teaches employees in both union and nonunion hotels and factories. Webber works with unionized janitors in a joint union/employer project. In our experience teaching immigrant workers, we have come to see our roles as ESL instructors as twofold. By definition, we are language instructors focused on helping our students learn to communicate more effectively in English. Less explicit yet equally important, our second goal is to help our students better understand and navigate their new environments and develop skills for changing them for the better. Recognizing that immigrant students make up one of the most exploited sectors of the U.S. workforce, we hope that our instruction also facilitates the discussions, skill development, and conditions necessary for immigrant workers to better their living and working conditions.

In this article, we will demonstrate how a learner-centered approach to instruction helps us meet both these goals. We will focus on three features of learner-centered instruction: (a) instructors take an inquiring stance, (b) language learned and practiced reflects students' own lives, and (c) instruction builds trust and community among students. For each of these features, we will give specific classroom examples of how these are not merely important components of effective language teaching, but these features also facilitate conditions in a classroom for immigrants to take collective action to improve their living and working conditions. Finally, we understand that all teachers work with different constraints that can be obstacles to implementing this approach. We will discuss several of the most common obstacles, the greatest of which is accountability, and offer suggestions for how teachers can implement this approach under these challenging conditions.

### **Learner-Centered Instruction Facilitates Collective Action**

Three key features of learner-centered instruction help set the conditions necessary in the classroom for students to take collective action to better their lives and working conditions. The inquiring stance taken by instructors in learner-centered instruction provides opportunities for students to develop greater voice for expressing their ideas, interests, and concerns. Second, when the language practiced reflects students' own lives, students have the opportunity to share their experiences and to recognize the common experiences and concerns they share with their classmates. They may start to discuss ways to improve their lives or working conditions in class. Third, learner-centered instruction builds trust and community among students. The community-building inherent in learner-centered classes is a necessary condition for students to feel safe planning and taking collective action with their classmates, whether inside or outside of class.

## *Inquiry*

The stance of inquiry taken by learner-centered instructors leads us to question profoundly the assumptions that traditional educational models make about the roles of teachers and students. As Brazilian educator Paolo Freire challenged all educators to do in his pioneering work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), learner-centered instruction requires instructors to renounce the notion of students as empty vessels to be filled by all-knowing teachers. It asks students to become active participants, rather than passive students, in their learning. This first feature of learner-centered pedagogy, inquiry, not only is an important component of effective language instruction, it also helps to develop immigrant workers' voice and agency. By agency, in this context, we are referring to the initiative to say or do something one would not have previously said or done. Workers often do not feel safe expressing their opinions or speaking up about problems. They may fear losing their jobs, or they may not know what their rights are or what resources exist to support them.

Understanding what issues are key and vital to our students is an important challenge. Most ESL instructors come to the classroom from lives that are very different from the lives of their students. These students are the experts about new immigrants' work and lives, their resources and constraints. By taking an inquiring stance, we invite our students' expertise and questions to the forefront of our classrooms. In doing this, we set a tone of respect for the mutual learning that happens between instructors and students in a classroom where everybody teaches and everybody learns. Moreover, we also approach the possibility of broadening the very definition of necessary skills at work and in society. Workers can learn the literacy and language skills for successfully meeting their job duties as well as develop the voice and agency for bettering their conditions on the job. As they are asked to help negotiate curriculum with the instructor, students gain experience and confidence in expressing their ideas, interests, and needs in the learner-centered classroom. As the following examples illustrate, this greater agency and voice help us to better meet our students' language needs and also gives immigrant workers opportunities to develop greater confidence in their abilities to express their ideas and assert their rights in their communities and at work.

Inquiry into working students' situations and interests can be used by an instructor in doing assessment, curriculum design, and classroom instruction. In a union-sponsored housekeeping class in Northern California, the instructor developed a participatory needs assessment exercise that resulted in concrete, useful data about what kinds of English students needed to learn at work. The instructor first asked the class to develop a floor plan of their work space, including stairwells, elevators, and anywhere they may interact with people. On the map, the students indicated with one color where they speak *some* English and with another color where they would speak *more* English if their skills improved. For example, many students indicated that they speak a little English when guests greet them or make basic requests. Many stated that they would like to be able to speak more with the guests by responding

in detail to complaints or complicated requests. Once the map was completed, the students were then asked to set priorities by ranking the order in which they wanted to work on these skills in class.

