



SHOP TALK # 15:

Workforce - Related ESL: Taking A Leap in Language Learning

While many programs are focusing on innovative ways to make their traditional adult education programs “workforce friendly”, others are making efforts to respond to industry-specific needs. One pilot made possible through a Texas LEARNS partnership with SER-Jobs for Progress, National, Inc. and Retention Education involves the use of a technology-based learning system designed to give those with very limited English language skills a start as well as a boost in self-confidence. Several adult education providers view *Sed de Saber* as a first step in serving a hard-to-reach ESL population by taking learning to the workplace and into the home, optimizing employees’ access, offering maximum flexibility, and introducing adult learners to new learning opportunities.

In spring 2007, fourteen adult education programs in eight Texas cities collaborated with *SER – Jobs for Progress National, Inc.* in the piloting of *Sed de Saber (Thirst for Knowledge)*, a LeapFrog-based, work-related adult English language skills program designed to help learners improve their functionality in their jobs and the real world. *Sed de Saber* is a self-paced, take home system developed by Retention Education (www.retentioned.com) that uses LeapFrog’s interactive Quantum LeapPad. It enables the learner to record his/her voice, hear it played back, and compare it to the proper pronunciation of the word or phrase being learned. Recognizing the sales and service industry sector as one of continued growth across the country, the U.S. Department of Labor awarded a federal grant in 2006 to *SER*, a Texas-based national non-profit that has provided employment placement and training to minority groups for forty years.

Since the service industry is where many adult English language learners find their first employment, Texas LEARNS responded to a special offer to purchase *Sed de Saber* learning systems and to participate in SER’s pilot initiative in eight cities across Texas. Pilot initiatives occurred in the following cities identified in SER’s proposal to DOL:

Brownsville	Corpus Christi	Dallas
El Paso	Fort Worth	Houston
Lubbock	San Antonio	

Adult education programs have taken responsibility for recruiting, enrolling, and assessing participants, partnering with food manufacturers and food service employers serving local educational institutions. *SER* Jobs for Progress was to provide orientation to participating employers and employees, interact with adult education providers, track learner progress, and manage the pilot data collection. Employees were able to use the units, take them home, work at their own pace, and return them when they had completed the modules.

Adult education programs who elected to offer *Sed de Saber* as part of a “hybrid” course (employees have the option of attending once or twice weekly classroom instruction to extend learning) have had very positive results with participants interested in continuing their English language instruction. The “hybrid” model affords ABE programs the opportunity to familiarize employees with a menu of learning options.



While entry level jobs in this sector rarely pay wages equal to or greater than the prevailing wage in the local labor market, these jobs can open doors to opportunities, provided individuals are given the chance to acquire employment-related language/literacy and work readiness skills, and to access occupational training. The same is true for those employed in the manufacturing, construction, and health service sectors.

In a recent progress update prepared by John Stevenson (Texas LEARNS), participating adult education programs shared their initial impressions of the pilot experience, describing what seemed to work as well as some of the challenges:

- “Participation was steady; in addition to using the *Sed de Saber* learning systems, 83% of the employees also attended a weekly two-hour block of ESL instruction offered by adult education.” (Ysleta ISD)
- “Participating employees in the Harlandale ISD Child Nutrition Department appreciated the opportunity to work on lessons at home. Word got out, and co-workers began asking to join the initiative.” (ESC Region 20)
- “The company with whom we partnered found distance education challenging but wanted to establish a traditional ESL class on site.” (Houston Community College)
- “The launch was so informative and motivating. The employer was exceptionally supportive of its employees. It was like opening Christmas gifts when the workers received their learning systems!” (North East ISD)
- “Some individuals had difficulty finding the time to work on the lessons independently; they wanted the project time extended.” (Socorro ISD)
- “Our pilot enrolled 13 employees from the district’s food services, and 4 others from the food service industry (private sector) also participated.” (Northside ISD)
- “Food service employees from eight schools in the district were referred, and others were on a waiting list for the second 16 week cycle.” (San Antonio ISD)

After completion of the pilot initiatives, adult education programs have the option of re-using the *Sed de Saber* learning systems with other adult learners. Additional units are also available for purchase by education providers and employers. SER Jobs for Progress is expected to provide the U.S. Department of Labor as well as participating employers, employees, and education providers with data on users’ gains in English language proficiency, retention/advancement in employment, wage gain, reduced employee turnover, and users’ increased ability to be promoted. While final assessment has not yet been completed by all ABE pilot sites, Retention Education collects user and customer data, and has some general statistics to share:

- ✓ After five months of study, *Sed de Saber* users were averaging 40% gains in English language proficiency.
- ✓ Customers report that on average, 31% of those participating in *Sed de Saber* are either promoted or promotable upon completion.
- ✓ Customers report reductions in employee turnover between 40% and 80%.

A construction edition of the *Sed de Saber* curriculum is currently being launched by Retention Education (www.seddesaberconstruction.com), and other industry sectors such as the “green” industry will be addressed in the future. Several adult education providers involved in the pilot are interested in seeing *Sed de Saber* considered for inclusion in Texas’ distance education initiative. John Stevenson, Texas LEARNS, will gather



additional information about the pilots, measure of mastery, and the tracking of proxy hours.