

## Elder Outreach ESL: Language Development, Social Interaction, and Community Orientation

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### Introduction/Background

Older refugees comprise approximately 8.5% of the total displaced persons' population (UNHCR, 2017). In the United States, the number of refugees and immigrants over the age of 65 nearly doubled between 1990 and 2010, from 2.7 million to nearly 5 million (Batalova, 2012). Recognizing this underserved population's need for support when they arrive in our area, the Washington Department of Social and Health Services awarded a grant to the non-profit organization Refugee Connections Spokane (RCS) beginning in 2016. Its purpose was to create an outreach program for elderly refugees that included English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, as well as workshops and field trips to promote acculturation. We undertook responsibility for the ESL portion of the program, whose primary goal was to teach functional language, encourage social interaction, and provide support for community orientation. Currently, the program serves two groups of elders: one is multilingual with students primarily from Bhutan, Burma, Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Congo, while the other has Russian-speaking students from a variety of Slavic countries. Some students are non-literate, while others

have had access to formal education. Most, but not all, students are beginners in English, with little or no previous experience.

There are very few curriculum materials available that are appropriate for this demographic of learners. We searched unsuccessfully for

materials that incorporated photos and examples relevant to seniors, had functional skill-based lessons, and that took into account their specific needs. For example, the first few times the class met, we used materials designed for children because we found they often included more visuals and less text. Once, we tried playing a commercially-made ESL picture bingo game. It consisted of tiny playing cards and pictures that the students had to put just inches away from their eyes in order to see clearly, never mind that many of the pictures were irrelevant to their needs. After several experiences like this, we realized the need for an informed and integrated curriculum that not only supported the class goals, but did so in a way that respected the students' age and life experience, and was cognizant of the implications of age on learning.



### Curriculum Overview

Based on action research, current literature, and a needs assessment, we created a functional skill-based ESL curriculum targeted specifically for refugee elders. The 24 topical lesson plans and materials focus primarily on speaking and listening skills. They are divided into four categories: Health, Community, Home, and Cultural Preservation. The first three topics were chosen to help the elders manage everyday situations, for example, giving them the language and information needed to make sure they are able to take their prescription medicines safely, or know



what to do in an emergency. The fourth, Cultural Preservation, which includes lessons based around music and language, storytelling, food and family, and customs and traditions, has a strong emphasis on cultural exchange. All lessons are designed to be as interactive as possible.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Health</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Self-care: Hygiene</li> <li>2. Self-care: Weather &amp; Clothing</li> <li>3. Medical Care</li> <li>4. Aging/Mental Health/Conflict Resolution</li> <li>5. Nutrition</li> <li>6. Fitness &amp; Exercise</li> </ol>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Community</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Police &amp; Fire Department</li> <li>2. Library</li> <li>3. Transportation/Bus</li> <li>4. Restaurants/Eating Out</li> <li>5. Parks &amp; Nature</li> <li>6. Your City</li> <li>7. Education</li> <li>8. Volunteering</li> </ol>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Home</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Kitchens/Cooking</li> <li>2. Homes</li> <li>3. Leisure Time</li> <li>4. Celebrating</li> <li>5. Shopping – Grocery</li> <li>6. Shopping – Clothing/ Household</li> </ol>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Cultural Preservation</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Sports &amp; Games</li> <li>2. Traditions &amp; Religion</li> <li>3. Food and Family</li> <li>4. Music, Dress, &amp; Language</li> </ol>

Table 1: Lesson Overview

## Curriculum and Instruction Considerations

When creating the materials and instructional methods, we took into consideration the cognitive, physical, social, and affective factors that advanced age has on learning.

