VIVIANA ALEXANDROWICZ
AUREEN ANDRES
CARLI DANAHER
University of San Diego

PAZ VALDIVIA
Grossmont College

Supporting Community Leadership Development Through ESL Classes: A Changemaking Initiative

This article describes the process of teaching English as a second language to members of an underprivileged local community. This initiative was developed as a result of a collaboration between a community center and a university. Three 1st-year TESOL master's candidates volunteered to design and teach curriculum to immigrant community members on a weekly basis to meet their needs in ESL and in areas such as health, education, community, housing, leadership, and autonomy. The class consisted of Spanish- and Vietnamese-speaking senior citizens who were community leaders, and who needed the language, skills, and knowledge to be more effective in their leadership roles. A key goal was to create empowerment opportunities for these students to become changemakers and to advocate for themselves, their families, and their communities. In addition to improving their English, student outcomes included finding their voices in their 2nd language through discussions and through oral and written work, developing a sense of unity among class members, and gaining confidence to take action for the common good.

Addressing Community Needs

The participants in this project came from a diverse community where the scope of cultural multiplicity varies as much as the socioeconomic levels. The community in which this ESL class was taught is among the most diverse communities in Southern California, where there are more than 20 linguistically and culturally diverse groups, including Mexican and Vietnamese immigrants. These groups have significantly higher levels of poverty, with a median income of $29,422 per year, compared to other segments of the community, with a median income of $108,652 per year. This disparity produces tension and creates the illusion that the community as a whole is thriving, but behind the scenes there are many needs that are yet to be met (Pahanish, 2017). The ESL initiative was in collaboration with

Bayside Community Center, which follows a mission to empower its diverse community, to work with the distressed, immigrant, and impoverished population, creating opportunities for leadership and promoting community action.

During meetings facilitated by the community center and the university, community members expressed the need for ESL classes. A faculty member recruited three graduate students to run the program. The participants consisted of a group ranging between 12 and 18 community leaders of Mexican and Vietnamese descent. The group comprised both men and women between the ages of 40 through 81. As a result of a small grant awarded by the university, the initiative evolved into focusing on developing leadership skills with the ultimate purpose of providing linguistic resources for participants to advocate for themselves and their community.

Objectives

Program Objectives

The program had two primary goals: (a) to provide community members with linguistic skills to address some of their basic daily needs, and (b) to provide community members with language for specific purposes with a focus on leadership skills. Below are specific objectives for both the community members and the teacher candidates who participated in this project.

Participant Objectives

Some of the objectives for the community members were:

1. To attend classes on the university campus as part of the "Open University" initiative that aimed to provide course access to community members—this program offered community members the opportunity to select and attend classes at no cost and have the choice to participate or complete requirements;
2. To acquire basic- and intermediate-level–proficiency language skills in English for listening, speaking, and writing;
3. To acquire English language with a focus on leadership and advocacy; and
4. To acquire basic computer and research skills to access information and resources for greater autonomy and improvement in their lives.

One objective that evolved during the program was for the community members to acquire basic and intermediate English language skills to carry out changemaking actions. For the purposes of this article, *changemaking* is defined as taking action to improve the world by being empathetic, collaborative, a critical thinker, and leader.

A changemaker is anyone "who has both the will and the skill to make positive change, who puts empathy in action for the good of all" (Ashoka et al., 2016, p. 11). A changemaker educator provides opportunities and facilitation for students in their journey to become agents of change by identifying a problem, imagine a solution, organize, lead others, and improve their immediate and global communities and life conditions.

For example, in the context of the initiative described here, students were provided opportunities, language, and skills to become advocates for themselves, their families, and their communities in several areas that affected their daily lives. For instance, they learned about housing rights, which included learning about tenant and landlord rights, so they can effectively advocate for themselves and other families. This issue represented a recurrent problem for many families in the community. In addition, community members expressed interest in acquiring language and knowledge on issues related to health and nutrition to improve their overall well-being.

