

## Organic English White Paper

### Introduction - Second Language Acquisition through a Hybridized Learning Program

The only way to really learn a language is to use it, which is true even with one's own native language. In an English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) classroom, English-learners listen to the teacher speaking English, and then practice speaking English with their classmates. However, upon returning home, few are willing to practice with family members and friends. They might fear that even the smallest mistakes will make them seem ignorant. Plus, learning is incremental. Friends and family may not wish to discuss an English learner's trip to the market the same day the ESL class learned about trips to the market.

Language must come from a natural desire to communicate. Consider a scenario in which classmates in ESL class are friends, family, neighbors, companions from sports teams, and co-workers. If an English-learner is already accustomed to practicing English skills with people who matter the most to them, new opportunities arise to practice on a daily basis. If English learners gather in private homes, churches, community centers, gyms, or breakrooms at work, they are in an environment where it is natural to chat, gossip, encourage, inform, pray, empathize, sing, exclaim, or whisper. Learners are much more likely to take the necessary risks to share a second language in a familiar and comfortable environment. Returning to the ESL environment, topics of interest within the group are much more likely to be discussed in class if learners actually drive the learning. These environments are numerous, diverse, and self-determined.

In Stephen Krashen's six hypotheses on language acquisition, he describes the "affective filter", which is an imaginary wall placed between a learner and language input. High anxiety, low motivation, and low esteem can turn the filter on, and language acquisition can be blocked (Krashen 1). Low-anxiety classes in a social environment can improve motivation and language acquisition skills.

Learning English in these comfortable environments seems intuitive, but where are the teachers to instruct in such a large number of locations? One obvious answer is teaching through a well-designed online program. Unfortunately, language is interpersonal and social, so an online program is only the first step in teaching language acquisition skills. First, online courses are typically undertaken solo. The learner takes the course, completes the assignments, receives feedback through online journals and emails, takes the tests, receives certification, and goes out into the world as one who has studied English. Will they have strong English communication skills? That is hard to say. Some will. Many won't. How many people have said, "I took Spanish in high school and got an 'A'. I didn't use it, so now I've forgotten it."

Technology skills, or lack thereof, often cause confusion for students taking online courses. The problems arise from various sources. The English learner may not be particularly computer-literate or

the learner's computer equipment and software setup may not support the training stream of data. Additionally, some cannot afford an internet connection in their home. Often, problems arising from the host side confuse users who may blame accessibility problems on their own equipment or lack of knowledge, requiring expensive and unnecessary trips to a computer repair shop. These problems are compounded by constantly-changing technology; the effects of viruses, malware, phishing, hacking, etc.; and the overall cost of maintaining current technologies.

Feedback is another important concern with online education. Long distance and delayed feedback interrupts the thought process. Ideas are put away, to be resurrected when the forum response or email arrives. For most people, the problem has been forgotten by then.

Online audio or video courses should address learning styles. Viewing an ESL lecture video online involves an auditory and visual learning style, and typically, linear content delivery. Physical learners may not retain the input from an online course as well as auditory and visual learners.

Motivation is also an important issue. When one has a specific goal, like demonstrating English fluency to enter a school in the US, motivation is less of a problem. However, if learning English is more of a personal goal to interact with a child's teachers or improve communication skills for the job, there may not be as much motivation to transform the lessons learned into real language skills.

Certification is yet another issue for online lessons. It is difficult to track in a meaningful way the progress in language acquisition. After all, English should be taught through a natural process for whole language development rather than as an academic exercise. This is a simple issue to address. Does every program actually need to certify their learners? If the ESL program is not part of a college degree program, nor are the actual units a prerequisite for an immigration or student visa application, certification may be unnecessary. And if the program is free to use, there is even less rationalization for certification or extensive testing. In fact, tracking language progress may best be done in an equally social way.

