

# Democracy and Adult ESL Education during COVID

Janet L. Eyring

Politics and education have always been closely entwined, but recent interactions with colleagues in my field about the border crisis have convinced me that these individuals are either in complete accord with the idea of large numbers of immigrants crossing the U.S. border illegally or they are completely ignorant of the situation and its implications for teaching English as a Second Language (ESL). It isn't clear why ESL teachers are hesitant to voice criticism of this disastrous policy. What is clear is that too many ESL teaching professionals have been silent in the face of a major threat to the basic pedagogical integrity of teaching the basics of American citizenship and English proficiency to millions.

The AAACE/NLA listserv consists of professionals interested in sharing ideas and information about adult education in the U.S. About 52 percent of students taught in the field of adult education are English Language Acquisition (ELA) learners, better known as English as a Second Language (ESL) learners;<sup>1</sup> thus, the listserv includes individuals who have spent their careers teaching, doing teacher training, or administering adult education and ESL education programs.

On the listserv, I shared an article published by Todd Bensman, Senior National Security Fellow at the Center for Immigration Studies, which described how the Biden administration was busing thousands of undocumented non-native English speaking immigrants

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1 National Association of State Directors of Adult Education, "Adult Education Program fact sheet: July 1, 2019 to June 30, 2020," (2022).

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across the country to cities of their choice.<sup>2</sup> Inside the post I asked the obvious questions—why was there secrecy and limited media coverage of these immigrant dispersions? What type of ESL curriculum would be used with these newcomers? Would the curriculum follow the TESOL Standards for Adult Education ESL Programs? Would trained ESL experts be hired to teach the classes and would AAACE or the International Association of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) serve as consultants? I thought my comment would be met with large numbers of affirming colleagues concerned about the welfare and education of these newcomers. Instead, one senior colleague peremptorily criticized any dissent about the busing as “anti-migration” and a threat to democracy, and that was the end of further communication on that topic on the listserv. I was essentially silenced.

Another post I made on the Adult Education Interest Section listserv for the TESOL organization informatively detailed the manner in which millions of undocumented immigrants have been encouraged by the Biden administration and assisted by the United Nations and other non-governmental organizations to migrate from Central America to the U.S. border in order to cross illegally, even though only a small percentage qualify for asylum. This post was censored, presumably because of the organization’s goal of “supporting multilingual learners of English, no matter their . . . status.”

My second disappointing experience occurred in March 2022 when I made a virtual presentation at the international TESOL convention in Pittsburgh titled “Impact of Undocumented Immigrants on Adult ESL and Advocacy.” Granted, it is difficult to gauge audience response in the virtual medium, but I guess I expected more impassioned involvement than I received, especially since most people were being bombarded by images on their TV sets of thousands of immigrants crossing the border each day from more than one-hundred countries around the globe. I thought, as ESL professionals, they would at least be curious about these students who would soon be arriving at their adult ESL public and non-profit organization

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2 T. Bensman. "Catch-and-Bus: Thousands of Freed Border-Crossing Immigrants Are Dispersing Across America," *Center for Immigration Studies* (March 31, 2021).

classrooms. I did receive a few positive inquiries about the topic, a couple of requests for my handout, but disappointingly, there were no extended communications or partnerships that resulted from our correspondence.

Finally, I recently responded to a call for a reflective response in the journal *Adult Learning*. Writers were asked to personally reflect on democracy and adult education practice. As inspiration, the editors referred to the recent Summit for Democracy hosted by President Biden in February 2021, whose purpose was to “renew democracy” in the U.S. and around the world to meet the “unprecedented challenges of our time,” and to relate it to our work in the field and to the progress of our learners. The three goals of the Summit were to: 1) strengthen democracy and defend against authoritarianism, 2) fight corruption, and 3) promote respect for human rights. As a trained ESL teacher and teacher trainer for more than forty years, I do not believe that the Summit’s view of “democracy” has much bearing on what democracy means in the U.S., especially for ESL learners, because the Summit was designed for world leaders practicing different types of democracy.

Overwhelmingly, ESL learners were born outside the United States, and though they come to the U.S. with a wide knowledge of governments and politics, it is unlikely that many fully understand the important nuances of the U.S. democratic system of government, nuances that are crucial to the proper undertaking of full U.S. citizenship. The U.S., according to its Constitution, for example, is a republic or representative democracy, not a direct democracy. According to Bernard Dobski, Associate Professor of Political Science at Assumption College, America’s Founders considered establishing a direct democracy but rejected it because it lacked the checks and balances that could “moderate” the will of the majority, leaving it “vulnerable to tyranny.”<sup>3</sup>

When globalists use the catchphrase “Build Back Better” it reflects a vision of reviving and rejuvenating democracy through the Liberal International Order (LIO), the system of global politics

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3 B. Dobski, “The U.S. Is a Republic, Not a Democracy,” The Heritage Foundation, June 19, 2020, 3.