**Cognitive Factors:** Although aging doesn't affect intelligence, it does have a profound impact on working memory, processing speed, and the ability to filter out superfluous information (Merriam, et al., 2007). When asked about his age and learning, one student said, "72, yeah, change — 27. [transposing the numbers and laughing] 27 easy learn English. 72, no. Older memory." One method to compensate for a reduced working memory capacity is the use of formulaic sequences in instruction. For example, instead of teaching *wash* and *dishes* separately, they can be introduced as *wash the dishes*. Incorporating a body movement adds another pathway for the brain as it tries to process, remember, and recall information. We optimized memory capacity by presenting language in the forms refugee elders are most likely to hear and speak, building on their previous experience, and

employing a variety of input modalities.

**Physical Factors:** The effect of aging on vision and hearing are particularly significant because of their impact on memory function: the increased effort that decreasing acuity requires adds to the brain's cognitive load (Mitsunobu, 2014). To help mitigate these effects, we chose an easy-to-read font, Helvetica, for all of the teaching materials in this curriculum, with nothing printed smaller than size 14 (and most larger). Pictorial and digital material are produced with large images and fonts, and without superfluous elements that could prove distracting. Additionally, in class, we try to minimize distracting noise, and face the students at all times when speaking so they can take advantage of auditory-visual cues.

**Affective Factors:** Affective areas include the effect of trauma on refugees, mental health considerations, and the relationship between motivation, learning, and successful integration (Grognet, 1997; Nickerson, et al., 2011). When developing the curriculum and teaching lessons, we attempted to filter our approach through the refugee lens and ask the question: How would I respond to 'X' if this had been my reality? For example, not knowing the students' histories, we avoided icebreaker questions or projects about the students' families until we knew the students' backgrounds and enough trust had been established for them to feel comfortable sharing their stories. We also considered their motivation for learning English, which was different from younger students who are often studying English for work or school. Older learners are primarily concerned with oral language skills to use in daily life with their community and families, and the curriculum reflects that.

**Social Factors:** We addressed social factors which affect refugee elders, such as isolation and boredom, and how their identity has been impacted by their relocation (Brown, 2009). The lessons include questions and vibrant



Reading ads

picture cards to facilitate a conversation circle at the beginning of every lesson. In our class, we serve coffee and tea while we discuss aspects of their culture and experience related to the day's topic. This provides an opportunity for students to share their own stories and get to know one another better. Furthermore, we structure the lessons to have significant time in communicative activities that foster relationships. For example, in one lesson, students are taught the language and rules for games like Go Fish and checkers. These are games that elders can play with friends, families, and grandchildren. We have

seen evidence of relationships being established between the elders themselves, and in their relationships with us, their teachers. One of the elders in our class commented, "Because of this class, I have friends in Spokane now."

## Conclusion

Elder refugees have begun a new life in a foreign land with a new culture and language. The Elder Outreach ESL program creates a context where these students can learn English, but also participate in an environment where they feel they belong and matter. When you see the students learning how to say *Hello* in each other's languages, or play music together on instruments, we see a 'language beyond language.' It is a forging of community and a sharing together of the commonality of a new life in a new place.

The free, downloadable curriculum and further information about the program can be found at [www.elderoutreachsl.com](http://www.elderoutreachsl.com).



Planting flowers

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Mary Goodrich and Kendra Grabowski met while pursuing their MA-TESOL degrees at Gonzaga University. Kendra is a long-time volunteer with World Relief and Mary has a background in education. Combining these interests, along with their language teaching experience, they collaborated to begin teaching immigrant and refugee elders together through Refugee Connections Spokane four years ago, and have continued to do so (although the program is currently on hold because of COVID-19). They are also both currently teaching at Mukogawa Women's University's U.S. Campus. They previously taught for several years at Gonzaga University's English Language Center. They can be contacted at [goodrichm321@gmail.com](mailto:goodrichm321@gmail.com) or [kendragrabowski@gmail.com](mailto:kendragrabowski@gmail.com). Information about Refugee Connections Spokane can be found at [refugeeconnectionsspokane.org](http://refugeeconnectionsspokane.org).