

2013

Educating Ana: a retrospective diary study of pre-literate refugee students

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Educating Ana:

A Retrospective Diary Study of Pre-Literate Refugee Students

A Thesis Presented to

Eastern Washington University

Cheney, WA

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree

Master of Arts: English

English as a Second Language Emphasis

by

Renee Black

Winter, 2013

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MASTER'S THESIS

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Preface

Renee Black has been an ESL teacher at the Adult Education Center for fourteen years. She has an Associate of Arts degree in Hearing Impaired Services and a Bachelor of Arts degree in Foreign Language and Literature: Russian major. She has spent many years tutoring students of all ages and has volunteered most of her adult life with children ages 3-5 in an ESL head start classroom

Educating Ana

Abstract

This thesis is a retrospective diary study of an experienced ESL teacher. The diary describes years of experience working with students who have come to the Adult Basic Education (ABE) program with little or no formal education. It details the challenges that teachers and students face when learning under these conditions. The thesis offers advice and guidance to other teachers who are faced with the challenges of teaching students who have not been in school and so have not become literate in their first language.



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Chapter 1

Introduction—History & Statistics

My years of working with pre-literate refugee students at the Adult Education Center (AEC) have been an ongoing learning experience of how to better understand and serve them. The term pre-literate refers to students from an oral language tradition where the native language is not written or only recently written. Non-literate learners come from a culture with a written language, but they have had little or no exposure to literacy in their first or second language. Though teachers at the AEC recognize the distinction in these definitions, the term pre-literate has always been used to refer to students who have never had any kind of education and who have never learned to read and write their native language.

In working with pre-literate refugee students through research, trial and error, conversing with other teachers, and remaining open-minded, I have come to a better understanding of how to best serve them. Throughout the years, I have learned and developed many of the teaching approaches that work, and eliminated those that don't, along with learning about my students, their lives, their cultures, and their backgrounds have given me the necessary tools to better understand these students.

My love of working with refugee students really started when I met Ana. When I first met her, I fell in love with her immediately. I had had three pre-literate refugee students in my class already, but the reality of where they had come from didn't really hit me until Ana. I was teaching one day in late October, which is pretty cold in Spokane, and in walked an African woman, smiling and laughing and so excited to be in school for

the first time in her life...in she walked with no shoes on. She was wearing only socks. Ana was wide-eyed and fascinated about everything in the classroom, and she took to learning eagerly. However, this story isn't really about Ana solely, but of others like her.

Statement of the Problem:

History and Statistics

In 1975 the Community Colleges of Spokane decided to expand its services to meet the needs of a growing population of non-English speaking students. Thus, the first ESL classes at the Adult Education Center (AEC) were born. . Novice ESL teachers in adult learning centers may not know the significance of this year since they were born long after 1975; however, it is good to know the history of one's profession and nation if one is to serve newly arriving refugees.

Haines (2012), for example, summarizes that period of refugees in his book, *Safe Haven?: A History of Refugees in America:*

The notion of America as land of refuge is vital to American civic consciousness yet over the past seventy years the country has had a complicated and sometimes erratic relationship with its refugee populations. Attitudes and actions toward refugees from the government, voluntary organizations, and the general public have ranged from acceptance to rejection; from well-wrought program efforts to botched policy decisions.

(web)

From Haines (2012), we are introduced to the refugees who came to the United States with the fall of Saigon in 1975, when the United States formally withdrew from Vietnam.

Reeves (2013) reports at that time, various learning centers for adult refugees sprang up across the United States, especially in churches who had sponsored groups of refugees from Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand. At that time, many of those seeking refuge in the United States were literate in their first language (L1), but the Hmongs were among those who were not, and it was then that ESL teachers had to consider how to best serve them. They sought federal and state funding (Reeves, Adhikari, Nemerimana, 2013).

The AEC receives its funding both at a state and federal level along with multiple grants contracted out through different agencies.

Some examples of grants are:

- Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS)
- Office of Refugee and Immigrant Assistance (ORIA)
- English Language Civics via the State
- Limited English Proficiency (LEP) contract, which is under the umbrella of DSHS

The AEC followed what was called The Washington State Competencies, but in 2006 those were replaced by the new Washington State Learning Standards, which were adopted from prior use of Equipped for the Future (EFF) Content Standards. According to the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC),

Learning Standards attempt to answer the real life outcomes question “What do adults need to know and be able to do in order to carry out their roles and responsibilities as workers, parents, family members and citizens/community members?”

Learning standards set high expectations for learners, while providing support to teachers to help learners meet those expectations.

These Learning Standards are used to

- provide a common language that defines educational success for students, teachers, partners, funders, and others;
- design local curricula, course outlines, and lesson plans;
- engage departments in planning for outcomes and alignment between levels;
- communicate to students the skills and strategies taught and performance expected in any particular class;
- facilitate student goal-setting;
- assess student progress;
- encourage faculty professional development and collegial dialog, and
- articulate with other educational partners (i.e. WorkFirst, which is a job employment program through the state that students must participate in in order to receive benefits; vocational/technical programs) and help students transition (i.e. to college classes, vocational training).

The Learning Standards to date have been developed for our ESL program in two disciplines: Reading and Writing. Teachers are given this content and are provided with basic materials to teach at the first level, but it appears that curriculum developers assume that the students are at least somewhat literate in the first language (L1). This poses major challenges for teachers and students because recent refugees often have

not had the opportunity to learn to read and write in their own language—in part because, according to Adhikari, there were no schools for adults in the refugee camps they came from (Reeves, Adhikari & Nemerimana, 2013), and sometimes there were none for children, or they could not attend on a regular basis because tuition was charged (Nemerimana, 2013). In other cases, the refugees had been farmers and had not been sent to school, even prior to the outbreak of wars and conflicts that led them to flee from their homelands to neighboring countries to seek refuge.

The following stated objectives would be more realistic if the adult learners could read in the L1. It would also help if their L1 were written in the Roman alphabet, but more often than not, that is not the case. So adults living in refugee camps as long as 17 years (Adhikari, 2013) had not even seen signs written in the Roman alphabet in camps, though those sponsored by the United Nations often used English as the medium of instruction in schools in the camps (Adhikari, 2013). What appears to be the case is that children raised in the camps in, for example, Nepal had been to English-medium schools, but their parents had no opportunities to learn English because the schools focused on teaching the young, not the adults. According to Adhakiri and others, for their parents and grandparents who reside in Spokane and who might be attending classes at the Institute for Extended Learning, where I teach, there is little hope for them to pass the citizenship test of 100 questions, primarily about American history and government (2013).

The following is a 2013 list of structures and proficiency levels required for students to pass to the next level, but, as will be explained in a later section of this thesis, the goals are not realistic for pre-literate adult refugees in most cases because

they do not yet know the Roman alphabet and have not had the experience of learning to read and write in any language yet. Of the three primary level 1 teachers at the IEL, Cielito Brekke and I realize we cannot cover all of these in the course of one quarter. Therefore, as will be discussed later in this thesis, the traditional level 1 class has been broken down into three classes, which includes a special beginning class for our pre-literate students. The following curriculum guidelines are for our traditional level 1 class.

Curriculum: Minimum Content for ESL Level 1

Structure	Required Level of Proficiency
Subject+BE+ noun/adjective	85% accuracy
Contractions with “BE”	85% accuracy
Subject-verb agreement with “BE”	85% accuracy
Subject-verb agreement with have/has	Introduction
Prepositions of time	Introduction
Prepositions of location	85% accuracy
Subject and possessive pronouns	50% accuracy
Intro to there is/there are	50% accuracy
Articles: an, an, the	Introduction

At this level, there are also themes that teachers are required to cover, as defined by the State of Washington:

1. Personal information
2. Calendar
3. Money/time
4. Health
5. Community
6. Family
7. Housing
8. Shopping (money, food, clothing)

Novice ESL teachers would also do well to know some basic facts about the history of the United States as a safe haven for refugees, starting possibly with WWII, but certainly reviewing the migrations since 1975 (Reeves, Adhikari & Nemerimana, 2013). They can discover this backdrop for our profession by reading Haines (2012):

Drawing on a wide range of contemporary and historical material, and based on the author's three-decade experience in refugee research and policy, *Safe Haven?* provides an integrated portrait of this crucial component of American immigration—and of American engagement with the world. Covering seven decades of immigration history, Haines shows how refugees and their American hosts continue to struggle with national and ethnic identities and the effect this struggle has had on American institutions and attitudes. (web)

Since 1975, the AEC has evolved into five centers that provide the following services.

1. ABE serves refugees and immigrants from over 40 different countries.

2. Each year ABE serves over 1,200 non-native speakers (unduplicated).
3. Each quarter ABE runs up to 18 sections of ESL.

The classes are offered at five centers:

1. Adult Education Center - N. Monroe St. (day/evening)
2. Hillyard Adult Education Center – N. Market St. (day/evening)
3. Valley Center – 11530 E. Sprague Ave (day)
4. SCC (advance level/day)
5. IEL/Magnuson Building (advance level/day)

The AEC serves refugee and immigrant students from a wide variety of countries. Fall quarter of 2010 the AEC served 620 refugees and immigrants:

1. 90 from Bhutan
2. 85 from Burma
3. 50 from Ukraine
4. 45 from Iraq
5. 45 from Marshal Islands
6. 32 from Mexico
7. 32 from Russia
8. 28 from Moldova
9. 28 from Vietnam
10. 19 from China
11. 19 from Kyrgyzstan
12. 14 from Burundi
13. 14 from Eritrea

14. 119 students from other countries (Afghanistan, Algeria, Bosnia, Brazil, Chuck Islands, Cuba, Egypt, Ecuador, Guatemala, Haiti, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Korea, Laos, Lebanon, Liberia, Lithuania, Philippines, Portugal, Rwanda, El Salvador, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tanzania, Thailand, etc.)

Keep in mind that these numbers are from one quarter only. The student dynamics are always changing and different countries are always being represented in the population.

The student population at the AEC is always growing and changing depending on what is happening in the world. In 1975, the program was developed to meet the needs primarily for Southeast Asians, mostly Hmong and Vietnamese. By the time I first started teaching at the AEC in 1999 it was the Russian speakers who dominated all the ESL classrooms. But in 2008, we started getting hit with what would become a huge wave of students we hadn't served before: the pre-literate adult refugees. These were students who had never set foot in a classroom and did not know how to read and write in their own language. These were also the students who came from refugee camps. Some had been born and raised in the camps and had never known any other way of life. The first of them came from various countries in Africa: Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia, and the Congo. Then came the students from Burma and Bhutan. The students from Burma came from the refugee camps in Thailand, the Bhutanese from camps in Nepal.

In February of this year, two young women, Pabitra Adhikari—who was raised in a camp in Nepal for 17 years, and Ange Nemerimana, originally from Zaire (The Democratic Republic of Congo) who was raised in a camp in Tanzania until the age of 13, told their stories at the Spokane Regional ESL Conference. Clearly, ESL teachers of refugees need to hear the stories of the refugee children, who are now literate in English

and studying at local universities. Let's now review the histories of various countries our students are coming from so that we might better serve these refugees (Reeves, Adhikari & Nemerimana, 2013).

To date, because so many of these pre-literate refugees come from Burma, Bhutan, and Sudan, it is necessary to have a basic understanding of their histories.

Burma

To understand the history and present situation of refugees from Burma, one must understand that Burma is an agricultural country of at least 135 different ethnic groups and hundreds of languages. According to former students and documents I have read over the years, the country has been in a state of constant civil war since independence from Great Britain in 1948. Ethnic tensions have contributed to massive human rights violations. The majority, ethnic Burmese, make up 68 percent of the population and have been responsible for much of the harassment and suppression of minority groups. In 1988, a democratic uprising was brutally crushed by the Burmese military government. As a result, at least 100,000 refugees fled Burma for refugee camps in Thailand or to live illegally in Malaysia. In 2006 1,612 refugees arrived in the United States. Since then the number has increased to 60,000. At this time nearly 630 have been resettled in Spokane.

