

# CASE STUDY: ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING INITIATIVES

## Introduction

The United States is a multilingual country. [According to 2018-2022 5-year American Community Survey estimates](#), 21.7% of people in the U.S. spoke a language other than English at home, including 13.3% who spoke Spanish at home. While immigrants have historically been concentrated in urban and metropolitan areas, suburban and rural communities are home to an [increasing number of people born outside the U.S.](#) In light of many transit agencies' needs to serve linguistically diverse riders and recruit and retain workers, locations around the country have begun to offer English language learning pathways (English for speakers of other languages, or ESOL) and to adapt recruitment and training initiatives to support bilingual workers. This Transit Workforce Center (TWC) case study explores several such initiatives.

## UTA Bilingual Bridges

[Like many transit locations](#), **Utah Transit Authority (UTA)** has been affected by workforce shortages. In 2023, the agency had an urgent need to hire bus operators. UTA training staff learned of a local school district, Granite Peaks, that offered ESOL adult education courses and had recently received a grant to help English language learners secure employment. The agency partnered with the district to develop Bilingual Bridges, a bus operator ESOL program focused on language skills directly relevant to transit.

UTA and Granite Peaks have been running Bilingual Bridges as a pilot; four cohorts have completed the program. The course runs for 8-12 weeks for 29 hours per week. Participants are paid to attend classes, which UTA's Director of Workforce Technical Training Stacey Palacios credited as a key factor in the program's success. The course is run by an ESOL instructor, employed by Granite Peaks, and a UTA trainer. About 60% of class content is focused on English language skills, while 40% is specific to bus operations and includes prep work for the CDL permit test. Overall, the focus is on job-relevant language acquisition, including safety, customer service, and navigation. Participants who complete the program can apply to become UTA bus drivers and join the new hire program, which includes CDL training. Some participants have also been hired as technicians.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- English language pathway programs can promote recruitment of transit workers from untapped talent pools.
- Recruiting bilingual workers can make transit locations' workforces more representative of service area demographics and ensures that transit workers are able to communicate with riders.
- Agency-based English language learner recruitment initiatives involving bilingual proficiency, training, and operations continue to evolve, with innovation occurring at the local level.
- Local partners and use of both national and local financial and informational resources can provide significant and effective support in designing and delivering these varied programs.

UTA staff estimate that 90% of participants in Bilingual Bridges are recruited through Granite Peaks. This pipeline allows Granite Peaks' ESOL instructors to recommend existing students with sufficient levels of proficiency to join Bilingual Bridges.

Running the program is not without its challenges. Cost is always a factor when designing training programs, and UTA may seek to identify a partner organization to sustain the program with less direct administrative oversight from UTA. Not all participants have sufficient driving skills, and some have been unable to obtain CDLs. In earlier cohorts, participants with lower English proficiency enrolled with mixed results; the program has recalibrated its requirements with successive cohorts. Significantly, retention rates for new hires who completed the program have been comparable to those of other new hires.

### Learn More

For more on the program, see [UTA's Bilingual Bridges information page](#) and a [Mass Transit magazine article on the program](#).

Bilingual Bridges has produced several major benefits. Creating a new recruitment pipeline advances the agency's goal of addressing the workforce shortage: Granite Peaks serves as a recruitment partner, and past program participants can refer others. The program also advances UTA's goal of having a workforce that is representative of service area demographics, and increasing the number of bilingual bus drivers enhances the agency's ability to serve riders who primarily speak Spanish or other languages.

While UTA staff emphasize that Bilingual Bridges is a pilot program (and will be paused through 2025), they feel that its success can serve as a model for other agencies.

## Bilingual Recruitment and Operations at HIRTA and MeVa

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Some agencies have adapted to changing demographics of their service areas by embracing bilingual recruitment, hiring, training, and operations. The **Heart of Iowa Regional Transit Agency (HIRTA)**, which serves seven counties in central Iowa, values community engagement and coordinates extensively with local partners. This approach extends to engagement with riders and job seekers who are learning English.

