



Vocational content for the Certificates in Spoken and Written English

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Acknowledgments

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Summary

This study explored the delivery of vocationally specific content in the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) in Australia. The goals of this study were to:

- determine whether learners perceive that some content is more useful and more motivating than other content, and whether content that is perceived to have instrumental value affects language learning;
- determine whether learners with a single goal and focus find relevant class work more rewarding than general content, and whether this affects language learning;
- make recommendations regarding appropriate modes of delivery and content for the two courses identified during the preliminary survey;
- articulate research findings for the professional and academic communities.

‘Communication in the workplace’ programs flourished in the AMEP in the 1980s. In the early 1990s, however, legislation introduced funding for only 510 hours of Commonwealth-funded instruction and the introduction of the national curriculum framework – the Certificate in Spoken and Written English (CSWE). This led to a more focused initial settlement provision of English language to recently arrived immigrants assessed as not yet having functional English. While many learners move from AMEP classes to other Commonwealth-funded or state/territory-funded English classes, AMEP providers have become increasingly aware of learners’ desire to enter the workforce or engage in further training. They have observed, however, that learners exiting from the AMEP with CSWE III are mostly unprepared for further training in the vocational education and training (VET) sector, where the language is beyond their current proficiency and the content is new to them. They have, therefore, begun to examine the content of the CSWE curriculum. The CSWE is a framework and thus a variety of different contents can be accommodated. While a settlement focus may be appropriate for beginning learners, many providers are exploring how to provide pathways for learners from the AMEP to the workplace or further training.

In this study, AMEP providers were surveyed to determine the vocational courses they were offering AMEP clients. Focus groups were held with four providers to explore current vocational content and determine issues involved in offering such courses. Training packages in the VET sector were examined and some were chosen for mapping against CSWE learning outcomes, based on information from the focus groups. A national meeting of AMEP providers was held to ascertain the types of vocational content appropriate for AMEP clients. Two vocational content courses were chosen for in-depth study – a combined AMEP CSWE III and Certificate II in Information Technology course, and a Senior First Aid course. Classes were observed and instructors and students were interviewed. Interviews were also conducted with former AMEP clients now taking VET courses, and those in the workforce.

Many learners in the study indicated that they wanted to learn appropriate topic content, as well as general English. The content nominated most frequently included health, community services, hospitality, IT and financial services. However, many of those interviewed also indicated that there were aspects of general English that they needed for their study and/or work. The areas most frequently referred to were formal reading and writing, grammar, job interview skills, pronunciation, vocabulary and cultural expectations of Australians.

The study demonstrated that AMEP clients are motivated by, and benefit from, vocational content courses as they include content of relevance to their current and career lives. However, the study also explored the issues AMEP providers need to consider when mounting such courses:

- choice of content for the course and delivery mode
- student perceptions of their future goals
- the balance between language and content teaching
- whether VET communication courses are the same as English as a Second Language (ESL)
- coordination between language and content instructors and institutions
- the extent to which language teachers need content mastery
- funding models
- logistics of offering courses across sites
- at which certificate level to offer CSWE and content
- pedagogy used
- background content knowledge of learners
- length of course.

Issues

One overwhelming issue that emerged in the focus groups is that although the VET sector is a national program, it is administered at state and territory level and there is tremendous variation across states and territories as to what Training Packages (TPs) are taught, with some TPs being specific to particular states or territories. Focus groups reported several issues, some of which are capacity issues within organisations, some of which are pedagogical in nature while others relate to regulatory constraints.

Capacity issues included

- Content needs to be relevant to learners. However, there is rarely a viable number of learners at CSWE III level who are all interested in a similar topic to be able to offer a course.
- Private AMEP providers were concerned about the difficulty in finding Registered Training Organisation (RTO) partners who could offer the TPs. They need to contract out the TP content but provide the language support themselves.
- Providers in TAFEs indicated that in some settings VET content area instructors were unwilling to have AMEP teachers teach VET content, as they considered it as competition.
- Instructors must be certified in the content area to teach it; so AMEP teachers would need additional certification if they taught the content themselves.

