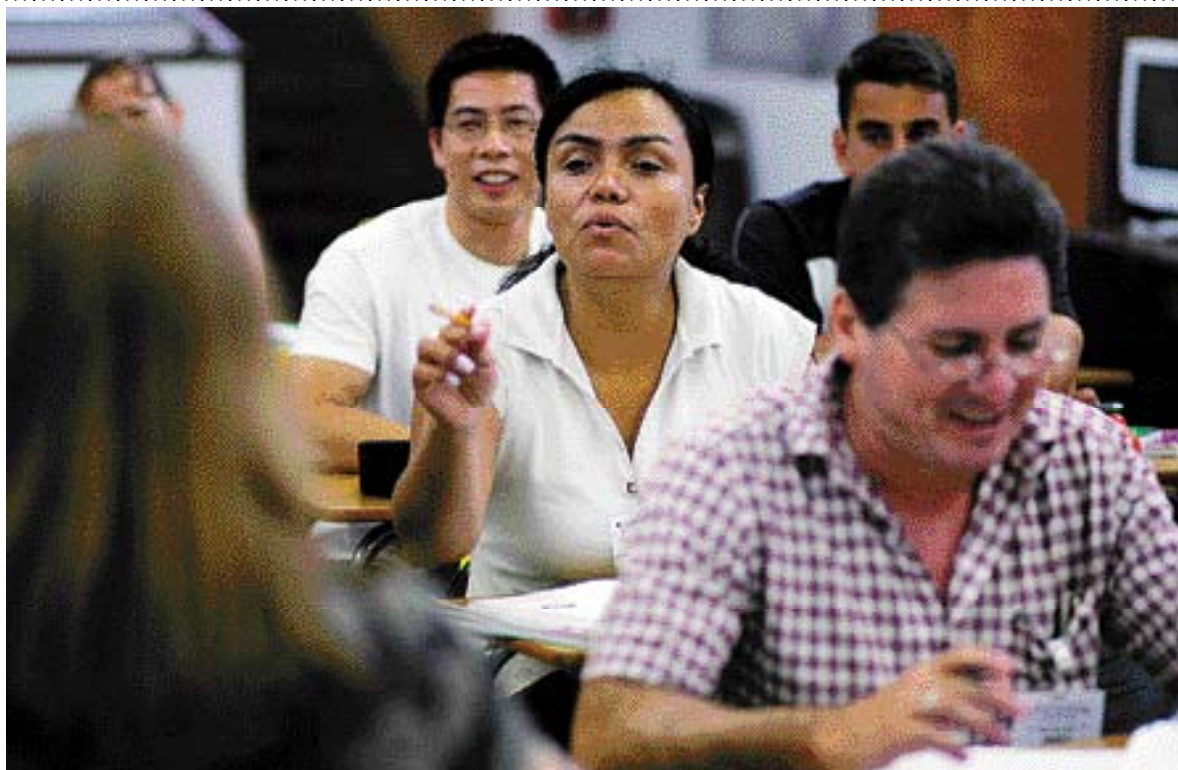


Learning English

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The lucky few... English language students take part in an adult education class in Miami Joe Raedle/Getty

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Migrants offered portal to language

With arrivals to the US struggling to find places in oversubscribed English language courses, the federal government is hoping that an online learning programme will bridge the gap, says **Marjorie Vai**

In the aftermath of the Bush administration's failed immigration bill this summer, which sought, among a range of measures, to make the government responsible for enhancing English as "the language of the United States", has come reason for hope for migrants desperate to learn English but unable to access classes for lack of funding.

By August much of the administration's 26-point plan for immigration reform was dead in the water, but George Bush was able to announce that one proposal, for an online English language programme called USA Learns, aimed at providing out-of-class support for adult migrants, was on track for delivery in 2008.

Plans for the USA Learns web portal were laid in 2005 when the Department of Education (DoE) Office of Vocational and Adult Education, awarded the Institute of Social Research at the University of Michigan and the Sacramento County Office of Education (SCOE) a contract to develop new English language learning resources.

According to SCOE two prototype

20-unit English courses will be ready next spring for field testing with students. The courses will cover the first two levels of the six-level National Reporting System (NRS) for Adult Education. If judged successful, the programme will be available to learners across the US from September.

The DoE says that USA Learns is being funded independently of federal spending allocated to individual states and with supplementary funding provided by the state of California. According to Daniel Miller, deputy director for adult education and literacy at DoE, the online course will rely on two existing programmes, English For All and Putting English to Work, which will be restructured to provide most of the curriculum for the project.

John Fleischman, director of technology services at SCOE and a lead developer on the project says that a priority is to make the programme easily accessible to migrants.

"The prototype is in essence a learning management system that will offer a wide range of functions and capabilities.

Unlike popular learning management systems, such as Blackboard and Moodle, this system is being designed specifically for adult learners with limited English language and literacy skills," he says.

"The prototype will include 15 different activity types, a range of communication and collaboration tools, and a variety of administrative functions and tools."

USA Learns' online learning component is intended to work in parallel with the classes-based courses that most adult learners currently access.

Keeping USA Learns relevant to current in-class teaching is vital, says Erik Gundersen, editorial director for English as a second language publications at the education publisher McGraw-Hill.

"In adult school districts, such as Miami-Dade, that have developed extensive computer labs, online learning materials pegged to the six NRS levels would be a very helpful supplement to classroom instruction," he says. "However, as language learning

demand a social and interactive context to be effective, it's important to note that online learning is rarely used in effective ways as a primary form of instruction."