The refugees who fled to Thailand, mostly ethnic Karen and Karenni , have lived in nine official refugee camps along the Thailand-Burma border. The refugees have been confined to camps with limited education and training opportunities and no official means of earning income or gaining employment. They have been largely dependent on outside aid for food, shelter, protection, and other basic needs. The Thai government has not given them permission to seek employment or travel freely outside the refugee

camps. Those who fled to Malaysia have lived a life similar to undocumented workers in the United States. They are subjected to discrimination and exploitation and have not had access to health care or education.

Most refugees from Burma have limited or no formal education. They have skills in subsistence farming but do not have skills or training that would prepare them for life in the United States. Many come with physical and mental health issues. It is noteworthy to remind teachers that the ruling military junta changed its name from Burma to Myanmar in 1989, a year after thousands were killed in the suppression of a popular uprising. A statement by the Foreign Office says: "Burma's democracy movement prefers the form 'Burma' because they do not accept the legitimacy of the unelected military regime to change the official name of the country" (web)

Bhutan

There are nearly 350 refugees from Bhutan living in Spokane today. These refugees were displaced from Bhutan in 1991 when nearly 108,000 people were forced, through ethnic cleansing, to flee. The ethnic cleansing was initiated by the Bhutanese government when the Nepali-speaking Bhutanese from the southern part of the country started to become a majority. The King of Bhutan, an ethnic Drukpa, became concerned and declared the national culture of Bhutan to be Drukpa. The Bhutanese of Nepali ancestry were discriminated against, and anything related to their culture and language was banned. They were not allowed to use their language or wear their traditional clothing. Several thousand were imprisoned for many months in primitive conditions. Many were tortured while in captivity, but few Bhutanese incarcerated there were formally charged of any crime. When the prisoners were released, they returned to homes

and farms that had been demolished by the Bhutanese government, so they fled into India. India did not permit the refugees to set up camps and the refugees were forced to move across the border into Nepal, a nation that shared their culture and language.

The displaced Bhutanese lived in seven refugee camps in Eastern Nepal. While living in the refugee camps, they were not given permission by the Nepal government to work or travel freely. In 2009, the United States government offered resettlement to 60,000 Bhutanese refugees.

The refugees came to the United States with many challenges. Most had no or very little formal education. They had been subsistence farmers and had no other training or skills. Many came with poor health, suffering from malaria, respiratory illnesses, Tuberculosis, malnutrition, and mental health disorders, including anxiety and depression. In 2010, there were eight reported cases of suicide among Bhutanese refugees settled in the United States.

While living in camps for years, this displaced population dreamt the American dream, and thus were not prepared for the challenges in America. Some of those challenges for Bhutanese and Burmese are

1. low educational background (little or no schooling in their native country);
2. their frustration with resettlement for those without English skills—The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) is looking at the possibility of not resettling these individuals;
3. their difficulties/frustration in finding employment (especially older refugees),
and

4. their poor health conditions (malaria, respiratory, TB, malnutrition, oral health, infectious diseases, mental health disorders, depression).

There are other concerns/challenges that ESL teachers of refugees need to know about, so they can provide community contact information:

1. Concerns about health care –Many students are unaware of how they can take care of their health here in America. If they haven't put themselves into a community of their peers, they lack community resources. Many students often have difficulties with understanding how and when to take medications. There are cultural issues which affect communications between them and their doctors. Also, in many cultures mental health conditions are stigmatized. Students with these conditions feel ashamed and won't seek help. Many of them don't even know that they have that option and that it's ok in America to seek help.
2. Concerns about the elderly—Often times elderly students have difficulty in school and eventually quit coming. With no school to occupy their time, they end up sitting in their apartments all day every day doing nothing. Being house-bound without the ability to communicate debilitates not only physical health but also mental health as well. Finding employment and being able to sustain that employment is also difficult for them, and because of that they are forced to be completely dependent on their children.
3. Age/look older than they are –Typically this affects their chances of gaining employment.

4. High expectations/low realization of work/education—Some Americans have misconceptions of people from other countries and expect them to be and act and do things in the same manner that we do. Many people lack patience and understanding of the differences in other cultures. That lack of understanding directly impacts how people interact with these refugees.
5. Adapting to this new culture –Refugees coming to America don't know the laws here. Many have gotten into trouble because of this lack of knowledge. Safety for children is another concern. Their children were used to being raised by a community. In America, the responsibility is solely on the parents. In many cultures it is acceptable to be physically harsh with the children, which is not accepted here. They don't know about having to keep household cleansers out of children's reach, or about car seats and seatbelts. Their children learn English quicker than their parents and so loss of authority is a concern, as is watching their children possibly lose their own culture. In addition, coming from community-oriented cultures, the loss of a social network can lead to depression.
6. No background knowledge of living in cold climate—Students often fall and are injured because they don't know they have to have appropriate footwear. Many of them wear socks and flip flops in the winter. They don't know about frostbite. When it's cold, they will often bring small barbecue grills into their apartments to act as heaters.

Sudan

From the onset of the first wave of refugee students in 2008, there have always been students from Sudan. But as of the 2012/2013 school year, the AEC has received a new wave of Sudanese students. Not unlike the Bhutanese and Burmese students, these refugees also suffer from mental and physical health issues. They too are dealing with issues of adapting to a cold climate and a new culture, resettlement frustrations, and difficulties in finding employment. There is also the high possibility of PTSD in these students.

Sudanese Refugees from Darfur

There has been an influx of refugees from Sudan's Darfur region in recent months, in the 2012/2013 school year. The refugees have limited to no formal education. Their situation can be better understood in the context of the ongoing conflict in which they have lived.

Since the beginning of the conflicts in Darfur in 2003, over 400,000 Darfurian civilians have been killed, which means about 150 people lose their lives every day. 300,000 people have died directly from acts of violence in Darfur, and 90 percent of the villages of Darfur's targeted ethnic groups have been destroyed. 90 percent of these killings have been against innocent civilians and have been executed by militia groups instructed by the government. With every 1,000 births in Darfur, at least 150 die as a result of malnutrition. Also, 45 percent of children suffer from physical stunting as a result of lack of proper nutrition. 80 percent of those displaced are women and young

girls who are consistently the victims of sexual violence and are abducted into sexual slavery (Eleven Facts about Darfur).

Humanitarian refugee camps in Chad and Sudan are overcrowded, disease infested, and prone to attacks. Regardless of the treacherous conditions of the camps, about 20 percent of the Sudanese population resides in a camp, with a majority of this percentage being young people. More than 100,000 people have fled Darfur, mainly to Chad, where they are facing further violence (Eleven Facts about Darfur).

On September 9th 2004, United States Secretary of State Colin Powell said the Darfur conflict was genocide and called it the worst humanitarian crisis of the 21st century. This is the first time the United States has ever declared genocide while the genocide was still happening. The majority of recent Sudanese refugees are from the Darfur Daju and Masalit regions.

Daju

Daju-speaking Sudanese come to Spokane mostly from Egypt. They fled from Arab government conflicts with ethnic Sudanese rebels. The Daju people are a group of seven distinct ethnicities, speaking related languages and living on both sides of the Chad-Sudan border. The traditional area identified with the Daju is the Daju Hills in the southern portion of the Marrah Mountains located in the Darfur province of Sudan. The Daju are primarily grain farmers (mainly millet, sorghum, and corn). They hunt as well as gather mainly honey, berries and wild fruits. They are predominantly Muslim. Refugees in Egypt experience discrimination by both the Arab government and civilian services. Many refugees in Cairo live in dismal conditions of Cairo's destitute neighborhoods or in impoverished areas on the outskirts of the city.

Masalit

Masalit-speaking Sudanese fled to Chad for refuge. One side of the conflict was composed mainly of the official Sudanese military and police, and the Janjaweed, a Sudanese militia group recruited mostly from the Arabized indigenous Africans and a few Arab Bedouin. The other combatants are made up of rebel groups recruited primarily from the non-Arab Muslim Fur, Zaghawa, and Masalit ethnic groups. Although the Sudanese government publicly denies that it supports the Janjaweed, it has been providing financial assistance and weapons to the militia and has been organizing joint attacks targeting civilians.

Refugees often flee in the middle of the night, with no time to collect their belongings. They are totally dependent on international aid for food, water and shelter. There are tensions as local Chad citizens struggle to survive on already limited resources. Because these refugee students have suffered from repression, wars, traumas, abuse, disease, malnutrition, and have had limited or no education and/or limited or no access to information, there are many challenges they face attempting to establish a new life in America.

Research questions

In writing this diary, I have tried to answer these two major questions so that ESL teachers and their communities might better understand pre-literate refugees—those who are not literate in their first language.

1. What have I learned through working with this population that other ESL teachers might benefit from knowing?
2. How might we best serve this population with special needs?

Overview of the Thesis

Chapter 2 is a review of literature about working with pre-literate refugees. Chapter 3 is the diary about working with preliterate refugees in an adult learning center that I wrote retrospectively in the past one and a half years. Chapter 4 is the summary and conclusion with recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

When an ESL teacher is faced with a class of adult refugee students who have never gone to school or have gone for only a short time, he or she must be aware of what it means to be non-literate and must be ready to take a balanced, flexible approach. Considerable research about educating refugees fleeing from wars has been done in the past decade (Nemerimana, 2013; Pratta & Richter-Devroebe, 2011); and the suggestions might be effective in working with refugees in the United States, especially those from Africa, Bhutan, Nepal, and Burma. A comprehensive report, *The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children Thai-Burma Border Assessment, Annotated Bibliography* (2004) is of particular interest to teachers of refugees and will serve to situate global conflicts for ESL teachers who need background information on their students (Reeves, Adhikari, Nemerimana, 2013). Since such major works already exist, it is not within the scope of this thesis to review all of that literature, but rather to focus on the populations represented in the classrooms being introduced in the present diary study.

Juliet McCaffery, for example, wrote, "Using transformative models of adult literacy in conflict resolution and peace building processes at community level: Examples from Guinea, Sierra Leone and Sudan," a paper that focuses on transformative models of refugee education, including expressive writing/drawing and community-based projects (Popchok, 2013) to reduce the stress of forced relocation...in Guinea, Sierra Leone and South Sudan, to explore how the methodology and modalities of community based

participatory literacy can interrelate and combine with those of conflict resolution and peace building. The paper considers how transformative models of literacy, such as those of Freire, REFLECT, the ActionAid literacy programme, and ‘New Literacy Studies’, along with the self-expression and creative writing these generate, can contribute to the processes of forgiveness, reconciliation and reconstruction. It argues that adult literacy programmes constitute an important element in post-conflict reconstruction.

(McCafferya, 2005, p. 443)

For pre-literate adult refugees, such writing is nearly impossible at first, so the Language Experience Approach is recommended in which students tell their stories to a language partner or teacher, who then writes in simple English the story for the learner (Popchock, 2013; Reeves, 2013). With time, the learner may be able to read these stories with assistance and/or copy them as literacy is approached. They are to be kept in a portfolio for the learner to draw upon and to document that learner’s journey and progress in the United States (Reeves 2013).

Women Teachers in Refugee Education

Over the years, ESL refugee education in the United States has been known as women’s work, and recent research supports this position. In *Gender & Development* in 2004, there was a special edition devoted to “Peacebuilding and Reconstruction,” and Jackie Kirka wrote an article, “Promoting a gender-just peace: The roles of women teachers in peacebuilding and reconstruction” in which she identified schools—even temporary and “improvised”—as “often among the first community organisations to start functioning after a crisis” (p. 50). She states that schools must “set a high standard in

encouraging the active participation of women in reconstruction and peacebuilding after conflict” (p. 50). Her article examines

the potential of women teachers for significant participation in building a gender-just peace, and the challenges that exist for women to fulfill this potential.

Drawing on examples from a number of different contexts, especially Afghanistan, Ethiopia, and south Sudan, it discusses women teachers' personal and professional development. It identifies some of the challenges faced by women in becoming teachers, and strategies to support women teachers to become agents of change in their societies. (p. 50)

As the staff at the learning center where the current diary study was conducted is primarily female, it is appropriate to consider the literature about women who take the lead in educating refugees in the United States historically. Teachers like Molly Popchock (2013), who engaged her adult refugee pre-literate students in community projects, are examples of what the Kirka means by “agents of change” (p. 50).