established by the U.S. and its allies after World War II to expand democracy and free markets throughout the world. This expansion was accomplished through global institutions such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organization.<sup>4</sup> Developments since 2014 in the LIO, however, have revealed “major geopolitical and domestic socioeconomic trends that are calling into question the order’s fundamental assumptions,”<sup>5</sup> thus President Biden’s interest in holding the Democracy Summit. Held during the Covid pandemic, the Summit featured world figures and LIO supporters such as Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern of New Zealand and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau of Canada.<sup>6</sup> In truth, these leaders are not democracy’s best representatives from a U.S. perspective. Jacinda Ardern’s response to Covid of holding citizens against their will in quarantine camps until testing negative for the Covid virus hardly “defends against authoritarianism.”<sup>7</sup> Justin Trudeau’s freezing the bank accounts of protesting truckers without a court order does not “promote respect for human rights.”<sup>8</sup>

One priority of the LIO, of course, has been the unimpeded movement of capital and labor across national boundaries, which in practice has resulted in porous, if not open, borders.<sup>9</sup> However, it is hard to see how adult ESL teachers could support the unrestricted flow of 5.5 million undocumented migrants encountered at the U.S. border over the last few years,<sup>10</sup> or the Biden administration’s refusal to recognize this situation as a “crisis.”<sup>11</sup> It would also defy common sense for them to support abolishing Immigration and Customs

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- 4 H. Kundnani, "What is the Liberal International Order?" *German Marshall Fund of the United States*, 2017.
- 5 M. Mazarr, A. Cevallos, M. Priebe, A. Radin, K. Reedy, A Rothenberg, J. Thompson, J. Willcox, "Measuring the Health of the Liberal International Order," Rand National Security Research Division, (Santa Monica, CA, 2017).
- 6 J. Davidson, "Without Debate, President Biden Has Decided upon Complete Open Borders," *New York Post*, (March 8, 2021); U.S. Department of State, The Summit for Democracy (February, 2021).
- 7 C. Creitz, "Victor Davis Hanson Laments New Zealand’s COVID-19 Quarantine ‘Camps’ as End of Personal Freedom," *FOX News*, October 28, 2022.
- 8 Post Editorial Board. "Canada’s Justin Trudeau Just Proved the Protesting Truckers Right," *New York Post*, February 15, 2022.
- 9 J. Mearsheimer, "Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order," *International Security* 43, no. 4 (Spring, 2019): 7-50.
- 10 D. Chiacu, "U.S. Facing Biggest Migrant Surge in 20 years—Homeland Security," *Thomas Reuters Foundation News*, March 17, 2021; Federation for American Immigration Reform, "FAIR Analysis: 5.5 Million Illegal Aliens Have Crossed our Borders Since Biden Took Office—How is Secretary Mayorkas Still Employed?" *PR Newswire*, (October 24, 2022).
- 11 Davidson.

Enforcement (ICE), defunding the police, and using “catch and release” border enforcement,<sup>12</sup> especially when the majority of their current students (citizens, permanent residents, F-1 visa holders, asylees, and refugees) have come to the U.S. legally, waited in line, and spent time, effort, and money to obtain legal status. The inability or unwillingness of ESL teachers to speak up, as best I can tell, has three possible causes: 1. deference to liberal immigration policies and identity politics which sees opposition to any amount of migration across borders as akin to racism; 2. the fear of losing friends, status, and job opportunities from an ideologically-driven education establishment; or 3. self-interest, defined in terms of the benefits of the enormous resources that will presumably flow to ESL practitioners from purposefully directed and unprecedented illegal immigration.

In technologically advanced countries like the U.S., immigrants do not automatically learn English and obtain living wage jobs. For school-age non-native English-speaking immigrants, it normally takes about three years of instruction to learn basic interpersonal communication skills and six to eight years to obtain academic language proficiency. For adults, this time period is usually extended if students are non-literate or semi-literate in their native language, which many of the undocumented immigrants are. These time periods exist despite adult ESL teachers utilizing teaching methods that can expedite the learning process and provide support to orient immigrants to life in the U.S.<sup>13</sup>

During the pandemic, many dedicated resourceful ESL teachers kept in contact with their adult ESL students by extraordinary means—teaching classes online or in parking lots to ensure social distance, or by delivering materials to student homes or explaining assignments in personal phone calls.<sup>14</sup> Without such caring personalized help many students would have floundered. However, an unexpected rush at the border during the pandemic left teachers

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12 S. Hankinson, “Mayorka’s ‘6 Pillars’ Border Security Plan Is Delusional,” *Heritage Foundation*, March 24, 2022.

13 R. Crawford, N. Witherspoon Arnold, “Exploring the Meaning and Paths of Advocacy for Undocumented Students’ Access to Education,” *Journal of Latinos and Education* 15, no. 3: 197-213.

14 T. Miles, “Adult Education: A State Director’s Perspective, Where Are We Now? Where Are We Headed?” *Adult Literacy Education* 3, no. 2, (2021): 44-49.

unprepared to provide adequate support and introduced greater tensions and competition within established immigrant communities.

