Introduction
The “English for Workers” program of the Center for Immigrant Education and Training (CIET) of LaGuardia’s Division of Adult and Continuing Education (ACE) has recently been renamed “English for Careers.” This seemingly insignificant change represents an important shift in our approach to workplace ESOL. Unlike the long-term academic goals of ESOL students planning to enter LaGuardia’s credit programs, the objectives of CIET students are immediate: our students must learn basic English to work and they must work to survive. If their English does not improve beyond the basic level, their economic opportunities will not improve either.

In search of increased economic opportunities and freedoms, many CIET students arrive in New York with little or no English, obliged to start life over again in a culture that is unfamiliar and, at times, perhaps, unwelcoming. Those who find their way to our program are from opposite ends of the educational spectrum. At one end are those with professional licensure or multiple degrees earned in their native countries: social workers, architects, or managers. At the other end are migrant workers; some may never have worked at all.

Cutting across all groups is the single characteristic of limited English proficiency (LEP). Stuck on the wrong side of the language barrier, his or her sense of identity and confidence diminished by the trials of immigration, a person of limited English proficiency usually accepts almost any work at all. Without English, the nurse or lawyer who sacrificed a prestigious position and social status at home and the factory worker with less than a fifth-grade education both end up trapped in a relentless cycle of low-paying jobs. Regardless of class and education, whether from Egypt or Ecuador, China or Colombia, CIET students are aware that limited English proficiency affects the kinds of employment, level of earnings, and amount of benefits available to them.
Since its inception, CIET’s mission has been to improve the economic status of students, supporting the efforts of low-income immigrant adults to become independent, contributing citizens of New York City by providing them with free courses in basic English, career counseling, and case management services (LaGuardia). In addition, the Center customizes programs for special purposes, such as family literacy, civics education, and workforce development. Driven in part by a shift from a need for manual workers to a demand for those adept at customer service, CIET’s programs have evolved to meet workforce demands. In 2002, one of the first specialized projects that CIET took on was the provision of English classes to displaced factory workers in Long Island City.

In July 2005, CIET was awarded a $500,000 demonstration grant by the United States Department of Labor to create and implement a curriculum to advance back-of-the-house LEP workers in the hospitality industry (housekeepers, laundry workers, and food service staff) to more customer-service-oriented positions (“President’s”). Our partner in this project was the Sheraton Hotel whose primary objective was to prepare these workers to assume higher-level, front-of-the-house positions, such as front-desk agents, concierges, information desk employees, and wait-staff, all of which would require greater customer interaction. To earn promotions, workers needed to learn to project Sheraton’s corporate philosophy of “a thriving and dynamic service culture that is both inclusive and respectful” (“Sheraton”). Clearly, for those who wanted to move up from their invisible positions in the back of the hotel to the more challenging and interactive positions out front, representing that message meant achieving improved performance in English language communication as well as mastering other skills related to customer service. The collaboration between CIET and the Sheraton resulted in the Hotel TEACH curriculum (Teaching English and Careers in Hospitality), a teaching model that integrates English, career counseling, and technology.

The Hotel TEACH curriculum was written by a team of teachers and administrators, including the authors, an ESOL instructor and a career counselor. At CIET, we recognized the real economic and social problems facing our LEP working students. We resolved to create a comprehensive course in contextualized English that aimed to raise levels of English acquisition and redirect career choices. Our ultimate challenge, however, was to prepare our students to envision entry-level positions not as end points, but as openings to professional futures.
To meet these goals, we designed Hotel TEACH around three primary competencies and created individual lessons that stressed practice in communication skills, emotional intelligence, and technological proficiency, the key performance areas in which today’s professional must remain competitive. Structured this way, we believed, Hotel TEACH would help facilitate the transition from worker to professional. The following is a brief examination of the course, our students, and their progress.

The Course
In response to the requirements of the Department of Labor grant, CIET designed the Hotel TEACH integrated curriculum, using a strategy motivated by research that concluded that “the most effective programs for moving low-income individuals into work . . . provide a mix of services, including job search, education, and job training” (Wrigley et al. 1). The course was designed to integrate the diverse needs of the students and the specific goals of the employer by combining improvement in English language skills with the acquisition of soft skills needed for front-of-the-house hotel jobs.