Another researcher/teacher, Chineze J. Onyejekwea (2009), wrote about women’s roles in peacebuilding and teaching refugee populations, emphasizing the disruptions of relocation and the need for stable home and school environments in the resettlement experiences, though she does not deal with how to educate pre-literate adult refugees, the focus of the present diary study. It is essential that ESL teachers understand the non-literate adult learners, their histories, their challenges, and their sense of urgency to learn to read and write in order to contribute to their families’ well-being in the country granting them asylum (Reeves, Adhikari, Nemerimana, 2013).

Educating Refugees Post-Conflict

Experiencing war and/or trauma affects a person's sense of control, meaning, and connection to self, others, and one's surroundings, all of which are aspects required in learning. Adults experiencing these post-conflict results face more of a challenge than adults who have not had these experiences. These adults can be affected by symptoms of PTSD and/or may suffer from depression. They may also have repressed memories of abuse and may have outbursts of emotional distress. They sometimes experience memory loss and can have concentration and focus issues. As one writer noted,

“Women and children are increasingly the targets of war and victims of rape, torture, and abuse. Leaving their homes, villages or countries can put women and children at a greater risk of violence, poverty and poor health because they lack essentials such as access to accurate information, documentation, basic literacy and funds for transportation. As a result they often experience a downward spiral of insecurity and vulnerability” (Hanemann, 3).

Education is an important aspect in reestablishing a sense of safety, success and self-confidence. “Just as literacy has the potential to instill new values, attitudes, skills and behaviors, it can also help promote new social relations that will build resilience to conflict and trauma” (Hanemann, 13). For adult refugee students who have experience with violence and torture or abuse, with no prior education, coming to school can be intimidating. One of the most important things for these students is to instill a sense of safety. According to Center for Adult English Language Acquisition (CAELA), the following suggestions can make the students' learning environment safer.

- Listen to your students. A learner-centered approach helps develop a sense of community.
- Allow students opportunities to share information, but only if they are willing. Let them know it's ok if they choose not to.
- Validate the student's strengths.
- As a teacher, make sure to have a list of current community resources.
- Be aware that certain themes covered in class, such as family and health, can have negative impacts on students. It is difficult for refugees who have lost family members due to war. Physical and mental health can be very private issues that are not talked about in many cultures.

In order to help facilitate learning, it is important for the teacher to create a safe, predictable, stable classroom which builds on community and the learners themselves. "Community participation and ownership...[are] key in order to really meet the learning needs of the conflict-affected populations and to pave way for sustainable long-term development processes" (Hanemann, p. 17).

What It Means to Be a Non-Literate Adult Learner

Beginning literacy can be viewed as a continuum. The literature often defines the term pre-literate as referring to students from an oral language tradition where the native language is not written or only recently written. Non-literate learners come from a culture with a written language, but they have had little or no exposure to literacy in their first or second language. Semi-literate students have some but minimal literacy in their own language, but these students are not the focus of the present diary study. In practical use, the terms "pre-literate" and "non-literate" are used interchangeably to describe

learners who are not literate in their native languages. For the purpose of this thesis, I will use the term, pre-literate, to refer to students who have had no formal education and cannot read and write in their L1.

In her article, “Working with Literacy-Level Adult English Language Learners”, Cunningham Florez refers to the diverse nature of non-literate learners as a group. In this diversity, she includes such factors as age, gender, language, length of time in country, goals, and previous education, if any (Cunningham Florez, 2003).

Adkins, Sample and Birman (1999) discuss the implications of mental health issues that can be encountered in a class of pre-literate adults. *In Mental health and the adult refugee: The role of the ESL teacher*, they write, “The learners are further differentiated by their experiences. Many have experienced trauma related to events in their native countries and to resettlement in the United States, and this trauma may affect the speed and facility with which they learn English” (web). They go on to describe the different kinds of mental health challenges that are common with pre-literate learners: “Stress occurs when the burdens imposed on people by events or pressures in their lives exceed their resources to cope. For refugees, resettlement involves three types of stress: migration stress, acculturative stress, and (for many) traumatic stress” (Adkins, Sample, & Birman, 1999). Moving to a new country triggers a number of stressful life events at one time. When migration occurs suddenly as a result of political violence, war, or other catastrophes, refugees are functioning under conditions out of their control. Moreover, many of the losses associated with migration represent the loss of the usual coping resources, such as family, friends, and surrounding community, that people would ordinarily rely on to help them cope with stress. Ange Nemerimana, a refugee who came

to America at the age of 13, wrote a short story to illustrate her experiences, and she won a full scholarship to EWU as a result.

My name is Ange Nemerimana and I am 18 years old. I moved to the US four years ago from Tanzania, Africa. I was born in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Africa. When I was born, my mother immediately handed me over to my grandmother because my grandma was living alone and was lonely. I was raised by her, and rarely saw my mother and my younger siblings although we kept in touch and I missed them very much. When I was 12, three people from America called my house and told me that my grandmother and I had the opportunity to come to America. It took 1 year to process everything, when I got here I didn't know any English at all. It was difficult in the beginning because nobody wanted to be friends with me. Coming here and having to learn English and interact with people I did not understand helped me grow up quickly and has shaped me into who I am today. When my grandma and I had the opportunity to move to America, my mom was faced with the decision to keep me in Africa with her, or sign me over to my grandma forever. She ultimately decided to sign me over for my own safety and well-being. This was a hard fact to live with, but it has shown me that my family cares for me so much and just wants the best life for me.

Acculturative stress results from having to learn to function in a culture different from the one an individual is born and raised in. Immigrants and refugees often do not expect that the very fabric of life around them will be profoundly different. Ways in which people relate to each other and form and sustain friendships will be different, and how children go to schools and are socialized will change. Even the most simple of daily

tasks, such as shopping for food or asking for directions, can become challenges involving not only the language barrier, but also the potential for deep cultural misunderstanding. New refugees and immigrants can feel that their very identity is threatened in the new culture. Traumatic stress results from extreme events that cause harm, injury, or death, such as natural disasters, accidents, assault, war-related experiences, and torture (Adkins, Sample, & Birman, 1999). Adhikari (2013) states that there is less acculturative stress when the family stays together. Many refugee families opt to wait and come to America together rather than relocating separately at different times.

The Mainstream English Language Training (MELT) project, which developed ESL curriculum and assessment instruments for Southeast Asian refugees in the early 1980s, posited that it takes from 500-1,000 hours of instruction for adults who are literate in their native language but have had no prior English instruction to reach a level where they can satisfy their basic needs, survive on the job, and have limited social interaction in English (MELT, 1985). For adults without a literacy background, it may much take longer.

In her thesis, *ESL Tutor Curriculum Guide for Adult ESL Preliterate Learners*, (2009), Brekke emphasizes the importance of knowing the students' cultural, socioeconomic, socio-political, and educational backgrounds. Pre-literate students often come from societies that are used to learning through folktales, fables, and other oral stories that contain morals. Generally, they learn by watching and observing others, and they prefer to observe activities before they join in. Pre-literate learners have extreme difficulty using reading and writing to support or reinforce what they learn orally. They

generally progress slowly in literacy and other language instruction. Further, they may misinterpret non-verbal language from other literate students as signs of disapproval or animosity.

Brekke goes on to discuss the significance of the students' socioeconomic and socio-political backgrounds. Pre-literate adult students may have been in wars and have lost their loved ones, homes, and property. Some may have lived in refugee camps, been imprisoned and suffered because of extreme poverty, poor health, and trauma. They may have been uprooted from their familiar surroundings and are raising their children in a place that is very different from their homeland, with people speaking a language that they do not understand. Their sense of security may be threatened and compounded by the foreign surroundings. When pre-literate students enter our ESL classrooms, they may carry with them the war, their lost loved ones, poverty, traumatic experiences, and memories of the days gone of a world that made sense to them.

According to Brekke, knowing something about the students' past experience with literacy is important. Some pre-literate learners have never lived in an urban environment surrounded by print. Students who come from non-literate settings may not realize the way print functions, or they may not recognize its essential importance for their survival in literacy-based cultures.

In her article, *What Non-readers or Beginning Readers Need to Know*, Shirley Brod identifies some of the differences between literate and non-literate learners (Brod, 1999).

Literate	Non-literate
Learn from print	Learn by doing
Visually oriented	Aurally oriented
Make lists to remember	Repeat to remember
Have spent years learning to read	Have a limited time to learn to read
Know they can learn	Lack confidence in their learning ability
Learn best when content is relevant to their lives	Learn best when content is relevant to their lives
Can distinguish between important and less important print	May accept all content as being of equal value

In her presentation to a TESOL conference in 2006, Kramer outlined some of the important things non-literate students need to know before they can progress. They must learn how to hold a pencil, trace and make shapes, learn left to right progression and top to bottom orientation. They need to be able to trace and form letters and numbers and write on the line. It will be necessary for them to learn the difference between upper and lower case letters, know the sounds of letters and to put letters together to form words. They also need to practice putting spaces between words and to understand some sight words (Kramer, 2006).

Liden, Vinogradov, and Poulos (2010) propose a balance of top-down (first emphasis on the meaning) and bottom-up (first emphasis on the parts) instruction for pre-literate learners that they call the “whole-part-whole” method. The method starts with a whole text (ex: vocabulary from a thematic unit or a story) then pulls out specific parts to

analyze for phonics/phonemic awareness skills, and then goes back to the text to practice in context.

In her article, “*Maestra! the letters speak.*” Adult esl students learning to read for the first time, Vinogradov (2008) offers a list of suggestions for teaching pre-literate students including:

1. **Keep it in Context:** The message is a simple one: that people learn best when learning starts with what they already know, builds on their strengths, engages them in the learning process, and enables them to accomplish something they want to accomplish.
2. **Go Up and Down the Ladder:** Years ago, when teachers and researchers discussed how best to teach reading, the debate between whole language versus phonics received a great deal of attention. Today, most reading and ESL professionals agree that reading is an interactive endeavor that includes both top-down and bottom-up processes, and teaching reading should be balanced to include both types of instruction.
3. **Provide a Buffet of Learning Opportunities:** We cannot expect students with limited formal schooling to immediately excel in a traditional ‘Western’ classroom. It is important to assume that these students will learn differently, and to provide an array of opportunities for them to receive, process, and master the material in our lessons.
4. **Tap into Strengths:** While these learners may not have the same approach to learning as those socialized in modern, literate societies, they are of course no

less capable or intelligent, and in fact, they may have many skills that literate students do not.

5. Nurture Learners' Confidence: Older, struggling English learners often lack confidence. They may not see themselves as capable. They may not understand how schools work, or they may have concluded that schooling does not offer them any benefits. Effective teachers help all their students value school and value themselves as learners (Vinogradov 2008).

Croydon (2010) suggests that teachers begin with Listening and Speaking, and believes that teachers should “only ask students to read something they have spent time practicing orally” (web). Croydon goes on to outline suggestions for teachers including:

1. Start with student-generated words that they find in their immediate environment as a basis to learn sight words.
2. Create a system to record and recycle new sight words.
3. Teach word-attack skills. Students need to learn the sounds that letters make so eventually they will be able to read words that are not sight words. Start with some consonants and short vowels.
4. Use a combination of top-down and bottom-up processing strategies in every lesson that focuses on both reading for meaning. Work on sounds and letters in each lesson.
5. Teach study skills and spend time organizing paper work. Nonliterate students have little experience organizing paper work. Number and date pages, color code important handouts and sort paper work regularly (web).

Summary

The literature is consistent with my experience teaching pre-literate ESL students. Instruction needs to be balanced and provide many learning opportunities targeting different learning styles and needs. Students need to start with fundamentals such as how to hold a pencil, the sounds of the alphabet, and decoding, but this instruction should be balanced with top-down strategies that focus on meaning and the backgrounds of the students. Classrooms that are learner-centered help create a safe environment that builds community. This is essential to refugee students coming from post-conflict situations. Teachers need to be aware of the backgrounds of their students and aware of the signs of stress from present and past experiences. Pre-literate learners tend to be visual and tactile, and they benefit from the use of pictures and manipulative materials while learning. Many refugee students come from oral cultures, and teaching methods should be incorporated into the curriculum to support that. Students in pre-literate classrooms come from a wide variety of backgrounds and do not fit into any single mold, so each class and every student needs to be approached on an individual level that meets that student's needs.

