



What is *U.S.A. Learns*?

U.S.A. Learns is a free Web site funded by the U.S. Department of Education to support immigrants who want to learn or improve their English skills as they become part of American society.

The Web site consists of three unique programs:

First English Course: a 20-unit, video-based beginner-level course

Second English Course: a 17-unit, video-based intermediate-level course

Practice English and Reading: 42 intermediate-level stories and activities

Designed as an online tool for learning English outside of a classroom, the site offers contextualized practice activities in listening, reading, writing, speaking and life skills necessary for success at work and in the community.

All instructional materials are online; there are no videos or workbooks to purchase.

Features of *U.S.A Learns*

- High-quality video with topics, characters and situations that reflect the challenges of immigrants in U.S. society
- A wide variety of activity types offering rich media – video, images, and audio files
- Picture dictionary with over 460 high-quality photographs and audio
- Definitions and vocabulary practice for over 800 words
- Units organized by thematic topics
- Immediate feedback in comprehension checks
- Scoring and quizzes
- Simple navigation requiring little or no orientation
- Animated Introduction narration available in English and Spanish
- Animated Help screens
- Recordkeeping and bookmarking of a student's last activity
- Management site for teachers or tutors to monitor student progress



The Intended Audience

The need for English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction in the United States far outstrips what classroom programs can provide. About 11 million adults need ESL instruction, and less than 15% are in adult education classes where English is taught. Many classroom programs are overwhelmed by the need, so much so that 56% of adult education ESL programs in the U.S. report having waiting lists—some as long as three years! *U.S.A. Learns* provides an important resource to help alleviate this shortage.

U.S.A. Learns has been developed primarily for immigrant adults with limited English language skills who cannot attend traditional classroom programs because of difficulty with schedules, transportation, or other barriers. The potential learner might work from home or a public library.

English Skill Levels

The *First English Course* is intended for beginning-level learners functioning at NRS levels 2-3. These students are often considered Low Beginning to High Beginning ESL. Some aspects of the course may be considered NRS 1. (ESL Literacy)

The *Second English Course* is intended for learners functioning at NRS levels 4-5, generally considered Low Intermediate to High Intermediate ESL. Some aspects of this course may contain slightly lower and higher level material.

A broad range of intermediate-level readers, not only immigrants, will benefit from the activities in the *Practice English and Reading* section. The stories in this section are designed to build vocabulary and comprehension skills.



Computer Skills and Technical Requirements

Learners do not need advanced computer skills to use *U.S.A. Learns*. Simple navigation through all the menus and activities makes it accessible to learners with basic computer skills and limited schooling in their native country.

Basic Prerequisite Computer Skills:

- Mouse: click and scroll
- Keyboard: letters, punctuation, backspace, shift key, space bar
- Web browser: open a browser, navigate a basic Web site, click buttons and links
- Use of microphone is optional

Hardware Requirements

The *U.S.A. Learns* Web site is accessible from almost any computer with a fast Internet connection. *U.S.A. Learns* will not operate via a dial-up modem connection.

Learners need a computer with:

- fast broadband Internet connection (384 Kpbs or faster)
- up-to-date Web browser with the Flash plug-in
- sound card
- speakers or headphones

A microphone connected to the computer is recommended for Speaking practice, but use of the microphone is optional. Students can complete the Speaking practice activities without a microphone.

The site has been designed as a distance learning Web site for use on home broadband connections and it is *not recommended* for use in school computer labs.



The Conceptual Framework of *U.S.A. Learns*

The combination of sound, visuals and context in video make it a powerful and motivating language-learning tool. For this reason, video was chosen as the basis for the two ESL courses on the *U.S.A. Learns* Web site.

The First English Course is based on the video *Putting English to Work 1* developed by the Los Angeles Unified School District. The video has been reworked to fit the requirements of Web-based instruction. The Second English Course is a rework of the popular *English For All* online series.

While the videos provide context, sequence and language, the site's online activities provide the opportunity for learner interaction, practice and mastery of the content. The activities allow learners to read and listen to the script multiple times; complete activities to demonstrate understanding and listening comprehension; practice speaking, writing and life skills using new vocabulary and structures in the context of the topics.