Teacher Candidates Objectives

Some of the objectives for the teacher candidates were as follows:

1. To gain general experience in teaching English as a second language to adults within a classroom setting;
2. To gain experience developing curriculum and lesson plans according to their students' needs;
3. To identify effective and ineffective approaches and strategies;
4. To develop awareness about the immigrant communities, their assets, cultures, and challenges they face;
5. To acquire skills to work with immigrant populations in underprivileged communities; and
6. To gain experience in a collaborative/co-teaching classroom, combining styles and approaches.

Process and Challenges

Process

The project was carried out in a classroom setting at the university, where one of the three teacher candidates met the students once a week for two hours. In terms of the teaching system, for the first semester the three teacher candidates taught collaboratively, adopting co-teacher roles. For the second semester, the teacher candidates rotated weekly, providing equal practice of and experimentation with methods and strategies. One initial meeting involved the teacher candidates, the Vietnames-English community liaison, and the mentor professor in order to develop content suitable for students' needs, the lesson plans, and the curriculum. In addition, guidance and supervision were provided by a mentor professor. The process of

planning the curriculum required constant feedback from the students and the community liaison, who provided considerable input in terms of their leadership and linguistic needs. For the summer sessions, the teacher candidates alternated by themes, in which each teacher candidate would lead a sequence of classes based on the themes she developed. Once those sessions ended, the next teacher candidate would start a new series of lessons based around a new theme. This alternating teaching system proved to be the most efficient and productive for students and teacher candidates alike. By the end of the semester, only one teacher candidate taught per class period, which made lessons more cohesive. The teacher candidates worked together to ensure that all lessons were cohesive and linked by opening the lesson with a review from the previous week. As a result of co-teaching, the curriculum was taught and divided equally among the three teacher candidates.

Teacher Challenges

The primary challenge faced by the teacher candidates was the students' inconsistent attendance and their slow progress, which was due to meeting for class only once a week. In addition to limited exposure to the target language, student promptness posed a problem. Most sessions started at least 15 minutes after the scheduled starting time and as late as 25 minutes on several occasions. Another important challenge faced by the group was the fact that some students were preliterate in their native language. These students struggled significantly—as a result of their limited linguistic resources—when participating in pairs and in groups. Consequently, class activities had to be as flexible as possible by adapting and changing in the moment in order to be effective and meet the needs of all the students.

Maintaining students' motivation to attend class was also extremely challenging. Speculation and student feedback suggest that one factor for this was the students' feeling that too much homework was assigned during the short academic spring break. Also, gauging students' anxiety level and type of anxiety was a challenge. In this particular group, anxiety posed a challenge because the students were at a low proficiency level. This caused students to be dependent on the teacher and the community liaison. Brown (2007) states that "learners at beginning stages of a language will of course be somewhat dependent on the teacher, which is natural and normal" (p. 71). After approximately eight sessions, the students began to feel more comfortable participating in class, engaging in pair and group work, and asking questions directly of the teachers without seeking help from the liaison. Brown (2007) believes that "as learners gain confidence and begin to be able to experiment with language, [the teacher should] implement activities in the classroom that allow creativity, but are not completely beyond the capacity of students" (p. 71). Once the teacher candidates saw an increased

level of confidence in students' ability to speak out, they implemented more creativity into their lesson plans.

Eliciting student responses when creativity and imagination were required appeared to be more challenging than teacher candidates expected. For example, in a grammar lesson of modal verbs *should* and *shouldn't,* when asked to fill in a chart regarding what one should and should not do, students struggled with generating ideas, even after considerable time was spent on directions, modeling, and presenting necessary vocabulary. Another poignant example regarding production of creativity was with respect to journal prompts. Students were more focused on copying the examples given on the board than on creating their own sentences for their journal entries. This led the teacher candidates to believe that most of the students were not ready for creative writing and, as a result, journals were modified and prompts were no longer given. Journals were then used for language assessments, to help teacher candidates identify grammar challenges to address in future lessons, and as a communicative tool for uninhibited student writing.

Curriculum

For this project, the curriculum was developed with input from the students with the purpose of tackling their specific community leadership needs. The three teacher candidates administered different needs assessments to have an accurate understanding of the students' proficiency level regarding their four language skills: speaking, reading, listening, and writing. Additionally, the different topics covered in every class were related to the students' actual daily needs and thus were ever evolving. For example, the first 15 lessons focused on the improvement of the students' well-being and basic needs. However, the lessons thereafter began to focus on the development of the students' leadership roles within their communities per their request and need.

