

Who is Being Overlooked in Our Classrooms?

Teaching Preliterare and Nonliterate Adult

Refugee English Language Learners

Lena Webb

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Dr. Forrest Inslee

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## Introduction

During my first year teaching a woman from South Sudan joined my ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) class. She had been dropped off by a young case worker who took time to explain what bus she would need to take to and from the community center. We were engaged in an activity reading a simple news article written for English language learners when she stepped into the class. The woman seemed lost as she sat silently off to the side without participating. She left afterwards without saying much, and never returned. Unlike the other students in my class, the woman who had joined that day could not read. I had not been prepared to teach students who could not read or write and, like many teachers, had designed my class with the assumption that all those I was teaching would be literate in their first languages.

Since that first year, I've had other adult students show up for English classes who had come to the United States as refugees and were preliterate or nonliterate, had not yet learned to read or write in any language, driving me to consider how these students can better be served. Many such learners join traditional ESOL classes that are not designed with their needs in mind, only to discontinue attending. This is evident here in Worcester, MA, as it is extremely difficult to find any programs that serve this population of ESOL students. Preliterate and nonliterate adult refugee students face unique challenges in traditional adult ESOL classrooms. The inclusion of culturally relevant classes specifically designed for preliterate learners can bridge gaps and enrich the learning experience as students are effectively empowered to reach their goals. This project aims to design a course geared towards preliterate and nonliterate refugee students using an asset-based approach that can be utilized in adult education programs. Drawing from what I learned in qualitative interviews with refugees in Worcester, I will go on to look at who preliterate and nonliterate refugee learners are, the challenges they face in traditional ESOL

classrooms, unique factors that impact learning, important aspects of designing a class for aforementioned learners including an asset-based approach, and plans for carrying out the proposed project. In the end, I will share an initial curriculum created to be used with preliterate and nonliterate adult English language learners in an adult education program.

## **Background**

### **Who are refugees?**

We live in an increasingly globalized world. That is to say, a world in which ideas, news, diseases, products, money and more are moving quickly and easily around our ever-shrinking globe (Myers 37). Included in this back and forth movement around the globe are people. As is stated in *Engaging Globalization*, “People are moving in all directions” (Myers 41). I find an ESOL classroom to be representative of this continuous movement, with students present from a variety of different countries and backgrounds. Many of the students those of us involved in adult education interact with on a daily basis have come to the United States for a variety of reasons, be it work, family, opportunities, or even safety.

There is diversity in migration. Nevertheless, when it comes to people coming to build a new life in the United States, it has been pointed out that, “The pervasive tendency is to group immigrants and refugees together” (Segal and Mayadas 564). People can easily overlook the variety of stories, unaware of the distinctiveness of the journey that led to someone being seated before them. No immigrant or refugee is the same, and everyone’s background and experience is unique. When it comes to a general picture, however, of the distinction between refugees and immigrants, one description given is in terms of push vs. pull factors. Immigrants are pulled by the possibilities of life in United States or another country, often planning to immigrate. In the case of my mother, for example, marriage would be considered a “pull” factor in her coming to

the U.S. Meanwhile, refugees are pushed from their homelands, often being selectively resettled in the United States or elsewhere (Segal and Mayadas 564). It has, nevertheless, been argued that the categories of “push” and “pull” factors made in traditional migration studies are based on assumptions and that such dichotomies are inconsistent (Holmes 17, 188).

For the purpose of this paper, and common understanding, a clearer distinction would be the one defined by legal terms. The legal definition for a refugee comes from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). As was stated at the 1951 Refugee Convention, a refugee is someone with:

well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is out-side the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. (“Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees”)

It has also been added that, “The 1969 Organization of African Unity Refugee Convention and the 1984 Cartagena Declaration of Latin America expanded the definition to include people who have fled because of war or civil conflict” (Collins 107). The threat of violence or persecution, and fear for one’s wellbeing and safety, are central to one being considered a refugee. These threats and fears are what drive one from their home. With this being said, what is discussed and proposed in the following pages would also apply to asylum seekers, such as asylum seekers from Central America, who are also driven from their homes for these reasons.

**In Their Words...**

During the summer of 2018 I engaged in fieldwork interviewing Syrian refugees living in Worcester, Massachusetts. This was done through an organization called WARM (Worcester Alliance for Refugee Ministry). The executive director accompanied me as we met and chatted with refugees in their homes. The central theme of my interviews was wellbeing, specifically in the context of the refugee experience. I was seeking to understand how the refugees I met defined wellbeing and how they had or had not experienced it.

I was participating in qualitative research. In doing so one is, “interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam and Tisdell 6). I wanted to learn about the refugee experience from refugee’s points of view, how they saw and made sense of their life journey coming and building a life here the U.S., of their time living in Worcester. This involved interviewing, listening as, “people speak for themselves by telling about their lives” (Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater 220). What did refugees have to share while speaking for themselves?

In the process, I was struck by how often people brought up English as important to wellbeing. The ability to understand what is going on, communicate, and be heard can make things easier when adjusting to a new home. One woman spoke of her desire for connection, sharing how alone she felt leaving family and starting a new life and longing to build new connections with people in the U.S., yet stating, “How can I connect with them without the language?” (Asma). Another gave voice to the opportunity for jobs, expressing, “if [you] go to school and...learn the language you can work anywhere” (Obaida). There was general consensus that the ability to speak English makes life in the United States easier and opens doors to opportunities, as in the words of one man, “when language is available things become simple in

front of us” (Morhaf). The ability to communicate in English was connected to many things considered significant for wellbeing while living in America. Since this was an area identified as important, it was an area I decided to continue to focus on. In doing so I sought to consider how refugees can better be served as they seek to become proficient in the dominant language of their new home.

### **Who are Preliterate and Nonliterate Learners?**

As people seek to learn English, however, it turns out not all refugees’ experiences in attending English classes are the same. Timon, a Ugandan refugee in Worcester who is now both a case manager at RIAC (Refugee & Immigrant Assistance Center) and a teacher at ACE (African Community Education) explained:

Among the refugee community we have at least three groups of people. The first group are the people who have some knowledge of English, some basic English. Maybe they learned at school, or they lived with people who speak English. They know at least something; they can hear and understand... There are people who have never learnt English, but they speak another language. They can write, they can read, they’re educated somehow, but they don't know English. The... third group of people, is those who have never stepped in a classroom. They cannot even write their name. They're not [going to] spell their name. So, the three groups, if you put them together to teach English in whatever, with whatever, method you can use, it's very, very frustrating because those who know some, have some basic English, they know some English, they feel like they're wasting their time. They're not making any progress. And those who know some, another language, they can write, read, find it difficult also to learn. Those who have never stepped in school, so frustrating, they learn nothing. I've seen people who have been in

such class for two, three years. They said English is so complicated and we don't understand, we've not learned anything so far. We keep on coming, coming, and [it] does not help. (Timon)

It has been evident that certain groups of students are not benefiting from existing ESOL classes.

Changing patterns of migration are reflected in the students that step into adult education classrooms, and student diversity, impacted by such patterns, cannot be discounted when considering students' learning experiences. There has been a noted increase in newcomers coming from backgrounds where common languages are oral and not written, or from where much of the population lacks access to literacy, since around the mid-1970s (Burt et al., "Reading and Adult English Language Learners" 4). It was then that the United States experienced a surge of Southeast Asian refugee arrivals who were not literate. At the same time, there continues to be a lack of knowledge in this area by ESOL administrators and teachers. This may result from the fact that any research that exists concerning ESOL learners without literacy in their native language is rather recent (Brekke 6), and there is not a lot of research to draw on (Vinogradov 2). Yet, adults with limited formal educational backgrounds continue to migrate and will continue to seek ESOL services, being reported as comprising, "an ever growing segment of the adult education population" (DelliCarpini 251). Such students, however, can often be found alongside those with literate backgrounds within the same English class.

When we look at the diversity of adults seeking to learn English, we find learners who can be classified as preliterate, nonliterate, semiliterate, non-Roman alphabet literate, non-alphabet literate, and Roman-alphabet literate (Burt et al., "Reading and Adult English Language Learners" 8). Those who would be considered literate include non-alphabet literate, non-Roman alphabet literate, and Roman-alphabet literate students. Non-alphabet literate learners read and



write a language with logographic script (symbols representing an entire word), such as Chinese. Those who are non-Roman alphabet literate read and write a language with alphabetic script (symbols corresponding with sounds) other than the Roman alphabet, such as Arabic or Russian. Those who are Roman-alphabet literate are those who read and write in a language that uses the Roman alphabet, such as Spanish or French (Burt et al., “Reading and Adult English Language Learners” 11-12).

Preliterate learners, on other hand, include those who speak a native language that is not written, or it is being developed or only recently written. Literacy is not common in their everyday life. Learners who are nonliterate speak a language that is written, e.g. literacy is available in their culture, yet they have not had access to literacy learning. This would include, for example, many adults from Central America who never learned to read or write, yet their native language, Spanish, is a written language. Those who are considered semiliterate are those who have had some access to literacy, yet never achieved a high level of proficiency. This could be due to reasons such as interrupted education and having to leave school at a young age (Burt et al., “Reading and Adult English Language Learners” 8-9).

Having lived for two years with a wonderful woman who never learned to read or write, given that she never went to school, in rural El Salvador, I’ve felt a special draw to students who enter classrooms here in the United States without print literacy. Yet, since being involved in adult education, I have been exposed to the gap that exists when it comes to serving this population of students. There are a variety of reason why an adult learner has had limited exposure to reading and writing, such as coming from an oral tradition (speaking a language that has not been written down), poverty, distance from a school, or even civil unrest and violence (Vinogradov 1). One woman from the Central African Republic, whom I met at ACE, explained

to me that her not attending school as a child had been a decision made by her father in what was seen at the time as him being “a loving dad” (Monique). Many such learners come from refugee backgrounds (Finn 586). All types of learners have different needs. This project seeks to focus on preliterate and nonliterate refugee learners in particular, who are often overlooked.