The research that exists on working with pre-literate adult refugee students, however, appears to be limited to classroom techniques and methods. There is a lack of research on the learning process of the students themselves. There is also a lack of research on the obstacles to learning as far as their cognitive process: for example, that they fail to connect a word on a piece of paper as a written instruction, even after having had that repetition for months. There is more research needed in the area of cultural influences on their way of thinking and learning. There needs to be further case studies

that follow students throughout their educational experience. Furthermore, case studies exploring the reasons students leave school, the multiple obstacles they face in trying to stay in school, and the long-term impacts on their quality of life.

Chapter 3

The Retrospective Diary—The Classroom and Students

Chapter 3 is a diary that is a combination of concurrent and retrospective accounts, but I do not distinguish between the two in the present study. David Nunan and Kathy Bailey would call a diary study an introspective method that is a first-person account of language teaching and/or learning. An introspective method is “the process of observing and reflecting on one’s thoughts, feelings, motives, reasoning processes, and mental states with a view to determining the ways in which these processes and states determine our behavior” (Nunan, 115). I chose this method because it would provide a framework for reflection on teaching pre-literate adult refugees in the past five years of my 14-year career in ESL adult literacy education.

Data Selection

While I have hundreds of memories, I have chosen to write about the pre-literate refugee students—academic challenges, cultural obstacles, working with them, attendance issues, three students up close, “lingering” students, testing, graduation statistics, and recommendations for future teachers. My diary entries were made over the past year and a half, and I chose to write about the areas that I think ESL teachers would need and want to know about this population.

The Diary

As I said, as early as 2007, I had had a few pre-literate students in my class already. But up until then, all of my students had already learned, somewhere along the line, how

to read English to some extent. They came to me without a word of English, but they could read. They had had an education. The pre-literate students, however, couldn't read any English and couldn't read or write in their own language. Nor had most any of them ever held a pencil. Writing a simple letter was difficult and the letters they did write looked similar to those of a five or six-year-old American child (Appendix A). Now, I knew these students had never been to school, but at the time, I didn't realize the extent the effects of that would take on their learning. And my teaching.

I was surprised that they couldn't copy a symbol and that they didn't know one letter of our alphabet, nor could they remember any of them when told. Not knowing quite what to do with them in my normally somewhat fast-paced regular Level 1 classroom, we hired an aid and had her work with them for special alphabet/reading pullout sessions. I didn't think we would have any issues there and thought that soon they could join the class fully. To be honest, I was dumbfounded that after being with my aid daily, four days a week for three months, they hadn't learned the alphabet and the basic sounds the letters make. I also wasn't sure why they didn't seem to be learning the vocabulary we all practiced as a class together. I started working with them myself, thinking I could get things moving a lot faster. That also was not the case.

Suddenly, in 2008/2009, the number of pre-literate students coming into my class seemed to explode. In a matter of months, my class went from three pre-literate refugee students to about twenty, and the rate of learning with these students was incredibly slow. We quickly realized that these were high special-needs students who definitely needed a special class all to themselves. And so, after about a year, one was finally opened. It was a special class, which was deemed the Level 1a class. After quite a long time, these

students finally learned to read. That is to say, they learned to read “well enough” so that they could read simple things that they repeated over and over such as their names, addresses, if they had children and how many, and simple adjectives such as married, happy, hungry, and tired. The problem was that they couldn’t read well enough to be integrated into a regular Level 1 classroom, but they had done well enough to pass the Level 1a class. Because of this, these students had no place to go. They seemed to be stuck in space, in limbo somewhere. There were too “high” for the pre-literate class, and too “low” for the regular Level 1 class. We decided to open a transitional class: a class that was in between the Level 1a class and the regular Level 1 class. So we revamped and offered three Level 1 classes: Level 1a for the pre-literate refugee students, Level 1b, which was the transitional class, and Level 1c which was the regular Level 1 class that we had always had. We had never needed or had this transitional 1b class. Hence, I was the first teacher to teach it. Immediately, difficult issues became apparent.

Academic Obstacles

Growing up in the American educational system, we take many things for granted, things that you can’t assume students with no academic background can do. For example, if we are given something written on a piece of paper, and underneath we have four choices: A, B, C, or D, we know almost instinctively that those are there because we are supposed to choose one. Or if there are blanks, we know that we are supposed to fill them in with something. If we have pictures down one side of the page, and words down the other side, we know we are supposed to match them. These refugee students had none of this knowledge, which created just another obstacle for them to have to overcome. In working on these types of skills, they constantly needed direction and

guidance even though we had done these exact same things over and over and over. Initially, time spent on these activities didn't seem to impact retention of such tasks. Whenever they were given a paper with something to do on it, after going through great lengths to explain it many times to make sure everyone understood, I would still see materials being received with blank stares. And for some reason they wouldn't ask. They would just sit there and stare at it or start talking to someone who spoke their language about what they were supposed to do.

So I would sit down with one student and explain, then go to the next student, and then the next. Trying to explain by addressing the class as a whole didn't seem to be working. Though they seemed to understand my explanation addressing the group as a whole, with a demonstration of what to do up on the smart board, students from non-literate backgrounds don't associate what's up on the board with the paper that's in front of them. So though they understand what's up on the board when you explain it, they see the paper in front of them as something completely different. There's no correlation there. So as a consequence, I had to go from student to student for one-on-one explanations. And by the time I'd make the rounds, I'd see that the first student I had explained things to had done number one and then was just sitting there, pencil on the table. All the students did that. They'd do number one and then stop. So I'd have to make the rounds again to tell each student individually to go to number two, then make my way around again to tell them to go to number three. I couldn't figure this out because it seemed so natural to me to do all of the things on a paper I was given, especially if those things were numbered. But for these students it just didn't work that way.

This is just one example of how these particular students cannot work independently. They don't have the academic background or knowledge to allow them to do such tasks. So it's one of the skills I spend a lot of time trying to teach them. I also spent a lot of time trying to teach them to ask for help or for things they need. When they got to the point where they would ask for help, what I would get would be "Teacher, no," which basically meant "I don't understand and/or I don't know what I'm doing," which was a bit of a milestone for them to speak up like that. Having never set foot in a classroom, such a setting is intimidating to these students. They're afraid, unsure, and insecure. They also lack self-confidence when it comes to their learning, so to feel safe enough and confident enough to speak up is progress for many of them.

Pre-literate students typically do not know how to work independently. They don't know what's expected of them, and they have no background knowledge of academic skills. For many students mastering the academic challenges (filling in blanks, multiple choice, matching) well enough to work independently takes many quarters. And it takes a lot of mental energy on the teacher's part having to constantly go from student to student in a class of 25-35 students, four days a week, five hours a day.

Some students never really seem to master the skill of filling in the blanks. Even though it's done repeatedly, and consistently, there are students who, when given the activity, still won't know what to do. There are others still who will, for whatever reason, fill in the blanks with random words. For example, on the end of the quarter exam, the students have a simplified version of a map of a community. They have to fill in the blanks with a preposition of location. For example, if the sentence is *The bank is _____ the post office*, they have to fill in the blank with *next to* or *across from*.

They are given a list of words to choose from. Sometimes the students will start off ok, with the first two or three done correctly, but then they'll fill in the rest of the blanks with things like "yes, I do," or something like the name of a fruit or their phone number-completely random words or phrases. None of us really knows why this is. Sometimes they'll just fill all of them in randomly anyway, regardless of how many months they've been practicing.

Directions are also something that they don't seem to recognize. If the directions say to write something, when given the paper, the student will not know what to do with it. When you point to the directions "write" and ask the student what it says, he or she will say "write" and then ask you if they're supposed to write on the paper. I don't know if they just don't notice the words, even though they're right there on the paper, or if they just think they're some words on the paper that aren't important. Perhaps they don't make the connection that the words on the paper are telling them what to do. Either way, it's something we haven't quite been able to figure out quite yet. But teaching them to read directions is a continuous task, one that is important in enabling them to work independently and build self-confidence in their abilities.

After directions are understood and papers are complete, it is time to check everything. It is really difficult for so many of these students to follow along with the teacher when checking papers together as a class. So for example, if they're just answering yes or no to questions on a piece of paper, after asking a certain student to read number one, and the student says the answer is yes, I repeat that that is correct. "Number one is yes." And even though they understand me, they don't seem to connect what I'm saying to their paper. It's a part of academia and education that they've never

experienced. If their paper says no for number one, and I repeat “Number one is yes,” they don’t change their answer. I will ask them what number one is and they’ll say, “I don’t know,” or they’ll say, “No” even though I’ve repeated the answer to number one three or four times. Or they’ll say that number one is “yes” because that’s what I just said, but they’ll have “no” written on their paper. They don’t correct it. Or they’re looking at number four when I’m trying to get everyone to be on number one, or they start looking at other papers, or talking. There are a number of things that happen. Checking as a class together requires a lot of repetition on the teacher’s part (constantly repeating the answers) and constant monitoring to make sure every student is where you want them and that every student ends up with the correct answer on his or her paper.

In final analysis, I’m beginning to question the practice of providing immediate feedback on these lessons and how accurate the exit exam measures their knowledge of what they learned in class. Many of the reading/writing questions on the test could easily be answered by students who are very oral and have higher listening skills.

Cultural Obstacles

Not only are the academics an obstacle, but incorporating basic societal information into learning is difficult. Many of these refugee students come from villages or camps where addresses were never used. For the longest time I would teach them how to say their address without a thought behind the fact that they may not even know what “address” means. One day it was made perfectly clear to me by accident, from a higher level student, that though they could tell me their address because I had taught them how, they didn’t know what it meant. All they knew was that it was a number they saw on the

front of their house or apartment and that they had to know this number. But that they didn't know exactly what it was for or why they had to have it was a little difficult for me to wrap my brain around, even though logically I could see how that would make sense. One of my colleagues took a group of these students for a walk and showed them the street signs, that each street had a name, and showed them the numbers on the houses to show them that each house had a number, and that the street name is important because that same number can be for other houses on other streets. They discovered through this, and through the use of interpreters, that that is how we find people in America. Many refugees come from villages where using landmarks to locate people sufficed. I've had female students invite me to their apartments, and when I ask where they live, they'll tell me their apartment is by Fred Meyer. Or that they live by "the school," whatever school that is. I try to explain to them that that's why we have addresses here, and that we can't simply find a person's house from nothing but one mere landmark. It is important to note that not all refugees bring with them the same knowledge, or lack of it, and so while many of them did know what addresses are, many of them did not, so it was a bit of a revelation to some of them.

Time is another huge issue. In many of the villages and camps, there aren't any clocks. They don't have time constraints determined by numbers. For those students, their concept of time does not involve numbers as does ours. Some people (not teachers) have told me that it should be like teaching American children. That is simply not true. American children share the concept of time and clocks and numbers that all Americans share. These students do not. It is difficult just to teach the clock itself. What is an hour? What does that mean to someone with no concept of "an hour"? And to

compound that, it's difficult for them to learn that each hour has sixty minutes, and that we speak in minutes differently, depending on if those minutes are coming after the hour or before the next hour. There are three different ways, for example to say 6:15, and three different ways to say 6:45. You have to add and subtract when you tell time, and many of these students do not have such basic math skills. It is not only the clock and the math and language that go with it that is difficult, but also the concept that this thing and the numbers on it determine how we live our lives in this country. Most students have digital clocks as that makes getting to and from where they need to be when they need to be there easier. Many learn to voice a time solely on numbers, for example, saying "six-fifteen," but cannot understand "fifteen after" or "a quarter after". They can understand 6:45 but can't tell you what time it is if you say it's a quarter to seven. It is quite common to have these students in class for a year, and they still can't tell time to this extent.