The curriculum consisted of 41 lessons over 41 weeks, spanning fall, spring, and summer (see Appendix). These lessons were divided into two main points of focus: (a) social language and (b) leadership and advocacy themes and language.

Lessons 1-15

The curriculum covered social language for introductions, health, and grocery shopping. Throughout these lessons students were required to label, memorize, role-play, and practice pronunciation. Additionally, students were consistently being guided by the teacher candidates for the majority of the activities. Since all three teacher candidates attended the first 15 lessons together, they were able to provide extra support and assistance, especially

in these beginning stages. During the first 10 lessons, teacher candidates, along with assistance from the Vietnamese-English community liaison, guided students in completing most of the activities.

Lessons 16-20

At the end of the first 15 lessons, the students expressed interest in improving the English language skills necessary to function in multiple social settings, for instance, for formal and informal interactions. As a result, this group of lessons focused on social language for formal and informal interactions with their neighbors and community representatives. The teacher candidates taught the students basic classroom etiquette, along with how to introduce themselves in a classroom setting. The students participated in role-play conversation to practice introducing themselves at public meetings and events.

Lessons 21-25

Lessons 21-25 also focused on social language, but for transportation purposes, such as learning the language for accessing public transportation and reading bus routes. In these lessons, students learned how to give directions and how to follow navigation.

Lessons 26-30

The instruction during this instructional section focused on leadership and advocacy development. In lessons 26-30 the students learned skills such as individual and group brainstorming. This led to students' brainstorming about issues in their communities. Teacher candidates taught and helped students explore community infrastructure and provided the vocabulary necessary for public presentations specifically related to community improvements.

Lessons 31-35

Lessons 31-35 became more student centered and less teacher dependent. These lessons focused on assisting students with debate language and skills, along with helping students learn how to take action to make improvements in their communities. The activities shifted from memorization and guided practices from the earlier lessons to independent writing and speaking activities. Lessons 31-35 provided the students the opportunity to engage in meaningful conversation during mock arguments while also being able to share opinions. The mock arguments prepared students to participate and express their concerns in actual community meetings. As a result, the students were able to learn how to agree and disagree while respecting each other's opinions. They also learned how to construct arguments in oral

and written form. The students began to further develop a sense of identity and leadership in their communities by learning public speaking skills.

Lessons 36-41

The last six lessons, 36-41, focused on compiling all the acquired skills and applying them to concrete action. Students composed a personal-business letter addressed to a local, city council member requesting and/or suggesting improvements for their communities. Accordingly, the class underwent another adaptation to meet the students' needs. During these last lessons, the class became a hybrid class with a basic computer-skill component yet still maintained the focus on leadership. These lessons concentrated on the development of appropriate written and electronic correspondence, accessing resources on the web, and familiarizing students with the different programs available on Microsoft Office Suite. The Appendix includes the agenda with class sessions.

Outcomes

Student Outcomes

Overall, with practice and guidance, and based on students' participation, students gained confidence in using the language needed for daily purposes. As a result, students' language skills increased based on informal assessments of observational data in areas such as using public transportation, going to the doctor, buying at a grocery store, and shopping at clothing stores. Some of the outcomes for students were:

1. Acquiring the language needed for interactions and communication with their children, grandchildren, and other community members who spoke a language different from theirs. Since this community contains a diverse population, English was the common denominator for our students to interact with other community members.

2. Gaining confidence to advocate for themselves, for example, by being able to write letters to civic leaders and express concern about infrastructure, rent increases, and outdoor recreational facilities. Because of students' lack of basic computer skills and limited time, they were able to dedicate lessons to improve their basic computer knowledge in hand with their language skills.

3. Developing social skills such as respect and courtesy toward each other that helped unify the class and establish a support system among its members. For instance, in this support system, students and teachers generated a safe space for students to study and make consultations for their citizenship exam. Students also learned the

definition and importance of classroom etiquette, which made the teacher candidates' expectations and rules more comprehensible. Some of the expectations included: arriving to class on time, turning off of cell phones, and not interrupting classmates when they were speaking. Along with these expectations, students learned informal and formal greetings, such as saying, "Hi, how are you?"