### **Challenges Faced in Traditional ESOL Classrooms**

This past September as I attended a training in Boston hosted by USCIS for adult education providers, an enthusiastic case manager from RIAC’s Worcester office sat with me for lunch. After expressing concern for one of her clients enrolled in an English class through my program, she began to talk about a group of clients she noticed quietly dropping out of ESOL classes. She found out many of these clients could not read or write. A week later, as we met again in Worcester at RIAC, Christine (the case manager) elaborated:

I found out that when they are enrolled in... the ESL 1 class not only does it not work, but it’s detrimental, you know, because it reinforces the trauma the, the bad feeling they have about themselves, you know. And, I have one client...he took on drinking after having a bad experience where he went to class with his two sons and his sons were able to, they had been to school a little, they were able to write [their] name and he was not, and the shame for him to look stupid, you know, having his two sons next to him. He dropped out of the class and he took on drinking. So, ah...now I am uncomfortable sending clients to an ESL 1 class. (Christine)

There are various challenges experienced by students when literate students and those without first language literacy are all grouped together in the same classroom. One consequence is what has been described as, “a ‘revolving door syndrome,’ in which students begin a course then fail, then start again, and eventually quit” (Brekke 6), as students find it difficult to make progress

and even participate (6). Often, preliterate and nonliterate students can feel uncomfortable and inferior when placed in a classroom alongside learners who can read and write. Preliterate and nonliterate learners tend to progress at a slower pace, and it is common that in entering an ESL classroom it is their very first time in a formal school setting as a learner (Brekke 8). One study of nonliterate Ethiopian and Eritrean students found that the students in the study felt stressed and confused by lessons that were mainly taught using a whiteboard, and were overwhelmed by the abundance of handouts as well as worksheets they found meaningless (Brekke 9).

In a talk about intersectionality, it was pointed out by Kimberlé Crenshaw that, “when facts do not fit with the available frames, people have a difficult time incorporating new facts into their way of thinking about a problem” (3:32-3:41). As we seek to serve adults learning English, when we fail to consider particular aspects of student’s identities, and lack frames for things such as formal educational background or lack thereof, students can end up unnoticed and unseen, with their particular needs not considered.

## **Factors That Impact Learning**

### *Cultural Factors*

We can’t talk about people from varied backgrounds coming together without talking about culture and how it impacts experiences within an ESOL classroom. There are various explanations of what culture is, and different ways of trying to define what could be broadly visualized as a fluid portrait comprising brush strokes of language, customs, beliefs, traditions, values, shared history, art, food, forms of expression, worldview, roles, ideologies, and more. Hofstede et al., in the book *Cultures and Organizations*, define culture as entailing, “the unwritten rules of the social game...the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes

the members of one group or category of people from others” (6). We all carry with us this “programming” and it influences how we live and our interactions with others.

One example of culture’s influence can be found in *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, a book by Anne Fadiman about a refugee family from Laos residing the California. In the book the author describes the many misunderstandings encountered between American doctors and Hmong patients. Such misunderstandings included the disrespect Hmong patients felt when doctors tried to maintain eye contact, which though expected and friendly in American culture was seen as invasive by the Hmong. Other misunderstandings included doctors not acting in the formal way the Hmong expected figures of authority to act and disregard of religious beliefs (Fadiman 64). It turns out these same things can play out in a classroom environment. It has been pointed out that, “The hierarchical social and family structure, communication styles, gender and age relationships, ethnic divisions, norms of social behavior, and values and attitudes all play a role in the classroom dynamics” (Vaynshtock 27). With the influential role culture can play, it is good to be aware of its influence on the dynamics in the classroom.

In continuing my conversation with Timon, some of these cultural factors were brought to light. Timon shared:

American people want you...to look in their eyes straight when they're talking to you. Now for people that come from like our culture in eastern Congo, in Congo actually in eastern Congo, generally if you are looking at somebody straight in the eyes like this you are being disrespectful. So you who...are teaching, they don't know that but you keep on looking at them. “What are they? Is there something wrong with me?” Then they look down, they are scared, they fear to express themselves. (Timon)

Instances like this can affect student participation, with the teacher completely unaware of such misunderstandings. As he goes on to speak about students from French-speaking African countries, Timon continues:

The culture of the French people is that if you make a mistake when you're learning, when speaking, they look at you like, "Where are you coming from? Did you go to school to speak like this?" So, people who come from French speaking countries, they are scared of trying. If they don't know the language, they'd better not speak it because they think, "If I make a mistake here, what will they say about me?" Okay. They're not eager to try. No, the English people they don't mock...they will not, they will not look at you like you don't know [anything], they will encourage you... We understand the idea. But, changing from that culture of fearing to make a mistake to where you can just speak... they find it difficult because [of] their fear, they are scared of making mistakes. (Timon)

There is cultural influence on how students approach learning, as well as the relationship between students and teachers. For example, some learners come with the expectation of a more formal relationship between student and teacher than that which is typically experienced in adult education in the U.S. (Vaynshtok 28). Hofstede refers to this particular dimension of culture as power distance, referring to different cultures' approach to inequalities (55), with greater power distance correlating with education that is more teacher centered (69). When this is the case, students can expect control of the learning process to be held by the teacher (Vaynshtok 28). Learner-centered activities may be difficult to initiate in the beginning (Benseman 99).

#### *Stress- Migratory, Acculturative, and Traumatic*

Having been forced to flee their home countries, many refugee students have experienced stress and trauma. One study looks at three different types of stress refugees experience during

the resettlement process. These include migration stress, acculturative stress, and traumatic stress.

Migration stress is referring to the stress experienced resulting from a sudden, unplanned move from one's home (Finn 587). In the process of a move outside of one's control, one experiences significant loss, such as the loss of family, community, home, and even professional standing (Magro 25). As one Syrian refugee, Asma, explained to me in her home, via an Arabic speaking interpreter:

When I came here to U.S., like suddenly everything different. Because my culture... all the times they sit together, the same thing with the girls, the women, the men, the friends, relatives, aunts, all the time together, you know...I'm a part of the community. Suddenly I'm without them, without anything, that I should rebuild again everything. But I [want] community, but I couldn't do that because different people, different culture, everything different, you know. So... that why I, I face really [psychological] challenges, you know, with myself. (Asma)

In leaving her home and moving to the United States, Asma experienced abrupt loss of the community she'd known and been a part of all her life.

As one enters a new culture or society and has to adapt anew, acculturative stress is experienced (Finn 587). In addition to loss, Asma spoke of all the changes she encountered in the place that was to be her new home, "Everything new here. New environment, the weather, the language, study, the people, everything... Everything different, like opposite, you know? That's big change" (Asma). Her husband, Mohamad, in another interview reiterated that, along with the language, the people in America were a big change, and went on to speak about the major differences, culturally, in the way people dress, as being a challenge for him. This experience is

different for everyone, for example some refugees who come from agrarian contexts have to also adapt to living in a city (Magro 29). It has been pointed out that, “resettlement issues cannot be separated from language development” (Benseman 95). Christine, from RIAC, explained how this is especially true for preliterate and nonliterate learners, sharing, “They’re struggling in their life adapting to life in America and to be focused on learning, to say I need to go to this class, I need to, you know, it’s, it’s difficult, especially for those who never set foot in a school” (Christine). Learners are acclimating both to a new home and to attending classes at the same time.

When it comes to trauma, one helpful definition is given in the book *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence- from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. Judith Herman writes, “Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning. Traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life” (33). She goes on to explain that such events confront us with, “extremities of helplessness and terror” and that they “evoke the responses of catastrophe” (33). There are many events in a refugee’s experience that can contribute to a loss of control, connection, and meaning. In addition to what we may typically picture when we think of events such as war or natural disaster, John Benseman notes, “Trauma can include physical and psychological torture, living in primitive conditions in transit camps for long periods, sustained separation from family and friends, and cultural alienation in their new host societies” (95). Effects of trauma can manifest in numerous ways, and it has an impairing impact on one’s confidence, self-esteem, and sense of self (McDonald 691).

According to studies, amongst refugees, those experiencing trauma related symptoms comprise between 30% and 86 % (Gordon 1). Within refugee populations, there have also been found to

be high rates of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and substance abuse. Knowing this, it is important not to generalize or make assumptions about one's experiences. Everyone, and everyone's experiences, are different, and people can also be in different stages in their recovery (Gordon 2). It must also be noted that the severity of symptoms one experiences are dependent on various pre-, trans-, and post-migration factors (Magro 25).

The effects of trauma can play out in the classroom, impacting one's ability to learn. So much so, it has been stated that, "trauma must be recognized as a potential source of learning disabilities" (McDonald 692). Some of these impacts include difficulties when it comes to processing and remembering information, as well as difficulties concentrating, beginning and completing new tasks, and in taking risks (Magro 25). When it comes to language learning in particular, factors such as attention, memory, and cognitive processing are all important aspects of second language acquisition, yet are also the very things influenced by traumatic experiences (Gordon 3).

At the same time, students' anxiety levels have been found to impact the ability to take in new information. As research has found, "Neuroimaging and neurotransmitter studies demonstrate that under stress, information is blocked from entering the brain's higher cognitive memory consolidation and storage" (Gordon 4). Stress and anxiety can be seen as an invisible barrier to learning, the existence of which is important to acknowledge and consider.

