# English Language Learning Program Newsletter

## Summer 2026

### Upcoming Tutor and Learner Events

I am excited to bring another guest speaker to the ELL Program next month. Debbie Centamore is an experienced teacher and trainer who has led many popular workshops for adult educators around Massachusetts. Some of you attended her workshop in Framingham earlier this year; one tutor wrote to me afterwards, "Debbie was fantastic: passion, humor, fast-paced, lots of examples. 2 hours felt like 20 minutes. I'm so glad I participated." The upcoming workshop will be on the same topic: teaching pronunciation. It will take place on Friday, September 18, from 10:00 to 12:00 at the library. Registration is required. You can read more about the workshop and Debbie and sign up here.

In addition, the next "Tutor Talk Time" events will take place on Wednesday, September 9. These are an opportunity to share experiences and learn from other tutors, and right after Labor Day is the perfect time to get back into ELL mode! There will be two options: an in-person session from 10:00 to 11:30 at the library and an online session from 3:00 to 4:30 on Zoom. Click on the links to register.

Also, be on the lookout for information about an event for ELL tutors and learners at Newton Community Farm in September. And I am excited to share that I am planning a potluck dinner for the ELL Program this fall. Longtime volunteers probably remember the program's popular potluck events from pre-pandemic days. More details to come!

### Simple Definitions

Many of you enjoyed our event with Merriam-Webster editor and lexicographer Peter Sokolowski earlier this year. While I was on the Merriam-Webster website recently, I noticed a new feature: simple definitions that are written for the benefit of English learners. They can be enabled for many (but not all) words by toggling the button at the top of the definition page, which switches from a regular to a simple definition. For example, the regular definition of the word *swan* is: "any of various large heavy-bodied long-necked mostly pure white aquatic birds (family Anatidae, especially genus *Cygnus*) that have webbed feet and are related to but larger than the geese." The simple definition is: "a large usually white bird that lives on or near water and that has a very long and graceful neck." Or take the word *archetype*: "the original pattern or model of which all things of the same type are representations or copies: prototype" (regular definition) vs. "a perfect example of something" (simple definition).

Similar definitions have been available on other websites and in print dictionaries for years. When I'm looking for a simple definition, I tend to use the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online. Other learner dictionaries include the Cambridge Learner's Dictionary and the Oxford Learner's Dictionary.

While you're on the Merriam-Webster site, check out some of the other interesting features (just watch out for ads, which can be a bit intrusive and annoying):

- Mini articles on grammar and usage
- A section on slang and trending terms
- Fun lists in the "Wordplay" section, such as "14 Phobias You Probably Haven't Heard Of" and "17 English Words That Come From Japanese"
- Merriam-Webster AI, which answers questions about language based on Merriam-Webster definitions and other reference content. To use it, click on "AI Search" on the home page.

### Grammar Time

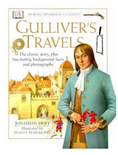
In my training for new tutors, I talk about "ELL grammar" -- the aspects of grammar with which English learners often make mistakes, but which native English speakers hardly ever think about. A great example of this is phrasal verbs. What is a phrasal verb? It's a verb that consists of two or three words. (The second or third word is a preposition or adverb and is technically known as a "particle.") Examples include *pick up, throw out, pass away, take off, run into, come up with,* and *look up to.*

Phrasal verbs often correspond to a single word that has a more formal register, typically derived from Latin. For example, instead of *throw out*, you could say *discard*, instead of *take off*, you could say *remove* instead of *look up to*, you could say *admire*. These relatively formal words are useful for learners to know, but they're generally less common in everyday speech than the corresponding phrasal verbs. As Keith Folse explains in his excellent book *The Grammar Answer Key*, "Learners who speak Spanish, French, Portuguese, or Italian -- which are languages from Latin -- are much more likely to use a Latin-based word than a phrasal verb. However, not using phrasal verbs makes a student's English sound strange."