4. Being able to work cohesively as a group. In several instances, when the Vietnamese-English community liaison was not available, higher-proficiency–level students would intervene in assisting lower-proficiency students who were struggling in decoding and interpreting the teachers' instructions.

5. Gaining confidence and willingness to communicate in front of a larger audience. Students often participated in a large number of community meetings at local community centers. Based on feedback from the Vietnamese-English classroom community liaison, who was an active member in the students' community, students were more confident in using their English voices. The students' ability to voice their opinions at these community meetings rose significantly from passive noncommunicative involvement to active communicative participation.

6. Learning more terminology related to specific subject matters. For example, students demonstrated a greater variety of vocabulary regarding infrastructure of their neighborhood. In addition, they became more aware of the proper jargon to officially request improvements for their local community.

7. Decreasing inhibitions about making errors. Students demonstrated increased ability to experiment and show a variety of speech divergent from models introduced by the three teacher candidates.

Teacher Candidates Outcomes
Through the process, the teacher candidates:

1. Were able to implement theory learned in graduate courses into practice. For instance, teacher candidates put into practice constructivism by putting "emphasis on social interaction" among students (Brown, 2014, p. 12). In one activity, students were asked to role-play scenes from a variety of social settings, such as an informal family gathering and a formal town hall meeting, in which high interaction was fundamental.

2. Developed close connections with the students who regularly attended the class and gained a better understanding of the Vietnamese and Mexican immigrant experience in the US. For example, teacher candidates learned how religion played an important part

in their students' daily lives. Most of their Vietnamese students regularly attended temple, sometimes several times a week if not daily.

3. Rotated in being responsible for leading classes. This system allowed them to further develop their own style of teaching, to refine their teaching philosophy, and to explore and experiment with different strategies and methods. For example, all teacher candidates incorporated parts of Freire's (2005) teaching philosophy. This included ideas related to becoming agents of change in their profession and acting as political agents to help guide their students into helping themselves for the good of the community.

4. Learned about and practiced community engagement by leading an initiative in their university's community.

Reflection and Recommendations

This pilot program was instrumental in providing insight about the challenges ESL teachers face when using constructivist methods with older immigrant students. These students were accustomed to "receive, file and store deposits" of information (Freire, 2005, p. 72), which hindered their ability to be creative and imaginative. For example, any activity that required the students to generate their own ideas or sentences often required twice the modeling and allotted time. Future lesson plans were adjusted accordingly after discovering this particular challenge.

The teacher candidates also gained insight about factors that increase or decrease student attendance. Students felt discouraged by the amount of homework that was assigned during the academic spring break. To motivate students to come back, teacher candidates constantly emphasized that assigned work was not graded and that it was for the sole purpose of improving their linguistic skills and competency. As a result, the number of students attending gradually increased but never reached the average number experienced during the beginning of the program. This program demonstrated the importance of involving the learners in developing their ESL curriculum and to take ownership of their learning. Because of the fact that the curriculum and lesson plans were developed with the students' and the Vietnamese community liasion's input, the teacher candidates were able to tackle the students' linguistic and leadership needs more effectively.

One suggestion for those who want to create a program such as this would be to remain in constant communication with their students in order to understand how they want to apply their English skills in the real world. Getting to know the students' community and daily activities provided the teachers with significant and meaningful input for the elaboration of their lesson plans and curriculum.

Additionally, teachers should keep in mind their students' proficiency levels and autonomy in the second language, especially when homework

cannot be completed independently. The students who participated in this program resented the amount of unguided homework and, perhaps because of cultural assumptions, they did not feel comfortable attending class with incomplete assignments.

Another important suggestion is for teachers to be flexible and adapt to their students' needs and learning styles. This program began with a set of goals and objectives that kept changing and adapting according to what was considered more appropriate for this specific group. It was also important to establish expectations in the beginning of the semester. The teacher candidates discovered that this was the first English class for some of the students. It was also some of the students' first class in America. The teacher candidates had to discuss cultural norms and demonstrate basic elementary skills with the students, such as raising their hands to speak and not interrupting their classmates.