The online activities for these two courses were written by a small team of adult E.S.L. educators. The approach of the activities was guided by the following beliefs:

- Language learning is most effective when it is developed using listening, speaking, reading and writing skills.
- Comprehensible input, clues that are visual or contextual in meaning increases learners' comprehension even when no native language support is available.
- Language acquisition occurs through meaningful use and interaction with contextualized, authentic language that is within (or just beyond) the student's level of linguistic competence.
- Language and literacy develop through interactions with tasks that require critical thinking.
- Opportunities for authentic communication enhance language learning.
- Multiple video viewings and listening opportunities combined with focused tasks increase comprehension.



The Role of Teachers and Tutors with U.S.A. Learns

U.S.A. Learns is designed primarily for distance learning, away from the traditional classroom. One of the appeals of distance learning is the freedom it gives students to study at their own pace and at times and places convenient to their busy everyday schedules. However, it also removes the social support of a classroom teacher and fellow students who offer encouragement, feedback and motivation. Teachers and tutors of *U.S.A. Learns* need to develop ways to support and motivate students to stay focused on their learning needs and goals in the online learning environment.

Strategies for Teaching Distance Learners

The teacher of distant learners monitors, guides, suggests, encourages, and hopefully motivates the learner from a distance. Strategies for teaching *U.S.A. Learns* distance learners include:

Monitor student progress with the *U.S.A. Learns* management system

While *U.S.A. Learns* is not designed for class use in a lab, a tutor or teacher can use the Web site's learning management system to create an online class. The site enables educators to view students' work and provide feedback online.

Teacher management features allow teachers to

- create an online class.
- monitor student's progress and scores.
- score and comment on writing assignments.
- post messages to the online class.
- print an instruction document to help learners sign into the online class.

To access the management system, go to usalearns.org/teacher. Students enrolled in an online class with a teacher go to usalearns.org/class.

Guide students through content and assignments

U.S.A. Learns provides sequenced units and activities that allow students to work through the content independently. Though there is a recommended sequence, a teacher could guide a student through the materials in a fashion that best meets the learner's individual goals. For example, in the Second Course students could complete the topics in a different order to better suit their personal language learning needs. Teachers might also suggest readings from the *Practice English and Reading* section to supplement topics covered in the First Course or Second Course.



Motivate and encourage students

A critical issue for any adult education program is the ability to keep students involved. Teachers may need to develop new ways to motivate and support their online students to avoid feelings of isolation. Some effective ways to support and motivate students include:

- Provide prompt feedback. Try to respond within 48 hours, at least to let the student know you have received the work and will respond shortly.
- Send emails that ask questions and prompt students to think about their goals and offer support.
- Send an e-card or email on a regular basis encouraging students and praising accomplishments.
- Telephone students to learn more about students' goals and concerns.
- Establish telephone "office hours" during which you are available to take students' calls.
- Offer drop-in times for students who want assistance from a teacher "in person."
- Telephone students who have not been active for a period of time to encourage them to stay with the program.
- Provide completion certificates for pre-determined units of work.
- Encourage students to study with a family member or friend.
- Offer assistance to students in finding information or sites on the Internet that could extend their understanding and/or practice of the unit topic.

About the *U.S.A. Learns* Project

U.S.A. Learns was an outgrowth of a project that was conceived by the U.S. Department of Education (ED), Office of Vocational and Adult Education, Division of Adult Education and Literacy (DAEL). Core funding for *U.S.A. Learns* was provided by ED. Additional funding for *U.S.A. Learns* was made available by the California Department of Education, Office of Adult Education.

DAEL promotes programs that help American adults get the basic skills they need to be productive workers, family members, and citizens. The major areas of support are Adult Basic Education, Adult Secondary Education, and English Language Acquisition. These programs emphasize basic skills such as reading, writing, math, English language competency and problem-solving.

The opinions expressed in the articles and Web pages included in this project do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, Division of Adult Education and Literacy. The inclusion of resources should not be construed or interpreted as an endorsement by the agencies of any private organization or business.