Their concept of time also does not involve the printed calendar as we know it. They don't know how to read a calendar, so when they are given one, they can't tell you what day of the week a certain day falls on. If you tell them Wednesday the 20th, they don't know which Wednesday that is. They don't know when one month ends and when another begins or how many days there are in one week. Many of them also do not know when their birthdays are, which is why when they come to America, they are all given a birth date of January 1st, and the year of their birth is estimated. Though they learn quickly that their lives are now dictated by time in America, the academics of learning that time are slow.

Money is another huge obstacle. Many of these refugee students never had any need for money. They grew and raised everything they ate, and anything else they needed they traded for. In some families, only one would be in charge of the money transactions, either the man or the woman. Many of them were born in refugee camps or grew up in the camps from an early age, so they never had any need or use for money. For some of them, when they did use money, it was in whole units, so any change making was in whole units. For most of my students learning the value of each coin isn't such an obstacle, but because they tend to lack math skills, adding or subtracting these values is difficult. Some of them simply just cannot add multiple amounts, even if the numbers are written down for them. And some of them will do inexplicable things such as, when given two quarters, they know it's fifty cents, but when you add more money to that and ask them how much it is, they'll tell you a value of less than fifty cents. Oddly, many of them have problems adding pennies. Given a quarter, a dime, a nickel, and a penny, they'll count accordingly: "Twenty-five, thirty-five, forty," but when you add that penny they'll say "one". Or they'll say they don't know. Some of them can't add that extra one cent at the end, or any pennies at the end: Twenty-five, thirty-five, forty, forty-one. And making change is even worse. Some of them, it seems, never learn how. I'm always amazed that when we do our shopping units, the family member in charge of the money can't tell me what you can buy with how much money or if you buy something, whether or not you'll have money left to buy something else. I still haven't figured out how they manage their food cards without this information.

On the flip side of that, I've had students who couldn't read or write and could hardly speak English, but who were great with money and could do all the calculations in

their head. We do have some refugees who had received an education in their countries. They know how an address is used, for example, and how to make change, but it's important to know that for many of them, specifically the pre-literate students from remote villages and/or camps, this knowledge is non-existent. An effective teacher shouldn't take for granted that these students know so much of what we do, and he or she should be prepared for obstacles such as these.

There are often other small, overlooked cultural issues that affect learning in the classroom as well. Names, for example. This is one of the reasons why teachers of low-level students often create their own reading material using names from the students' countries. The students don't know American names: John, David, Sally, Jane. They don't recognize them as names of people. This gets especially difficult when using pronouns. We know that John is a "he" and that his wife Mary is a "she". They don't. And without this knowledge, a simple reading assignment can become an utter disaster. Further, in many cultures they don't have separate pronouns for men and women. They just use one for both, with no gender markers whatsoever.

When reading about people, another interesting phenomenon occurs. Typically, the students cannot understand that the story isn't about them. If the story is about a woman named Maria, who is thirty-eight years old, and the first question is "How old is Maria?" it's not uncommon for the students to write, "I am 42 years old," or however old they are. Or if the question says, "What is the woman's name?" the students will write their own names. These are a couple of reasons why pre-literate and/or low-level teachers need to start readings such as these with stories about the students themselves. The students talk to each other and get to know each other, and we practice asking and

answering personal information questions such as where the students are from, whether or not they are married, and how many children they have, making it easier for them when they have the stories on paper in front of them. We also copy a photo of each student next to his or her story.

Another small example of minor cultural influences is pictorial images. Being born and raised in America, we were raised with paper and pencils, crayons, coloring books, children's books, magazines, billboards, TV shows, and just drawing and doodling in general. Because of that we immediately recognize that a circle with lines sticking out of it is a sun. These students don't have that same background knowledge. So many times we, as teachers, have drawn things we think perfectly represent what we're trying to say, but the students often times don't make that same connection. Many of my students have not recognized that a circle with two dots in it with an upwardly curved line underneath is a human face. This is not to say that a teacher shouldn't draw, because you need to, and we all do it. It works, for the most part. But non-print-literate adults typically don't understand pictures as representations of real things, at least in the way we represent them, so try to use as many realistic pictures as possible. It makes it much easier on both the teacher and the student.

Recognizing a yes/no question as being a question that requires a response of yes or no may impact understanding for many students. Many students do not recognize a yes/no question as being such no matter how many times it's practiced. Eventually they learn, but it takes quite a while. For many cultures, yes/no questions are not posed in the same way or answered in the same way. In many cultures they don't answer a question with "no". So if asked if their apartment is big, they might reply with "I have small

apartment.” It can be difficult to just get a simple “no” out of them, and worse yet, to get them to say “No, it isn’t.” The concepts of is/isn’t and are/aren’t, that one is positive and one is negative is very confusing to cultures that don’t use language in such a way. If you tell them, for example, “John isn’t married,” and then ask them if John is married, sometimes they’ll say yes, or sometimes they’ll say, “John single.” And if you say, “Ok, yes, but is he married,” they’ll answer yes, when he’s really not. The verb “to be” is one of the most difficult things to teach, as many languages don’t have it. It’s a constant struggle for most all students, regardless of their status, all way up through the levels.

Cultural Issues that may Affect Classroom Behavior

Though not huge obstacles or obstacles that are difficult to overcome, there are some basic culturally accepted behaviors that students need to learn. Many of the students who come from villages and refugee camps often don’t have the same barriers when it comes to bodily functions as we do. They are accustomed to spitting wherever and whenever the need arises. They also have no barriers when it comes to nose picking and/or belching. Thus it is not uncommon for a student to get up in the middle of class to go and spit in the garbage can, which is not too far from the teacher. It is also not uncommon for students to have their fingers half way up their noses during class. These students need to be taught that such things are not culturally acceptable. Many of the Burmese students chew areca nut (betel nut), which they chew as one would chew tobacco. We have to tell them it’s not acceptable to have a huge wad of that in their mouths while in school. They also need to be taught simple things such as not getting up to start doing what they want right in the middle of class or that they can’t just talk with their friends in the middle of class when they feel like it.

Occasionally we'll have students who have to bring their children to class with them. Either the child has the day off from school, or he or she had an appointment, or they aren't in childcare yet. For those students, they have to be taught that there are expectations for children, and parents, as well. Children in camps were accustomed to much more physical freedom than children are here. They were used to roaming away from their families and/or running around the camps because they were raised by communities rather than parents. That was acceptable there, but it's something they can't do in a school building here. We have had issues with children as young as four running around the building unsupervised and going outside into the parking lot with no one knowing where they are. I don't think it's necessary to explain what a safety issue this is. In many countries, it is also acceptable to hit children. Hard, and more than once. They have to be taught that that is something that's not accepted here and that in fact, there are laws regarding such matters. Sometimes the parents aren't able to handle children the way we expect them to, and so they're told they cannot come to school on days when they have to be with their children.

Students from certain cultures also tend to do everything a bit more slowly than we do. Being raised in villages and camps, they didn't have the same time constraints dictating their lives. They walk more slowly, eat more slowly, gather things up more slowly, and put things away more slowly. If we, as Americans, have only twenty minutes for a break, for example, we do what we have to do in that time as quickly as we have to do it in order to get it finished. These refugee students don't. Or when it's time to go to the computer lab, sometimes it can take a long time for them to gather up their stuff. So there is quite a bit of time spent in class getting them to finish their breaks, getting them

to gather up their things to go to computer lab, getting them formed into groups, and getting them back to their seats.

While not a cultural thing per say, evacuation drills can cause stressful and/or dangerous situations and behaviors. Many of these students come from post-conflict environments. As do most schools, the AEC participates in its required evacuation drills. To a new student coming from a post-conflict situation, these alarms can be distressing. When the AEC first started serving refugee students from war and trauma backgrounds, it didn't dawn on me what consequences not knowing about these drills would cause, and because of my lack of knowledge, I didn't prepare my students in advance. Thus, when the alarm went off, students were in a panic and became visibly afraid. Some started running, others sat frozen with fear on their faces, and some immediately tried to run down the stairs to get their children and panicked and started yelling when they couldn't get into the classroom. One student even passed out in the chaos, in the middle of the doorway the students were supposed to exit through. Now I make sure to prepare my students in advance. I tell them the exact time the alarm will sound, tell them that it's only practice, and remind them during the five minutes before it goes off. There have even been a few students whom I have directed out of the building ten minutes before the drill. Every time. The students eventually learn, but there are always new students enrolling in the class without that knowledge.

Working with Pre-literate Students

They say in the literature that repetition is key. If it were that easy, we as teachers, and they as students would have it made. It seems logical though. You would

think that if you heard and saw and said and read and wrote the same words over and over and over, four days a week, five hours a day, for weeks and months, you would learn them fairly quickly. It does not typically work that way with pre-literate students. And despite my research efforts to find out why that is, it still remains a mystery to me.

It is not uncommon for these students stay in Level 1 for months or even years. As a matter of fact, it's pretty normal. The curriculum is per quarter, so every quarter they start over studying the same themes, the same grammar, and the same basic vocabulary. Now, this is not to say that you don't need repetition, because you certainly do. You would get absolutely nowhere without it. It is vital to their learning. There's something interesting in this repetition though that doesn't happen for quite a long time. Even though you've given your students say, a piece of paper with pictures and the words to go with the pictures on it, if you give them a different piece of paper with the same information on it, they don't recognize it as information they've had before.

For example, at the beginning of the quarter every student gets a pink piece of paper that has all the basic information on it: What is your name, where are you from, how old are you, etc. Questions and answers. After we've been working on these basic concepts for a long time, both in reading/writing and in speaking/listening, I'll give them a piece of paper with a few of these questions on it. They are to read the questions and write the answers. If they don't understand them and/or don't know what they are or what they mean, it doesn't enter their minds, "Oh, hey, I have this on another piece of paper. The pink piece." And this is how it is with everything. They don't make the connection that they have this information already, and because they don't make that

connection, they don't know to pull out their pink piece of paper and look. And so I say a lot "It's on your pink paper" as I hold up the same pink paper.

For some students, making this connection that they have this information takes only a couple of months, but for others it can take up to a year. I can tell you that once you see them make that connection and they open their notebooks and pull out that piece of paper, or any paper that has the information on it they're working on, it's a pretty amazing thing. For some reason that seems to be one of the huge milestones in their education and learning. When giving important papers that they will use as references throughout the entire quarter, using color-coded paper is highly important. These students don't recognize one piece of white paper as the same or different from the next. If you hold up something that's on a white piece of paper, and they're trying to find the same paper in their binders among all their white papers, they'll take out completely different papers and ask you if that's the paper they're supposed to have, even though what's on it doesn't match the one you're showing them.

Since it is common for the pre-literate students to repeat the class many times, there are many of them who have stayed in Level 1 anywhere from three to fifteen quarters. And since each quarter is three months (excluding summer which is roughly seven weeks) each of these students is potentially in Level 1 anywhere from one year to almost five, studying the same curriculum. So why are they not progressing any faster? Can it be possible that it's as simple as the fact that they've never gone to school before? For some reason, I just cannot bring myself to accept that. And as a teacher I get frustrated at myself for not being able to make them learn at the rate I'd like to see them

learn. So I'm always looking for new and different activities and ways to help them learn.

Retention is not only generally very difficult, but there's also this odd phenomenon that occurs where the students completely understand something and do great with it for a while, anywhere from one day to one week roughly, and we as teachers are so happy that we've accomplished this huge milestone, and then suddenly one day they'll act as if they've never seen it before in their lives. They literally stare at you dumbfounded and confused as to why you've given them something that they've never seen before. And some of the students will ask you what it is and tell you they don't understand it. As a teacher, it puts you in a bit of a predicament. You have a curriculum to teach and a limited time to teach it in, and yet suddenly with these students you're right back to where you started. You'll have other students who are ready to move on, and at the same time, students who have fallen backward. To compound matters, what they learn is limited only to the time they spend in class. You can't really give them homework when they can't read or write, so there's no study time on their part. They also don't have the background to know how to study at home. Although one thing I can say is that these students work really hard in class. They do everything you want them to do, and they try their best and work their hardest.

