English as a Precious Language

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Body

Riverside Church was packed with immigrants hoping their number was up. Hairdressers, plumbers and mathematicians from Russia, Haiti and the Dominican Republic, they formed lines that snaked through a cavernous assembly hall, 500 people desperate for the luck of the draw.

A lottery had drawn them to this spot beneath stained-glass windows, but it was no ordinary cash-prize game. This was a lottery to win one of 50 coveted spaces in the free intensive ***English*** classes offered at the Manhattan church.

In the years before the lottery, spaces were awarded on a first-come, first-served basis, and the night before registration, immigrants would sneak into the church and sleep there, in line. Their passion to learn was that intense, and the opportunities to do so that rare.

At Wednesday's lottery, Bilga Abramova, a 35-year-old Russian refugee, tugged at the sleeve of a program administrator. "Please, madam, please help -- is not my first time at lottery, is my third time."

'I Need to Win'

Ms. Abramova switched into Russian: "I need to win, I need it badly. My future is on hold. Without ***English***, I cannot begin a new life. I do not want to depend on welfare. That is shameful."

Contrary to some native-born Americans' belief that immigrants no longer make a genuine effort to learn ***English***, the demand for ***English*** lessons in New York City -- as in immigrant havens across the country -- far outpaces the supply. Very few immigrants who arrive with no knowledge of ***English*** can afford private tuition, and in New York City, immigrants must wait four months to three years, depending on the program, to get into free classes. For newcomers eager to move into American jobs and society, the wait can be unnerving.

Free ***English*** classes -- financed with Federal, state and local funds and offered by the Board of Education, the City University of New York, public libraries and community groups -- fill to capacity with about 30,000 students a year. But about 1.36 million New Yorkers may need them, a conservative estimate of city residents with limited proficiency in ***English***, according to the 1990 Census. Most classes are open to all immigrants, regardless of their legal status.

"There's not a single ***English***-***language*** program in the city that isn't inundated, and waiting lists go into years, not months," said Kay Sardo, assistant commissioner of the city's Community Development Agency.

In New York State, more immigrants languish on waiting lists for adult ***English*** classes than in any other state, according to a study by Beltway Associates, a Washington consulting firm. The study found about 17,000 New York immigrants on waiting lists in 1990, a conservative tally since the study dealt only with programs receiving Federal adult-education funds, and many programs, like Riverside, have abandoned waiting lists altogether.

To some experts, the shortage of ***English*** classes reflects a laissez-faire attitude by the Federal Government toward the needs of the 800,000 immigrants legally admitted each year. About half speak poor ***English*** or none at all, immigration experts say. But the United States Government, which has one of the most liberal admissions policies in the world, has traditionally left newcomers to fend for themselves -- or state and local governments to pay for their services.

"Unlike Canada, Israel and Australia, the United States has an immigration policy but no deliberate Federal immigrant policy, which is a mistake," said Michael Fix, an immigration expert for the Urban Institute in Washington. "We need to think of immigrants not just in terms of the costs and burdens they impose, but in terms of the investments that need to be made in them."

'People Do Want to Learn'

As anti-immigrant sentiment built with the influx of immigrants during the recession, much hostility focused on what some perceived to be the threat to ***English*** as the nation's common ***language***. But many experts say that immigrants' desire to retain their native tongue does not translate into an apathy about learning ***English***.

"I've never run into a single person who said, 'I don't need ***English***, I can just hide in my neighborhood and get along fine,' " said Heide Spruck Wrigley, who directs a research project on immigrant adults' ***English*** study for the Southport Institute for Policy Analysis, a nonpartisan group in Washington. "Instead, there is overwhelming evidence that people do want to learn ***English*** and either can't get into classes or have such complex lives that they can't fit in the time."

Juliana Loma, an accountant from Panama, applied to ***English*** classes in the Bronx when she arrived in this country. "It was the logical first step, and I didn't have anything else to do yet," she said in Spanish. Two years later, a place finally opened up for her in a community college class. By that time, however, she was working during the day at a garment factory, and at night and on weekends at a restaurant. The class was a luxury she could not afford, she said.

"It's frustrating," she said. "I'm stuck in menial work because I don't speak ***English***, and I don't speak ***English*** because I can't afford to quit my menial jobs to take a class."

The Federal Government spends about $300 million each year, through a variety of financing mechanisms, on ***English*** programs for immigrants -- "a spit in the ocean," Mr. Fix said. In New York City, the combined Federal, state and city financing for general ***English*** classes for immigrants, which is renegotiated every year, is about $20 million. Some additional Federal money supports programs for political refugees only.

Shortage of Clout

New immigrants, impotent politically, lack the clout to demand what they need.

"***English*** as a second ***language***, particularly for adults, is considered a marginalized field, a stepchild in all the various areas of funding and decision-making," Ms. Wrigley said. "And you're not likely to see a march on Washington by the students. They're just not in a position to make demands."

There is no typical immigrant student of ***English***. Most believe that learning ***English*** will help them find a decent job. But some are grandparents who feel alienated from their ***English***-speaking grandchildren, and some parents tired of the imbalance of power in their homes that results from relying on their children as interpreters. Still others want to learn ***English*** to negotiate with landlords, police officers or welfare officials, or to participate more fully in their new culture.

"Where I live, in Borough Park, nobody speak ***English***, only Hebrew, Yiddish, Russian," Iana Skylarevich, a Russian immigrant, said in halting ***English***. "I hear ***English*** only on TV, never in street. So I am not in America. Yet."

Aura Kevalier, a Dominican doctor, agreed. "I'm enjoying a mountain of things here, but without ***English***, I'm trapped outside all the opportunities I came for," she said in Spanish. "I'm not going to stay here if I have to stand on a street corner and sell flowers. No way."

To avoid pandemonium, there was no public drawing at the Riverside Church lottery. Instead, winners were chosen privately and informed by postcard.

Ms. Abramova, on her third try, did not get lucky. And because in September she will have been in the United State for a year, she will no longer be eligible for the program, which serves only immigrants in their first year. She will now have to search elsewhere for ***language*** instruction. And she will have to delay, for the moment, her aspirations of a new career.

"I am a barber," she said. "But I truly want to go into medicine."

Graphic

Photo: Riverside Church in Manhattan was packed on Wednesday with 500 immigrants, all of them hoping to win a special lottery for 50 coveted spaces in the free intensive ***English*** classes that are offered at the church. (Angel Franco/The New York Times) (ph. 29); The demand for ***English*** lessons in New York City, as in other immigrant havens across the country, far outpaces the supply. In New York, immigrants must wait from four months to three years, depending on the program, to get into free classes. Joseph Lihota taught a class on Wednesday at Riverside Church. (Angel Franco/The New York Times) (pg. 34)

Classification

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Company: RIVERSIDE CHURCH (MANHATTAN)

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