The initiative provided teacher candidates an extended practical opportunity they would not have had as part of their TESOL program. Building this initiative was rewarding and helpful for the teacher candidates to grow as changemakers as well. Teacher candidates were able to take action on collaborating and supporting their students to empower themselves as biliterate leaders who can improve their community through the use of language.

Authors

Viviana Alexandrowicz is an associate professor at the University of San Diego. Her areas of expertise include TESOL, bilingual education, and K-12 English language learners education. She is also a change leader for Ashoka U for Changemaking in Teacher Education.

Aureen Andres is a master's graduate from the University of San Diego in the M.Ed in TESOL, Literacy, and Culture Program. Her work at the University of California, San Diego's International Center's English-in-Action Program for the past six years has supported her belief in inclusivity.

Carli Danaher is a M.Ed in TESOL, Literacy, and Culture graduate from the University of San Diego. She received her bachelor's degree in English literature at Saint Xavier University in Chicago, Illinois.

Paz Valdivia, M.Ed. from the University of San Diego, is an adjunct ESL professor at Grossmont College, in San Diego. She has six years of ESL and EFL teaching experience, including teaching in Santiago, Chile. Paz is also a citizenship instructor, teaching new Hispanic residents how to be ready for their naturalization process. Paz feels a huge commitment to her community, understanding the importance of language learning as a means for social justice.

References

Ashoka. (2019). *Ashoka changemaker schools.* Retrieved from https://www .ashoka.org/en-us/program/ashoka-changemaker-schools

Ashoka: Innovators for the Public, Hodne, P., Liu, T., Lloyd, A., Lyon, S., Owen, R., ... Zakaras, M. (2016). *Changemakers: Educating with purpose: By educators for educators.* Alexandria, VA: Star Empathy, Ashoka.

Brown, D. H. (2007). *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy.* White Plains, NY: Pearson Education.

Brown, D. H. (2014). *Principles of language learning and teaching: A course in second language acquisition.* White Plains, NY: Pearson Education.

Freire, P. (2005). *Pedagogy of the oppressed.* New York, NY: Continuum.

Pahanish, C. (2017). *Mindfully impacting transformation: Mindfulness strategies for an adult leadership academy in a low-income community* (Doctoral dissertation). San Diego, CA: University of San Diego.

Appendix
Curriculum

Lesson	Primary focus and theme	Secondary focus	Activity/assessments
1-5	Social Language: Introductions and Getting to Know Each Other	• Assessment • Expectations	• Ice-breaker • Who are your classmates? • The importance of journal writing • Pronunciation practices for intelligibility
6-10	Social Language: Health	• Telephone etiquette • How to make an appointment • Hospital visits	• Labeling body parts • Various ways to describe your illness, symptoms, concerns • Role-play at doctor's office
11-15	Social Language: Shopping at Grocery Store	• How to communicate effectively when shopping	• The price of items activity • What is this? Where can I find? activity • Asking for help • Item identification • Role-play shopping
16-20	Social Language: Formal and Informal Interactions	• Classroom etiquette • How to introduce yourself in multiple settings • Public speaking and language	• Should you and shouldn't you activity • Practicing speeches at public meetings and events • Role-play
21-25	Social Language: Transportation	• How to take public transportation • Reading bus routes	• Commuter terminology activity • How to give directions • How to follow navigation
26-30	Leadership and Advocacy: Improvements in the Community	• Learning vocabulary related to the community • Learning vocabulary related to infrastructure	• Individual and group brainstorming • Collaborative work on poster • Group presentations

31-35	Leadership and Advocacy: Debate Language and Skills	• Constructing an argument	• Journal writing • Think/pair/share • Agree/disagree activity
36-41	Leadership and Advocacy: From Thinking to Action; Introduction to Basic Computer Skills	• Formal letter writing • Public speaking (continued) • Basic computer skills	• Personal and formal correspondence • Eight parts of a personal-business letter • Letter "What I want to change in my community" • How to access information on the web • Google and YouTube • Email versus letters