

English Tutors: Level 100/200

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Background

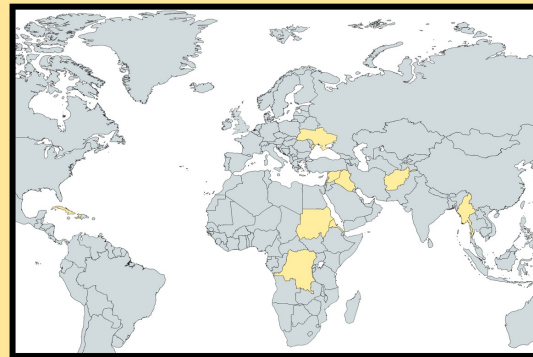
Refugee Definition: Under U.S. law, a “refugee” is a person who is unable or unwilling to return to his or her home country because of a “well-founded fear of persecution” due to race, membership in a particular social group, political opinion, religion, or national origin.

The Refugees we worked with came from a variety of backgrounds. The majority came from Africa which is statistically where most refugees in the United States come from. According to Pew Research, “Refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo far outnumbered those from other countries in fiscal 2019. D.R. Congo accounted for nearly 13,000 refugees, followed by Burma (Myanmar) with about 4,900, then Ukraine (4,500), Eritrea (1,800) and Afghanistan (1,200)” (Krogstad, 2020). The people we worked with reflected these numbers on a small scale. While it wasn’t appropriate to ask the personal stories of the students (and they wouldn’t have been able to communicate them), since they were all classified as refugees they fled from extreme circumstances. Many had never been to school or even learned how to read in their home languages. Likewise, many refugees have a difficult time assimilating to the language, technology, and culture in America. Karen Smith, one of the instructors for Catholic Charities said, “One of our past refugees from Cuba was a doctor who was loaned to Venezuela for many years. Eventually, she and her husband managed to make it to Mexico and then here. Now they both work cleaning houses. They were willing to trade a menial job for their freedom. Some of the husbands of our ladies worked with US forces so they were forced to flee for their lives and can’t go back to see family because they worked with Americans. All of them have come with hope for a safer life.”

Krogstad, J. (2020, August 20). Key facts about refugees to the U.S. Retrieved November 03, 2020, from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/10/07/key-facts-about-refugees-to-the-u-s/>

Service Activity

Over zoom, we assisted Ms. Karen, our instructor, in teaching refugees English. This class was a lower-level class, the students only knew little to no English. So, we helped to teach basic concepts like clothing, or if something is full or empty. As Ms. Karen explained the concepts, we held up examples to illustrate what they were. For example, if the student was learning “shirt, pants, coat, etc.” We would hold those items up to help visualize those words. Overall, we helped these refugees become more accustomed to their American life. We provided a safe space and a low-risk environment for them to speak English and practice the language. When a refugee speaks English to a stranger for the first time, they are unsure how the stranger is going to react. But through these classes, we provide a secure space for them to freely do so. Since these sessions are done virtually, it also provides the refugees with computer skills and helps them talk over the phone, which can help them in their futures.



Refugees from:

- Eritrea
- Syria
- Afghanistan
- Haiti
- Cuba
- Myanmar
- Congo
- Sudan
- Iraq
- Ukraine

Connection

- Seeing real people who likely had similar experiences to those from Outcast United.
- We came up with ways to teach new words to groups of people who don’t have any common starting language such as using gestures or bringing physical items such as different articles of clothing. (Invented Tradition).
- How they call us “Teacher” shows different levels of respect (cultural legacy).
- As Dr. Kaplan explained in her lecture on Refugees, how difficult the refugee’s situations can be, once arrived in America. (ie. expected to learn English and be self-sufficient in 3 months)
- Learning English takes a lot of practice and requires dedication and studying to become more fluent. Already being adults, most refugees have missed the opportunity to become fluent in English earlier than their children they bring to America. (Outliers, 10,000-hour rule)

Impact

The difference we made in our service project was unique, we were faced with the challenge of communicating virtually to students who had only a primary understanding of English. Nevertheless, we were able to make an impact on the lives of these refugees. Our group of three reached 9 individual students over the course of 9 weeks. We clocked over 24hrs of volunteer time between the three of us. The students in the program come from many different countries, including Eritrea, Syria, Afghanistan, Haiti, Cuba, Myanmar, Congo, Sudan, Iraq, Ukraine.



23 hrs of
volunteering



9 unique
students



10 possible
countries of
origin

Reward

(Samm): Becoming a future educator, it allowed me to gain practice and experience in the educational field. Teaching refugees English provided me with the knowledge and understanding that some of my future students may also be in a similar situation as them and gave me that experience to become a better educator for students of other languages. Ms. Karen also mentioned that I was welcome back to help teach again, and that gave me more possible experience in my teaching career. It also illustrated how difficult a refugee situation can be, while trying to become accustomed to America, they also need to learn English. Some students have children, and work, and not always have the time to learn English. I could hear people talking, and babies crying in the background of some students’ screen. Hearing that really helped me visualize some of the difficulties and distractions refugees can face when trying to become more familiar with their American lifestyle.

(Eleanor): The thing I found the most rewarding when working with the refugees was seeing the progression in their abilities to communicate. When I first interacted with them they could hardly introduce themselves. At this point in the semester, they are able to give the basic introductory pleasantries and name articles of clothing and colors. Seeing the excitement on their faces when they finally know the answer to a question is extremely rewarding. I am very grateful for the small help I could be to these people and I felt regretful that I couldn’t communicate with them enough to really get to know them as individuals.

(Erin): Truthfully, what stood out to me was the kindness and joy of the students I worked with. Never in my life have I seen strangers so excited to see me, a total stranger. The students I directly worked with were constant fountains of joy. I remember our last day of class together, Ms. Karen explained that I had been in school for 14 years and now I am going to college. One of the students started to talk about how in her country, women cannot go to school. I found out that her brother was a doctor, while she had no education herself, simply because she was a woman. I suddenly felt the weight of the privilege I’ve had to receive this education, something I will never take for granted ever again.