HIRTA has developed Spanish-language recruitment materials and job listings that are disseminated online, posted in public places that include stores serving predominantly Spanish-speaking customers, broadcast on Spanish language radio, and mailed out to the local Chamber of Commerce and community organizations. Julia Castillo, HIRTA's Executive Director, says that HIRTA staff also bring recruitment materials to community events just in case they encounter people who are looking for work.

HIRTA has hired a bilingual mobility manager and a bilingual call center worker. These individuals are available to assist with job interviews, which can be conducted in Spanish if a candidate prefers. Road training can also be completed with the support of a bilingual trainer, and training videos can be closed captioned with Spanish subtitles. The mobility manager and call center worker communicate with drivers and passengers in both English and Spanish. Castillo indicated that, while workers generally acquire stronger English skills over time, conducting agency processes in a bilingual fashion is feasible, and in fact supports stronger engagement with Spanish-speaking passengers.

**Merrimack Valley Transit (MeVa)** serves towns and cities in northeastern Massachusetts including Lawrence and Haverhill; the region has a significant Spanish-speaking population. Like HIRTA, MeVa has found that recruitment, training, and operations can be successfully conducted in a manner that enables workers who are learning English to succeed. The agency has removed stated English proficiency requirements from recruitment materials and job listings, although applicants still need to complete an application in English. Job interviews are generally conducted in English to establish an applicant's baseline proficiency, but Spanish-speaking staff are available to lead bilingual interviews. MeVa has two bilingual trainers, bilingual dispatchers, and a driver workforce half of whom are bilingual. MeVa's Director of Administration Jaymi Swarbrick indicated that having a heavily bilingual workforce creates a supportive environment for new hires who are still developing English fluency and facilitates effective communication with passengers.

Several members of MeVa's management have been bilingual, which was a factor in the agency's move to recruit more heavily from the region's Spanish-speaking population and affirm bilingualism in the workplace. The professional organization [Latinos in Transit](#) has been an important resource for MeVa's leadership. Affirming language diversity has been part of MeVa's broader efforts to attract more riders through rebranding – the agency's buses now feature the bilingual English and Spanish slogan "Let's go/¡Vamos!"

### Learn More

To learn more about HIRTA, please [visit their website](#).

To learn more about MeVA, please [visit their website](#) and read a [Mass Transit magazine article on their rebranding efforts](#).

## The WIN Partnership and Canal Alliance

In a [February 2024 case study](#), TWC detailed workforce initiatives developed by the WIN Partnership in Marin County, California. WIN, a labor-management partnership formed between **Golden Gate Transit** and **ATU Local 1575**, with support from California Transit Works, sponsors operator mentorship, registered apprenticeship, and pre-apprenticeship programs.

### Learn More

- [WIN Partnership information from CA Transit Works!](#)
- [Canal Alliance ESOL programs](#)
- [Canal Alliance job skills programs](#)

Golden Gate Transit staff found that elements of their application process disproportionately created barriers for members of certain demographic groups. Sixty-seven percent of people who began a job application did not complete it, with the highest rates of non-completion among Asian/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander and Hispanic applicants. A bus operator pre-apprenticeship program was created to reduce barriers to entry. Pre-apprentices can access wrap-around services through the Canal Alliance, a community-based organization, including English language classes. Canal Alliance also serves as a recruitment partner.

## **Partner Resource: National RTAP technical brief: Essential Spanish for Rural Transit**

The **National Rural Transit Assistance Program (RTAP)**, like TWC, is a Federal Transit Administration - sponsored technical assistance center. Their resource library includes many materials designed to support rural transit operations, including a brief entitled Essential Spanish for Rural Transit. This document summarizes existing initiatives to train transit workers in basic Spanish to better communicate with riders and contains a list of common phrases in English and Spanish that were identified through a survey of transit operators. To view the brief, open the PDF under the 'media' section of the [resource listing](#).

In 2020, National RTAP hosted a [webinar on the topic](#).

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