#### *Stress- Current Stressors*

In the documentary *Being Hmong Means Being Free*, a girl shares how after coming to the U.S. her dad, a Hmong refugee living in Wisconsin, had to choose between going to work and going to school. In the end he never went to school as he had to work in order to support his family. Her mother was able to attend classes, yet found it difficult due to also having to support



her family and raise her children (9:30-9:52). Like the family documented in the video, many refugees find attending adult education classes difficult due to various outside factors. Those who do attend class are often dealing with current stressors that can impact their learning. Timon highlighted the present situations adults learning English face as he shared:

...somebody challeng[ed] us one day. We are in the second meeting. They say you must, you must put more effort to learn English and this and that. And they say, okay, when I need a job, they tell us that if you don't know English it is not easy to get a job. You now have to pay rent, soon will be paying for your rent after three months of resettlement. You'll be the one paying for your rent yourself. Then, that is already stressful, reason for stress in your mind. But, how? I can't get a job, but I have to pay this rent? Then, with that stress they take it to class to learn English. They make your effort, make much effort to learn English...With the stress learning becomes more complicated, because you're not focusing only on learning, but you're focusing on so many things... It's making [the] learning experience more complicated. (Timon)

Many of those in the classroom have real, present concerns that can interfere with the learning experience. In one study, refugee adults identified barriers they felt interfered with their educational and personal goals. These barriers included financial burdens, poverty, balancing work, parenting, and school, difficulties reuniting with family members, and simply a lack of time for taking part in classes (Magro 27-28). In an informal interview with Nina, from Worcester's ESOL Navigator, it was pointed out that language learning can take a backseat to other needs, that life happens (Nina).

For those that have experience trauma, current stressors and past trauma can actually be mutually reinforcing. Current stress also has an impact on one's recovery from trauma

experienced (Gordon 10). In regards to PTSD in particular, one study involving resettled refugees from Iraq found there to be an interaction between PTSD symptoms and ongoing stress (Söndergaard and Theorell 322). With this being the case, each can then add to the other's impact on learning.

*Beyond Reading & Writing: Literacy Basics Taken for Granted*

For many preliterate or nonliterate learners, showing up for an ESOL class is their very first time stepping into a classroom. For those who *have* stepped into a classroom before, their schooling experience is often minimal. It is important that this isn't overlooked, since simply being a student in a classroom environment is a new experience for many learners that they may not yet be accustomed to. As Benseman states, "As adult learners they therefore lack the 'learning blocks' that most learners acquire as schoolchildren and teachers take for granted" (101). There is much we learn outside of class content, related to schooling and formal classroom learning, from the time we are young children that we can forget some adults may not have been exposed to. For many, this involves things such as holding a pen or pencil and working on classroom tasks with fellow learners (101). This can also include sitting at a desk and listening to a teacher (Burt et al., "Working with Adult English Language Learners with Limited Literacy" 2). In one study teachers shared that students they taught with low levels of literacy skills had to "learn to learn," and that teachers can't take anything for granted (Benseman 98).

At the same time, there are many other aspects of literacy itself that preliterate and nonliterate adults find unfamiliar. It has been pointed out that a literate person has learned to process information differently than a nonliterate (or preliterate) person, and that there are certain skills that are gained in formal schooling. Such skills include reading-related skills such as text organization and interpreting pictures and figures (Benseman 94). Also inherent to literacy is

seeing written symbols as representing, “sounds, words, and meaning” (Benseman 101). One needs to see patterns in symbols, recognize that written text can be representative of a message or story, and that such text has a beginning, middle, and end (Burt et al., “Working with Adult English Language Learners with Limited Literacy” 2). There is also the understanding that words are made up of sounds (Marrapodi 10).

Considerable background knowledge is involved in print literacy that those who are literate can fail to recognize and often give little thought to. Those who already have reading and writing skills can transfer those skills into new languages (Benseman 94). However, those who have not had the same exposure and experience with reading and writing need to start with the basics. With the amount of extra learning and experience needed, it is no wonder that for adults with limited literacy, learning progress has been found to be considerably slow in comparison (Benseman 99).

### **Designing the Class**

Taking into consideration the various factors that impact learning, and current available knowledge on the subject, there are number of components I believe are important when designing a class geared towards preliterate and nonliterate adult refugee learners. As is the case with all learners, the desire is to pursue instruction that is learner centered.

### **Important Attributes**

#### *Consideration to Culture and Language*

We cannot expect to be an expert on the culture of every student in the classroom, yet we can be aware of culture and how it can play out in a classroom environment and be considerate of the various cultural differences that will likely be encountered. As Timon reminded me in our interview, as students enter the classroom, “The culture, everything is very different. So, it also

makes the learning experience different. They're in a different world with a different culture, different approaches" (Timon). It may play out in student expectations. Some may expect teachers to play a traditional role in which there is a formal, hierarchical, relationship between teachers and students. Casual dress by American teachers can be seen as disrespectful to some (Vaynshtok 28), or as Timon also highlighted in our interview, the American approach to looking people in the eyes might be seen as disrespectful. Traditional approaches of seeing the "teacher as expert" may make learner-centered activities more difficult to start or get used to (Benseman 99). It may also play out in how students are accustomed to learning. Those who are preliterate may come from cultures in which learning is done through oral means such as fables, folktales, or other oral stories (Brekke 7).

It's pointed out that we should know about student's cultural backgrounds to be aware of barriers (Brekke 7). I would add that learning about student's cultures can also provide opportunities. For example, learning orally, common in various cultures, can be useful and be used as a bridge to literacy learning (Brekke 7-8). Cultural differences can be used as learning opportunities in the classroom, learning opportunities for both teachers and students. When it comes to cultural differences, we can welcome student's cultures into the classroom, showing respect and appreciation, and take a posture of learning as we all learn from each other. Cultural differences can be used as a bridge to learn new things. At the same time, as we are able, we can get to know students as individuals, valuing and showing interest in students' backgrounds and experiences while, as much as possible, avoiding relying on assumptions or generalizations.

Concerning language, bilingual helpers, who speak students' languages, have been found to be helpful in classes with preliterate and nonliterate learners. Such aids can help with cultural issues in addition to language difficulties (Benseman 99).

### *Creating a Safe Space*

As we welcome students' cultures and their whole selves into the classroom, we also want to create a safe space for those who may have experienced trauma. Students don't leave traumatic experiences at the door when they enter the classroom, and we should be aware of how past trauma can play out in a classroom setting (Benseman 10). While not underestimating the impact of past experiences, at the same time we don't want to pathologize such experiences' effects (Benseman 95), and want to refrain from painting a single over-generalized picture, and overly focusing on such students as "different". Chimamanda Adichie talks about the dangers of creating a single story about people, only showing people as one thing (Adiche 9:26), I believe the same is true for trauma survivors. In her book *Too Scared to Learn*, Jenny Horsman, as she writes about violence and literacy learning, states:

...our strategy must not be to separate out trauma survivors for treatment different from other learners. Instead, we must focus on all learners as whole people, stress the importance of drawing on their strengths in all approaches to literacy learning, and avoid focusing on survivor behaviors as individual problems. (80)

While we do so, seeing our students as whole people, we can aim to make sure our classrooms are a welcoming, safe space for all who walk through the door.

Centers for adult education serve a role beyond that of teaching English language and literacy skills. It has been pointed out that they can offer some stability and serve as a "safe haven" (Magro 24). In regards to "hard" and "soft" skills, according to studies, "refugee learners place great importance on the latter- experiencing the classroom as a social space that provides essential solace, a sense of belonging, routine, and rootedness" (Klenk 169). This role of the adult education classroom is valuable. As students feel safe, they also are more ready to learn, as

it is in such a state, calm and attentive, that the brain can best receive new information (Gordon 4).

As far as physical space and class structure, there are things we can do with the purpose of creating such a learning environment. For example, we can leave the door open in order to help students feel comfortable and not experience a lack of control, and let learners know where the nearest bathroom is and/or water fountain (Finn 591). The same can be done with windows and, if it is possible, we could aim to locate the classroom in a quiet area to prevent loud noises that could be triggering (Gordon 11). As we seek to empower students and give them a sense of agency, we can offer learners choice when it comes to participation and instructional content (Lucey et al. 12) and let them know what to expect before each class so that choices in regards to participation can be made. In response to concentration difficulties, learning sessions can be kept short and activities can be varied (Gordon 11). We can make use of repetition and ensure there is consistency as terms are reviewed on a regular basis while being patient and continuing to motivate learners (Finn 593).

Between teachers and students, trust is an important factor. Though we must remember that building trust takes time (Horsman 10). We must do so with, “slow, sustained effort” (Finn 591), and, of course, patience. As teachers, we can empathize, acknowledge losses, impart respect, and show sensitivity (Vaynshtok 27). In the classroom, we can encourage active participation in community within the classroom and collaboration amongst students (Finn 589). At the same time, students may have needs a teacher cannot meet, yet if we are able we can provide information and direct them to resources. With that being said, we are not social workers, and teachers are not trained therapists. Certain issues would warrant the input of a professional (Finn 594). If a referral is made however, due to different cultural perspectives

towards things such as mental health, it would also be necessary to be culturally sensitive (Lucey et al. 20).