If you are a new teacher, you'll have to understand ahead of time that you will never have a class where every student is at the same level. Never. Especially in each discipline. Some will never finish what you give them while others will finish quite early. Many of the students are very oral. They learn to speak and understand quickly, but they still can't read or write. It's normal to have a student in your class with Level 3

speaking skills, and that student can't read or write. You'll have other students who can do their paperwork well, but whom you can't verbally communicate with. You'll have students who can't tell you their address or phone number, while others are almost ready for Level 2. It can be tricky to balance if you're not aware of these kinds of dynamics ahead of time, and even trickier when they seemingly, out of nowhere, act as if what you've been doing for weeks they've never seen before. So what do you do? Do you go back and start all over? If so, you're doing a disservice to the others in your class who are working at a higher level. If you just keep going, you'll lose the lower-level students. The further ahead you go, the further behind they will fall. So yes, it's a bit of a balancing act in some ways, so you need to make sure you have adequate materials and activities planned ahead of time. You can make higher and lower level materials and activities using the same vocabulary. And always integrate the old with the new. It's repetition: If you don't constantly include it and connect it, they'll forget.

Self-confidence will play a huge part in your students' learning. Having never gone to school, many of these students are very insecure and believe they can't do it. So many times I have new students who simply do not even bother to try. They'll tell me "no," or they'll voice that they can't do it before they've even attempted to. These students need constant reassurance and support. For some of them, that insecurity and self-doubt will manifest itself in their reading and writing, and for others in their speaking. I've had students I've spent a lot of time and effort with in order to build their self-confidence. And when they finally break away from that and start trying and doing and coming out of their shells, it's really an indescribable feeling for a teacher. There is a

connection, however big or small, to self-confidence and learning that can't be overlooked.

Attendance Issues

There is another issue that can sometimes, for some students, interfere with retention: lack of attendance. As I've already stated, many of these refugees have physical and/or emotional illnesses. They can miss a lot of school due to medical appointments not only for them, but also for their family members. And some of them have fairly large families. One of my Nepali students, whom I will call Sabitra, is married and has six children. When each of those family members has two appointments in one month, Sabitra can miss sixteen days of school. Now, I've never had a student miss that much school for medical appointments, but it potentially could happen. Sabitra missed a lot for precisely that reason. Even if it's not sixteen days, missing a few days a month has a big effect on some of these students. And during breaks, such as spring break or summer break, when they're away from school for one to three weeks, a huge bulk of what they had learned goes out the window. And inevitably their appointments are during your class time. They don't know that they can say "no" to certain appointment times or request that their appointments be after a certain time or on a certain day. When we are working on our health unit, it's one of the things I explain: that it's ok to say no and request another time.

World Relief is also a contributor to our students missing school. There are two main components to World Relief: a resettlement piece and an employment piece. World Relief has an employment contract with the state, so they are always pulling students for

job-related issues. It's frustrating for me as a teacher because I don't understand why we can't work together more closely and have World Relief, for example, pull the students after school hours and on Fridays when the students don't have class. Many of our students get pulled two days a week, which adds up to eight hours of missed class a week. And when some of our students find jobs that give them days off during the week, they'll come to school on those days. I've had students who work and can only come to school one or two days a week. And if you think retention of material taught is difficult just in general, coming to school only one or two days a week makes it almost impossible. Right now I have two students, a married couple, who both work. They usually arrive in class around 8:50, but because of their jobs, they have to leave at 10:00, allowing for only an hour and ten minutes of learning per day out of the five hours of class. There are constantly different students coming in and out on different days and during different times because of appointments, health issues, World Relief, or jobs. This is something to be prepared for before you start working with these students. It's not the ideal class where all of your students come to school every day on time and stay until class is finished. On the flip side of that, there's always that small "core group" that comes consistently every day, that solid group that you can always count on to be there, which is wonderful.

These past few years many students have sacrificed their education in order to work. World Relief has found jobs for these refugees doing migrant farm work. You'll have certain students in your class for a certain number of months, and then they'll go off to work in these farms for six months where they are not speaking any English at all. When they come back, which is always in the middle of the quarter, they're right back to

where they started. And because they've finished that job, they are now unemployed and have to start working with World Relief to find another job, which means they start getting pulled from the class again. Unfortunately, many of our low-level students end up in menial, isolated jobs such as working in clothing factories or cleaning hotel rooms, and they can't come to school anymore due to the time commitments. But these students are obligated to pay World Relief back for their trip here. That is the agreement: World Relief will pay for their airfare, and the students will pay them back. They have three years to pay them back without interest. After that three-year interest-free period, if they haven't paid off their loan, the interest starts accumulating. There is no set monthly payment plan, so the students pay however much they can pay each month.

Most of these refugees receive some kind of government assistance when they first arrive. At the AEC we deal with two types of programs through the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS). The first is Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF). Students can qualify for TANF if they have a child or children under the age of 18 living in the house. On this program they can receive assistance up to 60 months, though there is talk of reducing that duration down to 48 months. The second program is Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA). Refugees can only receive these benefits for the first 8 months they are here. They have a limited time before they have to find work.

Having an open enrollment policy, as we do at the AEC, also interferes with attendance. An open enrollment policy means that we can take new students at any time up until around a week before the quarter ends. It is not uncommon to get six new students at various times during the quarter and toward the end of the quarter. It is also not uncommon to get new students two weeks before the quarter ends. Many of these

students come in and their stress level immediately goes up when they see and hear all the other students who have been studying together for the entire quarter and are now starting to review for the test. It makes it hard not just from a language aspect, but from a social aspect as well.

A Look at Three Students

Bishnu

Bishnu is a 46-year-old woman who fled Bhutan to a refugee camp in Nepal and is representative of the typical pre-literate student: learning is a very slow and difficult process. Bishnu is also a typical example of how writing speed never really seems to get any faster. After five quarters in Level 1b, her writing is exactly as slow as it was the first day she started class. Because she was a slow writer and because learning was so hard for her, I could constantly see the frustration in her, and periodically she would try to voice that to me. And that in itself was frustrating for her because of her lack of English. I had become quite familiar with the fact that these students wrote incredibly slowly, but it was Bishnu who really made me see that it was a constant issue that never really seemed to resolve itself. Because of the agony this seemed to cause her never finishing when many of the other students had, she was the one who made me start trying to ingrain in my students that finishing was not important, that learning wasn't a contest or competition, that it was an individual process, and that understanding and doing what you could do took precedence. When we'd go over our work, check it, and discuss it in our own low-level English way, Bishnu and others like her would be able to fill in anything they missed or had not finished. Learning was so incredibly difficult for

Bishnu, as it is with many of these students, and she seemed to spend her days agonizing over all of the academic aspects that being in a classroom involved. Even as she progressed, the issue of writing speed seemed to keep her constantly behind. Yet she came to school every day and worked as hard as she possibly could. When she finally passed to Level 2, she was so overcome with emotion that she was sobbing, couldn't talk, and almost appeared to be close to fainting. And though she passed, she barely passed, and now starting in level 2 is just as hard for her as her first day in Level 1 was five quarters ago. For her, it's like starting all over again. However, as of now, because of the lack of jobs in Spokane, Bishnu and her family are moving to Kentucky. She is sad to leave our school and all the people she's grown close to, and even sadder because there is no school for her where she is going. Her education, for now, is over.

Yusef

Yusef is a 33-year-old man from Eritrea and gives an example of how difficult it is to educate students who have suffered physical and/or emotional trauma, which a lot of them have. Yusef's is an interesting story. His family were sheep herders. One day while herding sheep, he fell down the side of a mountain and smashed his head in. One of his brothers found him and ran back to his village to fetch his father. The family thought Yusef was dead and threw him onto the back of a truck to take him to be buried. On the three-hour drive, the father changed his mind and for unknown reasons decided to take Yusef to a hospital. There they discovered that in fact he was still alive, but in a coma. After recovering from that, Yusef joined the army. During his service fighting in a civil war, he was injured in the wake of a bomb and again suffered head injuries along with injuries to other parts of his body. His body is now riddled with shrapnel and he

suffers from cognitive disabilities. At first, when Yusef started in our program, he didn't do too badly. It was difficult, and although learning was slow, as is typical, he was learning. Because of injuries to his body, he walked slowly and with a limp, and the physical process of getting to school was difficult for him. But he came. His hopes were to learn English, get a job, and bring his wife and child here. He was positive and hopeful. After about a year, or a year and a half, I started noticing changes in his behavior. He seemed more confused about things that were going on in his life and more emotionally sensitive. He'd try to convey to me the best he could about his physical pain and emotional sadness. It was obvious that he was suffering from what could become an extreme depression. Communication was difficult for us. I started using an interpreter with him periodically to keep tabs on how he was doing, to make sure he was taking his meds, and I went to a few doctor's appointments with him. Because of his brain injuries, he suffered memory issues. He could never tell you what medication he was taking, or why, or if he had taken them, or how much he was supposed to take. He also could not tell you what was wrong with him as far as what the doctors had told him. He could not live alone because he wouldn't remember to turn off the stove and things of that nature.

After spring break, when we started a new quarter, I noticed immediately upon Yusef's return that something was wrong. He was a completely different person. His eyes and the way he looked at me were not his anymore. He started getting angry at me in class and started expressing irrational thoughts of paranoia. He thought the police were following him and that he was being broadcast on television for everyone to see. We again used an interpreter to go to medical visits, monitor his medications, and scheduled an appointment for him at a mental health facility. He never kept that

appointment. He started coming to school for thirty minutes a day, in the morning. Sometimes he'd start laughing for no reason in class, other times he'd be looking at things that had no relevance to what we were doing. After about thirty minutes, he'd just get up and leave, sometimes with a smile and a handshake, other times sad and with no handshake. Every once in a while he'd stay for maybe an hour. I never knew why. One day he just quit coming. We tried to contact him, tried to find him, but no one knew where he was. Finally someone found him at the downtown library. He now spends his days roaming the streets of Spokane and sleeping at someone's house at night. After eight quarters with him, we finally lost him. To this day, no one knows where he is.

Zara

Zara is a 22-year-old single mother from Afghanistan and not typical of the pre-literate students in our program. Although Zara never went to school in her country and doesn't know how to read or write her own language, she learns at a surprisingly fast rate. While typically our students are in the Level 1a class anywhere from three to six quarters, Zara only needed to stay for two. When she came to this country, she didn't know one word of English, not even "yes" or "no", and after only two quarters in the class she learned to read and passed into the next level, a rarity among students like her. In three consecutive quarters she went directly from a Level 1 class into Level 2, and directly after that into Level 3. Not only did she learn everything I taught her, but also seemed to use it verbally with ease. She studied diligently at home and passed all of her tests every quarter. Zara was always very positive and happy and had a great sense of humor. She could laugh at her mistakes and actually have fun with the language, something that's not so obvious in many of the students like her.

When she first came she was quite timid, but after only a short time she became very social and was always trying to interact with the other students, which consequently helped her in her learning. One of the things that makes her so positive and seemingly happy is the depth of gratitude she has to be living here and getting the opportunity to go to school. One day while I was at Zara's apartment helping her work out some problems, she talked to me about her life. Zara's story is quite similar to many women from countries like hers. At the age of fifteen, she was sent off to be a wife to a thirty-eight-year-old man. Although she protested as best she could, her parents forced her to go anyway. Her son was born when she was sixteen. During her marriage she suffered severe physical abuse by her husband. Because of the conditions in Afghanistan, Zara, along with her husband and son, fled to Iran, and then to Turkey. In Afghanistan, divorce wasn't allowed, but in Turkey it was. After Zara made sure she had all her documents in order, she divorced her husband. Her husband then threatened to kill her, so the police in Turkey relocated her to a women's shelter in another region. After spending two years in the shelter, Zara got a job and moved out. Shortly after moving into her apartment, her son opened the front door to someone who knocked on it, and a masked man burst through and attacked Zara cutting her with knives. Her son ran to a neighbor who proceeded to chase the man away. Zara has told me that she is now afraid of all men.