Assuming that most ESL instructors know that the U.S. is a republic, it isn't hard to imagine that many would see an open border as a violation of the U.S. Constitution under the Guarantee Clause, Article IV, Section 4, which requires the national government to guarantee every state a republican form of government and protection from foreign invasion and domestic violence.<sup>15</sup> In fact, several instructors have told me so. Leaving borders open increases opportunities for cartels and other criminals to cross the border and increases corruption. This is one reason that Secretary of Homeland Security Mayorkas's "6 Pillar Border Security Plan"<sup>16</sup> has been labeled "delusional" and inadequate for upholding the values of the U.S. republic. The plan claims to 1) increase resources to meet needs, 2) increase border patrol processing efficiency, 3) administer consequences for illegal entry, 4) increase the ability of non-governmental organizations to receive immigrants, 5) target and disrupt transnational gangs, and 6) deter irregular migration south of the border. But in actuality, it simply continues the Biden administration plan for illegal immigrants to "quickly process them into the U.S., release them under parole, and grant them asylum."<sup>17</sup>

A representative democracy has meaning to all adult ESL learners, especially the undocumented immigrants who have arrived most recently. Many seek the American Dream, where opportunities are plentiful and human rights are respected. The irony is that by entering this country illegally, they also unintentionally damage the very system that makes America so attractive to them in the first place. And by tolerating, even facilitating, their illegal entry, the Biden Administration damages that system even more.

By remaining silent about fluid borders, many adult ESL educators and administrators may be self-censoring for fear of professional censure. But courage is in order now because their silence actually

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15 T. Nehls, "Rep. Nehls Reminds Biden of His Constitutional Duty to Protect States from Border Invasion," Troy Nehls home website, (May 31, 2022).

16 A. Mayorkas. Memorandum: Executive Summary of DHS Plan for Southwest Border Security and Preparedness, (April 26, 2022).

17 S. Hankinson.

contradicts the legal rights of immigrants and citizens already in the U.S. They are also implicitly condoning the growing property damage, injuries suffered by border patrol, crime, child trafficking, and sex and drug trafficking within U.S. borders. The relatively light coverage of these events in the media, not to mention the Biden administration's likely collaboration with Big Tech in the censorship of news about it, will not "defend against authoritarianism" either.<sup>18</sup> It has accomplished the opposite and our immigrant students probably realize this because many fled their native countries to escape such tyranny.

The "democracy" advocated by the Summit for Democracy seems to be working at cross-purposes to our representative republic. A better solution would be for adult ESL educators to fight for serious control of the Southern border and effective immigration reform. Yet, ESL teachers and their professional organizations need to do the research regarding the effects on migrants and the native born of competition for housing, education, medical care, and jobs,<sup>19</sup> as well as the tax revenue required when millions of new undocumented immigrants settle unexpectedly in established immigrant and native-born communities during a pandemic. Adult ESL professionals might benefit from talking and writing to legislators about these issues so that bills can be passed to address these concerns.

A large number of immigrants in our adult ESL classes hail from traditional, family-oriented backgrounds.<sup>20</sup> The agenda proposed by the Summit for Democracy, especially its support of virtually open borders, does not fit their real world needs and aspirations. Teaching newcomers about the Constitution and the distinction between federal and state powers and rights could well be one of the most enlightening and empowering lessons they will learn. Assisting learners to experience the fruits of a constitutional republic which provides opportunities for all to succeed by legal pathways should be our goal.

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18 B. Adelman, "Court Rules Biden Administration's Collision with Social Media Be Exposed," *The New American*, July 22, 2022.

19 CBP Releases, March 2022 Monthly Operational Update, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, April 18, 2022., cited in A. Arthur, "Nearly 1.06 million CBP Encounters at Southwest Border Thus Far in FY 2022: And Biden Illegal Migrant Releases Now Exceed 836,000—Does the President Have a Plan?" [democratfacts.org](https://democratfacts.org), April 19, 2022.

20 Partnership for a New American Economy, *Shared Values: How Immigrants Align with the Republican and Democratic Parties on Social Values Issues*, [newamericaneconomy.org](https://newamericaneconomy.org), (November 2014).

Returning to the beginning of this section, I am sorry to report that *Adult Learning* rejected my response, claiming that it included “loaded political viewpoints” and it did not “conform to Adult Learning manuscript requirements,” yet academic challenges concerning democracy and ESL adult education remain. It is imperative that our teachers understand what a republic is and that they train millions of adult immigrant learners for the realities of such a form of government. The future well-being of our republic is dependent on how well we teach that equality of opportunity for those living legally within U.S. boundaries is not the same as “equity” for all by majority rule. As professionals in the field it is also incumbent upon us as teachers and administrators to take courage, speak up, and persist in communicating ideas on listservs, at conferences, and in publications. These ideas may not be accepted by many in the academy and may well cause ridicule, yet they are worthy of consideration, especially as they apply to our rights guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution and our representative democracy.