*Starting with the Basics and Building Oral Competency*

It was found in a study focusing on Sudanese refugees in Australia that, for learners, trying to learn speaking, listening, reading, and writing and other learning skills all at the same time could be too much. It was argued that learners should be able to focus on oral language skills first (Benseman 95). This sentiment was reflected in my interview with Timon, as he found that mixing together reading, writing, and speaking was too difficult for his preliterate students, commenting, “I don't mix up writing at the beginning, writing, reading, and speaking. The first one is speaking, like a baby. You should learn how to speak” (Timon). In addition to the complexity of putting too much on the plates of learners who are just getting used to being in a classroom, if our focus is on meaning making, it follows that learners being introduced to literacy would need to understand the meaning of the words they are reading. With an initial focus on oral skills, later on sight words could be taught from the oral language vocabulary learners already possess, which could also be broken down into individual sounds (Brekke 15).

With those completely new to the English language, this would involve starting at the very beginning with basic oral survival English language skills. We want to meet our students where they're at. As one woman shared with me, “I wish I could have a teacher who can understand my level and start from low level and move on up together” (Clarice). As we teach oral English, we can make considerable use of oral practice and repetition, engaging in teaching that doesn't require written text (Brekke 9).

Before introducing reading and writing, there are various basic preliteracy skills that need to be in place first. These would include things such as holding a pencil or pen, shape/letter

recognition, associating written symbols with meaning, etc. (Brekke 9, Burt et al., “Working with Adult English Language Learners with Limited Literacy” 2). With this in mind, we would want to start with preliteracy exercises to practice such skills, such as shape recognition and directionality, before introducing beginning literacy skills such as the alphabet (Burt et al., “Working with Adult English Language Learners with Limited Literacy” 3). This also goes for practicing sound differentiation and visual literacy before phonics (Marrapodi 11). As we meet students where they are, we can scaffold skills, building upon and reviewing each new skill learned (Benseman 101). As we engage in different learning activities, one way we can make sure an activity is appropriate for learners is through task analysis. This involves taking note of the particular skills and knowledge necessary for performing an activity, finding out what skills and knowledge would be needed, or are prerequisites. Basically, breaking an activity down into parts and identifying whether students already have the prerequisite skills (Marrapodi 17). Doing so can help us in choosing what activities are best to utilize with students.

### *Building Learner Confidence*

As has been previously mentioned, for many stepping into a classroom is a completely new experience. Some may have only learned in informal environments, and for some the school experiences they have had may have been unsuccessful. It has been stated that for teachers of learners with low literacy skills, one of their main goals is nurturing students’ confidence (Vinogradov 8). Timon shared with me the response of many preliterate students when they feel they are in over their head in the classroom and learning English is too much, explaining, “the moment they think it is difficult, they build up resistance, that [it] is complicated, I can't go to that class, I'm wasting my time, so difficult, you know, we cannot make it in this country. That's always been the reaction of so many people” (Timon). Building learners’ confidence was



emphasized more than once in our interview, as integral to student success. As far as how to do so, he elaborated, “They build self-confidence when at each session they come out believing that they've learned something...even if they don't get many, many words, the few that you teach at one, in one, session, they should get out of there believing that they've learned, and should believe, make sure they feel that they've learned” (Timon). It is important that students experience themselves learning, even if it is just one or two words. We want learners to experience small successes, and celebrate that. Seeing that they can learn, and have learned, helps build confidence for further learning.

Benseman talks about the importance of students believing they can succeed, having a supportive learning environment and praising achievement (Benseman 101,102). An example of what can result from a non-supportive learning environment was illustrated as Monique, a student at ACE, shared about her experience in a program she had attended previously. As she spoke, a French speaking interpreter relayed:

...many of the women who used to be [in] that program, they decided to stay home because they don't see that that program is helping them a lot. Because instead of encouraging them to learn more, they say something which discourage them and they decided instead of going to stay home... Because... they didn't even have a lot of chance as African women to learn in their home countries, but they are interested learning here, so when the teacher's not encouraging them to do so it makes them unhappy and they [decide] to stay home. (Monique)

Along with encouragement and support, we can further assist students with patience, consistent practice and repetition, and providing a sense of predictability (Vinogradov 8,9). As learners see

themselves making gradual progress and their self-confidence builds, motivation can also grow to continue to develop and utilize their skills (Benseman 102).

### *Contextualized/Immediate Relevance to Student's Lives*

As we engage with adult learners, what happens in the classroom has to be relevant. Students come to class for a reason, they have lives and real-life goals they want to achieve as a result of their language learning. This being said, it is when what is being learned is reflective of their real-life needs and is authentic that learners are most engaged (Finn 591). Having relevant topics as a backdrop for what is learned in the classroom is how students learn best (Vinogradov 2). Having a learner-centered approach involves utilizing in the classroom how students actually make use of language outside the classroom (Finn 592).

With this in mind, we want our class to be contextualized, built upon the interests and needs of students and relevant skills and knowledge for everyday life (Magro 26). As most refugees seek independence when it comes to things like doctor visits, shopping, or other daily life activities (Benseman 95), our lessons can be placed in the context of such actions. We can utilize realia from everyday life in classroom activities while seeking to connect lessons and activities to learners' community and family roles and everyday lives (Brekke 18). In order to do so, it is important that we also understand the contexts of the adult learners that step into the classroom (Magro 29) and actively listen and seek out what is important to them (Vinogradov 2) while also being aware of their identified goals.

### *Varying Teaching Strategies*

Everybody learns differently, that is part of the beauty of a diverse humanity. The same is true for preliterate and nonliterate adults in the classroom. This is especially vital to remember with learners who have had limited experience with formal schooling. It is unfair to assume

everyone will automatically do well in a traditional ‘Western’ classroom. With preliterate learners especially, many come from oral traditions (Vinogradov 5). Learning in such traditions more often occurs in informal settings, and, “is done largely through observation in a cooperative, relevant manner, where learners are performing a task that is necessary and works towards the family’s or community’s well-being” (Vinogradov 5, 6). It’s also been observed that the Western model of learning is more abstract, compared to oral traditions that tend to be more concrete (Vinogradov 6).

In working with adult learners, it is important for adults that their learning is both relevant and meaningful, as has been shown by research. Within this context, considering the diversity in receiving and processing new learning, we can provide a variety of learning opportunities for students that allow different ways for learners to connect to the lessons and respond to diverse learning preferences. This can include going between group work, work in partners, individual work, and doing things together as a whole class (Vinogradov 6). This can also involve utilizing visuals, hands on learning, role plays, and drills (Brekke 18, 19).

In speaking with refugees at African Community Education (ACE) about their learning experiences, one man from the Democratic Republic of the Congo explained to me, “I can understand more if you put a video or a picture” (Fred). A woman being interviewed alongside him went on to add, “What I would like first is the image. When you are teaching me show me what you are saying through papers, pictures, video, image, even like body language, like using your body to show everything that you are teaching” (Clarice). In teaching those with low literacy skills, we can make use of forms of conveying information other than the written word, responding to what students indicate is most helpful and is best understood. Not everything will always prove to be effective. For example, it’s been found that symbolic pictures can be

misinterpreted by preliterate adults (Hvitfeldt 28). However, we can make changes and adjustments, such as using photographs of things that are familiar instead of drawings students may find confusing. As we engage with learners, we can take note of, and respond to, how students in our classrooms learn best.

### *Utilizing Learner's Strengths*

Nonliterate and preliterate learners come with a number of strengths that can be made use of in the classroom. According to Vinogradov and Bigelow, “When working with second language learners who have limited literacy skills in any language, educators need to identify and utilize other strengths and resources that these learners bring to the learning situation” (2). A lack of literacy skills simply provides us the opportunity to identify and apply other valuable skills to the learning experience. It’s even been pointed out that such learners may have various skills literate students don’t have. One example is the many well-developed strategies those from oral cultures have for remembering things (Vinogradov 6). The ability to memorize was echoed in interviews I held with refugee students at ACE. When asked how she learned, Monique expressed, “[I try] to practice all the time, repeat, repeat, repeat those letters and until [I have] those letters in [my] memory” (Monique). Such skills students have are invaluable. They can be recognized as well as built upon, enhancing learning.

It is also helpful to take note of what learners are already doing. In one study focusing on low-literate Hmong speakers, it was found that there were numerous learning strategies learners were already making effective use of (Vinogradov and Bigelow 3). We can start from a place of learning and acknowledging the many strengths students bring into the classroom and the learning approaches they are already using effectively.

## **Asset-Based Approach**

As we utilize learners' strengths, we are encouraged to embrace an asset-based approach. In community development, an asset-based approach to development is seen as an alternative to a needs-based approach, which is common (Wilke 3). Rather than simply focusing on a community's needs and deficiencies, the emphasis is on the strengths and assets that can already be found in a community. Such assets can be, "human, social, financial, natural, and physical" (Peters 43). Existing assets can be built upon in an approach that is community-driven (1).

When it comes to learning, and literacy in particular, a deficit model is all too common. As Horsman writes, "In societies where literacy is highly valued and part of schooling, it is easy to frame the learner as the problem, with a deficit of skills, and to lose awareness of the learners' strengths and knowledge and of the socially framed nature of the problem" (19). With this view, the focus is on what the learner lacks, the learner then needs to change and obtain the skills they are said to be lacking (19). It has been pointed out that with such an approach, a deficit approach, only certain forms of literacy are seen as valuable, diverse ways of knowing and literacy practices that can be found within other communities and cultures are then devalued. Horsman, as she shares about First Nation people and traditional reading of the environment, goes on to state, "A society that values only one form of reading- the reading of print- discounts all other forms of reading" (20). If all we see is students' lack of print literacy, we are blind to the rich knowledge they possess, and the diverse ways in which they already "read".

