



## Developing Workplace English Programs: 3 Considerations

by [Karin Wiebe](#)

Many newcomers who are also English as an additional language (EAL) learners engage in self-directed EAL learning in the workplace. By participating in workplace socialization processes, newcomers gain work-specific vocabularies and additional language experience, which supports their journey to fluency. However, this ad lib method comes with an extended period of additional language learning that works like a double cognitive load at a time when newcomers should be focusing on bringing their expertise and innovation to the workplace.

Workplace English programs may be shaped specifically for an industry or workplace. However, educators seeking to support newcomers in smaller communities are more likely to work with students who either come from, or are aiming for, a wide variety of jobs. In these situations, the definition of what is a business English, workplace English, or English for special purposes course may be very different. This article draws on current research to offer three considerations for educators who are developing curriculum and learning experiences for general workplace English programs.

### 1. Share the Framework

Theoretical perspectives of additional language learning are not usually made explicit in the classroom, but it is worth considering that this could be a key feature of adult EAL education in workplace settings. In this way, students are invited into the discussion of additional language learning through the same doorways of understanding that educators use.

For example, the theory of additional language socialization perceives language learning as occurring through bidirectional socialization processes into a group (Duff & Talmy, 2011). In the classroom, educators can use this understanding to activate student awareness of their coworkers and community members as potential learning affordances. Learning experiences then become designed to guide students to recognize and more fully participate in additional language socialization at work and in the larger community.

Drawing on this theory, humour can work as an additional language socialization process in the workplace. Workplace interlocutors may use humour to convey intent, correct a new employee, and socialize newcomers into the workplace culture (Holmes, 2005). In the classroom, humour can be harnessed as part of a larger discussion about workplace culture to support students'

casual conversation skills development. For example, students can be scaffolded into practicing wordplay while sharing previous experiences and observations of how humour is used in the workplace.

Okayama University Associate Professor John Rucynski edited an excellent resource, [\*New Ways in Teaching with Humor\*](#), which offers activities and resources to support additional language learning through humour. Educators can draw on these methods while keeping the materials closely relevant to the kinds of humour their students encounter in the workplace and community. Educators might consider dedicating a Humour Week within the workplace English curriculum, where lessons are designed to raise awareness of culturally constructed messages embedded in workplace humour.

Educators can also reintroduce the socialization framework to elicit experiences and challenges working in multicultural environments. This presents an opportunity to incorporate learning outcomes around intercultural awareness skills development. For example, this video series, [\*“Series of HSBC Ads about Culture”\*](#) is crafted to showcase how different cultural perspectives can become a challenge at work and in the community. Framed as humorous vignettes, these videos are excellent to open a class dialogue and spark a variety of learning artifacts which draw on student experiences, challenges, and successful strategies nested within language learning.

## 2. Consider Renaming a Unit According to Workplace Duration

Newcomers participating in a 2022 Canadian qualitative study of successful self-directed learning strategies and practices in the workplace mentioned that their strategies and experiences were different, depending on how long they had been in a particular workplace (Wiebe, 2022). For example, when, over time (between the first weeks, early months, and after a couple of years), newcomers took on more responsibilities, made friends, or changed departments, vocabulary, paralanguage, and pragmatics changed. Drawing on this, a workplace language course could be organized around three key time periods of a job:

- **New Job:** to look at language used for job hunting, interviews, and the first weeks with a new employer
- **1 Year:** to focus on full participation in teams, using language negotiation strategies
- **1+ Years:** to focus on language for changing social roles in the workplace and community, including mentoring

Delineating an instructional unit according to how long someone has worked in a particular place invites students intuitively into familiar experiences. For example, adult language learners generally all have experiences as new employees with goals and expectations of eventually advancing to senior or managerial roles. This connection to length of employment is a rethinking of how to organize overarching units, topics, and learning resources while continually connecting back to workplace language socialization processes as they may occur during that time period on the job.

### 3. Connect Chairs, Teams, and Inquiry

Many adult language learners may come from previous educational experiences where students sat facing the front of a classroom and depended on teachers to provide key knowledge needed to pass exams. This traditional setup is a particular spatial arrangement which obliges students to fully focus on the teacher, who inhabits a space of knowing at the front of a room. There is an opportunity here to rewrite the classroom space both in terms of seating and in terms of who inhabits the space of knowing, which can foster more authentic workplace language practice and reinforce learning through additional language socialization processes.

There are a number of benefits to reorganizing a learning space for adult students to sit facing each other in teams of three to four:

- Team seating more closely reflects a workplace meeting situation. It provides opportunities for students to practice different workplace social roles within a meeting, like, for example, team leader, note-taker, gate keeper (ensures everyone is getting a chance to contribute), and presenter.
- Students within a team spend extended time learning and practicing language together. Team members may foster genuine connections that extend beyond the classroom.

The team seating strategy also lends itself to inquiry-based learning and allows educators to act as a support and fellow student in additional language learning. Inquiry-based learning starts with an essential question, which is shaped to promote a variety of answers and ways of thinking (Watt & Colyer, 2014). The method calls for the use of smaller enabling questions, which work like puzzle pieces toward thinking about the larger essential question. In this way, each team is given different enabling questions to study; when brought together as a class, the response pieces fit to complete a picture of a facet of a workplace or industry situation.

Inquiry-based learning combined with teamwork encourages adult learners to fully engage with topics using critical thinking and connection to previous knowledge and experiences. Students read, hear, and see language modelled during team learning experiences, and, in effect, learn in situ, or through the practice of doing a job.

### Conclusion

These ideas and considerations spring from an additional language socialization framework, research findings, and teaching experiences. Lessons and learning activities are backwards designed—that is, with goals and learning outcomes in mind first. In this way, learner outcomes are a combination of student needs and language benchmarks. When students are invited into the language learning conversation and encouraged to supply their own learning outcomes, inquiry-based team learning can positively support the development of new language skills and the emerging identities and habits of lifelong learners.

There is a need for further study of self-directed language learning in the workplace to better understand how additional language socialization processes positively contribute to language learning and how that can be supported in classrooms. This need for further study calls for a

unique perspective that adult newcomers are the experts in their language learning experiences. It is worth considering that workplace English programs might best be developed through studies that situate learners as teachers and partners.

## References

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**Karin Wiebe** is pursuing her PhD at the University of British Columbia's Okanagan School of Education (OSE). She is interested in how English as an additional language (EAL) is learned in the workplace, and how that can be supported in the classroom. Wiebe works as the EAL Access Initiative coordinator with the OSE's English Foundation Programs. She is also publications chair for BC TEAL and editor of TEAL News.