In telling me her stories, she has told me that that was her life, but that now she has a new one. Now she can start over and feel safe and have opportunities she never would have had. She told me that females in Afghanistan aren't allowed to go to school and that here, that's all she wants to do. She is so grateful for that opportunity, and it's a depth of gratitude that radiates from her to an extent I do not see in many people. Zara

was put to work doing laundry in a busy hotel. She worked forty hours a week and had her son in two different daycares to do so. She wants to go to school at night, but does not have childcare for that. She has expressed to me repeatedly her desperation to go, and I just don't know what's going to happen to her. I told her I wanted to see her go to college and perhaps a university. Zara is young and beautiful and so incredibly bright and determined and motivated. She has everything going for her right now and I would hate to see her not be able to continue her education. But unfortunately, it's a sad story we see with many of these students. They are put to work in hotels or factories, and that becomes the end of their education, which has adverse effects on their future. While teaching a student as incredibly sharp as Zara, she is not representative of the norm. And it would be naïve of teachers to go into teaching pre-literate students thinking so.

Lingering Students

Because so many of these students have been in the same quarter for such a long time, the IEL is now forced to address the issue. In order for the Community Colleges of Spokane (CCS) to receive money from the State, each student enrolled must show significant gains after one quarter. If a student doesn't show gains after one quarter, CCS does not receive funds for that student for that quarter. Three quarters of not receiving funds per student is, according to CCS, too long, so CCS now has a state-mandated policy that if students have been in the same class for three quarters and haven't made any "significant gains", they are no longer allowed to attend school. These students were deemed "lingering students." However, since the ESL students don't fit the description of a traditional student, and because their classes are not credit classes, we were able to get around that for a long time. But last year we started getting more pressure from the

state. We didn't want to just dump these students out onto the street, so we started thinking of ways we could help them that would work for the state. Since we have to revamp our program quite a bit depending on our dynamics, we are used having to make changes. The solution to our dilemma was to open a Life Skills class. This class would take away the more academic aspects of a community college facility and focus more on life skills. The class was designed for all lingering students, regardless of level, and as it was a pilot class, it would only be offered for one school year: three quarters. This pilot was taught by Molly Popchock, who has been teaching at the AEC for many years. The students were not to be given the in-house test, however, at the end of the year it was decided to test them to see if they could possibly show any level gains in order for us to keep some of these students in our program. Only two students made significant enough gains after that year. The rest of the class, all 22 students, were let go and are no longer allowed in our program. There was more discussion about opening another life skills class for the students who have since qualified as lingering students. But it never happened.

Testing

During the quarter, each student is required to take the Federally-mandated Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) two times. Shortly after the quarter starts, each student is given the test, which consists of a reading test and a separate listening test. They are given these tests on two consecutive days. These two tests together make up the "pre-test". Toward the end of the quarter, the students are again given both tests. These later tests make up the "post-test". The scores from the pre-test determine which post-test the students will take. For example, the CASAS

Reading Form 81 and 82 are pretty much the same, only things are ordered differently. The 81x and the 82x are the next level up from the 81 and 82, respectively, and those two are pretty much the same. If students don't score above a certain score on the 81 as a pre-test, they are given the 82 for the post-test. The reason for this is that they are not allowed to take the same test in succession. If they don't score high enough on the 82, they will take the 81 the next time they test. Thus, they can fluctuate between the 81 and 82 for a very long time. If they take the 81 and do get a high enough score, the next test they would be given would be the 81x, as it's the next test up in level of difficulty from the 81 and 82. If they don't score high enough on the 81x, the next test they are given is the 82x. Because we can't administer the same test in succession, and because the students typically don't get a high enough score to advance to the next test, students can fluctuate between the same two tests for a very long time.

The AEC receives an allotted amount of money from the federal government each year. This is called a base payment. Each year the AEC sets a goal of the number of students who will show gains in four areas. These four areas consist of the CASAS reading, CASAS listening, our in-house reading/writing exit exam, and our oral exit exam. If we reach our goal, which is now set at 60 students per year, we receive additional federal money, called the performance outcome payment. Kind of like a bonus. If we don't meet our goal, our allotment for the next year will be reduced by five percent.

Now, part of the problem with giving this test to pre-literate students is that **THEY CAN'T DO IT**. And it really upsets me that we have to put them through such agony. They don't like to take it, they get frustrated, they get sad or upset because they

have to sit through forty minutes or so not knowing what's going on, not understanding anything, but knowing that they're supposed to be doing something. They don't know what they're supposed to do and usually end up not doing it correctly.

The CASAS reading test consists of pictures with questions about the pictures underneath. There are multiple choice answers for each question. First of all, they don't understand what they're looking at. Secondly, they don't have any academic background knowledge to know they're supposed to choose A, B, C, or D. Third, as stated before, they tend to stop after the first one, so you're constantly going around from one student to the other to keep them on track. They can't work independently just yet, and if they can, there are still plenty of other issues the test causes them. Because the reading test is in booklet form, they'll miss pages, so you have to watch and check that each individual student isn't missing or hasn't missed anything. Sometimes instead of circling A or B, they'll circle the number, or they'll circle all A, B, C, and D. Or they'll circle the picture instead. Or the number AND the picture. There are multiple ways in which they will circle things. It's just an all-around really difficult test to administer. And every time and every quarter it's the same way. Now, I have to interject here that we've tried to communicate this issue with the CASAS people. It used to be that the students had to use bubble sheets, which seriously was impossible. We finally were allowed to have that changed so that we could use the booklets themselves as consumables. To get that accomplished took years.

The listening test is set up basically the same way except that they listen to something, look at a picture, and then circle some kind of corresponding multiple choice answer. The test repeats the question twice, then moves on to the next one. Typically,

what happens is that because the students don't know what's going on and can't understand anything, they're still staring at number one trying to figure it out while the DVD for the test is on number 4. There's no way they can catch up. Not only that, compounded with all the same issues that happen with the reading test, they don't know their numbers yet. So when the speaker on the DVD says "number 7", it means nothing to them, and they never know where they are. After years of this as well, we finally got it so that we were allowed to stop the tape after each one to make sure everyone was where they needed to be and had circled something. Then we'd start the tape again for the next number. This process turned an approximately thirty-five minute test into an hour-long test. As a low-level teacher I had to deal with this a lot. I was used to it. So it was kind of funny to me when one of the other teachers, who had to teach that class for a quarter, came to me after giving one of the CASAS test aghast at what a nightmare it was and shocked that it should even be required. And to listen to that teacher voicing her frustrations and telling me all the things that the students did and how impossible it was for them, all I could do was look at her and say, "Um, yea, I know. That's what I've been trying to tell everybody." After years of having to give this test to these students I had had it. Together with some other teachers, we tried to get the CASAS people to listen to us and do something about it. We were told, if you can believe this, that the pre-literate students only needed to be in Level 1 for one quarter to show significant gains. This was shocking, to say the least, so we decided to invite the CASAS people to our school to observe how this testing process went. They, of course, declined to do so.

Throughout my years of working with pre-literate refugee students, and through research, community resources, trial and error, and colleague discussions and sharing of

experiences, methods, and techniques, I've compiled a list of basic recommendations for future teachers. Things that are recommended and things that aren't.

Recommendations

- Always repeat and review everything you do and recycle all of the vocabulary and minimal grammar into every unit throughout the entire quarter. Trust me, they will forget. And just when you're convinced they have it, they'll prove you wrong.
- Pictures, pictures, pictures. You can never have too many pictures. At the beginning, pictures are pretty much all you have to convey anything. Pictures make clear the concrete vocabulary they are learning, and you have to start with the concrete before the abstract.
- Body language. I'm sorry, but you just have to act things out. There's no way around it.
- Do expect some level of frustration on both sides.
- Expect obstacles such as hearing/visual impairments, mental health issues, ADD, PTSD, effects of certain medications.
- Monitor constantly. Constant monitoring is absolutely essential, not only with their paperwork but also with their facial expressions and body language.
- Give appropriate wait time. Some students take longer to think about things and some take longer to answer. It's important to have an appropriate wait time as too little time makes them feel rushed and doesn't give them a chance to answer, and too much just causes frustration.

- Use color-coded paper. It's very important. These students can't tell one white piece of paper from the other. When you color-code important things, you can hold up a blue piece of paper and say, "Take out your BLUE paper," which is very easy for them. And after a while you don't have to show them. You can just say, "It's on your blue paper." Color-coding important things will save your life.
- Be patient. I hate to use the cliché "patience is a virtue," but in this line of work, with these particular students, it is so true.
- Use as many authentic materials as possible: real fruit or food containers, money, or clothing sale ads from newspapers, to name a few. This aids in student learning when they can connect what they are learning with their everyday lives.
- Use a variety of learning activities, and use different techniques that will appeal to different learning styles. Doing nothing but the same types of activities over and over gets really boring for the students. They will lose interest. And with all the different personalities and learning types in your class, catering to one type of learning style will only do a disservice to your students.
- Incorporate interactive activities. This will help build a sense of community in your classroom, which holds great weight in their learning, and it's usually the only time your students will have the opportunity to use and practice their English.
- Take advantage of using everything as a learning tool. When I put students into groups, for example, I have the students count how many students there are. Or when we use our picture cards (each set is a different color), I ask the students which color set they would like.

- Be consistent with your materials. For example, keeping the same font. It's best when starting out to use Comic Sans, as the lowercase "a" and "g" look as we typically write them. To pre-literate students, "a" and "a" are two completely different letters, as are "g" and "g". Or, if your calendar is always on green paper, keep it on green paper. Believe me, switching colors can cause some serious confusion.

Things that are not recommended:

- Don't assume they know things we think they should know.
- Don't attempt to write on the board while talking and have them copy what you're writing all at once. Multi-tasking in an academic setting really isn't possible for them. They actually cannot do it. And it's torture.
- Don't assume all blank stares on every student mean the same thing. Learn to read your students. One's blank stare may mean "I'm trying to figure out what you mean." Another's may mean "I understand the question. I'm just thinking about how to answer." And another student's might mean "I have no clue what's going on."
- Don't assume they're going to come to school prepared. Most of our refugees do not come to school with paper, pencils, notebooks, and binders. We give them these supplies, but don't assume they know how to use them. Usually we have to show them which way the paper is supposed to go and how to punch holes in their papers and put them in binders, not upside down. They don't know the pockets inside the binders go on the bottom and are used to hold other papers.

- I'll state the obvious: don't talk fast or use a lot of words. Keep it slow and simple, but not so slow that you're talking to them as if they are not intelligent beings. It's always surprising to me how many people I see who, when speaking with students who don't speak English, use a high vocabulary or try to explain simple words with ten bigger words. That's just not going to work.
- Don't expect them to study at home. Of course, since there will be varying levels of abilities in your class, there will always be some students who will. But most of them can't, so just don't expect them to and don't demand they do. That doesn't help. Not having had a formal education, these students don't make a connection to study time and learning. Also, when they can't read, there's not a lot they can do at home. That's not to say that you can never give homework, because I occasionally do. But if you do, just make sure it's ability appropriate and be prepared for your students to come to school not having done it.
- Don't be caught off guard by the sporadic attendance. It is what it is and there's nothing you can do about it.

Graduation Statistics

At the AEC, we serve roughly 1,200 ESL students per year. In the past years, 70% of those have been refugees. This past year, of the 50 ESL students who graduated from our program, 17 of those were refugees. Last year we had 29 refugees graduate. All of the refugees who have graduated had had prior education in their countries. To date, we have never had a pre-literate refugee student graduate since 2008 with the large influx of refugees into the program. I hope that in the future we can devise ways to help make this this more of a possibility.

Chapter 4

Summary and Conclusion

Working with pre-literate refugees can be quite a challenging job at times. The slow pace, lack of retention, and constant repetition can tax even the most dedicated teachers. Having a genuine empathy, maintaining understanding and patience in everything you do, and working to create a sense of community will go a long way. It will not only make things easier on you as a teacher, but also help the students feel safe and comfortable in your classroom, which makes for less stressful learning. On the other hand, despite the challenges and frustrations, it can be one of the most rewarding jobs a teacher can have. Refugee students are some of the most appreciative and grateful students there are. And being a part of all they achieve and all the milestones they overcome is genuinely a rewarding experience.

