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# Word of Mouth | Language Learning

By April Witteveen on April 26, 2016 [Leave a Comment](#)



ENGAGING ENGLISH (Clockwise from top l.): New Americans Corner in Nashville Public Library's (NPL) Southeast Branch; Nashville patron shows off her new library card; ready to write at NPL; NPL adult literacy coordinator Megan Godbey (l.) offers computer help; Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh's Let's Speak English group

**Programming that supports** English-language learning (ELL) is not new in the world of public libraries. Kenneth English, associate director of adult learning centers at the New York Public Library (NYPL), has seen "photos and notices from around 1920 promoting classes in Manhattan's Lower East Side immigrant neighborhoods." While ELL programming has existed for nearly 100 years, modern libraries continue to update their offerings to fit the needs of their communities. Innovative and traditional projects that are responsive to demographic shifts and capitalize on local people power are key to best serving library customers working on their English-language skills.

## RIGHT PLACE, RIGHT TIME

When California passed bill AB60, allowing residents to apply for a driver's license without having a social security number or proof of legal immigration status, staff at the Sacramento Public Library (SPL) discovered a need for specific ELL assistance. Erica Naranjo, at the time serving as branch manager of SPL's Courtland branch, tells *LJ* that word of mouth among the agricultural migrant community spread to library staff: workers wanted to apply for licenses but were intimidated by the English skills required to navigate the road test successfully. "There was no guarantee that they could find a Spanish speaker at the DMV," Naranjo says, and even if a resident had basic English skills, the nuances of vocal commands while driving could prove difficult. "One driving instructor would use the word *accelerate*, another instructor might say 'speed up,' or 'increase your speed.'"

Within a couple of months of the bill's implementation, SPL had its driver's ed ELL classes in place at the three branch libraries that served the highest population of agricultural workers. "We had a really quick turnaround," Naranjo recalls. "We had to meet an immediate need in our community." Instead of relying on a regular program marketing campaign with major media outlets, it was more beneficial for SPL to spread the word directly to the migrant community through outreach as well as using the local

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school district to disseminate information for parents through their children. The 12 driver's ed programs, run by bilingual library staff as well as volunteers, were spread among the three participating branches

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project and also allowed NPL a spot at the table for larger conversations about meeting the needs of TELLEONants.

Community analysis is essential for planning appropriate English-language learning programs. In addition to the benefit of a supportive city government, Godbey and the NPL staff needed to investigate what gaps existed in the area for ELL services and inquire about the "wish lists" of local new Americans. What they found was that while other organizations already offered ELL classes, they had wait-lists of 50 to 100 people. NPL branches offer needed space to expand programs and reduce class wait-lists. Locating classes in branches took advantage of libraries being thought of as safe and convenient, helping to mitigate any fear of entering government buildings. Many of the existing programs and classes were being taught by volunteers and part-time staff "who didn't have a lot of training but had a lot of heart," according to Godbey. The library stepped up to provide professional development to ELL educators. NPL now hosts monthly events that highlight various resources for use in the ELL classroom, such as the language-learning tool Transparent, to which NPL subscribes.

The Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh (CLP) also hoped to "identify our role in the overall ecosystem of services for nonnative speakers," according to Dan Hensley, adult programming coordinator. "Initially our staff was eager to provide formal ELL training. However, it became apparent almost immediately that training and recruiting volunteers for formal classes was way beyond our capacity and, more important, would be redundant because our region is already well served in this regard by the Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council." What the library discovered was a need for informal discussion groups.

CLP's Let's Speak English conversation groups became the flagship program targeting nonnative adult learners. Bonnie McCloskey, a senior librarian with CLP, tells *LJ* that Let's Speak English "is not instructional—rather it consists of structured activities and discussions." Staff and volunteers with ELL backgrounds facilitate the sessions. "We don't correct mistakes. The environment can be very open and supportive," says McCloskey. As Let's Speak English programming spread across the CLP branches, Hensley reports, the system was able to gain a deeper awareness of its ELL customer base. "We have been able to highlight the growing diversity of our population, welcome new customers, and raise awareness among staff of ELL needs in their local communities." These services, acting in complement with resources already offered in the area, are part of a tapestry of programming that addresses the needs of Pittsburgh's new citizens.

## BUILD CAPACITY WITH COALITIONS

The 1980s saw an influx of immigrants arriving in Rhode Island. The Providence Public Library (PPL) responded with an initial run of family literacy programming but was soon overwhelmed by the needs of the ELL population, according to Karisa Tashjian. Tashjian, based at PPL, directs the Rhode Island Family Literacy Initiative (RIFLI), a collaborative partnership of five Rhode Island libraries. She tells *LJ* that RIFLI "began as a dialog among staff from various libraries" to help meet their organization's mission of "connecting adult immigrants to learning in libraries." PPL now serves as the fiscal agent for RIFLI, enabling the coalition to offer a wide variety of experiences for ELL students in the state. Classes take place at 11 locations including RIFLI member libraries, public housing, public schools, and local workforce centers.

Recognizing the need for digital literacy in the ELL community, RIFLI offers computer classes that are aligned to the Northstar Digital Literacy Assessment, meaning students can earn certificates and digital badges for meeting competencies in a variety of basic computer and software skills. Tashjian also notes that RIFLI offers a Transition to College and Careers class to help navigate these systems while

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developing English- language skills. Other programming includes conversational courses, citizenship classes, and a driver's ed program.

