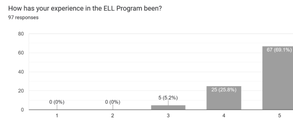
English Language Learning Program Newsletter

May/June 2025

Volunteer Survey



In April I sent an anonymous survey to volunteers. There were 97 respondents, who had many positive things to say about the ELL Program and their learners! Several volunteers described how meaningful the experience of tutoring and developing a bond with an English learner has been. One tutor wrote: "I believe I've been doing this for seven or eight years and I truly love it. Even if I feel tired or busy or don't feel like meeting, I always, always come away feeling that it's such a gift, for me!" Another tutor: "Helping someone learn new things feeds my soul. Learning about new things from someone also feeds my soul. This program does both."

There were many helpful suggestions from volunteers; the most common ones were that the program have a more developed curriculum and provide tutors with more support for lesson planning. Volunteers also expressed an interest in having more guest speakers (in the works for the fall!) and program-wide events, such as potluck dinners.

Volunteers were also asked what advice they would give to new tutors, and I have collected a representative sample of the responses here. I recommend reading through these suggestions, even if you are not new! It's also worth reading the suggestions from learners; the most recent learner feedback is here.

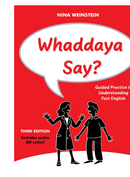
Photos in the News

In a previous newsletter I made the suggestion of discussing works of art with English learners. Google Arts and Culture, a vast collection of digitized art from museums around the world, is my favorite online resource for this purpose.

You could also consider discussing photos about topics in the news. This is a great way to get students talking about current events, even if your learner is not interested in reading or not able to read an article about the same topic. The AP, Reuters, CNN, and The Guardian all have online photo galleries that are updated regularly (called "Photos of the Day," "Pictures of the Week," and so on). Some ideas for using these with learners:

- Have your learner describe what they see in the photos. This is a way for them to develop their vocabulary and practice making sentences. Even low-level learners can identify basic words or create some simple sentences.
- Ask your learner specific questions about the pictures, which will help them improve their listening and speaking skills. (Who is in the photo? What are they doing? Why are they doing that? Where is this happening?)
- Discuss and share opinions related to the topics in the photos. (What do you think about _____? Do you agree or disagree with _____? Explain.)
- Do a role-play or have students tell a story based on the photos. (Imagine you are this person. How do you feel? Why?)
- Give learners a say in the lesson by having them choose the photos they're most interested in talking about. In my experience, students usually enjoy discussing news or other topics related to their native country and culture.

Recent Additions to the ELL Collection



There are some exciting recent additions to the ELL collection on the third floor of the library!

We now have bilingual editions of short stories in Spanish, Chinese, Russian, Japanese, and French, as well as folktales in Korean. Students can read and discuss the stories in English and refer to the translations in their native language if necessary, without having to spend time looking up words using Google Translate or similar tools.

We also have new editions of an excellent listening and pronunciation resource, *Whaddaya Say? Guided Practice in Understanding Fast English* by Nina Weinstein, as well as a grammar series, *Grammar and Beyond: Essentials*. I like the fact that both feature QR codes, which make it easy for tutors and learners alike to access the audio files. (The popular *Ventures* series also uses QR codes. Older series often have CDs, which many people are unable to play easily nowadays.)

Some other additions:

- New books in the *Learn English through Stories* series by Donald Wells. The stories, many of which are based on classic fables, are all told at three levels: beginner, intermediate, and advanced.
- *Everyday English*, part of the popular *English for Everyone* series, which features vocabulary and exercises based on everyday situations.
- *Idioms in Love*, a collection of idioms related to love (such as "tie the knot" and "have chemistry" with someone), by Elizabeth Claire
- Helpful resources for teachers/tutors, such as *Penny Ur's 77 Tips for Teaching Vocabulary*, *Mark Hancock's 50 Tips for Teaching Pronunciation*, and *Scott Thornbury's 101 Grammar Questions*.
- *Let's Go*, a series for younger English learners.

Grammar Time

A challenging aspect of English grammar is what we call the "perfect" tenses, which consist of a form of the verb "have" followed by the past participle of a verb (done, gone, worked, lived, etc.). The most common of these is the present perfect tense, which we use to talk about something that happened in the past — without mentioning a specific time — or something that started in the past and continues now. For example: "I *have gone* to Brazil." "She *has done* her homework." "They *have lived* in the United States for five years."

Contrast this with the past perfect tense, which we use to talk about something that happened before something else in the past. "By the time we arrived at the party, our friends *had left*." "Before I came to the United States, I *had never seen* snow." (There is also the future perfect tense, though this is less common: "By tomorrow morning, we *will have finished* all of our work.")

It's common for learners to make mistakes with the present perfect tense; one possible reason is that there may not be an equivalent tense in their language. For example, learners might use the present perfect instead of the simple past to refer to an action at a specific time in the past ("I have visited Mexico two years ago"). They might mix up "have" and "has" ("My wife have worked as a nurse"). Or they might make mistakes with past participles, especially when using irregular verbs ("I have saw the Star Wars trilogy").

The present perfect tense is a great way for intermediate or advanced students to practice talking about their experiences – for example, by doing a mock job interview. (I wouldn't try to teach this grammar to beginners.) You could also have fun with various "Have you ever..." questions: "Have you ever ridden a horse?" "Have you ever met a famous person?" "Have you ever won the lottery?" You could play Two Truths and a Lie using statements in the present perfect. Finally, to learn the past participles of irregular verbs (see → seen, eat → eaten, be → been, etc.), you could play a game like Bingo or Concentration.

Program News

- Many of you have probably seen the signs in front of the library featuring haiku poetry. They were selected as the winning submissions to the recent contest organized by Haiku Newton. You and your learner might want to take a stroll to read and discuss these poems. (They will soon be moving to the First Baptist Church and the Boys and Girls Club in Newton.) Then your learner could try writing their own haiku (or other poetry), perhaps about the process of learning English or adjusting to life in the United States!
- Unfortunately, one of my favorite online resources, VOA Learning English, is not currently being updated. It is part of Voice of America, a victim of recent federal funding cuts. However, old content is still available on the site. As a reminder, we have a subscription to News for You Online, which has similar articles for English learners. Contact me for the password.
- As you may have seen, Mayor Fuller recently shared guidance from the Massachusetts Attorney General about ICE enforcement, which I would recommend reading. It has useful information about when a warrant is or is not required, rights of detained individuals, what bystanders are permitted to do, and more.
- Two upcoming events may interest you and/or your learner, and you could consider attending together: a nature walk at the Newton Cemetery and Arboretum on Tuesday, June 17, at 10:30 a.m. and a crochet workshop for beginners on Monday, June 23, at 6:30 p.m. Register using the links above.

Until next time,
Andrew

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