The course met for 10 hours per week, from Monday to Thursday, for 16 weeks during the Spring 2006 semester. On three nights, after their work shift, 22 Sheraton workers traveled from the hotel to LaGuardia for computer lessons and English classes. On the fourth evening, class consisted of two parts, a career counseling session and an English class, each given by a different instructor. These two parts were held at the Sheraton on 50th Street and Seventh Avenue in Manhattan, in an executive conference room complete with water, mints, and Sheraton stationery provided by the supportive management. At both LaGuardia and the Sheraton, classes were supplemented by Internet and Blackboard resources, and MP3 players received as part of the grant. The technological resources allowed students to download lessons or practice independently.

The Hotel TEACH students had worked in the hospitality industry for an average of 10 years or more. Some of them, like Maritzabel and Sylvia, wanted to move to upper-level positions. Others, like Steven, an immigrant from China, worked in the laundry room and did not care to be promoted. His goal was to learn about computers and communicate with his non-Chinese coworkers, thereby meeting a secondary Sheraton objective to create more cohesive and collaborative work teams. An unplanned outcome was that self-sufficient students working toward
accomplishing their own life goals would also become happier, more productive, and more enthusiastic Sheraton employees.

The three components of the Hotel TEACH curriculum (English, career counseling, and technology) complemented one another in a variety of ways. As the course instructors, we knew that in addition to improving their English, our students would have to think critically about career choices and learn the professional skills necessary to advance in the hospitality industry.

Career Counseling
Unlike traditional models of career counseling that focus solely on resume creation and interview preparation, our Hotel TEACH course used career counseling sessions to help students increase language proficiency and confidence by using English in multiple interpersonal exchanges. The weekly career counseling session reinforced English-language learning through lessons that addressed active listening, conflict resolution, and teamwork, as well as skill in managing stress, and building self-awareness and self-esteem.

As described by Daniel Goleman, these interpersonal skills, widely known as “soft skills,” are some of the key features of emotional intelligence. These competencies are increasingly ranked by employers as most important for professional growth and success (5), and employees who lack these competencies often remain at the bottom of the ladder. Sylvia, for example, had worked in the housekeeping department for many years, but her ambition was to become a manager of that department. Adept at the “hard skills” needed to do her job, Sylvia performed her duties efficiently and thoroughly. However, her short temper and self-described anger problem kept her from advancing. She was quick to get into conflicts with her coworkers, driven perhaps by the difficult nature of her work and a perceived lack of appreciation from hotel guests and management. She held on to resentment that, at times, revealed itself in nonprofessional ways. Once, when a hotel guest addressed her as “Maid,” Sylvia’s response was immediate and defensive: “Excuse me; I am not your maid!”

In class, Sylvia’s frustration with the guests was shared among her fellow students, many of whom felt the same way as she. Sylvia’s experience became material for instruction. The class established ground rules for discussion and confidentiality, allowing important tensions to be worked on safely. In small groups, using Sylvia’s experience as an example, students brainstormed ways to respond positively and
negatively to confrontational situations, identifying outcomes for each response. Our conversations permitted students to talk openly about their own struggles with communication in English with the perception that they were intellectually inferior. To illustrate this perception, we discussed the use of the word “maid” as an insult. To the students in our class, the label “maid,” unlike the word “Miss” or “Mister,” connoted subservience and reinforced a common stereotype of immigrant workers. “We are with the housekeeping department,” they said. “We are not maids.” Sylvia’s anger and frustration were invaluable to teaching both the central concept of self-awareness and the dangers of taking personally remarks made by hotel guests.

In a follow-up class, we assigned role-plays in which students acted out customer-service conflicts and used a student-generated rubric to score key customer-service coping skills, such as maintaining eye contact, expressing verbal and nonverbal cues that indicate attentiveness to the guest, paraphrasing what was said to ensure that the message was received, and, of course, taking a deep breath if negative feelings arise. In additional lessons focused on empathic listening and maintaining a professional demeanor, we discussed the cultural expectations of American professionalism.