This workplace mapping exercise, while giving the instructor valuable information about her students' world, serves as an informal assessment of the English functions students most need and want to practice and refine and new functions they want to develop. If the class is in a nonwork-site setting where students perform different jobs, the instructor can group learners in similar jobs together. This type of learner-centered assessment can also be used to inquire about nonwork-related needs by asking them to draw maps of their neighborhoods and communities (community mapping).

Programs themselves can also be structured in ways that promote inquiry into students' lives. Instructors and program coordinators can, whenever possible, be informed by community-based bilingual, bicultural aides, coteachers, and student leaders. These can be seen as cultural liaisons or advocates and bridges between cultures. Some union-based classes have taken the step of institutionalizing the position of a learner advocate, or *promotor(a)*, who is paid to represent the students and help the instructor design the class and curriculum in a way that reflects participants' expressed experiences, interests, and needs.<sup>1</sup>

Inquiry naturally leads to new questions about workers' skills. Traditional "survival" and "vocational" ESL programs and materials focus on improving learners' language and literacy skills at work and thereby creating "good" workers and, by doing so, eliminating problems. Such approaches claim neutrality. In fact, they can be far from neutral. They tend to teach obedience while remaining silent about workers' rights and the skills and information needed for changing working conditions. Such programs are political in their failure to also teach the skills necessary for developing voice and agency and the steps toward action to improve unjust conditions. For example, teaching workers to follow safety instructions does not change the fact that they work in dangerous environments and may not know what they can do about changing that. The hidden, or implicit, curriculum of most survival and workplace ESL involves teaching English for assimilation and submission, for improving productivity and efficiency, not for questioning or changing immigrant workers' positions, in underpaid, often dangerous, jobs at the bottom of the power hierarchy (Auerbach & Wallerstein, 1987). Learner-centered instruction can turn the curriculum around. In this way, the learner-centered approach helps instructors better understand and meet their students' real learning interests. At the same time, it creates the space in class for students to develop agency and a stronger voice in English for expressing their ideas and opinions.

For example, in one noncredit community-college class, students learned language for asserting themselves. The students discovered the shared experience of not getting paid overtime, or not getting paid at all. The students agreed that they wanted more information about workers' rights regarding pay, how to document and report problems, and other resources available in

the community. In response, the instructor contacted a lawyer and a community worker from California Rural Legal Assistance (CRLA) who visited the class and presented basic information and answered students' prepared questions. The class followed up this visit by filling in a calendar with hours worked and breaks taken during their most recent work week. Using role plays, they practiced talking to a boss about missed wages and breaks, rehearsing such phrases as: "Excuse me, can I talk to you? There is a mistake in my pay." "I worked \_\_\_\_ hours but I was paid for \_\_\_\_ hours." "I worked \_\_\_\_ hours of overtime." These classroom role plays were rehearsals for the real world as students learned to develop an assertive voice in English.

When students help to shape the curriculum, they gain experience and confidence in expressing their ideas and asserting their needs. In an ESL class at SEIU Local 1877, janitors expressed a desire early in the course to study cleaning chemicals. They wanted to learn how to properly read and understand the instructions and warnings on the labels. Because the teacher had mistakenly assumed that this topic would be boring, he had planned it as a one-day lesson for much later in the semester. However, because he asked students what they wanted and responded to their requests, the class not only studied this topic first, the students also initiated the invitation of a vocational health specialist to their class to educate them further on the proper handling and risks of certain chemicals used daily in commercial cleaning.

In another instance, at a community-college site, students spontaneously decided to join a march for legalization in support of undocumented workers. After the march, they chose to write a statement describing their experience, how strong and unafraid they felt, as well as the importance of collective action. The instructor used the Language Experience Approach to record the group's collective thoughts. When asked who should read or hear what they had written, the students chose representatives from the class to take their statement around to other classrooms and read it to students to invite them to join future actions for immigrant rights.

As these examples illustrate, with learner-centered instruction, the different role students are asked to take in negotiating and setting the agenda for the classroom promotes vital language learning for daily use on the job and for confronting problems. Students develop language skills and strategies to deal not only within the system but also the skills and both individual and collective strategies necessary for changing the system (Auerbach, 2001; Unga, 2001).