Another point about phrasal verbs, which native English speakers rarely consider: They can be "separable" or "inseparable" (also known as "non-separable"). An example of a separable phrasal verb is *take off*; you can "*take off* your shoes" ("your shoes" coming after the verb) or "*take* your shoes *off*" ("your shoes" coming in the middle of the verb). An example of an inseparable phrasal verb is *run into*; you can say "I *ran into* my friend," but not "I *ran* my friend *into*."

When teaching phrasal verbs — typically to intermediate or advanced learners rather than beginners — it's helpful to point out the corresponding formal words, which can help learners understand the meanings better. Consider incorporating phrasal verbs into a role-play, such as a conversation with one's doctor. ("I think I'm coming *down with* the flu. I *threw up* yesterday, and I almost *passed out*.") Remember the importance of having students interact with new vocabulary multiple times, not just once. And as with other topics, make phrasal verbs relevant by having learners use them to answer questions and make sentences about themselves. For example: "What is a skill that you would like to *pick up*?" "Tell me about someone you *look up to*." "How do you feel when the plane *takes off*?" (In this case, "take off" has a different meaning than the one above and is inseparable. Remember that phrasal verbs can have multiple meanings!)

### Booklists



Did you know that the library website has a variety of "booklists" for children, tweens, and teens, many of which could be used by and with adult English learners? For example, the kids booklists include lots of "condensed classics" (under "Fiction, Non-Fiction, and More"), such as *Gulliver's Travels* and *Around the World in 80 Days*. Both the tween and teen booklists include the categories "Hispanic and Latino Stories and Voices" and "AAPI [Asian American and Pacific Islander] Stories and Voices," which might resonate with learners in our program. One example from the latter category is *They Called Us Enemy*, a memoir in graphic-novel format by actor George Takei. If you are looking for a book to read with your learner and haven't found the right thing in the ELL collection, take a look at these lists; explore the collections in the Children's Room, Tween Space, or Teen Room; or ask one of the librarians in those areas!

Also, keep in mind that learners and other patrons can borrow children's books in Chinese, French, Hebrew, Japanese, Korean, Russian, and Spanish. And there are occasional bilingual storytimes in languages including Spanish, Mandarin, and Japanese; these are posted on the library's online calendar. Many learners are already familiar with these offerings, but in case they're not, you might want to share them!

### Program News and Miscellany

- As you may have noticed, calling the library's main number (617-796-1360) is a bit different than it used to be. When you call now, you hear an automated message describing different extensions. (Don't worry -- staff are still available to answer questions and help patrons by phone!) To reach the English Language Learning Program, choose option 6. You can also continue to contact me directly at 617-796-1364.
- In addition, you may have noticed new tables and chairs on the third floor of the library. Feel free to use these for tutoring if you haven't reserved a study room. You can also borrow a rolling whiteboard and markers from the librarian on the third floor.
- The City of Newton is looking to hire a climate community liaison. The time commitment is 1-5 hours per week. More information is here, and the application is here. Some ELL volunteers might be interested in this position. If you know a learner whose English level is fairly advanced, feel free to share the opportunity with them as well.
- Have you ever wondered whether it would be possible to play a word game like Scrabble in English and Spanish at the same time? This is the idea behind Tongue Tied, which was co-created by a Newton resident. It's a multiplayer game that currently supports English, Spanish, Portuguese, French, Italian, and German. The website also has a free daily puzzle, in which players unscramble words in these six languages or several others.
- Are you interested in traditional Chinese calligraphy? Check out this event at the library, on Wednesday, September 23, from 6:30 to 8:00 p.m. All are welcome, and no experience or Chinese-language knowledge is necessary. Registration is required.
- A volunteer recently shared this "listicle" about the telltale signs that someone is American. These would be fun to discuss with a learner!
- Lastly, here's a lovely photo that was shared with me earlier this summer, showing Barbara, an ELL volunteer, flanked by her learners, Lily and Li. Enjoy the remaining days of the season!

Until next time,
Andrew

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