But the impending launch of USA Learns has not put to rest pressing concerns about the state of English language training for migrants. In 2004 the DoE began breaking down federal funding for adult basic education to include a category for "English language and civics education". In that year the foreign-born population of the US stood at 34.2 million and the federal government allocated \$69.1m to English and civics training. This year that budget stood at \$67.9m.

According to James Parker, an adult learning consultant and former coordinator for work-place education at the US Department of Education, federal funding has been in long-term decline, with individual states having to self fund.

"Just one state, California, spends more state funds on adult education in one year than the federal

Learning English

Proof of character demanded before entry

South Korea responds to fears about bogus foreign teachers with draconian visa rules

James Card

Are you HIV positive? Do you have a criminal record? Is your bachelor's degree real? Are you a drug abuser? New visa laws to be implemented by South Korea next week have set foreign English language teachers scrambling to prove they do not have Aids nor are coke-snorting felons.

Native speakers of English who intend to teach English in South Korea will be required to provide an affidavit of any criminal convictions, undergo a medical and drug test, provide sealed academic transcripts and have their university diplomas inspected. The rules will affect an estimated 17,000 foreign English instructors that hold an E-2 visa specifically for EFL teachers.

The most controversial requirement is that English teachers residing outside Korea will have to have an interview at a Korean embassy or consulate before they take up their teaching posts. For applicants living in remote rural area in Canada, Australia or the US, this is seen as an additional travel burden. Meanwhile teachers currently living in Korea must leave the country after their one-year contract ends and renew their visa at a Korean embassy in their home country or third country.

The visa changes are likely to slow up the supply of teachers to South Korea's English language-hungry private education sector. Currently a background check from the US Federal Bureau of Investigation takes about four months. Other countries and jurisdiction vary greatly.

"Teachers wanting to go to Korea for the first time will be turned off," said



A banner at a primary school in Changwon, South Korea, warns foreign teachers not to work illegally James Card

Michael Duffy, manager of a teacher placement service, Duff Recruiting. "There will be a drop in teachers and getting affidavits for documents can cost a few hundred dollars. Korea has put up too many hoops to jump through," he said, adding that teachers would seek work elsewhere.

The visa changes are a reaction to mounting public concern about the suitability of some foreign teachers. In October Canadian Christopher Paul Neil was arrested in Thailand on suspicion of sexually abusing boys in Vietnam and Cambodia. Neil had fled South Korea where he had been teaching English for four years.

Last month Korean authorities deported a 55-year-old American teacher working in Changwon in the south of the country. The man was on a sex offenders watch list for a previous child pornography conviction in Los Angeles. It was the first time South Korea had deported a teacher for having a criminal record in another country.

This autumn, MP Min Byung-du released a report from the ministry of education stating that more than 106 foreign English teachers in Korea's public school system are working illegally by not having a four-year college degree. Between 2001 and August of this year, 1,481 foreign language teachers have been caught for a range of offences including forged degrees, visa violations and general lawbreaking.

According to a ministry of justice statement, the rules are intended to "prevent native English teachers who disrupt social order with taking drugs, committing sexual harassment and alcohol intoxication".

The anticipated shortage of approved teachers will hit the legitimate teaching sector, but demand for lessons is such that many foreigners will continue working illegally on tourist visas. These teachers usually work at cram schools for under-the-table cash or in private tutoring.

"I don't think Korea has thought

this through," said Scott McInnis, a Canadian teacher based in Incheon near Seoul. "This is a reactionary move by the government that will have strong implications for the EFL community. Simply put, good teachers won't go, and the others will say 'it's not worth the hassle' and teach somewhere else."

Many teachers are wondering if the experience of working in South Korea will be worth the burden of the paperwork and increasing restrictions. For example, E-2 visa holders are not allowed to change jobs without their employer's permission, even if working conditions are abusive or corrupt.

According to the ministry of justice, activities undertaken in teachers' spare time, such as playing in a rock band that performs at a local bar or volunteering at an orphanage, violate E-2 visa rules. Last year, nine foreign English instructors in Busan, on Korea's south coast, were arrested for putting on a comedy performance.

Migrants offered portal to English

«Continued from page 1 government allocates for all 50 states and territories combined," he says.

The shortage of money has meant that English programmes are struggling to keep up with growing demand. Earlier this year The New York Times reported that in 12 states, "60% of the free English programmes had waiting lists, ranging from a few months in Colorado and Nevada to as long as two years in New Mexico and Massachusetts."

ProLiteracy, the national adult literacy organisation, says that almost all of its 1,200 local member literacy programmes have waiting lists.

Fleischman remains optimistic that USA Learns will help to bridge the training gap. "Although developing a comprehensive web resource for adult learners with limited English language skills is a challenging venture, the potential of using technology to extend the reach of adult education presents an exciting opportunity to have a sig-

nificant impact on literacy in the US."

Rochelle Cassella of ProLiteracy is more cautious about the role of USA Learns. "While technology is a necessary and forward-looking enhancement to Esol study it cannot totally replace classroom learning. Students need to be in classes where conversations take place to develop their communication skills. It would be difficult for online study to serve the needs of students who are not literate in their first language. Today, 60% of immi-

grants coming to the US are Hispanic. Many of them are young men between the ages of 18 to 32 who are not literate in Spanish," she says.

"Also, online training may not be helpful to immigrants, such as the Chinese and Arabs, whose language does not share the same writing system as English. To study online one must have access to both a computer and the internet. For the neediest immigrants this may be an insurmountable problem."