### *Authenticity*

The second feature of learner-centered instruction that makes it such a successful language teaching tool and that allows it to lead students to collective action is its authenticity. By this we mean that the material through which language is taught comes from the lives and experiences of the students. The stories we read and study are stories from students' lives. The activities we do in class are authentic interactions such as information gather-



ing and sharing. By using students' own knowledge, their experiences, and their questions, the learner-centered approach keeps students engaged and active in their learning, which leads to faster, better language learning. Using students' lives as curriculum also provides space in the classroom for students to share experiences with each other and recognize commonalities. Identifying shared concerns is one of the first steps toward working together to improve their living or working conditions.

Language instruction that reflects students' true experiences is particularly successful with working students for several reasons. First, many working students in our community-college and workplace settings have not had a lot of success with traditional schooling. As a result, many lack confidence and become anxious when faced with traditional approaches. When the content of instruction is about the students themselves and their world, students can relax and can feel at home. Second, when students' own lives are the context in which they study language, we as instructors do not have to manufacture a shared context artificially. With the learner-centered approach, students don't practice grammar by reading stories about college students going to job fairs or vacationing in France. Instead, they write and share their own stories and practice grammar in the contexts in which they will actually need it. When the schema and the vocabulary for that job or at least that industry are already known, students can more easily and more quickly discuss topics in depth and focus on the specific language points. Last, the multilevel nature of most workplace classes and many community-college classes can be challenging to instructors and frustrating for learners. By using the learner-centered approach, students, who are all experts on their own lives, can participate at the level to which they are able.

To illustrate the previous points, consider two lessons from a series of classes held at offices of the janitors' union, SEIU Local 1877, throughout Northern California. In the first, instructors give writing prompts to the janitors to create simple, but powerful, poems about themselves. By responding to question prompts using "to be," members write lines to a poem, "I am" or "I am not." These poems, which allow for a wide range of English ability, are then shared in class and turned into grammar exercises for explicit language practice. One student's poem stated, "I am undocumented. I am not illegal." This led the janitors' discussion first on the grammar of the sentences and then on to a lively discussion about their role as immigrant workers and whether a person, as opposed to an action, can be "illegal." Another janitor's poem included the stanza, "I am a janitor, but I am not invisible." These statements sparked a critical discussion on how the janitors often feel they are treated as invisible at their workplaces. Because the grammar exercises are written by other janitors, and they often express ideas other students share or are familiar with, these poems provide a more accessible and engaging environment for janitors to practice the verb "to be" than traditional grammar exercises.

Another example of teaching specific grammar points by eliciting and discussing common experiences comes from an ESL class for janitors at a



large public Bay Area university. When prompted with a photo of an overflowing trash can, all students shared the understanding that the trash cans in campus classrooms are too small for the amount of trash the college students produce. After plenty of heated discussion around this issue, the teacher was able to naturally lead into a lesson on comparatives (i.e., smaller-bigger, too small) and to a class project on writing the management to request larger trash bins in university classrooms. A learner-centered approach to workplace instruction allows instructors to use the shared context of the work site to introduce and practice specific language skills in a context-rich, less intimidating manner.

The authenticity of the learner-centered approach is not only a component of effective language instruction, it is also a means by which students can recognize common experiences and begin to understand their shared experiences in a larger context. In many cases, this understanding can lead to a consciousness-raising on the part of the students that can motivate them to analyze, problem-solve, and act as a group to change their lives.

Changes that result from this shared understanding of each other's experiences can vary from subtle to significant. In one nonunion hotel class of housekeepers in California, the manager asked the instructor to teach employees how to complete an employee survey that was distributed each year by the manager. The manager wanted critical feedback and wasn't getting it from the housekeeping department. In class, when the instructor asked the students about this survey, she learned that the students were afraid to write "real" answers because they were afraid of retribution. During class discussions on this topic, the students learned from each other that they all were complaining about similar things, for example, not having air-conditioning in the lunchroom, but that they were too nervous to actually tell the manager. The students were shocked and excited and started to share with each other their concerns and complaints. Ultimately, they expressed their ideas directly to their managers via the survey.