Such views and assumptions can be found in regards to English language learners as a whole, seeing adult English learners as lacking in language and culture (Larrotta and Serrano 318). A lack of language proficiency can be unfairly seen as the learner's problem. However, when we approach things from a deficit model, we are missing out on the many strengths and

skills learners possess (McDonald 692). Such a perspective also marginalizes learners' experiences (Magro 33). In teaching, we are simply introducing skills to the existing knowledge and skills people already have. Such knowledge and skills can be built upon and enhance the learning of additional skills (Horseman 21).

It has been found that students who can both identify and utilize their assets experience greater success and persistence in adult education. Such assets include individual assets as well as family, institutional, and community assets (Reynolds and Johnson 36-37). As teachers and students, we can take note of those assets together, and utilizing such existing assets can be encouraged. Students' strengths are present in a variety of different ways. Author and Somali refugee Hamse Warfa, in his autobiography addressing leadership, for instance, writes about how leadership is being exhibited by a mother who may not herself be educated, yet inspires her child to pursue a bright future (109-110). Students also have numerous cultural assets. Many cultures in which print literacy is not common have rich oral traditions, such as poetry and storytelling. Such existing traditions are a valuable basis for developing print literacy (Vinogradov and Bigelow 5). Dwight Conquergood, in engaging in a health education campaign in a refugee camp in Thailand, found that Hmong refugees living in the camp would already communicate information through performances such as storytelling and folksinging, which turned out to be invaluable for the campaign (Conquergood 221).

With all this in mind, in teaching we can build on adult learners' funds of knowledge. Funds of knowledge refers to learners' life experiences, skills, knowledge, and learning habits, of which adult learners have in abundance (Larrotta and Serrano 316). In doing so, one has, "a positive view of households as containing ample cultural and cognitive resources that can be used for classroom instruction," and, "shift[s] attention toward[s] what learners bring with them

to the education process and intentionally coconstruct[s] knowledge with the learners” (Larrotta and Serrano 318). As we acknowledge all learners bring with them and “conconstruct” knowledge, we see learners as whole people. In doing so, it is also important to find out from students what they are already doing to develop and practice their English language skills on their own outside the classroom (318). As I spoke with refugee students, some shared about how they would practice at home through watching TV and videos, and memorizing things while utilizing repetition. As we get to know our students and all they bring with them, we can also get to know their current learning practices, celebrating and validating how students engage in learning outside a formal English class.

### **Most Important: Teacher-Student Relationship**

Overall, a lot comes down to the relationship between the teacher and students. As I spoke with Christine, she emphasized how important the teacher himself/herself was to her clients. In response to me asking what was found to be most helpful to refugee clients, she replied:

The teacher, you know, some teachers, they are welcoming. They’re funny, you know, they make them feel good, you know. If they like going to class because they like the teacher, you know, it’s a winning combination... the teacher himself or herself... being friendly, welcoming, you know, enthusiastic, making them participate, you know, I think a lot relies on the teacher and the personality of the teacher. (Christine)

It has been repeated, in reference to refugee learners, that the teacher’s attitude makes all the difference. That, “Just like all adult learners, refugees are most receptive when they experience genuine respect, authentic desire to help, and openness to a different worldview” (Vaynshtok 28). Miroslav Volf, in his book *Exclusion and Embrace*, writes about having “double vision” in

which “we step outside ourselves,” “move into the world of the other,” and “take the other into our world,” letting “their perspective stand next to ours” (251-252). As teachers and students we are humans in relationship. It’s important that, like with all relationships, it is built on trust and respect, being open, considering and respecting the other’s perspective as we learn together. It is important that we respect learners’ age, life experiences, knowledge culture, religion, etc., showing patience and encouragement, listening and being learners ourselves as we seek to truly support the learners we welcome into the classroom.

Education theorist Paulo Freire had depicted an educator as a, “co-learner, guide, mentor, and challenger” (Magro 26). Being a co-learner fits nicely with the concept of copowerment, described as, “a mutual exchange through which both sides of a social equation are made stronger and more effective by the other” (Inslee). As we both learn, we both come out stronger as our lives are enriched by that of the other. Of course, as educators this requires humility as we are open to such mutual learning and exchange.

As teachers, with many students both entering a school setting for the first time and getting to know a new language and culture, we also find ourselves in a position to bridge the cultural gap. Serving as such a go-between has been termed as being a cultural-broker (National Center for Cultural Competence 2,3). With mutual sharing and respect, we are in a place where we can support students as they navigate the cultural environment in which they now live and pursue their goals in a new cultural setting, bridging cultural worlds as they come into contact in the classroom.



## Carrying out the Project

### Implementation

The class designed in this project was originally created to be implemented during the summer trimester at Literacy Volunteers of Greater Worcester (LVGW). Due to the current pandemic, summer ESOL courses are being moved online. As implementing a course for preliterate and nonliterate learners while the program is online would be difficult, the plan is to offer the course in the fall instead.

Unlike other programs whose classes may run longer and offer more classroom hours, LVGW offers once a week ESOL classes in nine-week trimesters. LVGW's main program is one-on-one tutoring, with classes being provided to give students some way to be involved and work on their English despite the long (at least six months) wait list for a volunteer tutor. The class is therefore designed for a nine-week trimester at LVGW. However, it is proposed that the course be offered twice a week rather than once due to the amount of learning hours that are necessary to show progress at this level. The designed course is geared towards preliterate and nonliterate learners who are also absolute beginners in their oral English. It aims to serve all adult learners who would be considered preliterate or nonliterate, not solely those officially designated as refugees. With the limited learning hours available it aims to be an introductory class, focusing on basic oral survival English skills, preliteracy skills, and simply building learner confidence and comfort in a classroom learning environment. The class is mainly a starting place, a foundational course for further learning.

Intake for the class will take place at the same time as LVGW's other course offerings, during a two-week period a few weeks prior to the start of classes. Volunteers from the tutoring program often volunteer to help with intake, bilingual volunteers will especially be encouraged

to do so. As preliterate/nonliterate prospective students who have previously come looking for classes have typically come with a case worker or family member, whoever joins will also be helpful and informative in the intake process. In addition, their advice will be sought as to how to best reach out and remind students about classes.

This will be LVGW's very first time offering a course for preliterate and nonliterate learners and will be a new experience for all involved. What follows is an initial curriculum. Based on the knowledge available, the plan is to learn by doing and make corrections and adjustments along the way (Kelley and Kelley 115-116), taking note of what works, doesn't work, what could be better, and what changes could be made. The current curriculum can then be revised and updated based on our experience implementing it in the classroom.

### **Evaluation**

In evaluating the course there is the recognition that learning hours will be limited. It has been emphasized that preliterate and nonliterate learners need a large amount of classroom learning time in order to make useful progress in their learning (Adult Migrant English Programme Research Centre 3), however such classroom time is not currently available at LVGW. The class will be evaluated based on limited class time, while also keeping in mind that progress is comparatively slow at this particular level. There have also been found to be unique difficulties in assessing preliterate adult learners, as their needs differ from what would be typical of beginner-level adult learners (Moore 25).

Outcomes are the target we are working towards (Penna 35). Learner outcomes for the class will include increased confidence in learning and utilizing English by students, increased ability to provide basic personal information, increased ability to respond to simple, short conversational exchange, increased shape/letter recognition, and increased proficiency utilizing a

writing instrument. When it comes to evaluation, we will be assessing the degree to which the outcomes have been achieved (Reisman and Clegg 9).

It must be mentioned that one research paper reported that it, “found informal assessment, with its continual feedback to teaching, as being more appropriate for low/pre-literacy learners than formal, end of unit assessments” (Moore 34). It’s important that any assessments are appropriate for preliterate and nonliterate learners. In engaging in ongoing informal assessment of the nine-week course, achievement of the outcomes will be assessed through observed greater class participation, oral interview, role play, and ability to copy or write one’s name. A check list will be used to keep track of and record demonstrated progress towards, and achievement of, outcomes along with ongoing observation. As students identify their own personal goals at the beginning of the trimester, students’ subjective reports of progress towards their goals will also be taken note of.

### **Conclusion**

As we move forward, we cannot overlook the challenges preliterate and nonliterate refugee students typically face in traditional adult ESOL classrooms and their particular learning needs. There are various unique factors that influence the learning experience of preliterate and nonliterate refugee learners, encouraging us to consider how we can design and include classes with them in mind. As we learn and draw upon the numerous and valuable strengths and assets learners arrive with, we have the opportunity to pursue a learner-centered classroom to which students can bring their whole selves. In light of this, what follows is an initial curriculum that seeks to meet the need for classes that serve preliterate and nonliterate adult English language learners.

## Appendix

### **LVGW Survival ESOL- Preliteracy Curriculum**

This course is intended for preliterate and nonliterate adults who are also absolute beginners in their oral English skills. No knowledge of English is required to participate. The class will focus on basic oral survival English skills, preliteracy skills, and simply building learner confidence and comfort in a classroom learning environment. The duration of the course is nine weeks, being offered twice a week for one and a half hours. Each lesson is created for a two times per week class. A five to ten minute break will be provided in the middle of each class.

As this is the first time the course will be offered, what follows is an initial curriculum to which adjustments can be made as we learn what is most effective and ineffective, and as we learn about and from our students. If students need more time to process and gain proficiency in the language skills presented than what is provided in the course lesson plans, more time can be spent with particular language skills. It is better that students come away from the class learning a few things, than being overwhelmed with too much information and learning nothing. With that being said, if there is not enough time to cover everything that follows, the most important parts of the course would be greetings, personal information, copying one's name, and whatever else students indicate as most important to them and their daily lives.