### **What Prevents non-English Speakers in the US from Taking Formal ESL Classes**

Achieving English fluency can remain illusive to many people. Many working adults find themselves working at jobs where almost everyone speaks the same foreign language. Others are caregivers to young children or the elderly, and cannot leave their position when ESL classes are available. Parents of young children may not be able to arrange for child care during class times for financial, logistical, or cultural reasons. Many people do not drive, or cannot take public transportation to the ESL classes at the time classes are offered. Schools offering ESL within commuting distance may be expensive colleges or for-profit schools, as the availability of public programs has been limited due to the state of the economy. Many cannot afford these programs.

Even more challenging dynamics can come into play for some non-native speakers. Education beyond early primary is still a luxury in many nations whether due to cost, time constraints within the farm and manufacturing classes, or cultural gender exclusions. Others may not speak the predominant language of the country of origin.

Many immigrants have mastered some degree of English through adult school or on the job, but some have never developed pronunciation skills well enough to be understood by the majority of Americans. A particularly difficult situation has been described by immigrants preparing for US citizenship. If examiners who test for knowledge of the Constitution and English fluency are, themselves, non-native English speakers with very strong accents, applicants from different linguistic roots may have major comprehension problems interacting with the examiner. Results may not be particularly demonstrative of the applicant's own English mastery.

Of course, fear of the classroom can be caused by common conditions like dyslexia, uncorrected poor hearing, uncorrected poor eyesight, medical problems, limited wardrobe, and a host of other problems. Poverty is often a factor in limited English proficiency, but it is not the only cause.

Altogether, these issues limit communicative interaction with English-speaking people, preventing development of language skills through a more natural path.

### **Full English Fluency and Literacy Through the ESL Classroom is Essential**

A common complaint with adult school ESL classes is attendance, which can suffer because of limited motivation, variations in working schedules, and no family funds for even the smallest fees. In settings with dwindling attendance, some teachers continue to admit new students as the class progresses. Better-educated English learners may even drop these adult classes because with each new face in class, some teachers reboot to the beginning materials.

Unlike other subjects, beginning English can actually be more difficult to teach than advanced English skills, because level and language capabilities are so broad in an entry-level ESL class. Also, as newly-acquired English skills create an awareness of the benefits of assimilation with other Americans, students may become more motivated to improve their English. This motivation is particularly evident in more advanced ESL classes.

There is no question that formal ESL classes provide the ultimate route to full English fluency and literacy. Barriers may place formal education out of reach for a period, but learning English through alternative means can fill the void in the meantime. If these secondary methods of learning English actually result in a community of co-learners, ultimately, motivation in the community evolves for ESL classes. Moreover, as students enter ESL with a higher level of preparation, these classes can focus on more advanced skills.

### **The Online Educator**

Online classes and "Distance Learning" courses can certainly fulfill the learning needs of motivated students who are willing and able to practice the material offline. Effective online educators may not be driven by the clock - the hour lecture, for instance - because they know that the time needed to teach a particular content area varies. In a classroom, the rest of the time may be filled with questions, practices, quizzes, etc. With online classes, this may not be possible.

Assuming an online solution for non-native speakers wishing to learn English, what issues must be addressed? The primary question is, who is the teacher? For most, the online presenter is the teacher. However, there is more to teaching than delivering a lecture. Interaction with students, checking for comprehension, providing feedback, etc. are all very important. Thus, the online presenter provides one channel of learning for the online active learner, but there are more channels necessary for English fluency.

Constructivist learning theory, as envisioned by Jerome Bruner, promotes the construction of new ideas based on what has just been taught, often called "synthesis" in education. Bruner further championed the concept of spiral curriculum, in which topics are revisited at intervals and presented in increasingly advanced levels when students have mastered the simpler material. Bruner also recognized the fundamental role of social interaction in learning, especially in language acquisition. He believed that children learn language primarily to communicate as they absorb the linguistic code. [2]

These observations can be applied to English as a Second language, signaling how to advance the efficacy of online language training. Online courses provide the knowledge to learn a language, and can also help provide insight into the linguistic code. However, immediate feedback arising from synthesis by the student is missing. Social interaction is missing. These elements are both critical to flow into the spiral, developing the next level of sophistication.