To illustrate this point further, we will look at an example from a Canadian workplace literacy class for janitors. In this program sponsored by Canadian unions, a student came to class one night with a cut on his hand (Levine, 2002). Levine, the instructor, used class time to invite this worker to share what had happened to him; he had cut his hand while emptying an old metal garbage can. Because many students in the class reported similar cuts and scratches from the metal garbage cans at their work site, Levine decided to work with this kind of incident in class. She had students share their stories about workplace injuries from the trash cans. She explored the new vocabulary around this issue, writing key words and phrases on the board. She used the section in their contract on health and safety as a reading assignment and had the class rewrite it in simple English that everyone could understand. The class problem-solved together and wrote a letter to management asking for all metal garbage cans to be replaced by safer plastic ones.

This project took place over weeks along with other lessons and activities. The language activities were centered around a topic with which every-

one in the class had experience. But the lesson went beyond just language learning. In the process of studying the words, phrases, and language functions, the students were problem-solving together as a group and learning about the systems in place for dealing with these issues. "This way of learning not only helped the participants understand these systems better, but it engaged them in a process of how they could stand up for themselves to effect positive change" (Levine, 2002, p. 88).

By using students' own lives and experiences as the material for the class, the learner-centered approach is more engaging, meaningful, and accessible and therefore leads to more successful language learning. In addition, in our experience, the learner-centered approach allows for the shared recognition of common experiences, which can motivate students to work together to change their situations and improve their lives. For our learner-centered classrooms to foster social change, instruction must go beyond talking about learners' lives and add a *content* focus of learning to analyze and understand one's experience as a collective experience shared by classmates within a larger social context (Nash, 2001; Unga, 2001).

### ***Community***

Learner-centered instruction helps build a sense of community in the classroom as students are given opportunities to share their lives and experiences as part of language instruction. Group projects in which all students must contribute information from their own lives to create a class graph, collage, map, book, or other collective work help build a sense of community in the classroom. As the class members speak about their experiences, ideas, and opinions with each other, students from diverse backgrounds often recognize commonalities, develop friendships, and learn to trust one another. However, community-building in class is not just a touchy-feely nice way to run a class. It can be an essential factor in the success of the class itself. The communal bonds that develop foster the learning that takes place in the classroom. These bonds not only increase the motivation for students to attend class in the first place, but they also foster an environment of collective learning in which students help each other.

For example, simple class surveys on students' backgrounds and cultures allow students to get to know each other better and build connections. They can also lead to larger projects. In one hotel ESL class of housekeepers, stewards, and housemen, the instructor realized there was a large span of cultures, native languages, and English ability represented. From a learner-centered stance, the instructor had asked and learned that students were particularly interested in each others' backgrounds. The hotel was in San Francisco, and this particular class had at least eight countries of origin represented. The students naturally wanted to know how all the others had journeyed from their respective countries, arrived in San Francisco, and came to be in this class. The instructor developed a project that started with talking in small groups in English or in their native languages about their

hometowns, families, and journeys to San Francisco. It culminated in a book with drawings, photographs, and stories written in English by each student. Some stories were quite short and simple, and some were much longer and complex, but each student, regardless of his or her English ability, contributed his or her own stories and writings to the project and felt proud of the final work. Additionally, workers who may otherwise know each other only by job classification—as housekeepers or stewards—got to know each other as individuals with rich backgrounds. Students from different countries learned that they often had more in common with their coworkers than they would have guessed. Through learner-centered group activities such as these, students can learn the mechanics of the English language while also developing new friendships.

As students form friendships in their classes, they are motivated to attend class and feel more comfortable participating in class. Furthermore, as students recognize how much they have in common with the other immigrants in their classes, they can be more inclined to help each other. Higher-leveled students are more likely to solidify their own learning as well as build confidence when they help the lower-leveled classmates to complete tasks and learn new language competencies, lessening the burden on the teacher to reach all students simultaneously in a large, multilevel class.

Often, the commitment to collective learning fostered in the learner-centered classroom also transfers outside the class. For example, an instructor at Santa Rosa Junior College has students survey each other about their jobs: “What is your job?” “What do you do in your job?” “When do you work?” “What do you like about your job?” “What don’t you like?” The information they gather is then mounted on a big chart on the wall and subsequently used for language practice and discussions about issues at work such as breaks, overtime, benefits, safety, and communication. In this activity, students learn from each other about work opportunities in their communities and the advantages and disadvantages of different jobs. Survey and polling activities such as this one allow students to see each other as resources for finding jobs, housing, and other important information for adult immigrants.