<b>Survival ESOL- Preliteracy</b>			
<b>Outcomes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students will be able to participate with increased confidence</li> <li>• Students will be able to share basic personal information</li> <li>• Students will be able to respond to short, basic conversational exchange</li> <li>• Students will be able to recognize letters used in their names</li> <li>• Students will be able to copy their name using a writing instrument</li> </ul>		
<b>Assessment</b>			
By the end of this course, students will demonstrate their learning by...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engaging in a basic conversation/role play utilizing English learned</li> <li>• Copying/writing name with minimal assistance</li> </ul>		
Students/the teacher will evaluate learning by...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ongoing observation</li> <li>• Check list of demonstrated abilities</li> </ul>		
Other evidence of learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student feedback &amp; reports of progress towards goals</li> </ul>		
<b>Learning Plan</b>			
<b>Week</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Content</b>	<b>Authentic Materials</b>
<b>Week 1</b>	Greetings	- Hello, How are you?, Good bye -Introducing oneself	-Videos
<b>Week 2</b>	Giving Personal Information (1)	- "Where" (Where do you live? Where are you from?) -Address -Numbers 1-5	-Cell phone
<b>Week 3</b>	Giving Personal Information (2)	-What is your phone number? -Numbers 6-10	-Cell phone
<b>Week 4</b>	Giving Personal Information (3)	-When is your birthday? -Introduce letter recognition	-Photographs/videos

<b>Week 5</b>	Family	-Talking about members of the immediate family - <i>(Continuation of letter recognition)</i>	-Family photos
<b>Week 6</b>	Time	-What time is it? -What time is the bus? - <i>Introduce writing one's name</i>	-Digital clock -Bus schedule
<b>Week 7</b>	Going to the Doctor (1)	-Describing ailments -What's the matter? -I have..... - <i>(Continuation of writing one's name)</i>	-Photographs
<b>Week 8</b>	Going to the Doctor (2)	-Ailments continuation -Answering yes/no questions (Do you have _____?) - <i>(Continuation of writing one's name)</i>	-Photographs
<b>Week 9</b>	Going Shopping	-Food -Money - <i>(Continuation of writing one's name)</i>	-Food items -Grocery store food ads
<b>Additional Notes:</b>			

Template Adapted from: "ESOL Instructional Unit Plan Template." *Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education*, Mass. Dept. of ESE, ACLS, and SABES ESOL Curriculum & Instruction PD Center, [www.doe.mass.edu/acls/frameworks/esol-instruct-unit-template.docx](http://www.doe.mass.edu/acls/frameworks/esol-instruct-unit-template.docx).

## Week 1 Greetings

### Objectives:

- Students will be able to utilize basic English greetings
- Students will be able to introduce themselves to one another

### Materials:

- Ball or other object to toss or pass
- Video of dialogue (greetings/introductions)

### Outline:

1. Greet the class and introduce yourself.
2. Have students stand up. Bring students on a brief tour (bathroom, break room, etc.).
3. Show a video of dialogue (greetings/introductions).
4. Model "hello" with students. Go around and repeat dialogue with several students. (Can also do choral response.)
5. Have students repeat dialogue with partner.
6. Do the same (3 & 4) with "How are you?"/"I'm fine, thank you.", "What is your name?"/ "My name is\_\_\_\_\_.", and "Nice to meet you."/ "Nice to meet you, too."
7. Ball throw activity: Stand in a circle and throw around a ball (or other object). The person throwing the ball has to say a greeting or ask a question in English to the one who catches it (who has to respond).
8. Feel free to introduce more phrases if students indicate they are ready for more phrases, or desire a particular phrase for greeting/introduction (but not too many).
9. At the end of class, model "goodbye." Have each student repeat.

*Towards the end of the first class: Find out what tools are already used by, or familiar with, students in order to record phrases learned and share audio recordings or video recordings with students for home practice. For example, if students are already familiar with WhatsApp, time could be taken to create a class WhatsApp group.*

*For home practice: Record phrases learned and share audio recording with students.*

<b>Week 2</b> <b>Giving Personal Information (1)</b>
<b>Objectives:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students will be able ask for and provide basic personal information (namely, where they live, where they're from, and address)</li> <li>• Students will be able to recognize numbers 1-5</li> </ul>
<b>Materials:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ball or other object to toss or pass</li> <li>• List of students' addresses and home countries from intake</li> <li>• Two hats (or other clothing items)</li> <li>• Cards with numbers 1-5</li> <li>• Cell phone &amp; large picture of cell phone (showing number keys)</li> </ul>
<b>Outline:</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Warm up: Go around and exchange greeting with each student.</li> <li>2. Review: Do ball throw activity (either seated or standing) to review phrases learned the previous week. <i>If students need more practice of previous week's learning, feel free to engage in activities from the previous week making slight variations.</i></li> <li>3. Model "Where do you live?"/"I live in Worcester" with students. Go around and repeat dialogue with several students. (Can also do choral response.) If it is helpful, show a video of the dialogue.</li> <li>4. Have students repeat dialogue with partner.</li> <li>5. Do the same (4 &amp; 5) with "Where are you from?"/"I am from_____.", "What is your address?"/ "My address is_____." Use list of home countries and addresses as needed to model responses if students are not sure what they're being asked.</li> <li>6. Role play: Model role play with students with the introduced phrases. If it is helpful, use two different hats (or other clothing item) to demonstrate you are two different people while showing how the role play is done. Have one student come up and engage with teacher in role play (model to the others). Have students come up and perform role play in pairs. <i>Note: If role play does not work out with group of students, it does not need to be used or continued.</i></li> <li>7. Introduce numbers 1-5 using the 3-step method (see following). Use cards with numbers 1-5.</li> <li>8. Pull out cell phone, point to numbers and have students name them. Students can also name numbers on their own phones.</li> <li>9. Game: Project (if using projector) or stand up large picture of cell phone (showing number keys). Have individual students touch correct numbers as you (or a student) name them.</li> </ol> <p><i>For home practice: Record phrases learned and share audio or video recording with students</i> <i>Note: Can introduce less if too much for students at once.</i></p>



**1**

**2**

**3**

**4**

**5**

## 3-Step Method

**Situation:** 1 student, 1 teacher

**Materials:** 2-3 related items (colors, numbers, letters, table utensils, vegetables, etc.)

This example uses the three items: fork, spoon, knife

**Step 1: Introduction of Materials:** Teacher shows and names object. Student listens and repeats.

Procedure: Place one item at a time in front of the student.

TEACHER STUDENT

Show and say: fork Points and repeats: fork

Remove fork.

Show and say: knife Points and repeats: knife

Remove knife.

Show and say: spoon Points and repeats: spoon

*Repeat 1-2 times.*

**Step 2: Aural Recognition:** Teacher names object. Student listens and points to named object.

Procedure: Place all three items in front of the student and say each one at a time.

TEACHER STUDENT

Say: Show me the spoon. Points to spoon.

Say: Show me the fork. Points to fork.

Say: Show me the knife. Points to knife.

*Rearrange the objects and repeat 1-2 times.*

**Step 3: Recall:** Teacher shows object and asks the name. Student looks and names the object.

Procedure: Place one item at a time in front of the student.

TEACHER STUDENT

Show spoon and ask: What's this? Says: spoon

Remove spoon.

Show fork and ask: What's this? Says: fork

Remove fork.

Show knife and ask: What's this? Says: knife

*Thank the student.*

**Important:**

1. If the student gives can't answer correctly in steps 2 or 3, back up and repeat the previous step.  
Don't say "right", "good", "wrong" or "no". Just back up and repeat.
2. Do not attempt to explain.
3. If the student repeatedly fails to recognize or recall the words, complete the lesson and make a note to retry at another time with only 2 items.
4. Don't get stalled on pronunciation. Make a note of serious pronunciation problems and proceed with the lesson.

**Application:** The underlying principles of this method can be applied to different content areas at different literacy and ESOL levels. This principle is to present new information in simple, short steps. Minimize explanation by using demonstration and "self-correcting" (see Note 1, above) practice procedure. For example, introduce 3 new letters, demonstrate 3 new verbs by acting them out, etc.

<b>Week 3</b> <b>Giving Personal Information (2)</b>	
<b>Objectives:</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students will be able ask for and provide basic personal information (namely, their phone number)</li> <li>• Students will be able to recognize numbers 6-10</li> </ul>	
<b>Materials:</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ball or other object to toss or pass</li> <li>• Cards with numbers 1-10</li> <li>• Students' phone numbers written on cards</li> <li>• Cell phone &amp; large photograph of cell phone (showing number keys)</li> </ul>	
<b>Outline:</b>	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Warm up: Go around and exchange greeting with each student.</li> <li>2. Review: Do ball throw activity (either seated or standing) to review phrases learned the two previous weeks.</li> <li>3. Review numbers 1-5 using cards: Have student come up front and show students cards, one at a time, to identify. Lay cards out on table and have them find numbers named. (Can use 3-step method again if needed/helpful).</li> <li>4. Introduce numbers 6-10 using the 3-step method (see following appendix). Use cards with numbers 6-10.</li> <li>5. Pull out cell phone, point to numbers and have students name them. Students can also name numbers on their own phones.</li> <li>6. Game: Project (if using projector) or stand up large picture of cell phone (showing number keys). Have individual students touch correct numbers as you (or a student) name them.</li> <li>7. Model "What is your phone number?"/"My phone number is _____" with students. Go around and repeat dialogue with several students. (Can also do choral response.) If it is helpful, show a video of dialogue. If needed/helpful, give students cards on which their phone numbers are written</li> <li>8. Have students repeat dialogue with partner.</li> <li>9. Role play: Model role play with students with the introduced phrase. Have one student come up and engage with teacher in role play (model to the others). Have students come up and perform role play in pairs.</li> </ol>	
<i>For home practice: Record phrases learned and share audio or video recording with students.</i>	

