

IN ENGLISH, IT'S HOOEY

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Body

"WHEN MY grandparents came to America, they really wanted to learn English. Now immigrants don't care anymore."

Fact or fiction?

Nothing more than a big myth, actually. But the statement is repeated with such insistence that many people have come to believe it. Like any other prejudice, it is bred by ignorance.

"The demand for English classes is so overwhelming that we have had to go to a lottery system in our biggest branches," says Fred Gitner, who works with the Queens Public Library's New Americans Program. "For each student we take in, we have to turn another away."

The Queens Public Library, with 3,000 students per year, runs the largest English as a second language program of any library in the country. Classes are offered free in 25 of its branches.

"I invite anybody who thinks immigrants do not wish to learn English to come and watch the registration process," says Maria Fiol, ESL coordinator for the library.

Last year at one of the branches, Fiol says, people began to line up at 4 or 5 in the morning for the 10 o'clock registration. As time went by, the anxiety of not making it into the program erupted into some pushing and shoving.

"We had to cancel registration," Fiol remembers, "and call the police."

The variety of students is of the only-in-New-York kind. They come from 78 countries and speak 49 languages. With 43% claiming Spanish as their native tongue, Hispanics are the largest group.

In an intermediate English class at the Jackson Heights branch of the library, the 30 students come from Bangladesh, Egypt, Colombia, Peru, India, China, Korea, Russia and Moldova.

The class includes Galina Barzseva, a Russian widow in her 60s who emigrated two years ago.

"We want to read books, go to museums, movies, have American friends, we want to work. We need to learn," Barzseva says in halting English. Not bad considering she did not know "one word" when she arrived.

"I want a better job," says Ke Yu, 34, a soft-spoken Chinese woman who has been in New York eight months. She studied some English in China and did not waste any time enrolling in English classes here. "I need to learn English."

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"Get together with a partner who does not speak your language," instructs Bernice Katz, a native New Yorker who is the tough and effective teacher. "That way," she explains, "they have to speak English to each other."

The library is not the only place in Queens where classes are filled to capacity. ESL private schools have been a booming business for years. In the Queens yellow pages alone, there are 22 listed, some with three or four branches.

In addition, more than 40 community organizations teach English but cannot meet the tremendous demand. Something similar happens at the region's community colleges and universities for which English classes have become an important source of income.

When Katz is asked about immigrants not wanting to learn English, she simply points to Aurelio Bastidas, a severely handicapped Peruvian man being helped down the stairs to the basement where the group meets.

Bastidas, 58, had to quit his job as a delivery person for Sears five years ago, when he was left a paraplegic after an operation. Just coming to class is so difficult and laborious that one wonders why he does it.

"I want to work, I want to do anything to work," he says. "Now I can only work with papers and phones; I need better English. My body doesn't go, but I have to go."

Bastidas and the others in Katz' class, thousands of immigrants enrolled in English classes all over the city, and thousands more who would like to be but can't because of a lack of resources and work and family obligations, should be a reality powerful enough to dispel any myth.

IMMIGRANTS do not want to learn English: fact or fiction?

More like pure bunk.

Graphic

NEIL SCHNEIDER READ THIS: Teacher Bernice Katz, of the Jackson Heights branch of the public library, gives out books.

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