The community-building that results from a learner-centered classroom is also an important component of students’ taking action that is not just individual, but collective. If teachers and students are willing, the trust and friendships developed in ESL classes can lead a class of immigrants to take collective action to better their living and working conditions. Learner-centered techniques are not simply gimmicks or ice-breakers. They can help foster commitment among a community of learners, provide opportunity for students to help each other, and create the conditions of community necessary for collective problem-solving. Students will be more likely to decide to take collective action on a common concern if a strong sense of community and trust has already been developed in class.

For example, in a class with housekeepers in a large hotel in Northern California, the instructor learned from the students that they were having a lot of trouble communicating with their housekeeping supervisor. For the

next few weeks, the class practiced various problem-solving techniques. Employing a learner-centered approach, the instructor elicited concerns and problems from the women's lives for practicing problem-solving—What school to pick for a child? What to do about a troublesome neighbor? Then, as a class, the students addressed the issue of the difficult supervisor. As a result of their discussions in class, the housekeepers developed a problem-solving team to address the challenge of the difficult supervisor and other concerns, such as the housekeepers' having little say in the location and menu of staff parties. Formally recognized by the managers, the team was able bring up with hotel management the labor-management problems they identified. By coming together and expressing their concerns as a group, they were able to safely pressure management for changes in the workplace without fear of retribution. The housekeepers were able to work collectively toward addressing concerns at their work site that individual workers would never have dared raise with management on their own.

Another example of the community and trust built in learner-centered classrooms leading to collective action comes from a union-sponsored ESL program for janitors at a large, California public university.<sup>2</sup> One day, various students arrived in class distraught after having received pink slips in the mail advising them that they would shortly be laid off. The instructor decided to allocate class time for the janitors to discuss and research what rights they had and what steps they could take to try to prevent these layoffs. They decided to start by inviting to class their union representative. She answered their questions and also told them of upcoming union actions to protest the campus layoffs. After most of the class showed an interest in participating in such actions, the janitors practiced the English-language skills they would need to express concern over the layoffs to university management. They also researched who in the university made the budget decisions affecting their jobs and the different venues for voicing their opinions to these decision-makers. Soon, the class decided to participate in a union action at which the vice chancellor of the university was to speak directly with concerned workers. Surrounded and supported by their classmates at the action, two students from the English class spoke up and told the vice chancellor in English of the group's concerns about the layoffs and how the janitors' families would be affected by job loss.

As these last examples demonstrate, the sense of community fostered by learner-centered instruction can help set the conditions for students to decide to take action as a class to bring about desired change. In both these examples, if the students did not trust their classmates or see each other as resources to learn from and learn with, neither the housekeepers nor the janitors could have worked together as a group to address these problems.

Three main features of learner-centered instruction help foster the conditions for effective language instruction and for taking collective action. While the inquiring stance of learner-centered instruction provides space for students to develop greater agency and voice, the authenticity of language and community-building aspects of learner-centered instruction allow immigrant

workers to recognize common concerns and feel comfortable planning and taking collective action with their classmates. In these ways, the learner-centered approach helps us as teachers meet both of our teaching goals—to teach effectively the English language and to foster the conditions in our classrooms for immigrant workers to improve their lives and working conditions.

### **Obstacles to Using the Learner-Centered Approach and Strategies to Overcome Them**

For instructors interested in implementing a learner-centered perspective in their classrooms, several obstacles can stand in the way. The following section will examine the problems of accountability, lack of resources and guides, and student discomfort, and suggest ways to overcome these constraints.

#### ***Accountability***

Possibly the greatest obstacle to establishing learner-centered ESL classrooms for workers at workplaces, at union halls, community-college, or adult education settings is accountability. Who is paying for the classes? Who are the stakeholders? Funding for ESL programs comes from the state, community nonprofits, churches, employers, unions, and city or county governments. What do these different stakeholders want the students to learn?

The past decade has seen a national push for increased “standards” in education in the United States. This trend has reached adult education and community-college classrooms with worrisome effects for immigrant language learners. Funding for general noncredit ESL classes has dropped dramatically, and many community colleges in California now rely on funding from large national grants that require entry and exit tests along the line of CASAS (Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System) as well as additional assessment. For classes to continue getting funding, students have to show demonstrable improvement (increased test scores). In these situations, teachers are compelled to teach topics that will allow students to succeed on the test. How can a teacher incorporate learner-centered activities under these conditions?