Pedagogical issues included

- Providers find it difficult to include vocational content in lower levels (CSWE I and II).
- Providers and teachers have to determine how much time to spend on content and how much on language.
- AMEP providers have to determine how to train AMEP teachers to teach vocational content and what level of VET content to teach.
- Many instructors were concerned that teaching specific vocational content could channel learners too narrowly into job areas that may not be in their best interests. Students need to be linguistically and conceptually prepared for specific vocational content so that they know what futures are open (or closed) to them.
- Not all learners want to move into TAFE; some want to enter the workforce as quickly as possible.
- Numeracy skills are required for TPs and also for employment. So, providers and teachers need to juggle numeracy skills requirements with content and language needs.

Regulatory constraints

- The 510 hour mandate limits learners' potential and future job prospects. 510 hours is insufficient to provide learners with the language they need for TPs or for employment. Therefore, the types of jobs learners are able to get when they complete their 510 hours are very different from those to which they aspire.
- Former AMEP learners may take longer to achieve a TP module than mainstream students do. RTOs assume specific levels of previous schooling, which many AMEP clients may not have had.
- Some focus group participants noted that CSWE is less flexible than state certificates. In some state certificates, instructors can import modules directly from TPs, but in teaching the CSWE, teachers need to customise the modules to fit the CSWE and its learning outcomes. Teachers may not have the time to do this and would prefer modules that were already mapped to CSWE learning outcomes.
- The CSWE is not portable because it doesn't provide learners with a certification they can use for entry to further study.
- Employers do not get a subsidy for traineeships if trainees have already achieved a Certificate 3. So, employers are unwilling to accept AMEP learners who reach CSWE III, an accredited Certificate 3, even though in terms of communication skills CSWE III would be a minimum language level to be successful in a traineeship.

Conclusions and recommendations

The conclusions and recommendations are organised around the themes that emerged from the research.

Choice of content

The data in this study indicates that vocational content has considerable benefit for AMEP learners, in particular in motivating them by providing relevant content.

While vocational content may be a useful addition to AMEP delivery, no one course, whether general or content-based, is appropriate for all students. Of particular concern is the potential to provide AMEP clients with a limited range of options, limiting their flexibility for future study or work. As there is a danger that the choice of curriculum content may limit newly arrived immigrants to low-paying, low-skilled jobs that native-born residents do not want to take. Given both the motivation and the extensive previous education and experience of many immigrants, this is a short-sighted approach. A more socially just approach would provide immigrants with an opportunity to contribute their enthusiasm, considerable skills and determination to their new country. Such an approach needs to be sufficiently flexible for new immigrants to develop pathways to reach their future goals, not just to get any job that will provide money for their families. The current limit of 510 hours limits learners' potential and future job prospects. The primary goal in offering vocational content courses in the AMEP is to help learners begin their journeys on this pathway.

This study further indicates that vocational content courses are highly motivating for students and lead to the acquisition of relevant content, as well as English language skills. Students in the two courses that were examined in this study were engaged in the content and indicated they enjoyed the courses. While learners do have to contend with more specialised language, because it is in context they seem motivated to acquire it. For example, in the IT class observed, students were managing words such as 'peripherals', while the students in the first aid class were using 'tilt back', 'circulation', 'recovery position' and 'monitoring' with apparent ease.

Students who had taken such courses felt adequately prepared for their future studies. Indeed, some students indicated that such courses were more serious than the general English courses they had taken in the AMEP. Two students, however, were concerned about the background knowledge of the class. They considered themselves to have more expertise in IT than their classmates and felt that, because the course was delivered to a multi-level group, they did not progress as fast in the content. They all agreed that they needed basic English before they could be successful in vocational courses.

The study indicates that there is general agreement that CSWE III learners can achieve a Certificate II in some TPs. Learners clearly indicated that they wanted to have sufficient general English to be able to work successfully in vocational content courses. Instructors agreed that the content and the vocabulary were challenging even for CSWE III-level learners. However, they all felt that learners rose to this challenge and achieved more than they would have in a general English class.

Recommendations

- That vocational content courses be offered as electives. The choice of content for the elective needs to be one that can lead to a variety of future courses and/or jobs. From this perspective, first aid and IT both provide general skills that underpin many courses and jobs. Other content suggested by students and instructors included financial services, customer service and hospitality.
- That such courses be offered to learners at CSWE III level.
- That the SPP be offered to more clients to ensure they have sufficient English language skills be able to reach their potential and gain jobs that match their non-language abilities.