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<b>Week 4</b>	
<b>Giving Personal Information (3)</b>	
<b>Objectives:</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students will be able ask for and provide basic personal information (namely, their birthday)</li> <li>• Students will be able to form letters from their names</li> </ul>	
<b>Materials:</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ball or other object to toss or pass</li> <li>• List of students' birthdays from intake</li> <li>• Cards with letters from each students' name (set of cards for each student)</li> <li>• Bag of beans</li> </ul>	
<b>Outline:</b>	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Warm up: Go around and exchange greeting with each student.</li> <li>2. Review: Do ball throw activity (either seated or standing) to review phrases learned the previous weeks.</li> <li>3. Model "When is your birthday?"/"My birthday is _____" with students. Go around and repeat dialogue with several students. (Can also do choral response.) If it is helpful, show a video of dialogue, show picture and/or video of a birthday celebration. Use list of student birthdays as needed to model responses if students are not sure what they're being asked.</li> <li>4. Have students repeat dialogue with partner.</li> <li>5. Role play: Model role play with students with previously learned phrases and the introduced phrase. Have students come up and perform role play in pairs.</li> <li>6. Hand each student set of cards with letters from their name.</li> <li>7. Use separate set of cards to spell out your own name. Point to cards and read name aloud. Point at yourself. Repeat.</li> <li>8. Go around and order each students' set of cards to spell their name. Point to each students' set of cards and read name aloud. Repeat.</li> <li>9. Place pile of beans in front of each student. Show students how to form letters shown on cards using beans (one letter at a time). Give students time to practice forming letters. Allow students to work together and help one another perform task.</li> </ol>	
<i>For home practice: Record phrase learned and share audio or video recording with students.</i>	


Can be copied and filled in as needed.

## Week 5 Family

### Objectives:

- Student will be able to identify members of the family
- Students will be able to copy letters from their names

### Materials:

- Ball or other object to toss or pass
- Family photo (teacher's) and/or family photo (stock photo)
- Cards with letters from each students' name (set of cards for each student)
- Paper plates and sand

### Outline:

1. Warm up: Go around and exchange greeting with each student.
2. Review: Do ball throw activity (either seated or standing) to review phrases learned the previous weeks.
3. Show students a photograph of your family. Point to family members stating, "My brother", "My sister", "My father", "My mother", etc. (immediate family members). Repeat. Use 3-step method to reinforce vocabulary.
4. Invite students to share photographs of family members on their phones, if they are comfortable. Based on photographs/information shared, 3-step method can be used again to reinforce vocabulary (using students' photographs, in groups or all together) if needed.
5. Have students share about family photos with one another in partners and/or share about their family in front of the class.
6. For further practice, or instead of utilizing personal photographs, the same activity can be performed using a stock photo/photograph from google images.
7. Hand each student set of cards with letters from their name.
8. Go around and order each students' set of cards to spell their name. Point to each students' set of cards and read name aloud.
9. Place paper plate containing sand in front of each student. Using your own paper plate with sand, show students how to form letters from their name in the sand using one's finger. Give students time to practice copying letters.

*For home practice: Record video of words learned and share video recording with students.*

<b>Week 6 Time</b>
<b>Objectives:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students will be able to recognize and state the time in increments of 15 (00, 15, 30, 45)</li> <li>• Students will be able to copy letters from their names with greater confidence</li> </ul>
<b>Materials:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family bingo cards and bag of beans (or other objects to mark squares)</li> <li>• Digital clock</li> <li>• Cards with numbers 10, 11, &amp; 12. Cards with pictures of cell phones, showing 1:00, 1:15, 1:30, &amp; 1:45</li> <li>• Bus schedules (blown up/large font)</li> <li>• Cards with letters from each students' name (set of cards for each student)</li> <li>• Paper plates and sand</li> </ul>
<b>Outline:</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Warm up: Go around and exchange greeting with each student.</li> <li>2. Review: Play family bingo with students to review previous week's vocabulary (demonstrate first). Squares can be marked using beans (or other objects).</li> <li>3. Introduce numbers 10, 11 &amp; 12 using the 3-step method (see materials). Use cards with numbers 10-12. Review numbers 1-9 as needed.</li> <li>4. Show digital clock with the time reading 10:00, 11:00, or 12:00.</li> <li>5. Model "What time is it?"/ "It is _____ o'clock." with students. Go around and repeat dialogue with several students. (Can also do choral response.) If it is helpful, show a video of the dialogue.</li> <li>6. Repeat dialogue changing the time displayed on the clock (on the hour).</li> <li>7. Introduce increments of 15 using the 3-step method. (Cards showing 1:00, 1:15, 1:30, &amp; 1:45)</li> <li>8. Practice dialogue again changing the time displayed on the clock to show different times (in 15-minute increments). Have students ask each other the time.</li> <li>9. Depending on time/ability: Show photograph of a bus (point and repeat word), show bus schedule (large font). Circle times on schedule (only those ending in :00, :15, :30, &amp; :45) and ask students what times the bus will arrive. Follow with role play (model first).</li> <li>10. Hand out sets of letter cards and paper plates with sand again, continue practicing forming letters of name in sand using one's finger.</li> </ol> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>For home practice: Record video of words learned and share video recording with students.</i></p>



# FAMILY BINGO

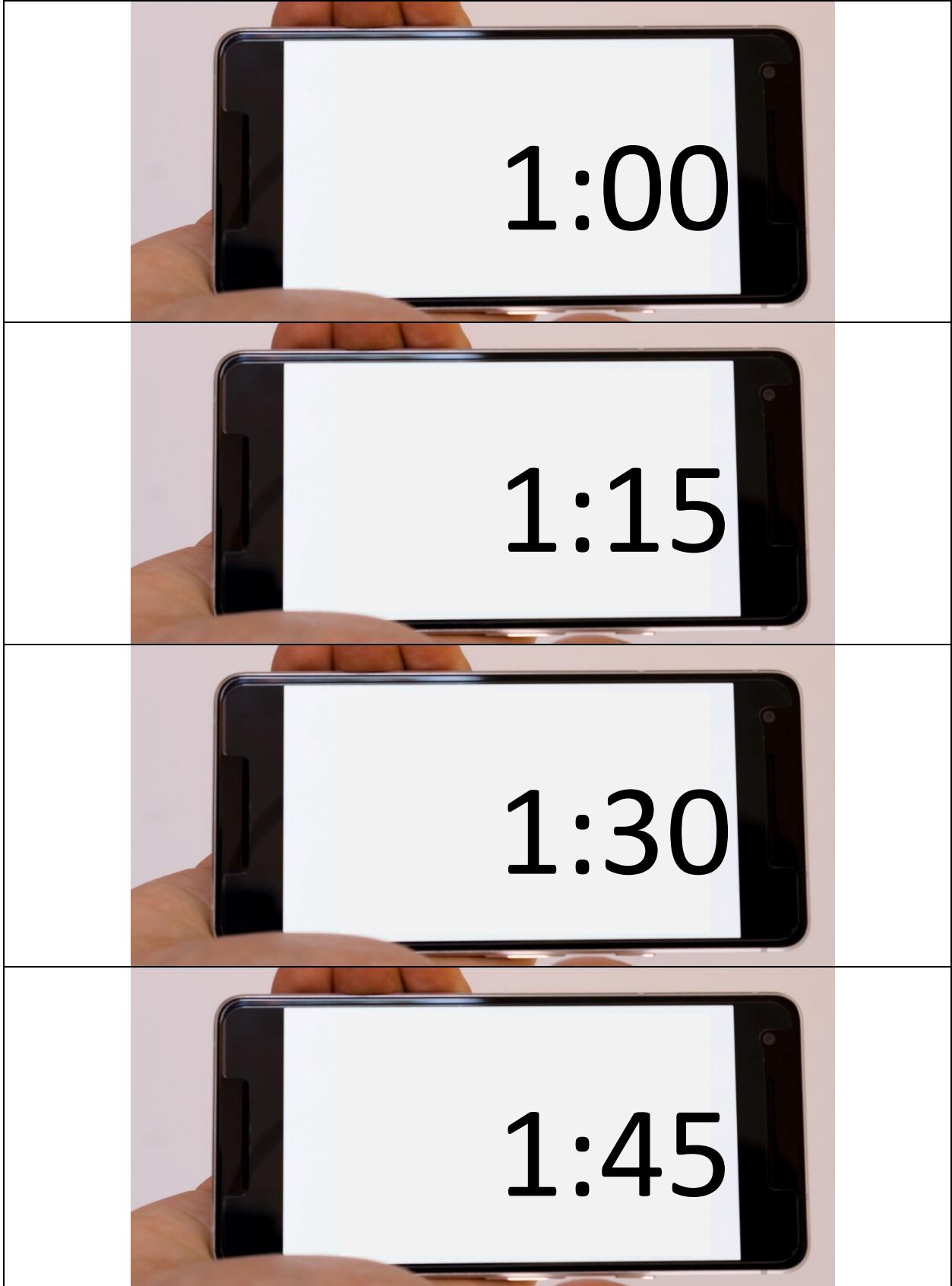


Photos can be changed and switched around.