When faced with a preselected curriculum or text, a teacher hoping to use a learner-centered approach has a few options. One strategy is to leave space in traditional materials for learner-centered work by adding blanks, or adding “and you?” to classroom worksheets. For example, if there is a list of 10 vocabulary words for tools at work, have students write in 5 additional words they want to learn for tools at their jobs. If there is a list of sentences for practicing grammar, such as the present and past of “to be” (“Mei was a teacher in her country. Now she is a room attendant.”) at the end of the list, ask students to add a few lines and write a similar sentence about themselves. (“I was a bank teller in my country. Now I am a janitor.”) Not only would these additional lines allow students to practice the grammar and vocabulary they need to describe their own work experiences, but it could spark a discussion in class of the jobs immigrant workers may have had in their home countries versus the jobs they have here in the United States.

Another strategy is to take a chapter in a traditional text, which may consist of a reading, comprehension questions, vocabulary questions, exercises, and discussion questions, and start at the back. You can ask students to share their own experiences first as a prereading context-setting activity. Often it is just an additional question or two at the right time that can turn an exercise from traditional to learner-centered and should in no way prevent students from performing well on any tests.

Another example involves the common ESL theme of body parts. Almost every beginning ESL text teaches body parts, usually with a picture of a generic person in the book. By simply asking students to use this same vocabulary to describe their own health concerns, instruction shifts from text-directed to learner-centered. For example, the janitors' union, SEIU Local 1877, has adapted an exercise from occupation health-and-safety training into their vocabulary lessons on body parts.<sup>3</sup> After learning some vocabulary for body parts in a more traditional way from a textbook, students are then asked to put a bandage on the place where they personally have pain or health problems. The janitors tend to place bandages on their backs, shoulders, and chests as well as over their eyes to show pain from repetitive stress at work and their concerns that cleaning solutions might hurt their eyes or lungs. In this exercise, students are up and moving around the classroom, engaged with each other and their own bodies, sharing real life experiences and feelings. They are practicing the health vocabulary most important for their own lives for expressing health concerns to their doctors, employers, or union representatives. They are also recognizing and discussing in their English class how they all share common health concerns because of their working conditions. Though this activity may stray from traditional methods and goals of instruction, it easily fits in a more "standard-based" lesson on body parts and can spin off from a traditional textbook lesson on body parts.

Employers, as the source of the instructor's salary, can place severe constraints on what an instructor can or cannot do in the classroom. In most employer-funded ESL programs, employers want to use the classes to increase productivity. They are paying for training to address specific work problems. For example, in hotels, where customer service is a key factor in success, employers might want to improve their customer service ratings by training housekeepers and other "back of the house" employees how to handle simple guest requests or complaints. In general, students are eager to learn the language they need to perform better at work. But they tend to have much broader language needs than the specific ones dictated by the employer. In this setting, there is little room for inviting students to negotiate the curriculum.

What is a learner-centered instructor to do? In addition to the strategies to modify the set curriculum described above, instructors and program coordinators can try to educate employers about the nature of language functions. For example, if an employer wants students to learn how to answer guest requests for an additional towel, the lesson will have students studying and practicing polite question formation with a range of vocabulary. By allowing students to practice the target language function using vocabulary



from their communities as well as from work, instructors can argue that students are more likely to practice the functions at home and thereby, learn the material more quickly.

However, educating employers on the need for practicing nonwork-related English will only get us so far. To address successfully the issue of accountability constraints in work-site programs, program designers can do what we would encourage our students to do—collaborate. Workplace classes often show greater success when developed with input from all the stakeholders: the employers, the workers, the unions (if present), and/or the funders (if different from the employers).

One example of this kind of collaboration comes from the Workplace Education Centre of ABC Canada, a nonprofit literacy foundation that operated 1995-1998. This program involved workers, employers, and the union in a collaborative committee process requiring the active and equal participation of all three stakeholders. The committee worked together to implement the WNA, or Workplace Needs Assessment, in which they planned to “examine basic skills needed in the context of work, develop education action plans to meet those needs, and evaluate the programs and activities that take place” (Belfiore & Folinsbee, 2001, p. 168). Despite traditional rifts in the type of skill development employees, employers, and unions may desire, the collaborative WNA process allowed these three groups to identify common goals in fostering education opportunities, basic skills development, and personal improvement of employees that can go beyond just increasing worker productivity at the workplace (Belfiore & Folinsbee, 2001).