CSWE curriculum framework

An issue always discussed with content based instruction is whether content will be taught to the detriment of language learning. However, any language study, other than direct instruction in grammatical features of a language, requires content. The CSWE is a curriculum framework and therefore is content free. Providers and teachers can choose content appropriate to the needs to their learners, while still meeting CSWE learning outcomes (CSWE LOs). This study showed that while this is an issue, courses can be carefully planned with attention paid to both language and content outcomes.

A further issue arose as to the flexibility of the CSWE for adaptation to vocational content. Focus groups and interviewees were concerned that the CSWE does not map well with TP competencies and that other curricula are more flexible for including modules from TPs. The CSWE is a language curriculum. Other language/communication curricula exist within the VET sector, but the CSWE LOs do not map those of communication units. It was clear in both the mapping exercise and the delivery of the AMEP/IT collaborative course that communication as taught in the VET sector teaches about the language, rather than teaches the language, and does not give ESL learners sufficient opportunities to practice language use. AMEP learners need to be taught how to use the language, not just about the language.

Additionally, the CSWE III language level is insufficient for learners to be successful in mainstream VET courses, without additional support.

While the CSWE is an accredited curriculum within the VET sector, it is not portable. Learners cannot use their CSWE certification as entry into VET courses.

Recommendations

- That DIAC consider alternative curricula to the CSWE to give providers more flexibility in delivery.
- That any curricula approved by DIAC be based, at a minimum, on the following criteria:
 - o Principles of learning English as a second language
 - o Opportunities for pathways into further study
 - o Seamless and transparent mapping into TPs
- That DIAC coordinate with the VET sector in providing support for migrants in VET courses. Such support could include
 - o Adjunct language courses
 - o Additional time for such students to meet the competencies in the TP

Coordination between AMEP providers and RTOs

In models where the content is taught by a content expert, language and content instructors need to coordinate instruction. This coordination needs to take place at both the institutional level and the classroom level. Often institutional bureaucracy makes such collaborative arrangements difficult.

In adjunct models, the language teacher does not need complete mastery of the subject matter, but needs to at least be familiar with what students are learning. However, in the model where the language teacher is responsible for content, the language teacher needs to have mastery, and usually certification, in the content area.

Logistically it may be difficult for AMEP providers to offer vocational content courses. If they are not part of the VET sector, they may have to find a cooperating partner, whose campus may be too far to make collaboration feasible. Even when the AMEP and the VET courses are taught in the same institution, they may be on different campuses, which can be difficult for AMEP clients because of transport or childcare.

Learners may encounter quite different pedagogy from instructors not used to working with ESL students. This presents a challenge for AMEP providers. One solution used by participants in this study was to choose instructors who knew how to work with AMEP clients. Another suggestion was to provide ESL certification for content teachers. While learners did not use the term 'scaffolding', they clearly were referring to the scaffolding they received in the AMEP and appreciated how it facilitated learning.

Recommendations

- That DIAC, in collaboration with AMEP service providers, develop materials promulgating successful models that can be used by other providers and RTOs.
- That DIAC, in collaboration with AMEP service providers and the VET sector, explore the possibility of offering accredited ESL certification to content area teachers, based on their work with AMEP clients and teachers.

Student perceptions

Learner perceptions vary. Some have unrealistic goals and assume that their previous qualifications and/or experience will be immediately accepted in Australia. Others' perception is that, even with training, they might not be hired. Instructors and providers also commented that the jobs AMEP clients can get may not be the same as the ones they would like to have. It is therefore important that courses be chosen that provide a pathway, but do not promise students a particular job, and that appropriate career counselling be provided. In addition, the strategy reported here of giving students the option of work or study experience helps them understand the consequences of their future choices.

Recommendations ¹

- That AMEP providers choose vocationally specific courses that provide pathways for learners.
- That AMEP counsellors provide appropriate career counselling.
- That case studies of successful and unsuccessful AMEP clients be provided to counsellors, teachers and learners.

¹ The recently published materials, *Get Wise: Your future work and study*. Provides very useful information easily accessible to learners.

Funding

To offer a content-based course providers require sufficient students for the course to be financially viable. Therefore, most centres are only able to offer one or two such courses. Additionally, the course model may be more expensive than general English. For the adjunct model to work effectively the language teacher needs to be present with the content teacher.

Recommendation

- That DIAC, in collaboration with AMEP service providers, explore alternate funding models, including increased funding for vocationally specific content classes and decreased class sizes.

The two innovative courses studied in detail here demonstrate the viability of offering vocational content in the AMEP.