English Language Learning Program Newsletter

Winter 2026

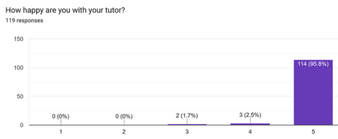
Upcoming Tutor Event

Like many of you, I love words and dictionaries. (A quick book recommendation: I really enjoyed *Unabridged: The Thrill of (and Threat to) the Modern Dictionary*, the new book by journalist and author Stefan Fatsis, who wrote it after delving into the world of dictionaries and even defining some words for Merriam-Webster.) That's why I am excited to announce an upcoming event for ELL tutors featuring Peter Sokolowski, a longtime editor and lexicographer at Merriam-Webster who frequently speaks about words and language. The event is called "Mind Your Manners: English Usage for Teachers." Here is the description:

What do we mean by usage? We mean the way English words and phrases are actually used: Is a word old-fashioned? technical? humorous? chiefly British? slangy? approving? objectionable? Is it usually followed by a certain preposition? Is its meaning usually literal or often very figurative? What kinds of contexts is it found in? Join us on a tour of the dictionary that goes way beyond definitions into the teaching of critical thinking, communication, and culture. There will be time for Q&A at the end of this event.

This event will take place on Wednesday, April 29, from 3:00 to 5:00 p.m. at the library. You can read more about Peter and sign up here.

Learner Survey



I am happy to share the results from the most recent (anonymous) learner survey, which was conducted in December. As in previous years, learners expressed a high degree of satisfaction with their tutors and said that the ELL Program has helped them a great deal. They reported that they benefit from personalized instruction, based on their specific needs and goals; they welcome the opportunity to practice conversation and speak at length about daily life, family, hobbies, current events, and more; and they often want to be corrected when they make mistakes. Some other takeaways:

- Learners appreciate tutors who are friendly, supportive, encouraging, caring, and patient.
- They learn best when tutors are organized and well-prepared, coming to lessons with articles, books, videos, exercises, etc.
- They like lessons that are varied and engaging, with a mix of conversation, reading, vocabulary practice, grammar instruction, and so on.
- They enjoy learning about U.S. culture and life in Newton.
- They value lessons that are practical, focusing on real-world situations and everyday communication.

I highly recommend that you review the survey results, with many quotations from learners about their likes, dislikes, suggestions for new tutors, and more. Last year one tutor told me that she went through the results with her learner to get her thoughts on the ideas — an interesting approach!

Field Trips!

You're probably aware that the library has a variety of museum passes available to check out, but you may not have considered using them with your learner on a field trip! Here are a few ideas:

- Discuss works of art on a visit to the Museum of Fine Arts, the Institute of Contemporary Art, or the beautiful Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Art can be a great source of conversation, a fun way to practice vocabulary, and a powerful means of learning about different cultures. (I would recommend preparing learners with one of my favorite online resources, Google Arts and Culture. Use it whether you're going to a museum or not!)

- If your learner has children, try the Boston Children's Museum or the Discovery Museum. You could go together with the kids, perhaps during school vacation week. Two additional options are the New England Aquarium and Zoo New England, which are appropriate for all ages.

- Is your learner interested in history? Check out the Harvard Museums of Science and Culture or the arms and armor galleries at the Worcester Art Museum. Closer to home, you might visit the museums of Historic Newton. A new exhibit at the Jackson Homestead, called "Newton: The City We Make," features stories from immigrants to Newton; you can read more about it here.

- If a museum doesn't seem like the right fit and you would rather focus on situations that your learner encounters in everyday life, plan a trip to a supermarket, pharmacy, or another kind of store. Your learner can practice asking questions to staff, talking about products in English, and making comparisons to stores in their country. (I would suggest doing some role-plays and going over key vocabulary in advance so that your learner feels more comfortable.)

- Finally, a field trip doesn't have to be indoors! Consider taking a walk in the Newton Cemetery & Arboretum or around Bullough's Pond or Crystal Lake — all very close to the library. A bit farther away is Hemlock Gorge, featuring the historic Echo Bridge.

If you try one of these field trips with your learner, please let me know how it goes!

On the Lighter(?) Side

A few volunteers have shared this video, about a proposed holiday called Silent Letter Day, with me. I also recently came across this video called "English Problems." Both are good for a laugh. The humor may be over some learners' heads, but the videos could lead to some interesting discussions about the many quirks of English and the challenges in trying to learn this (or any) language.

In addition, I enjoyed this recent article in the *New York Times* about a couple – a man from the United States and a woman from China – relying on a smartphone translator to communicate with each other, as well as this article about how parents in China are using new AI tools to help their children learn English. I recognize that the advent of AI strikes some people as rather dystopian, so this last article may not fall under the umbrella of "the lighter side" for everyone. Nevertheless, these are fascinating developments — and they're important, I think, for tutors to be aware of.

Program News

- If you would like the recording or materials from the recent tutor workshop on assessing learner progress, please let me know. Stay tuned for a pronunciation workshop in September!

- As you may have seen, the second-floor study rooms now have wall-mounted whiteboards, which tutors and learners might want to use. You can borrow markers from the second-floor reference desk.

- If you are looking for a place to meet with your learner besides the library, consider the beautiful new Cooper Center for Active Living in Newtonville. Tutors and learners can meet in the cafe area on the first floor, in the lounge areas near the main stairway on each floor, or (weather permitting) on the roof deck.

- There have been some additions to the Citizenship Corner on the third floor of the library. Citizenship applicants and other interested patrons can find copies of the new civics test – administered to those applying on or after October 20, 2025 – in English and several other languages. There are also handouts with word lists for the reading and writing tests, names of current officeholders, tricky vocabulary from the citizenship application, and more. One book has been updated to reflect the new test, and others are in the works.

- The most recent tutoring report form – an important way for me to get updates from tutors and maintain an accurate database – was sent to all active tutors (except those recently matched) earlier this month. If you did not receive it, please let me know.

- I know that some tutors and learners have taken advantage of AI-generated summaries when meeting online. If you are interested in doing this, please make sure that you get your learner's consent first. If you would like to learn more about these AI features, feel free to contact me.

Until next time,
Andrew

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