Madeline Hunter, a respected pioneer in education, developed models for curriculum. In her ITIP (Instructional Theory into Practice) model, she held that decision-making was a critical ingredient in teaching. Instructional input must be planned to advance the levels demonstrated by the students. The online presenter determines content. Feedback is required to shape the next level of content, which is not easily attainable with programmed online lectures. The online presenter is an important educator in this process, but who is the teacher?

### **Online and Solo**

In solo online education, the student must be a member of the teaching team. If the student does not place sufficient attention on the online training, learning will be stunted. If the student does not seek edification when questions arise, learning will be stunted. If the student does not practice the online material that he or she has learned while offline, learning will be stunted.

There are so many factors involved in the learning process. Online courses address many of these issues, but more can be done to maximize the educational outcomes for each student. Because individuals process information in so many ways, they may not be interpreting learning materials as intended. Feedback is critical not only to the student, but the teacher as well.

### **Hybrid Education: Online and in a Group**

Bringing more interaction into the online education process is better served with a hybrid model. Schools recognize the importance of feedback in education, and several hybrid education models are currently being used. In some hybrid courses, the professor provides the lecture online, the class meets

once a week with a teaching assistant for discussion and feedback, and tests are taken on-campus for a grade and course credit. This model can cut costs for appropriate subject areas, and a level of feedback is provided. While this method works very well in many subject areas, natural language acquisition skills require more social interaction at the time of lecture.

### **Organic English as a Hybrid Learning Method**

Organic English delivers English language acquisition skills through a hybrid methodology that is distinctly different from that used in a community college environment. In this model, the Internet provides crucial tools for learning, including online ESL videos, technology training, lesson plans, and certain types of practice problems. Moreover, Organic English also provides the feedback and social interaction necessary for language acquisition skills. A group of friends, neighbors, family members, co-workers, sports team members, and other social acquaintances decide to form an English study group to learn English socially.

A group facilitator, who is a volunteer and also an English learner, is trained in basic group management and technology, leading the group at a pace that best suits the group's entry skills in English, time constraints, and goals. As learners begin the English lessons, they are also taught technology skills.

Beyond the online educator, teaching responsibilities are shared by everyone, including facilitator and individual learners in the Organic English model. Rather than preparing each learning team as students, the philosophy is to train them as teachers: understanding how people learn and how each person can enhance the group's overall learning experience. This is a key point in Organic English.

After all, in social learning, every member of the group provides feedback. This feedback should be constructive rather than negative to maintain the esteem needed for natural learning. The group is encouraged to explore beyond the scope of the lesson, and engage in synthesis. These actions all arise from each member assuming the role of teacher, educator, and mentor.

Such a model may sound theoretical and impractical. However, immigrant communities commit to these roles in large numbers within church prayer groups that are often self-formed, self-organized, self-managed, and self-taught. They also provide invaluable services to their communities, even where levels of income and education are low. Many of these groups have been active for decades, with little effort at any organizational level. Along the same vein, small faith-sharing communities have sprung up within some church denominations, modeled after the prayer groups. These communities have somewhat of a hierarchy, with facilitators trained by the organization to help initiate sharing and keep the group on track. Organic English follows the latter model, which emphasizes accountability, training, and much-needed learning materials.

With the importance of community-building in adult learning, more benefits emerge as groups mature in their roles as teachers and their English skills improve. They acquire more technical skills. Also, as ESL classes become available, these small communities might provide child care services or carpools once members enter formal ESL classes in a school.

## **Organic English is Free**

There are many reasons why Organic English must be free to learners. The obvious issues include the economic status of targeted learners. However, there are many more reasons, including maintaining group stability and avoiding financial improprieties. With many immigrants holding seasonal jobs, incomes ebb and flow. Community-building is a key element of Organic English's approach, and fees would interfere with membership stability. Fundraising to support Organic English is prohibited in the groups.

