English Language Learning Program Newsletter

March/April 2025

Citizenship Training

Are you interested in learning about the U.S. citizenship test and naturalization process? Consider attending the upcoming training for ELL tutors! It will cover:

- Eligibility requirements
- What's on the citizenship test (Could you pass it?)
- Best practices and recommended resources to prepare applicants for the citizenship interview
- Proposed/potential changes to the citizenship application and test under the new administration

This event will take place on Friday, April 18, at 10:00 a.m. on Zoom; you can register here. (For those who can't make it, I am planning to offer this training again later in the year, on a different day and at a different time.) After the training, it may be possible to match tutors with learners who are applying for citizenship; however, this will depend on demand. I hope to see you then!

Google Translate

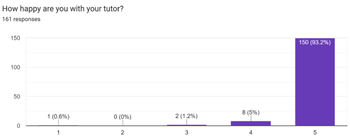
Tutors sometimes ask me whether it's a good idea for their learners to use Google Translate or other online translators during a lesson. These are powerful tools, which are getting increasingly accurate and whose capabilities keep improving – for example, you can point a phone camera at a page of text, and Google Translate can translate it automatically – and they pose a longstanding challenge for language teachers. So how should we approach using translators with our learners? Here's my philosophy:

We should discourage learners from relying heavily on Google Translate during their lessons, as it can take away from valuable time with their tutor, detract from activities, and lead to distractions resulting due to messages and other apps on their phone. In other words, the learner's focus should be on talking and listening to their tutor, engaging in activities, and using English. (If learners want to look up words at home, on their own time, that is perfectly fine.) When it comes to writing, students may benefit from looking up a word here and there, but I don't want them to write full sentences in their native language, then translate them into English; I am interested in what they can produce in English, however limited this may be.

Having said that, I don't think students need to avoid Google Translate 100% of the time. It may help them understand a key word during a lesson (especially one that is hard to explain or find a picture for). Of course, much depends on the learner's level of English; it's more appropriate for a beginner to use translation tools than an advanced student. For beginners, it may be necessary to rely on Google Translate to express themselves or to understand their tutors, especially when discussing scheduling or other important/sensitive topics. (For example, if a student wanted to tell me which days she is available, I would want to make sure that she's not confusing *Tues*day and *Thurs*day, and Google Translate could help her do that.)

It's also possible to develop some interesting and effective activities that make use of translation tools. For example, you could look up vocabulary words that you plan to teach during a lesson, then write the translations on the back of flash cards, which you could use in a game or a matching activity. With a more advanced learner, you could translate entire sentences and ask the learner to explain how they illustrate differences between the grammar of English and the grammar of their native language. For some additional food for thought on this topic, I suggest this article.

2024 Learner Survey and Data



In December I sent an anonymous survey to learners who were matched with a tutor. There were 161 respondents. As in previous years, the feedback was overwhelmingly positive! Here are a few responses that I enjoyed (lightly edited for clarity):

- "I truly appreciate the Newton ELL program; it has significantly improved my English skills. Before joining this program, I lacked confidence when speaking and listening to English with Americans. Now, I feel much more confident, and both my listening and speaking abilities have greatly improved. This progress has helped me connect better with people here."

- "My tutor always gives me some wonderful English experiences. She is an amazing listener, she is able to listen to my pronunciation even if it is not correct. She understands exactly what I want to say in English and supports me in expressing it. Her attitude is always thoughtful, respectful, warm, and kind. And she gently shows me the joy of learning. Our weekly tutoring time is my greatest joy. I am very happy to meet her and grateful to my tutor!!"

- "I would like to take this opportunity to express my heartfelt gratitude to my tutor. She has not only helped me a lot with my English learning but has also supported me in many aspects of life. She feels more like a friend to me now. I feel so fortunate to have met her, and I am truly thankful for everything she has done for me."

I have collected many of the specific responses – including activities that students like or dislike, things that they want their tutor to do differently, and suggestions for new tutors – here. If you have not already taken a look at this feedback, I highly recommend reading through it!

I would also like to share some data from 2024. Last year 186 learners were matched with a tutor. They came from 38 countries, the most common being China (49 learners), South Korea (19), Brazil (17), Ukraine (16), and Russia (11). There were 82 group classes – each class met once a week for about 8-10 weeks – and 466 students attended at least one class meeting. 101 volunteers completed the tutor training – kudos to them!

Partnership with FamilyAid

I recently emailed volunteers about a new partnership with an organization called FamilyAid, which has opened a site providing temporary housing (called a Family Navigation Center) for families in Newton. They will be providing English classes onsite, in collaboration with our program and a couple of other organizations. A handful of library volunteers have started assessing learners there; however, tutoring has not begun yet, and I am still in the process of collecting names of potential volunteers. If you are interested in tutoring there, please fill out this form (if you have not already done so). This doesn't commit you to anything; it's just an expression of interest. Thank you!

Program News

- The monthly Tutor Talk Time events continue to be a success! The next event will be on Wednesday, March 26, at 10:00 a.m. at the library. You can sign up here.

- There is a new page on our website with resources for students who are studying for a high school equivalency exam (GED or HiSET). This is in addition to our pages with English resources and citizenship resources.

- Some tutors who prefer not to use Zoom (usually due to the fact that meetings set up with a free Zoom account end after 40 minutes, though it's possible to start a new meeting at that point) have been using Google Meet, which allows meetings up to one hour long and which you can access with a free Google or Gmail account. I have previously recommended Skype as an alternative; however, it was recently announced that Skype is being discontinued in May. Microsoft, which owns Skype, recommends using the free version of Microsoft Teams, which also allows meetings up to one hour long.

- The library's Community Song Circle is a fun way for learners to practice English by singing! The next event will be on Monday, April 14, at 7:30 p.m., and you can register here. Also, there will be a concert on Sunday, April 27, at 2:00 p.m. by an accomplished pianist from Korea, who also happens to be a learner in our program! You can learn more and register here.

- After a pause of about six months, we resumed accepting tutoring applications from students in January. There are currently 129 people on our waiting list.

- According to the results of my most recent tutoring report form, 56% of tutors are meeting with learners in person, 35% are meeting online, and 9% are doing a combination of in-person and online meetings.

Until next time,
Andrew

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