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ESL classes go under the hood Durham Tech automotive course incorporates Spanish-language instruction

BY ANDREW DUNN

Tim Scott, an instructor at Durham Technical Community College, sat in the driver's seat of a white minivan, a computer hooked to its electrical system.

"When did you notice the problem?" he asked the owner of the car, who was among a dozen attentive students in this automotive technology services class working through a troubleshooter program.

Then Nestor Escobar, the course's primary instructor, repeated: "¿Cuándo empezó el problema?"

This class and traditional Durham Tech automotive classes are exactly the same -- except this one is taught in Spanish. About 45 students are taking the classes in Spanish over the summer, with 60 signed up for the fall.

The new program -- designed to help adults gain auto mechanic skills and a grip on the English language at the same time -- has garnered so much interest as it completes its first year that dozens of students have had to be turned away.

The classes help train students to take the Automotive Service Excellence test, the national standard for quality mechanics.

Nathan Smith, director of the automotive technology program at Durham Tech, said the average mechanic makes about \$40,000 per year.

And most students enter this program with little to no automotive experience, Smith said.

For many of the about 20 students in the second-level brakes class, who range in age from early 20s to mid-40s, the goal is to one day own a mechanic shop.

Though the classes, run through the continuing education department, are held mostly in the evening to accommodate the students' work schedules, it still is difficult for many students to attend.

"All of us have full-time jobs, so it's not always convenient," Francisco Rodriguez, who commutes from Raleigh, said in Spanish. "Really, it's a little bit of sacrifice if you want to come."

Many work at restaurants, but others already have jobs in the auto repair industry.

Juan Quroz works for a Nissan dealership, but jumped at the chance to advance his career.

"I want to do more difficult things," he said in Spanish.

The program began last fall when the interests of the English as a Second Language and automotive departments came together.

Durham Tech has offered ESL classes free of charge for years. One of the classes involves

a "career day," with tours of the college's different programs. Immediately, the auto shop was a popular location.

"People started looking in, wanting to see the shop," public information officer Nell Yates said. "But they didn't really think they could take courses because they spoke so little English."

At the same time, Smith, the automotive program director, was pondering his mortality.

"I started thinking, 'If I were to drop dead today, what would my three oldest children do with their lives?' " he said. "Like a bolt of lightning this thought came to me: 'What if you were Spanish? What if you were the same age you are now, came into this country and didn't speak good English?' I would be scared out of my mind."

He said his first thought was to help them through his job. He got in touch with a few ESL teachers, and the program was born.

Several auto mechanic instructors speak Spanish, and teach the class largely in that language. But students in that program also are strongly encouraged to take English classes, Yates said.

The goal of the program is, Smith said, "To take a person who speaks limited English and turn out a person proficient in reading, writing and speaking English with marketable automotive skills."

The first class teaches auto mechanic safety as well as how to change oil and perform maintenance, qualifying the student to work at a Jiffy Lube-type business or at a dealership.

The second class focuses on brakes. Brake mechanics are in high demand, Smith said.

Those who complete the first two classes receive a certificate.

Starting with the third level class, covering suspension and steering, the teaching is in English.

Because the first two classes are taught through the continuing education program, they only cost \$75 for a 16-week program, Smith said.

After those, the student is pursuing an automotive technology diploma, and the fee is raised to about \$300 per class.

Smith has taken several measures to advertise the program, including setting up an informational booth at a car show aimed at Hispanics, Yates said. Ads also run in the local Spanish-language newspapers Que Pasa and Conexiones.

Although the interest is there, ESL instructor Karin Abell said difficulties still remain in getting students registered properly.

"That's always a problem with a second language," she said, citing problems with giving directions and working out schedules. "The instructions you give have to be very detailed."