

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A PUBLIC SCHOOL ESL CLASS

By Michael George

December 2011 – New York City – If you’ve ever observed the moment an infant takes their first steps, then you understand how transformative that time can be. Learning a new language is likely to involve taking several baby steps. However the transformative moment comes when the person realizes that having mastered a new language, they’re capable of making personal strides that simply make their life easier to navigate. ParentJobNet’s English as Second Language (ESL) classes for Beginners and Intermediates at P.S 57 in East Harlem is all about taking baby steps. The participants, like a baby learning to walk, are discovering that learning English can help them to empower themselves. P.S. 57 Parent Coordinator, Lizbeth Rivera, has seen the results up close. On the day PJN visited for this story the crowded classroom with more than 20 students was a combination of the ESL class and a Job Readiness course. More in evidence however was the sense that people, from a variety of races, backgrounds and cultures were eager to help one another master the mysteries of resumes, cover letters and using the computer.

“I felt the community at large wanted a job readiness class,” explained Rivera, who started the ESL classes three years ago. “The classes overall are more structured this year and a lot more diverse. We felt this is a great opportunity to help people succeed in the future. We see a lot of parents and we offer as much one on one as we can.”

The class was mostly female; however Rivera understands the pulse of the community. “We’ve had more males,” said Rivera. “Some come to class and move on because they find a job. The goal is to use the English language as a reference mechanism. To help order food, fill out applications and forms or make doctor’s appointments, practical things. Some people are scared to use the skills, but we tell them it’s okay to use what you’ve learned. It’s okay to talk to your children to practice or listen to the radio or watch television. Do whatever it takes to practice and get comfortable. We think it’s working out.”

According to Manhattan’s Rob De La Cruz, one of the original members of the class, Rivera is correct. “I like it a lot,” said De La Cruz. “It helps me at work and with the people in the community. Before I knew nothing in the English language, now it helps going to the doctor or dentist. I told people about the class. If I didn’t like it I wouldn’t come.”

Ruma Bokth, a homemaker from Bangladesh, has been in the ESL for two years. Bokth says her time in class has helped her adjust in the six years she’s been here. “It’s been very good for me,” Bokth said. “It’s helping me learn how to speak, behave and follow rules. I’m looking for work, and this will help. I have good classmates. Everybody helps and share with each other.”

That is the essence of what this class is all about.

“It’s always a learning experience when people from other countries come together”, said Rivera “They all work well with Betty (Paysner) the instructor. She conducts the classes in English and it’s a wonderful program. And it’s for the community at large, not just a specific group. People are more motivated and we tell them it’s okay to be wrong. We have an I’m okay, you’re okay policy. We want people to read baby books or do whatever it takes to practice. I like to see when [the students] speak on their own, to see the students eager to answer.”

It’s that same joy that’s similar to watching a baby takes its first steps, a transformative moment no doubt.

The ESL class runs on Wednesdays and Thursdays through May 2012 from 9-11 am at P.S. 57, 117 E. 115th St. (between Lexington and 3rd Ave), New York City, N.Y. 10029. For more information contact Parent Coordinator: Lisbeth Rivera at 212-860-5812 ext. 2223 or register online at www.ParentJobNet.org/ESL-classes.aspx.