As foreigners in this country and outsiders in the professional sector, the students had not previously been oriented to these workplace norms. They knew how to keep their jobs; they understood that part of any job sometimes is to be on the receiving end of a rude guest or a stressed-out manager. What our students wanted to learn was how to move past the rudeness and the stress, both figuratively and literally.

In the end, the essential lesson of career counseling was that in addition to limited language proficiency, the true barrier to professional advancement for our students was their limiting beliefs about their own abilities. Career counseling helped students to address these barriers and to explore personal strengths, encouraging them to identify and deal with negative assumptions that reduced their potential for promotion and for “making it” in an English-only environment. To challenge limiting thoughts, students created counter-statements, an effective technique of cognitive restructuring. For example, “Learning English is difficult” became “I am learning more English every day;” “I am too old to change my job” became “I am able to change my job.” Students learned that “you are what you think you are”: If they wanted to be professionals, the students first had to envision themselves in that role.
Integrating English into Hospitality Work

Incorporating the soft skills learned in the career counseling sessions, the English class focused on listening, pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary within hotel situations. We also adapted the S T A R T curriculum created by the American Hotel and Lodging Educational Institute for its Lodging Management Program (American; Redman, and Richards 31–64), shaping the course to address the Sheraton’s specific needs. Students completed surveys about their work and communication goals; in turn, we used this information to identify topics and create lessons. For example, in response to a student request to learn how to interrupt supervisors, we designed a lesson that identified the grammatical structures, functions, and vocabulary appropriate to the situation.

The course opened with the basics of greeting guests, and concluded with lessons that targeted communicating with guests who expressed anger on the phone or in person (“Hotel T.E.A.C.H. Project Curriculum”). We addressed the register of speaking, guiding students to note the difference between informal and formal or professional speech. For example, our students needed to practice using more polite expressions such as “What would you like?” rather than the more abrupt “What do you want?” In addition, Sheraton management wanted employees to learn the art of chatting, the ability to make small talk with a guest or supervisor while, say, waiting for an elevator. An interesting, secondary outcome was that students found that the approach to coping with workplace issues influenced the way they dealt with family issues. For example, the “Apologize, Sympathize, Accept Responsibility, and Prepare to Help (ASAP)” method, a strategy used to calm angry guests (“How to Handle”), was useful at home, too. For Maritzabel, the techniques that now made her a more active listener at the Sheraton were improving her relationship with her teenage son.

The integration of English into workforce training was often accomplished through projects and inquiry-based learning that required basic levels of critical thinking skills. For example, e-mailed assignments required attentiveness and independence: students had to open the e-mail, read the instructions, and then follow the steps to complete the activity. In this way, they learned how to write “Thank You” e-mails, too. Task complete, students reviewed the e-mail’s required components before sending it on to the addressee at the hotel. This approach inspired the students to use their newly acquired knowledge, problem-solving, and critical thinking strategies to improve their situation at work.
Because the students were able to relate these language lessons to their daily work, they were more engaged in the course. One evening, a student who had never before given directions to a guest came in and said, “I explained to a guest how to get to the ladies’ room today and she understood me!” For Maritzabel, who wanted to move from banquet server to captain, lessons on how to speak to guests were enlightening. She remarked that she could not believe the difference between “need to” and “have to.” She had been giving guests directions using “have to” and now realized why guests had not looked pleased. She learned that “have to” sounded like an order as opposed to the softer or more polite “need to.” The accumulation of seemingly small successes at work contributed to a greater sense of happiness and control. Students attended our class regularly; they did not want to miss a lesson.

Technology and the Sense of Professionalism
Although the Hotel TEACH technology component covered a considerable amount of material, the students’ motivation was kept high by the awareness that they needed computer skills to advance in their careers. In addition to three scheduled hours of computer lab per week, Hotel TEACH students, like students all over LaGuardia, often accessed the Blackboard classroom and the Internet from their home computers, thus practicing and reinforcing their technology skills, learning to upload and download lessons to their MP3 players, setting up e-mail accounts, writing resumes, and explaining the steps of these processes to their classmates. In class, as the students worked together on an assortment of projects, the lab became a communal environment: Using Microsoft Publisher, students designed “Certificates of Appreciation” for their managers, printing them out in color on glossy paper. Creating Excel spreadsheets, they drew up monthly budgets, getting in some extra practice on the four basic math functions along the way.