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<b>Week 7</b> <b>Going to the Doctor (1)</b>
<b>Objectives:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students will be able to identify various ailments</li> <li>• Students will be able to report various ailments when asked</li> <li>• Students will be able to hold and manipulate a writing instrument with increasing familiarity</li> </ul>
<b>Materials:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time bingo and bag of beans (or other objects to mark squares)</li> <li>• Photograph of patient visiting doctor</li> <li>• Photographs of people with ailments (sore throat, cough, fever, cold, or other ailments students may indicate a desire to learn to express instead)</li> <li>• Pretend stethoscope</li> <li>• Pens or pencils</li> <li>• Blank white paper</li> <li>• Handwriting practice paper (3-lined paper) with each students' name written in traceable uppercase print</li> </ul>
<b>Outline:</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Warm up: Go around and exchange greeting with each student.</li> <li>2. Review: Play time bingo with students to review previous week's vocabulary (demonstrate first). Squares can be marked using beans (or other objects).</li> <li>3. Show students photograph of patient visiting doctor.</li> <li>4. Use photographs of ailments to introduce vocabulary using 3-step method.</li> <li>5. Game: Charades. Act out ailments and have student guess which ailment you have. Invite students, one by one, to come to the front of the class to do the same as fellow students guess which ailment they are acting out. (Or, have students do in partners.)</li> <li>6. Model "What's the matter?"/"I have a _____" with students. Go around and repeat dialogue with several students. (Can also do choral response.) If it is helpful, show a video of the dialogue.</li> <li>7. Role play: Model role play with students with the introduced phrases. Use the pretend stethoscope to indicate who the doctor is in the role play. Have one student come up and engage with teacher in role play (model to the others). Have students come up and perform role play in pairs.</li> <li>8. Hand out blank white paper and pens (or pencils) to students.</li> <li>9. Demonstrate to students how to hold writing instrument. Model writing an +, then model writing an O. Assist students as they do the same, following the teacher in writing +s and Os on their bank paper.</li> </ol>

10. If/When students are ready, hand each student 3-lined handwriting practice paper with their name written in traceable uppercase print. Read aloud each students' name while pointing to name written on paper.

11. Model tracing one's name using writing instrument on the paper. Assist students as they practice tracing their names.

*Note: If there is not sufficient time, activities can be continued the following week.*

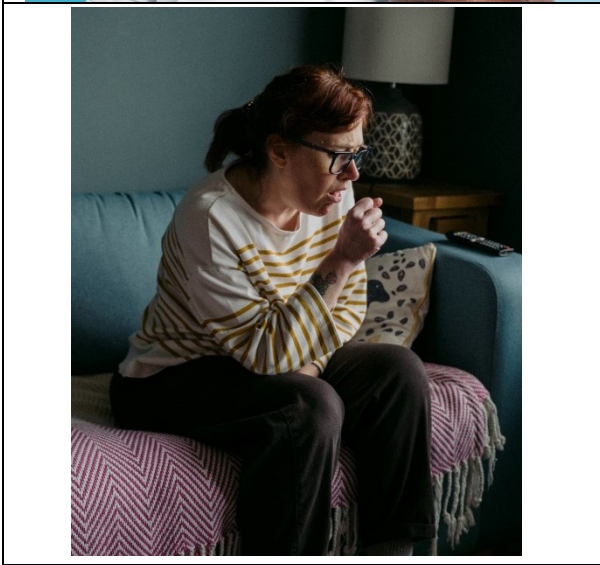
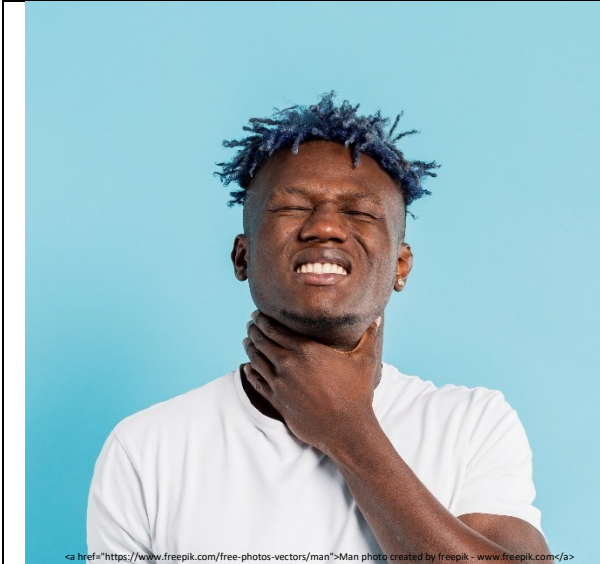
*For home practice: Record video of words learned and share video recording with students. Let students bring home practice paper with their names so that they can also practice at home.*

# Time Bingo

3:00	5:00	12:15
9:45	1:30	10:00
2:45	3:30	7:15

Times can be switched around and changed.





<b>Week 8</b> <b>Going to the Doctor (2)</b>
<b>Objectives:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students will be able to identify various additional ailments</li> <li>• Students will be able to respond to yes/no questions</li> <li>• Students will be able to manipulate a writing instrument with increasing familiarity</li> </ul>
<b>Materials:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Photograph of patient visiting doctor</li> <li>• Photographs of people with ailments (headache, toothache, backache, stomachache, earache, or other ailments students may indicate a desire to learn to express instead)</li> <li>• Pretend stethoscope</li> <li>• Pens or pencils</li> <li>• Handwriting practice paper (3-lined paper) with each students' name written in traceable uppercase print</li> </ul>
<b>Outline:</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Warm up: Go around and exchange greeting with each student.</li> <li>2. Review: Play charades to review previous week's vocabulary.</li> <li>3. Show students photograph of patient visiting doctor.</li> <li>4. Use photographs of new ailments to introduce vocabulary using 3-step method.</li> <li>5. Game: Charades. Act out ailments and have student guess which ailment you have. Invite students, one by one, to come to the front of the class to do the same as fellow students guess which ailment they are acting out. (Or, have students do in partners.)</li> <li>6. Hold up photograph of ailment. Say the name of ailment pictured (or incorrect name), then say yes (nodding head) or no (shaking head) depending on whether or not you said the correct name. Continue doing so with photographs, invite students to respond yes or no as a group.</li> <li>7. Model "Do you have a _____?" / "Yes/No" with students. Hand photograph of an ailment to person responding so they can respond based on photograph they possess. Go around and repeat dialogue with several students. (Can also do choral response.) If it is helpful, show a video of the dialogue.</li> <li>8. Role play: Model role play with students with the introduced phrases. Use the pretend stethoscope to indicate who the doctor is in the role play. Give a picture of an ailment to the "patient" so they know which ailment they are supposed to have. Have one student come up and engage with teacher in role play (model to the others). Have students come up and perform role play in pairs.</li> <li>9. Hand out 3-lined handwriting practice paper with students' names written in traceable uppercase print. Read aloud each students' name while pointing to name written on paper.</li> </ol>



10. Model tracing one's name using writing instrument on the paper. Assist students as they practice tracing their names.

*Note: If there is not sufficient time, activities can be continued the following week.*

*For home practice: Record video of words learned and share video recording with students. Let students bring home practice paper with their names so that they can also practice at home.*



<https://www.freepik.com/free-photos-vectors/medical> Medical photo created by freepik - www.freepik.com



<https://www.freepik.com/free-photos-vectors/people> People photo created by freepik - www.freepik.com



<https://www.freepik.com/free-photos-vectors/man> Man photo created by freepik - www.freepik.com



<https://www.freepik.com/free-photos-vectors/people> People photo created by master1305 - www.freepik.com

## Week 9 Going Shopping

### Objectives:

- Students will be able to identify various food items
- Students will be able to talk about prices
- Students will be able to utilize a writing instrument to copy/write their name

### Materials:

- Photograph of inside of a grocery store
- Bag of assorted food items
- Large stickers with prices (dollar amounts)
- Grocery store food ads
- Pens or pencils
- Slips of paper with student's names written on them
- Handwriting practice paper (3-lined paper)

### Outline:

1. Warm up: Go around and exchange greeting with each student.
2. Review: Play charades to review previous week's vocabulary.
3. Show students photograph of inside a grocery store.
4. Bring out bag of assorted food items. Let students choose from bag which food items are most relevant to them/which food items they want to learn.
5. Use 3-step method to introduce the names of food items selected.
6. Bring out large stickers with prices. Let students select which price stickers to stick on food items.
7. Model "How much is \_\_\_\_\_?" / "\_\_\_\_\_ dollars" with students, using food items with prices attached. Go around and repeat dialogue with several students. (Can also do choral response.) If it is helpful, show a video of the dialogue.
8. Role play: Model role play with students with the introduced phrases. Have one student come up and engage with teacher in role play (model to the others). Have students come up and perform role play in pairs.
9. Additional practice: Hand out grocery store food ads. Model with one student asking questions about food prices in the ads. Let students talk about food ad prices in partners.
10. Hand out both slips of paper with students' names and blank 3-lined paper. Model copying one's name on the 3-lined paper. Assist students as they practice copying their names.

11. If students are not yet ready to copy their names, feel free to hand out 3-lined handwriting practice paper with students' names written in traceable uppercase print again. Assist students as they continue to practice tracing their names.
12. As it is the last class, take time to review phrases and vocabulary learned over the course of the course. Most importantly, dialogue with students engaging in greetings and asking questions about personal information.

End of class celebration!

### Student Observation and Progress Report

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Skills	Yes	No	Sometimes	Needs Improvement
Exchange basic greetings/conversational exchange (circle one or both)				
Share name				
Say own telephone number				
Say own address				
Hear/understand well				
Produce speech clearly				
Hold a pen or pencil comfortably				
Write or scribble on paper from left to right				
Read and say numbers				
Form and write letters legibly				
Write own name				
Additional notes, comments, and observations:				

Adapted from: Brekke, Cielito. "Tutor Curriculum Guide for Teaching Adult ESL Preliterate Learners." Commission on Adult Basic Education, 2009.

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