

# LAIC starts ESL class to help Madison workforce

## Language barrier affects employees

By JANE UTECHT  
Staff Reporter

Adults commonly teach young children how to speak, but it is a rare occasion when a child teaches an adult.

That unusual turn of events is taking place this fall in an English as a Second Language (ESL) course being taught for adults in the Madison-area workforce.

Madison High School sophomore Ania Salcedo volunteers with the class.

"When I came to the U.S. I didn't know how to speak [English]," Salcedo said, "and I know how hard the grammar can be."

Salcedo was happy to volunteer with the class.

"This helps the people I know," she said.

### WORKFORCE NEED

The class is the brainchild of the Lake Area Improvement Corporation (LAIC).

A few years ago, LAIC Executive Director Julie Gross said that the area was experiencing a workforce shortage. Local businesses were able to hire people willing to work, but many were



Photo by Jane Utecht

**PERSONAL MOTIVATION** — Ania Salcedo (standing, center) volunteers with the LAIC ESL class being offered this fall. Salcedo knows how hard it is to learn English, but now that she is bilingual, she enjoys helping the people she knows.

Hispanic.

This brought in a language barrier, Gross said, and some of these workers "can't communicate very well" with their employers or with others in the community, such as school personnel or health-

care providers.

"It is hard to live in an English-speaking area and only speak Spanish," said Gross.

This is something other area development corporations are dealing with, she said. Some have hired an extra employee to deal with these workforce issues, she said. LAIC chose to focus on language and to deal with it with the help of volunteers.

First, the LAIC reached out to Madison Elementary Principal Janel Guse, Jim Backus at Job Service, Sandy Salley at the Career Learning Center, and Jacy Fry with the International Office at Dakota State University. These individuals provide help as an ESL board.

Madison High School offered the use of classrooms for the project, and LAIC found four teachers — MHS teacher Anne Elisa Brown and Madison area residents Greg Hanson, Alicia Persichetti and Stephanie Johnson.

Twenty-six Hispanic workers registered for the class, which started this fall. It is held on Tuesday and Thursday evenings for an hour

and Saturday mornings for two hours.

The students work at industries such as Rosebud, PPD, G.A. Murdock, Persona, Global Polymer, Dan and Jerry's Greenhouse, Bruns Concrete and Cederberg Dairy near Ramona.

Some students bring their children, so LAIC has found volunteers who provide child care.

Because many of the students work evening shifts, they average about 18 students per class period, "but they are very eager to learn," Gross said.

It soon became apparent that the students had a wide range of experience with English, so they split into a beginner and an advanced class.

"It's extra rewarding when they graduate from the beginner class to the more advanced class," Gross said.

With the two classes and the child care offered, it takes five to seven people per night to hold the ESL classes, Gross said. Teachers are paid a stipend; the others volunteer their efforts.

Continued on page 2



Photo by Jane Utecht

**ESL INSTRUCTOR** Alicia Persichetti helps Beatriz Alcalá with verb forms in the beginner English as a Second Language class. The ESL course, sponsored by LAIC, is helping area workers learn English and find confidence with daily tasks, such as speaking to their children's teachers or calling for medical appointments.

# LAIC starts ESL classes...

## Continued from page 1 CUSTOMIZED CURRICULUM

Brown said that they are writing their own curriculum for the course.

While there is some ESL curriculum available, Hanson said, "Unfortunately a lot of the stuff on the Internet is not as suitable for these students, things that are not the most useful for this group."

The ESL teachers needed to develop a more job-related vocabulary and other life-related topics, such as banking, shopping, directions, days of the week and numbers, and grammar lessons for the advanced class, Gross said.

Brown offered a vocabulary example. When she is teaching first- and second-level Spanish at MHS, she doesn't teach words like "surgery," but it's an important word for adult workers to know.

"I am learning words, too," she said.

So far, the curriculum is a 90-page book, Brown said, with vocabulary, grammar, discussion, whole conversations and some fill-in-the-blank with tenses. The students also use games and role playing, such as pretending to call a medical clinic to make an appointment, Gross said.

Because the classes have all different levels and capabilities, Brown said, the first couple of days were "interesting," but they have reworked things well.

"It's one of the more rewarding things I've done," she said.

Students find their rewards in the learning. Student Emma Anderson said the ESL class is "helpful for everything." An employee at Global Polymer, she admits "it's frustrating when people talk. English is so very, very hard." The class "makes me more secure," she said.

Student Francisco Ramirez said he uses what he learns in the class every day in his job with Danny Bruns' Construction Company.

Virginia Pina, who works at the dairy near Ramona, said the class "is good for life. It's difficult for us as a community. With the people here and everybody speaking English, we need to speak English."

She said she needs help with pronunciation, and it is easier to learn in the class than out in the community.

Gross said the students find the class to be a safe environment for learning English. They can all laugh as they learn, so there is "no embarrassment here."

Because of the positive response, what was initially planned as an 8-week course will continue through Christmas and into the new year.

"It's great to see them want to learn," Gross said.

## FUNDING SOURCES

Besides their own funding, the LAIC received some funds from Advantage SD and the Interlakes Area United Way to start the class. The goal, she told United Way members at their fall campaign kick-off, is to be self-sustaining and eventually be taken over by the Career Learning Center.

"This is our workforce," Gross told the IAUW members, "and what a positive impact you're making in our community."

Through United Way donations "you can help make [the workers] lives better."

Hanson said the workers also help make others' lives better.

"The key," he said, "is a lot of industry in the area does not have enough workers," so the Hispanic workers are "helping the economy by being productive here and spending money locally."