In reality, any type of fundraising should be avoided inside Organic English. Fundraising for members' own funding activities like candy sales for soccer, school fundraisers, and other drives should not take place within the Organic English sessions. It is important not to sidetrack the mission of Organic English with other priorities. Accountability is also impossible when financial activity occurs within small, independent groups. As a result, funds to support Organic English will be raised outside the learning program, through crowd-funding websites like Indiegogo, and sponsorships by businesses and organizations.

Also, Organic English features ESL educators who have developed their own online educational channels and demonstrated their credibility as language acquisition educators. Their programs, mostly through Youtube, are free. Income is derived through subscribers and advertisements shown on their channels. Organic English trains learners how to support these educators using methods that cost learners nothing. That encourages these top-rated ESL channel owners to expand their online lessons. While completely independent of these online ESL providers, Organic English provides links to the courses from the Organic English website with explicit permission from the providers. There are many online ESL lessons, but many are uploaded by individuals who do not hold the rights to upload the videos, and yet they are profiting from the viewership. Organic English does not condone or provide links for the ESL lesson videos not expressly created and produced by the channel owner.

Enrichment is a different issue. Through Creative Commons and the standard Youtube licensing, enrichment videos, songs, and cartoons are legally available on Youtube. Organic English provides links to these sources as another language acquisition tool.

## **Technology**

Organic English lessons are assembled with videos, online learning activities, and enrichment. The lessons are designed to be viewed on computers, tablets, and even smart phones. In technology training, facilitators and learners are shown the various options they have for online access. With current advancements, tablets may eventually be the device of choice. However, even older desktop computers can provide the training. Each type of device has its strengths and limitations. Teaching technology helps learners deal with setbacks due to a device's limitations and learn the concept of workarounds.

An important part of the technology is the humble white board with dry erase markers. It is important that everyone sees what is written in the video. It is also important that each group member does a lot

of writing during the lesson. Either way, the non-electronic white board is a supporting technology that improves learning.

### **Group Dynamics**

Organic English allows home groups to form independently, and is never involved in assigning an individual to a group meeting in a home. If a learner cannot find a suitable group to join, they can form their own group or look for a more public venue like a community center. Organic English will train facilitators in group management and technology.

### **Tracking Progress**

Exams to see how groups have progressed are not a part of Organic English. Rather, more social ways of demonstrating skills are employed. These might come in the form of contests, Skype challenges, theater and comedy productions, singing performances, and other demonstrations of proficiency levels. After Organic English has evolved somewhat, ways of tracking progress may be developed if the need exists.

### **Organizations**

Businesses often look for ways that employees can become more proficient in English. Organic English courses are in English so that employees from different language roots can learn together. It is an inexpensive and convenient way to provide English to employees, and at the same time, build community that crosses cultural lines inside the company. As employees learn English, they are free to set up home communities for themselves or their families.

### **Extending Technology**

Besides teaching technology, Organic English will put emerging technologies to even greater advantage. There are unlimited ways to use free technology to learn English. For instance, with free voice recognition technology already available on many smart phones, learners can practice pronunciation. Farm laborers can use smart phones and dry markers with white boards to learn in the fields. Because the concept of seamless communication is important, Organic English has devised methodologies to help English learners understand English speakers with a wide variety of accents, both regional (i.e., diverse accents like Texas, Boston, and Alabama) and international.

### **Website**

The ESL courses are hosted on the Organice English website, <http://www.organicenglish.org>. The website also provides tools to understand and apply the concept of web social ESL.

Google Translate is used so that people who speak various languages can navigate the site. Google Translate is a very inexact translator, and in some languages, it is more inexact than others. However, it is a start to help people begin their ESL journey. The English on the website is purposely less complex to help Google Translate provide the best translation.

Note that the Google Translate webpage widget works on most browsers like Google Chrome, Internet Explorer, etc. However, as of now, it does not work dependably with Firefox, even with the add-on for Google Translate.

### **Rollout**

Because of the cost of bandwidth, Organic English will roll out geographically, starting in California. A total of 20 pilot classes will be available to all who wish to begin independently while we initiate study group building in each area. Watch us as we build our website and our course content!