

A 'sanctuary' for immigrants

ESOL teacher hopes to create safe place for immigrants at Wando

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He sat down in the barber's chair without much concern, and his thoughts drifted as he waited to receive a haircut.

It was his first American haircut.

He didn't pay much attention when the barber picked up hair clippers. He didn't notice when the barber pulled back a bunch of his curly gold-blond hair.

He didn't notice until it was too late.

His eyes locked on the mirror. He was horrified -- a new bald strip stretched from his forehead across his scalp.

It didn't take him long to figure out what had happened. In Martinique, France, where he had lived most of his life, the French word for "buzz cut" was just another term for "haircut." So he went into the American barbershop and requested a buzz cut, expecting to receive a trim like in France.

He had, quite literally, asked for this.

The boy's story is just one of many that English as a Second Language teacher [ESOL] Anjie Curry has heard from her students. Moving to America and adjusting to its language and culture is not an easy thing.

But what exactly does ESOL do? It doesn't directly teach students English, as one might assume.

"They're learning English from being around their peers," Curry said.

Nor is it an opportunity for students to speak or learn in their own language.

"That's a big misconception, that we're all in here, and I'm speaking Spanish or I'm translating," Curry said. "But we have the immersion method -- so when you come in, we just all speak English."

So, what is ESOL exactly?

There is no simple answer to the question. One role of the class is to help students as they need it, although depending on the student, that can mean a variety of things.

"I have students who come in and they just know 'hello and goodbye,' and for those students we start out with survival English, like 'where's the bathroom, where's the cafeteria, yes, no' and we just build upon that," Curry said.

For students who moved recently to America, her ESOL classroom is a place where they can learn more English -- and because all of its students struggle with the language to some degree, it also offers them a low-pressure environment where they are free from the expectation that they should be able to communicate with the same ease that American-born students possess inherently. This makes ESOL a nice break for students from their other classes.

Curry also teaches students who know significantly more English, but who still may struggle in their classes because of the language barrier. And in some ways, this can be even more frustrating than knowing only the basics of the language. This is because "social English" -- the sort of language needed to have a casual conversation with one's peers -- can usually be learned in two or three years.

What's wrong with this, though?

The problem is that "academic English," the type of language which you might see in a history textbook, takes significantly longer to master -- around five to seven years.

"So that's what's very difficult for my students, because a lot of times the teachers will say, 'they speak fine English, socially.' But they don't understand that book English -- with academic words -- are a lot harder," Curry said.

Because of this, Curry often finds herself the go-between for her students and their other teachers.

This isn't the only way Curry helps her students to navigate the school environment. Her class helps them to adjust to things which most American students take for granted, like vending machines and daylight savings time.

In many ways, ESOL is not an English class, but a crash course on American culture.

Each of Curry's students is relatively new to the United States, so they are alike in that they all need the class. However, this is virtually all they have in common with each other.

"So I have this boy, he speaks Spanish, this boy speaks Swahili, they speak Chinese, she speaks Arabic, she speaks Portuguese," Curry said as she pointed to various seats around her classroom.

How can such a varied collection of students function as a class?

"We really don't have a communication problem," Curry said. "Amazing as it sounds, I mean, through gestures and talking... We just do it."

While this in and of itself is an accomplishment, it is not the most remarkable thing about Curry's class.

"Some of the girls went trick-or-treating together," Curry said. "They go to movies. I had two students three or four years ago; I think they're engaged now. One's from Vietnam, the other one's from Italy."

Despite linguistic difficulties, many of her students have formed connections which extend far beyond the classroom.

"We're like a small family, we take care of each other," Curry said.

So maybe Wando's ESOL class is more than a cultural lesson, too. It is a support group and a sanctuary in an unfamiliar school in an unfamiliar country. It is where students are seen for not only their differences, but their similarities as well.

It is a place for them to be understood.



ESOL teacher Anjie Curry helps one of her students in class on Nov. 27. photo // Hana Donnelly

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