

“They” should speak English.

People who say this about immigrants have never endured the frustration and humiliation of navigating through everyday life without fluency in a society’s dominant language to express oneself as a confident, intelligent, and assertive adult.

At English Language Partners of Wisconsin, 900 immigrants have experienced something different: Over 1,200 American citizens have devoted time to serve as their English conversation partners. Our students can relax while they practice English for extended periods of time with friendly, respectful tutors who are eager to cross cultures to learn about their lives.

THE NEED FOR ELPW’S PROGRAM MODELS IN MILWAUKEE

Opportunities to converse with fluent English speakers:

- Immigrants in low-paying jobs often have few English speaking co-workers.
- Immigrants who care for children or the elderly in their homes are isolated in their communities.

English classes for under-served immigrant groups:

- Publicly-funded ESL programs are required to administer standardized tests in English. Immigrants with low education in their first language are intimidated by tests and print-oriented curricula. They need conversation classes that teach English orally and support first and English language literacy development.
- Immigrants who are highly educated in their home cultures often read and write English but lack speaking proficiency. They need advanced reading material and long sessions in English conversation to prepare for mainstream classes at technical colleges and universities.
- Undocumented immigrants face restrictions in publicly-funded programs.¹

The immigrant population in Milwaukee needs English classes that are stepping-stones to publicly-funded ESL and Adult Basic Education programs. According to the U.S Census Bureau, in the City of Milwaukee, of the 71,381 people between ages 18 and 64 who speak a language other than English, 18,449 report that they speak English “not well” and 5,252 report they do not speak English at all.

Yet, in Wisconsin, only 5,579 adults were enrolled in publicly-funded ESL classes in 2009-2010. Of this number, 4,488 were enrolled in ESL Beginning Literacy, Beginning Low, Beginning High, and Intermediate Low classes, where adults who report knowing English “not well” or “not at all” might be placed.² Estimated numbers of applicants on 2009-2010 waiting lists ranged between 1,055 and 2,210.³

Even though it is not known how many of the 23,701 people in Milwaukee with English skills at “not well” or “not at all” have little or no schooling in their primary language, and though there are privately-

1 At the White House Hispanic Community Action Summit held in **Milwaukee at South Division High School on March 24, Dr. Arturo Martinez, MATC Associate Dean of Pre-College & Bilingual Education, told a group that was discussing the Dream Act that one of the major problems facing Milwaukee’s community was** that the lack of a government issued ID could prevent many undocumented students to present a valid ID when enrolling for an ESL or GED Spanish class. The issue regarding the testing would apply for those who want to take a GED exam, as students are required to present a valid government ID to meet the federal requirements to take a GED exam (clarified through personal email 2012-07-20).

2 AGE BY LANGUAGE SPOKEN AT HOME BY ABILITY TO SPEAK IN ENGLISH. American Fact Finder, 2008-2010 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates. Accessed: 2012-05-09.

3 Adult Student Waiting List Survey 2009-2010. NCSDAE National Council of State Directors of Adult Education. [Adult Education Waiting List Report.pdf](#). Accessed: 2012-4026. (As of July 17, 2012, the Adult Education Waiting List Report for 2010 -2011 is not yet available.)

funded programs in Milwaukee not included in the NRS and NCSDAE reports, clearly there is a large number of adults with low English proficiency who are not registering for ESL classes where registration entails standardized tests in English.

Javier's story illustrates the specific niche that this initiative fills in Milwaukee.

New students registering for ESL classes are given a one-page form to be completed in Spanish or English.

Javier wrote only his name and answered the other questions orally—behavior that might indicate a low level of first-language literacy.

To our surprise, after his first lesson, his Spanish on his evaluation form had fewer spelling errors than students with eight years of education.

Javier explained that after being orphaned at age six, he had been shunted between relatives every several months; therefore, he had never completed a year of schooling. Though he had taught himself how to read and write in Spanish and already had good English-speaking skills, he said he did not like to write because he did not want to show his ignorance of punctuation. He had internalized the stigmatism of being “uneducated.”

Thanks to his ELPW tutors, he realized how well he had educated himself. He was promoted into the advanced English class where his English writing and speaking proficiencies rivaled those of students who had formal education backgrounds.

At ELPW, Javier learned that he is intelligent, well read, and has the capacity to succeed in the U.S. where what one does with opportunities defines one's future.

ESL programs that receive federal and state funding are required to measure students' progress through standardized tests in English.⁴ Javier represents an under-served segment of the immigrant population whose English language needs are not met by these programs. Adults who did not have the opportunity to go to school as children are intimidated both by testing procedures and curricula that require learners to have certain levels of first language schooling in order to participate. They do not learn to speak English in print-oriented ESL classes if they do not read in their first language; therefore, they drop out or avoid ESL classes altogether.

Before studying with tutors at ELPW, Javier would not have been able to tolerate the placement test in English at a publically-funded program. After 125 classes, he was ready for the next challenge. At another agency, he took a placement test to enroll in Spanish GED classes. After he has attained his GED, he intends to continue his education in English.

⁴ Marguerite M. Lukes. “‘We Thought They Had Forgotten Us:’ Research, Policy and Practice in the Education of Latino Immigrant Adults.” *Journal of Latinos in Education* Vol. 8, No. 2, no. April 2009 (n.d.).