

Breaking barriers

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Author: Susan Palmer The Register-Guard

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Language classes around Lane County give adults a chance to get ahead

Eric Razo is carefully constructing a sentence, picking his way along the unfamiliar syllables of English words he is beginning to master.

"Because fish," he says.

"Complete sentence, please," his teacher, Amanda Moore, says.

Razo, an immigrant from Jalisco, Mexico, tries again: "I like view of ..."

"The view," Moore says.

"I like the view of," long pause, "the river because fish," Razo says.

"You like fishing?" Moore asks and deftly mimics the motion of casting a line and reeling in.

"Yes," Razo says, and then, unable to contain his enthusiasm, delivers in rapid-fire Spanish a lively fishing story. It's hard letting go of communication skills developed over a lifetime to start at square one with a brand-new language.

First there's the word memorization: this table, that chair, those pencils, these papers.

Then there's a whole new system of pronunciation with words such as "eight" or "choir" that, unlike Spanish, include silent letters.

Then there's grammar and syntax - unique to each language - that govern how words get built into sentences.

Razo is one of about 18 men and women learning English in Moore's class. She teaches at Downtown Languages, a nonprofit agency providing beginning instruction to adults that has seen attendance more than double in the past three years.

In an era of increasing immigration, lobbying for "English-only" laws and decreases in government support for adult education, Downtown Languages fills a niche.

It isn't the only place English is taught. All over Lane County, such classes are attracting adult students. Centro LatinoAmericano has free sessions morning and evening. Lane Community College, which provides federally mandated English classes, regularly fills its campus courses as well as its free community outreach sessions in Springfield, Cottage Grove and Creswell.

At the most recent series in Springfield, 70 students showed up for the first class, said Dawn DeWolf, division co-chairwoman for LCC's Center for Learning Advancement.

But the classes may not be meeting the demand. "We have waiting lists, people waiting to get into these classes," DeWolf said. "We could have many more students."

LCC isn't alone. The issue plagues the nation, with waiting lists so long in some areas that states such as New York have instituted lottery systems to place students in classes. A recent survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Education estimated that 93,000 to 125,000 adult learners were waiting to get into basic literacy and education courses, including ESL classes.

Federal and state budget cuts have kept the classes from growing to meet the demand at a time when immigrants feel pressured to learn.

Nationally, 28 states have passed laws declaring English their official language. In Oregon, two such bills have been sponsored by legislators. Linda Flores, a Republican representative for District 51, describes the bill she co-sponsored - House Bill 2864 - as an effort to foster community by ensuring a common language.

It's a bill that sends a message, but would neither require nor prohibit state agencies that want to provide services in other languages.

"It's not English only, but English first," Flores said.

While recent national polls show broad support for such legislation, many Latinos see it as anti-immigrant.

"It's a deliberate barrier on a community that's already struggling to survive," said Guadalupe Quinn, regional coordinator for CAUSA, an immigrant-rights coalition.

The fact is most immigrants are eager to learn English, Quinn said. "It doesn't take a scientist to know that it's an advantage," she said.

Two other Oregon House bills acknowledge the challenge associated with language learning for immigrants. House Bill 3112, also introduced by Flores, would create a pilot program to design English immersion courses for immigrant students.

And House Bill 3518 - proposed by Democratic Rep. Peter Buckley - would set up grant programs to pay for English instruction for adults in every community in Oregon.

None of the bills is yet scheduled for a hearing.

The students in Moore's basic skills class know English is the key to their futures.

Razo, a welder, works among Anglos who don't speak English. He attends class with his wife, Rocio Sanchez, a careful student who always has her dictionary handy. A full-time mom with four kids, Sanchez needs to communicate with her children's teachers.

Among the other students are winery employees, landscapers and home health care workers. They all say that to get ahead in their jobs, they need better language skills.

However, becoming competent in a second language isn't the sort of thing people pick up after a month or two of cursory classes. It takes motivation, intensive study, good instruction and many hours of practice, linguists say.

At the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center in Monterey, Calif., which provides specialized training in languages from Arabic to Chinese for the military, students study eight to nine hours a day, five days a week. The government rates language proficiency on a scale of 1 to 5, and the center turns out students with a rating of 2 after its intensive basic course. For easier languages such as Spanish, the course lasts 26 weeks. For more complex languages such as Chinese, it takes 63 weeks.

Those who aren't learning in such a structured environment need a lot more time, said Dr. Donald Fischer, provost at the language center.

"It's a long process and when it's not directed, it takes awhile," he said.

The students who come to Downtown Languages fit the classes into already busy lives, Executive Director Duane Funk said.

"It's amazing how committed they are, after working all day, to come here and study," she said.

Funk, a former English instructor at LCC, founded the agency three years ago, about the time LCC moved several of its ESL classes from the downtown campus to the 30th Avenue campus.

Funk wanted to keep classes available to students downtown because many worked at restaurants nearby. In July 2004, Downtown Languages began offering five-week classes at an inviting warren of rooms in a second-floor suite on Willamette Avenue across from the bus station. The first courses attracted 73 students and grew steadily with 191 signed up for the winter term that ended this week, Funk said.

Most of the students are Latin American immigrants, but there are also Russian, Asian and Middle Easterners studying there.

Downtown Languages provides instruction at the beginning level in a range of topics that include citizenship classes focused on the information immigrants need in order to become Americans, beginning computer classes, driver's education and basic language skills.

The students pay a \$25 fee for the five-week term that includes between four and six hours of class time a week. It's a low enough fee to make the class accessible to most students, but it also creates a sense of commitment that free classes don't always supply, Funk said. The fee doesn't begin to cover the costs of the agency, which receives funding

from a variety of local private donors.

While Downtown Languages started out just teaching English, the school was soon approached by people who wanted Spanish instruction for their employees, Funk said. Such classes have been offered at the Lane Transit District and the Eugene School District and at a real estate agency, Funk said.

The learning process is similar, regardless of the language. While Amanda Moore's students struggle with their pronunciation of English, Rae LaMarche's students are busily butchering Spanish across town at Gilham Elementary School in a class for Eugene School District employees.

LaMarche, a semi-retired Spanish and French teacher, uses songs and games such as "Simon Says" to help beginning students memorize the parts of the body, the time of day, the words for food.

"Tu bebes cafe?" LaMarche asks a student - Do you drink coffee?

"Yo no bebes," the student answers and LaMarche corrects the battered verb: "No bebo."

Like Moore, LaMarche encourages her students to speak in complete sentences, a request that can stop an otherwise articulate adult dead in his tracks.

Steven Cram, who works with special education students at Gilham Elementary School, has always been a little on the shy side and finds it hard to put words together in Spanish. "I have to think it through in my head first," he said.

He pushes through the shyness because it's clear that people with bilingual skills have a broader range of job opportunities, he said.

Fellow student Corinne Smith, a custodian at Gilham, just wants to be able to welcome immigrant students with a few words in their own language.

"I love it," she said of the little bit of Spanish she's picked up in LaMarche's class. Already some of the Latino students are sitting with her during lunch and helping her practice.

"I told one little girl I was 'aprendiendo Espanol' (learning Spanish) and she lit up,' Smith said.

Over at Downtown Languages, Moore lights up when Razo, struggling with his sentence, gets it right: "I like Eugene because I like the view of the river and I like to fish."

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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