

VESL for Victory and Independence

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Freedom and independence are never free. They are won by those willing to stand up and work for these bedrock human values.

Twice in the 20th century the people of the United States rose up to defend their freedom and independence. Among these people were hundreds of thousands of immigrants who came to the United States to gain these human rights and who then often found themselves fighting their own countrymen to keep these rights.

To rapidly teach the English language and literacy during wartime the Army followed a practice today called VESL: Vocational English-as-a-Second-Language. In this educational method, English language instruction and vocational instruction are taught concurrently, in an integrated manner. In both World Wars I and II the teaching of English was integrated with the teaching of military-related and morale-building information to help the soldiers learn and perform their jobs better.

VESL in World War I 1917

1. See Uncle Sam.
2. U.S. stands for Uncle Sam.
3. U.S. stands for United States.
4. Uncle Sam stands for United States.
5. U.S.A. stands for United States of America.
6. I am for Uncle Sam.
7. I am for the United States of America.
8. I stand for Uncle Sam.
9. Uncle Sam stands for me.
10. I am an American.
11. See me stand for Uncle Sam.

This is the second lesson in the "Camp Reader for American Soldiers" (Spaeth, 1919) used by thousands of foreign-born men who entered the Army in World War I and needed to learn the English language. In the first lesson, the men learned to say, "I am an American."

Used to teach literacy and the English language in what were called Development Battalions, the Camp Reader was written by J. Duncan Spaeth, Professor of English, Princeton University, and Educational Director, Army Y. M. C. A. at Camp Wheeler in Georgia and Camp Jackson in South Carolina. The book is the first book I have found that was intended to teach both native-born illiterates and foreign-born immigrants to read and write the English language. It also includes the first Teacher's Manual that presents a theoretical understanding of conversational and written English, including an introduction to "The Phonetic System of Reading" and an Appendix which serves as a separate Teacher's Manual for those instructing non-English speaking soldiers.

During World War I some 500,000 immigrants were drafted and thousands more volunteered for service (Ford, 2001, p. 137). While not all needed to learn English, tens of thousands did need to and did. One of those who volunteered for the Army was Louis Van Iersel, who was born in the Netherlands. He learned English with the help of the Y.M.C.A. and went to war in Germany. There he was credited for heroism which saved the lives of a thousand men and he was awarded America's highest military recognition, the Medal of Honor (Ford, 2001, p. 140).

VESL in World War II 1943

World War II saw the nation once again enlisting hundreds of thousands of men with no or very low literacy skills and others of foreign birth who could speak and/or write little or no English. Once again, as in World War I, Special Training Units were established to teach literacy and English language to these soldiers.

One of the tools developed for teaching men to read and write was a newspaper entitled "Our War." In the April 1943 issue there is a comic strip which features Private Pete and his pal, Daffy, both fictional characters who are in a Special Training Unit learning to read and write. This strip also features Pedro, a friend of Pete and Daffy, who cannot speak good English, but is nonetheless a good soldier. In the strip, Pete and Daffy save Pedro from going A.W.O.L. (absent without leave) by explaining what A.W.O.L. means. They offer to help Pedro whenever he is not sure about something, illustrating how soldiers from different cultural and language backgrounds can work together.

In another issue of "Our War" Private Porfirio C. Gutierrez, a soldier in a Special Training Unit wrote a letter home and said, "This is my first letter in English. I have learned to read and write so that I can help protect our country." By the war's end, over a quarter million troops had been taught literacy and/or English language in the Special Training Units.

VESL for Today's Immigrants

Today, many programs for those learning the English language follow a similar approach to that of the Army in World Wars I and II and embed or integrate the teaching of English within the functional context of vocational training. These VESL programs continue to help thousands of non-English speaking immigrants achieve social and economic freedom and independence in their newly chosen homeland.

When we celebrate Independence Day this July 4th, we can be grateful that the torch in the hand of the Statue of Liberty still shines and still stands as a beacon for those escaping oppression, terrorism, and poverty. Hundreds of thousands of immigrants from the past fought, and many died, so we could keep the torch of liberty beaming. Our freedom and independence is intact and thousands of new immigrants arrive each day to enjoy these human rights. But these rights are under attack still today, and sadly many of the new immigrants, like their forebears, will die fighting so that their families and their new American neighbors can continue to enjoy freedom and independence.

But freedom and independence are never free.

References

Ford, N. G. (2001). *Americans All! Foreign-born Soldiers in World War I*. College Station, TX: Texas A & M University Press.

Spaeth, J. D. (1919). *Camp Reader for American Soldiers*. New York: The International Committee of Young Men's Christian Association.