### ***Student Resistance***

Surprisingly, one common constraint to using a learner-centered approach can be the students themselves. Although many of our students experience anxiety or stress when faced with traditional, pencil-and-paper instruction, they might still ask for it if given the choice. In these cases, the students resist the learner-centered approach, preferring instead a model of instruction with which they are more familiar or which looks to them more like “school.”

When students are resistant to the learner-centered approach, the instructor can slowly ease them into it by starting the class in a more traditional vein and then through the weeks add learner-centered elements. Students who cannot be won over completely, or a curriculum that is preselected, as mentioned above, might still be open to some learner-centered activities sprinkled into a more traditional curriculum. The strategies previously mentioned of adding additional blanks or questions to traditional exercises, or jumping off from traditional worksheets into more learner-centered activities, can give students both the structure they desire and the opportunity to share their own experiences in class. Additionally, when immigrant students are simply asked, “What English do you want or need to learn?” they often respond, “Everything,” or “You are the teacher. You tell me.” However,



if this same question is posed through a more structured activity, students are often forthcoming about their needs and interests for learning English. Activities such as the mapping exercise described earlier in which students draw their workplaces and communities and indicate where they need to speak English are often successful in prompting students to identify their English needs in a structure in which they feel comfortable.

### ***Resources and Guides***

Imagine you have a class where you can teach whatever you want and your students are eager to go along with a new approach. What is available to you in the way of textbooks and guides? The answer is not a lot. But here are some of the few gems that we have found.

*Collaborations* (Weinstein, 1996), a five-leveled series, *Stories to Tell Our Children* (Weinstein, 1992), *ESL for Action: Problem Posing at Work* (Auerbach & Wallerstein, 1987; new edition forthcoming), and *Winning at Work* (Mar & Webber, 2003) are four excellent textbooks written from a learner-centered perspective that work extremely well with working students at different levels of English. *Making Meaning, Making Change: A Guide to Participatory Curriculum Development for Adult ESL Literacy* (Auerbach, 1992), *Participatory Practices in Adult Education* (Campbell & Burnaby, 2001), and *Talking Shop: A Curriculum Sourcebook for Participatory Adult ESL* (Nash, Caston, Rhum, McGrail, & Gomez-Sanford, 1992) offer wonderful descriptions and examples of this kind of teaching.

In addition to these published texts, every instructor can use student stories alone, without the additional language exercises, to compile into a book as rich material to share with other classes. For example, an instructor in the noncredit ESL program in Santa Rosa, California, regularly engages her classes in publishing learner-centered bilingual books. They are written and illustrated by her students about topics of their choice. When possible, the students themselves type their stories on a computer and design the cover and the layout. Upon publication, the class organizes public readings in bookstores where the books always sell out. Service Employee International Union (SEIU) Local 285's Worker Education Program publishes an annual student publication, *Working Writers*, produced by the union's health-care and public-sector workers that is regularly used as instructional materials in ESL classes at other unions.<sup>4</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Many forces are at work that can deter an instructor from being able to follow a learner-centered approach to instruction: national trends toward standards and assessments, the corporate focus on improving productivity, lack of information or materials for instructors, preset curricula, and even students themselves who resist an unfamiliar style of teaching.

As ESL instructors in workplace, union, and community-college settings, we each face different pressures and obstacles in our use of the learner-

centered approach with immigrant workers. Because of the various constraints imposed upon us and the different strengths and weaknesses we bring to our classrooms, we recognize that this approach, like others, spans a continuum. There are unlimited ways, big and small, to weave learner-centered strategies into our practice: adjusting an activity in a textbook by a line or two to include the students' experiences; using students' stories in grammar exercises; students deciding to write and distribute a pamphlet on local free community services; students sharing work injury stories, investigating the shared problem, and sending a delegation to negotiate with management to solve a problem. These are all varying degrees of the learner-centered approach.