Our use of the MP3 player suggested new avenues for workforce training. By using the MP3 players, we could extend the class, address varying skill levels, and individualize lessons for students who worked in different areas of the Sheraton. Our students were amused that their fellow subway riders most likely assumed they were listening to music hits when, in reality, they were memorizing irregular verbs! We also developed our own podcast lessons so that students could download pronunciation or listening exercises (Thomsen). One example of individualized podcasts was “Intro to Wines & Spirits, Part 1,” designed in
response to Maritzabel, who needed to work on her pronunciation. As she was the only banquet server in this class, we were able to help her pronounce the names of a variety of wines and liquors without having to take extra time from the rest of the class. The students would sometimes practice the podcast lesson in class and later download it at home to review it at their convenience. The online podcast site is available for any other instructor to download or use. Currently, there are thirteen podcasts to choose from, on a variety of workplace situations.

At the end of the course, happy with his job in the laundry room and his ability to chat with his coworkers, Steven found that technology gave him even greater opportunities to send e-mails to friends and family all over the world. Other students, like Maritzabel and Sylvia, were able to complete online applications and submit resumes for the jobs they wanted. Significantly, eighty percent of the participants in this course made one to two level gains in English as measured by the BEST Plus test of oral English proficiency, which is recognized by New York State. We speculate that the patterning necessary to master specific computer tasks such as saving or recording procedures may have contributed to students’ gains in English acquisition, given that as they practiced computer skills, they worked as well on identifying sentence structure or pronunciation patterns.

Conclusion
As described earlier, we designed Hotel TEACH’s three-component curriculum and piloted it as part of a Department of Labor demonstration grant. Course outcomes indicate that the Hotel TEACH cleared a transitional path for the students’ shift from worker to professional, first, by clarifying real world expectations and second, by providing concrete occasions for students to practice necessary competencies. Students increased their skill levels in English and technology; they demonstrated higher awareness of the emotional intelligence and social skills essential to advance in many sectors of the customer-service workforce. Although confidence and self-growth are difficult to quantify, the following measurable outcomes reflect Hotel TEACH’s success at integrating English, career counseling, and technology:

ESOL Gains:
16 out of the 20 completers (80%) made at least 1 level gain; 7 made 1 level gain, and 9 made 2 level gains (Goldberg, and White 18).
Computer Skills:
In the preprogram assessment, only 1 student reported being able to do 15 or more tasks such as opening and saving a Microsoft Word document and sending e-mail. Postprogram, 12 of the 20 completers (60%) reported being able to do more than 15 of the tasks (Goldberg, and White 18).

Employer Feedback:
(14 Sheraton supervisors completed questionnaire.)
• All 14 reported some or big improvement in English communication skills.
• 13 out of the 14 reported some or big improvement in customer service skills.
• 11 out of the 14 reported some or big improvement in “soft skills.”

Postprogram Advances:
• One graduate was promoted to Assistant Housekeeping Manager (June 2006). Two others applied for new positions but did not get them. One subsequently applied for Sheraton’s Associate Training Program.
• Four graduates were accepted into the Summer 2007 Associate Development Training Program (Sheraton’s management training program) and are now training for various front-of-the-house positions at the hotel.

We conclude that our project contributed to our students’ rediscovery of their potential. Most important, student outcomes demonstrate that with educational and workforce support, change can happen. Sylvia and Maritzabel were selected to attend the Sheraton Associate Training program, which will prepare them to assume managerial positions and responsibilities that, prior to Hotel TEACH, they neither imagined nor qualified for. Maritzabel has been nominated to receive a Starwood 2008 Employee of the Year Award in recognition of her initiative and efforts to advance at Sheraton Hotel. We believed in our students’ abilities, and we communicated our confidence to them. Since the course ended, we have received appreciative e-mails and phone calls from former Hotel TEACH students, thanking us for the encouragement to re-envision their lives.
Replicating these outcomes and obtaining a long-term analysis of the effectiveness of this model will depend upon the willingness of workforce development and ESOL programs to implement similar curricula and, ultimately, to create ongoing collaboration between educators, workforce development programs, and employers.

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Works Consulted