In addition, says Tashjian, PPL and RIFLI took the lead on an Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS)-funded Adult Lifelong Learning (ALL) Access project. Partnering with the Institute of Labor Studies and Research, ALLAccess offers a Jobs Club at PPL specifically designed for nonnative English speakers. The club, with an instructor provided by the institute, operates under the auspice of PPL's Learning Lounge, another ALLAccess project. Regular weekly meetings assist with various aspects of the job search. In its first session, PPL's Job Club had 16 participants, eight of whom found employment thanks to the program. The Learning Lounges also support the educational needs of nonnative English speakers; resources are available to help build computer skills and improve writing, math, and/or reading capabilities. "One nonnative English-language student at the community college frequently visited PPL's Learning Lounge and reported earning an A in her first college course," recalls Tashjian, "which she attributes to the support of the Learning Lounge."

Not only does RIFLI and its many allies increase the ability of Rhode Island libraries to serve their ELL customer base, those customers return to build the capacity of participating organizations. "More and more we are looking for opportunities [in the library system] to hire our students," says Tashjian. This dual-benefit approach means valuable U.S. work experience for immigrant applicants and expanded bilingual library services from the hires.

CLP was able to increase the number of language-learning classes drastically by recruiting graduates of the Let's Speak English program to teach the classes. "So many participants of Let's Speak English fall in love with the library and ask what they can do to get involved," says McCloskey. The graduates not only help with ELL instruction but also offer lessons in their native language. "It's been a great way for newcomers to contribute...impact[ing] more than our volunteers. Last year we had over 4,000 language learners from the community attend our classes."

Local educational institutions can also make valuable partners; Sacramento PL works in conjunction with the TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) degree program at Sacramento State University. TESOL students volunteer their time to conduct English-language conversation groups at various SPL branches.

## TRADITIONAL APPROACHES

Fairfax, VA, is another city that experienced a recent demographic shift, with increasing numbers of immigrants arriving in the metro-DC area over the past decade. Daria Parnes, manager of the Reston Regional Library, a branch of Fairfax County Public Library (FCPL), tells *LJ*, "We had a lot of inquiries as to where people could go to learn English and become assimilated into the U.S. culture. We thought: we can facilitate this process!" A benefit of the metro area is its high level of education and diverse population; FCPL began advertising for ELL volunteer educators and found that "people who previously taught [ELL] groups stepped up." These experienced volunteers started with beginning, intermediate, and advanced group discussions, adding classes on vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation.

According to Sandy Freund, manager of FCPL's Richard Byrd branch, "The English conversation group continues to be a vital part of our programming. New members are joining all the time." The ELL classes go on tours that are "the first introduction to the public library for many customers," says Freund. "They learn about our services and get their first library cards. Most return and use the library."

Reston Regional also offers one-on-one conversations where an English-language learner can "book" a one-hour slot, once a week, "with a volunteer who [speaks in] English with them on a variety of topics in order to increase proficiency and to gain confidence." There are 18 one-on-one volunteers who offer discussion meet-ups every Monday, says Parnes. "Our customers...line up to register. The slots fill up quickly," she continues. Parnes suggests having a point person to coordinate all ELL programming; the staff member organizing ELL services at Reston "is an immigrant herself, so she brings a deeper understanding of the needs/fears/hopes of our recent immigrant community."

## FAMILY FOUNDATIONS

When considering advice for libraries that want to start or expand their ELL offerings, Parnes recommends looking at children's services. Libraries that offer bilingual, native-language, or ELL programming for children do so with a dual purpose: to help the child with language skills and to attract the whole family to the library. "This is one way that parents learn what we have to offer," Parnes says. FCPL's Freund notes that one of the library's most heavily used programs is its Growth and Inspiration Through Volunteering and Education (GIVE) Tutoring. "GIVE Tutoring is held every Saturday during the academic year and provides free tutoring for elementary school children in all academic subjects," says Freund. This service is particularly valuable for nonnative residents as "parents in our community do not speak English well enough to assist their children with reading and don't have the economic resources

to pay for a tutor." This program is considered an "essential service" in the eyes of the ELL community, and local public schools refer parents to the tutoring program, again increasing the message of library services available to non-English speakers.

NPL's Godbey also recommends children's programs such as bilingual story times as a way to increase ELL efforts. "Look for things that can slowly be added [to your offerings] as your system is ready for it."

## CREATING COMMUNITY

Libraries are using ELL programs to support not only language literacy but financial literacy as well. FCPL has worked with the local Andrews Federal Credit Union to develop a series of basic banking sessions for new members of the community. "We solicited input from local service organizations like ECHO (Ecumenical Community Helping Others) and Alternative House as to what topics would be helpful to their clients," says Freund. "In addition, we partnered with Lee High School's IB (international baccalaureate) Spanish classes to help with translating handouts into Spanish and offering assistance in Spanish as needed. The programs were also advertised in both Spanish and English."

Carnegie Library's Hensley notes that "there are ways beyond offering programming specifically for English-language learners that support their learning needs. Invite people to volunteer, bring their children to programs.... The key is to create a welcoming environment." In order to help address barriers and give a greater voice to the immigrant community, NPL created an Immigrant Advisory Committee. The committee meets every other month for 90 minutes, Godbey tells *LJ*, and NPL programming librarians attend in order to run ideas past the group. These meetings provide feedback about the support a proposed program could expect and supplies insight into immigrant groups that can help generate new programming. Moving immigrants and English-language learners from the margins into an active participation with the library extends buy-in among the communities and helps support the overall literacy mission.

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