At whatever degree we are able to implement it, the learner-centered approach to instruction helps us to more effectively meet the language-learning needs of our students because of the inquiring stance, authenticity of language, and community-building inherent in the approach. These same aspects of learner-centered instruction also help foster student voice and agency, recognition and understanding of shared concerns, and the trust and friendship within the group. These are all necessary conditions for our classrooms to become a space for immigrant workers to develop skills and strategies for bettering their lives and working conditions. The learner-centered approach facilitates our students' acquisition of the language skills necessary for succeeding within the system as well as individual and collective strategies for changing the system.

## **Authors**

*Ellen Licht has taught in a wide variety of ESL contexts since the 1980s. She is now at home in the noncredit program at Santa Rosa Junior College, part of the California Community College system. Here, she teaches mostly at a community site in the heart of the barrio. In these times of budget cuts, the noncredit program struggles to meet the needs of a growing immigrant workforce in Sonoma County.*

*Since 1993, Beth Maher has taught ESL in community-college credit and noncredit settings, international programs, and workplace English projects. She is the coauthor of Northstar Basic Reading and Writing (1998 & 2004). Beth is now working on two joint employer/union/state-funded projects with hotel employees and janitors.*

*Alison Ascher Webber began teaching ESL to adult immigrants and refugees in a job-training program in San Francisco. Her students' work experiences compelled her to explore more participatory, worker-centered approaches to ESL instruction. Alison is a coauthor of Winning at Work: English for Workers' Rights, and she now directs an education and training program with the janitors' union, SEIU Local 1877.*

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Developed by the Center for Working Life in Oakland, California, the position of a learner advocate is described in *Assessment of a Worker-Centered, Team Approach to Workplace Education*, by P. D. Simon, 1995, San Francisco State University, p. 20.
- <sup>2</sup> Story related to authors by ESL instructor Maris Thomas and union representative Maria Witt of the Association of Federal State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME).
- <sup>3</sup> Bandaaid Body Mapping exercise shared with authors by the Labor Occupational Health Project, University of California, Berkeley, and later published in *English: ¡Sí, Se Puede!* (2004), an ESL curriculum in development of the janitors' union, SEIU Local 1877.
- <sup>4</sup> Jenny Lee Utech, an ESL instructor with SEIU Local 285's Worker Education Program, describes the *Working Writers* project in her article, "English Classes at the Union Hall," (2002), in *Teaching for Change: Popular Education and the Labor Movement*, Los Angeles: UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education.

## References

- Auerbach, E. (1992). *Making meaning, making change: A guide to participatory curriculum development for adult ESL literacy*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Auerbach, E. (2001). "Yes, but...": Problematizing participatory ESL pedagogy. In P. Campbell & B. Burnaby (Eds.), *Participatory practices in adult education* (pp. 267-306). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Auerbach, E., & Burgess, D. (1987). The hidden curriculum of survival ESL. In I. Shor (Ed.), *Freire for the classroom: A sourcebook for liberatory teaching* (pp. 158-159). Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.
- Auerbach, E., & Wallerstein, N. (1987). *ESL for action: Problem posing at work*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Belfiore, M. E., & Folinsbee, S. (2001). A collaborative process in the workplace. In P. Campbell & B. Burnaby (Eds.), *Participatory practices in adult education* (pp. 167-183). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Campbell, P., & Burnaby, B. (2001). *Participatory practices in adult education*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum International.
- Levine, T. (2002). Learning in solidarity: A union approach to worker-centered literacy [Electronic version]. *Just Labour: A Canadian Journal of Work & Society*, 1, 86-93. Retrieved September 20, 2004, from [http://www.yorku.ca/julabour/volume1/jl\\_levine.pdf](http://www.yorku.ca/julabour/volume1/jl_levine.pdf)

- Mar, W., & Webber, A. (2003). *Winning at work*. Berkeley, CA: Regents of the University of California.
- Nash, A. (2001). Participatory workplace education: Resisting fear-driven models. In P. Campbell & B. Burnaby (Eds.), *Participatory practices in adult education* (pp. 185-195). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Nash, A., Caston, A., Rhum, M., McGrail, L., & Gomez-Sanford, R. (1992). *Talking shop: A curriculum sourcebook for participatory adult ESL*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Unga, J. C. (August/September, 2001). Reading the world: Labour's vision of literacy. [Special issue]. *Our Times: Canada's Independent Labour Magazine*, 14-16.
- Weinstein, G. (1996). *Collaborations*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.
- Weinstein, G. (1992). *Stories to Tell Our Children*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.