In looking at all the obstacles both refugee students and their teachers face, it is important to acknowledge what our refugee students bring with them to the classroom. One thing is a great attitude. Most refugees are incredibly thankful to have the opportunity not only to be in this country but also to go to school and get an education. Because of that, they are grateful and highly respectful to their teachers. They will give you one hundred percent, always, despite the difficulty. They are very hard workers. Other than their thankfulness and dedication they bring their occupations into the classroom. Most of our refugees were farmers, seamstresses, or carpenters. They have an established background knowledge in these areas, and so when studying certain units such as housing, clothing, shopping, and food, they have something easy to relate to, thus

making a more solid connection between their life and their learning. Any learning that they can connect to something they're familiar with seems to progress a little faster, not to mention creating a higher interest level for them.

Remember the recommendations for working with pre-literate students. While some of them may seem common sense, it's surprising how many of them are overlooked by inexperienced teachers. Many try to teach refugee students in the same way they would teach students who had had a higher level of education in their countries. This will make for a miserable situation and do a huge disservice to the students. However, in keeping teaching simplicity, be careful not to overlook the fact that these students are adults with life experiences, trades, skills, and knowledge, all of which they bring with them into the classroom. Do not confuse the lack of literacy with lack of intelligence. Treat them with the kindness and respect they deserve, and in turn, they will reward you by being the wonderful people they are.

Though I always reflect on myself as a teacher and question whether or not what I do is the best way to do things, writing this thesis has made me more reflective and more questioning on a deeper level. I question now more why students do the things they do instead of simply being perplexed by what is difficult for them. I question that now more than simply questioning what I do. If there were more research in this area, I would be better able to understand my students and perhaps the cultural influences behind their thought processes. If there were more information at that level, I would be better equipped to help them learn. We as teachers need to understand the reasons and influences behind their cognitive processes in order to better serve our students. Currently, Adult Basic Education and ESL literature does not address practical solutions

to the challenges literacy specialists face. There is a need for more in-depth analysis of refugees' lived experiences, values, motivations, and world views. There is a need for research that delves into the cultural aspects that affect students' learning in a Western educational system.

Ana

So whatever happened to Ana? Sadly, as is typical with a lot of refugee students, Ana got stuck in Level 3. She remained in Level 3 for two years, and during that time her health conditions worsened, and the lack of advancement became too much for her. She would have been removed from the program as a lingering student, but before that rule came into place, she decided on her own to quit coming to school.

Because there are so many students like Ana, I would recommend that future researchers might do single case studies of students like her, from their arrival through their first years to investigate

1. their journeys,
2. their language acquisition,
3. their struggles and successes,
4. their decisions to leave school, and
5. what happens to them and their families after the head of household drops out of school.

Zara

Zara, on the other hand, being so determined and so highly motivated, quit her job at the hotel in order to continue her education. She found another job that

allowed her to work around her school schedule. She is happy, thriving, and successful, and I have a strong feeling that she will be the first pre-literate refugee student to graduate from our program.



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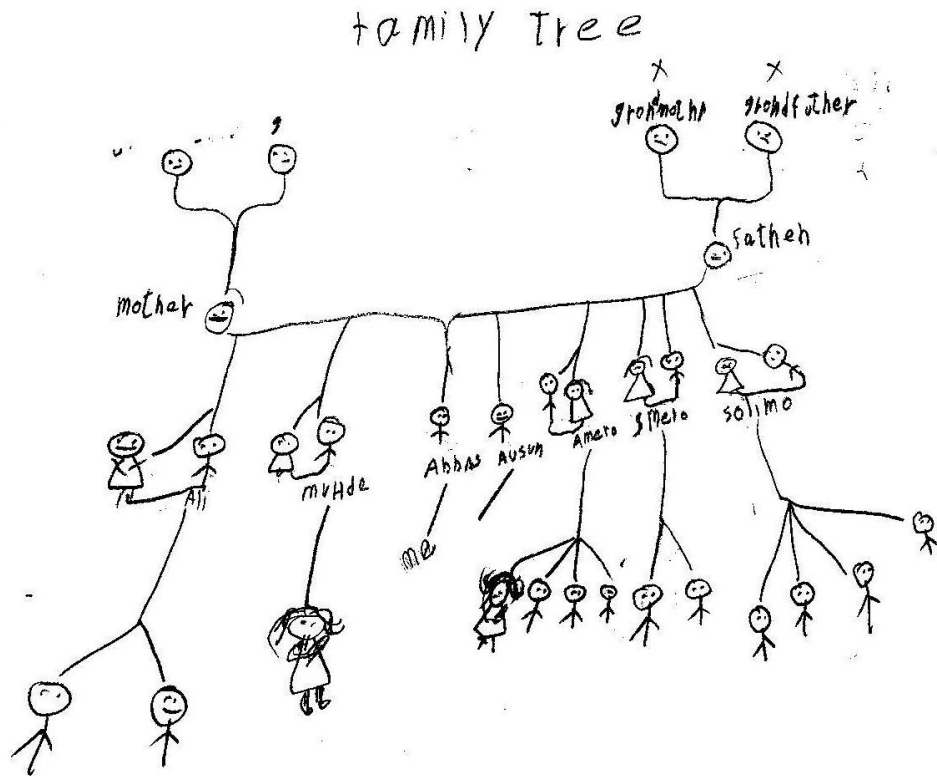
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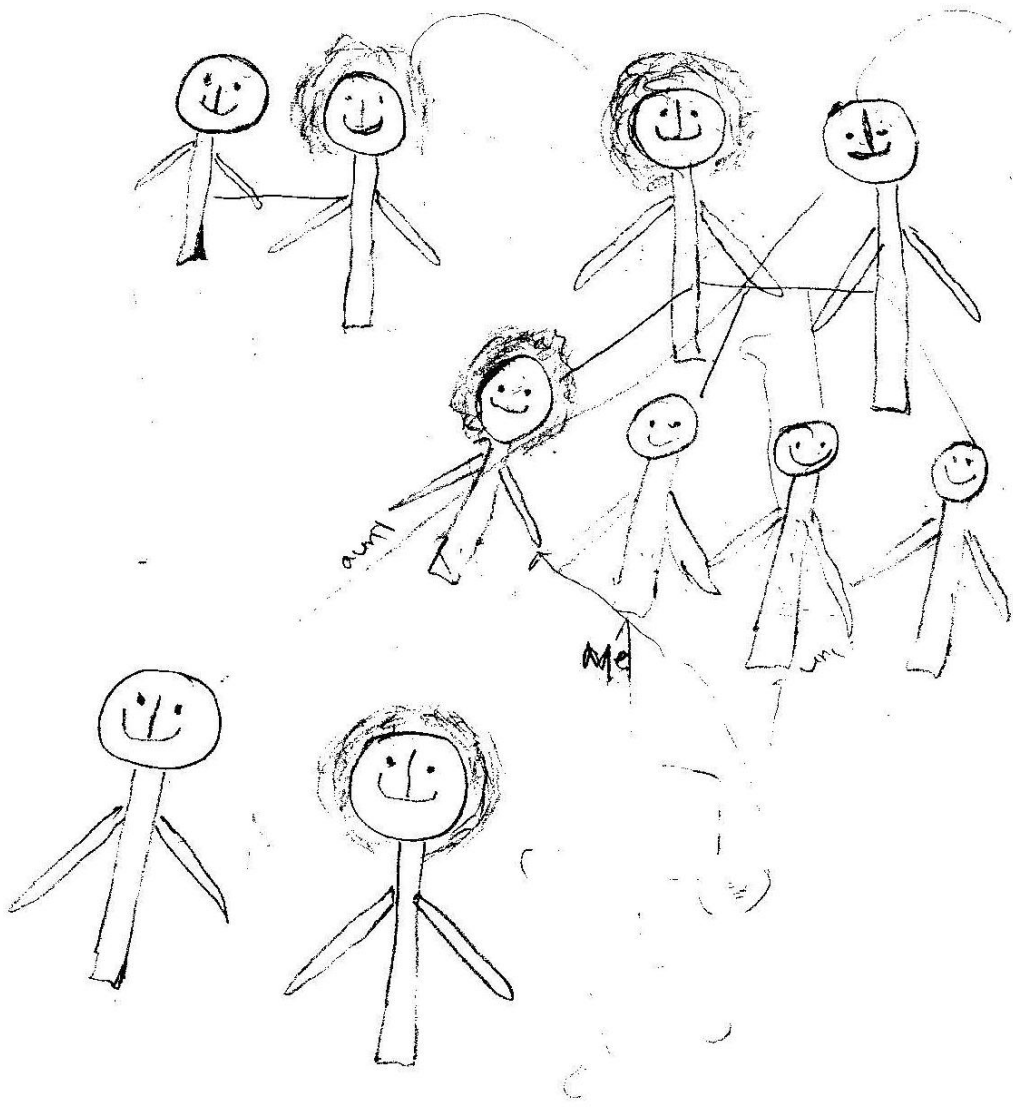
Appendix A

Writing Samples

Students' family trees:



Family Tree Faysal



Test practice questions:

A. Answer the questions.

ences

1. What is your name? is

2. Where are you from? Sudan

3. Are you married? on

4. Do you have children? yes

5. How many children do you have? 4

Section IV - Writing

A. Answer the questions.

USE COMPLETE SENTENCES

1. How are you? _____

2. Are you married? yes

3. Do you have a job? no

4. What do you like to eat? I like

5. What day is today? is trsdy

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Section IV - Writing

A. Answer the questions.

Write Complete Sentences

1. What is your name? 811 W Spofford Ave W

2. Where are you from? where you from? im Bhutan

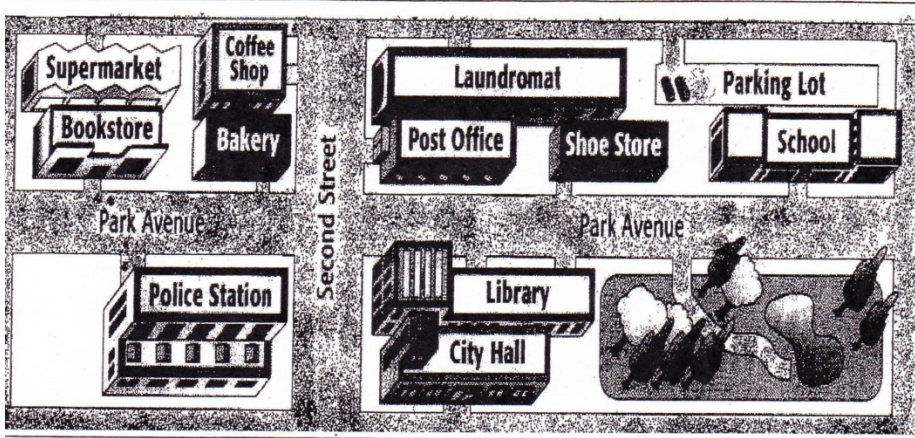
3. Are you married? I am married ENGLISH

4. Do you have children? Do you have children

5. How many children do you have? she speaks Nepali

Section II – Reading

A. Read the map above. Fill in the blanks with these prepositions:



across from between next to on on the corner of in behind

Example: The library is behind City Hall.

1. The city park is next to the library.
2. There are trees across from the park. 1
3. The Post Office is on the corner of the library.
4. The library is on the corner of Park Avenue.
5. The Shoe Store is isn't the school and the Post Office.
6. The bakery is across from Park Avenue and Second Street.

Writing answers to oral questions:

1- they is Freag beg
2- NO
3- 1
4- Tam gio
5- they is gusedy
6- NO
7-
8- NO icy
9- amy husef
10- 1

two day is there is day 25

yes it is
7000 hardly dollar

I am good.

the wind day
No, it isn't. It's big.

May brother

No, I don't.
May TV in a permit
three bed room

Vitae

Education:

Spokane Falls Community College, Spokane, WA.

1991 A.A.S. Degree, Hearing Impaired Services.

Washington State University, Pullman, WA

1998 B.A. Foreign Language and Literature: Russian Major

Eastern Washington University, Cheney, WA

2013 M.A. English: TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language)

Employment experience:

1999-Present—ESL instructor

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