A Driving Curriculum for Multilingual Learners

Introduction

This white paper describes a driving curriculum collaboratively created by a research team from the University of Massachusetts Amherst and the staff and students of the International Language Institute of Massachusetts. The driving curriculum’s ten lessons, free and available online, teach learners the language and literacy skills necessary to navigate the RMV process of applying for a driver’s license in Massachusetts. The curriculum covers everything from how to navigate necessary documentation, what to do at the RMV, and how to study for the RMV written and road test. Importantly, the curriculum treats “language and literacy skills” not just as vocabulary or terms to be learned but also the social practices and insights that drivers, particularly those who experience heightened discrimination and danger on U.S. roads, need to know. In this way, the UMass/ILI driving curriculum is in conversation with PVWC’s expressed goals to enact justice for multilingual and migrant people in our community. Our hope is that once (or perhaps even before) the Work and Family Mobility Act is passed, our team is ready to support anyone who would like to begin the driver’s license application process.

Problem: The Language Necessary for Driving

Driving offers access to work, care, and community, especially in locations like Western Massachusetts where public transport can be slow or scant. For many low-wage and immigrant workers, physical mobility and social mobility are linked—the ability to move oneself here and there sometimes means a step up in job quality, pay, or better schooling. Therefore, learning about driving presents no small set of rewards and risks, including the challenges of learning specialized English-language terminology and jargon, as well as U.S.-based cultural symbols and assumptions. Further, while the need to drive is a practical necessity, the bureaucratic and linguistic barriers to a driver’s license are compounded by politicized demands for documentation in Massachusetts.

Proposed Solution: A Sociopolitical Language Curriculum for Driving

ILI is a non-profit community language school in Northampton, MA whose mission is to promote intercultural understanding and strong, diverse communities through language instruction and teacher training. The driving curriculum was initiated by ILI students in the Free Evening Program (FEP) which primarily serves immigrants and refugees. FEP students requested of ILI staff a course to teach them how to get their licenses. ILI staff in turn asked the UMass team if this was a community project they could assist with.
From 2018-2020, the UMass team, which consists of undergraduates and graduate students working with Professor Rebecca Lorimer Leonard on her multilingual literacy research, designed ten lessons to support the language and literacy skills necessary to apply for a driver’s license in Massachusetts. These lessons were drafted and submitted to ILI staff for feedback several times, and then piloted with two ILI students in spring 2020.

For two reasons, the lessons evolved to include important social components of driving in the U.S.: 1) The UMass team’s research activities are guided by Gerald Campano, Maria Paula Ghiso, and Bethany J. Welch’s “coalitional” approach to community literacy whereby project members are reflective with respect to social location and aim to build coalitional energy at the community site, investigate and center community members’ experiences, and work toward a shared vision of social change. 2) In working on the curriculum, UMass students noticed that driving was a powerful theme in assigned reading on multilingual literacies. They began to track the social literacy skills demanded by being in a car in the U.S. For example, in the book *American by Paper*, author Kate Vieira describes at length the “textual vulnerability of driving” as an undocumented person in the U.S. Therefore, as the driving curriculum evolved, students revised its content and structure to 1) recognize the material and social constraints ILI students might encounter on the road and 2) negotiate and transform those constraints with a curriculum based in storytelling and locally collected narratives.

As we are implementing the driving curriculum now, UMass Amherst graduate students work one-on-one with International Language Institute students who express a desire for support in applying for the driver’s license. Tutors move through the lessons alongside the students, discussing the language and literacies associated with navigating the RMV in person and online, taking the driving test, and to a certain extent, eventually driving in the U.S. Our driving curriculum is unique in that it provides free, open-access one-on-one literacy and language support in English, while simultaneously being critical of the social dynamics involved in driving in the U.S. The curriculum enables students to have access to driver’s licenses, which positively impacts their mobility in the Pioneer Valley, and to be critical of the ways that driving situations and language can intersect to marginalize them.