



A New Hope: Immigration Into America

Alexis Tisdale

Cormier Honors College Study Abroad Alternative
Longwood University



William & Mary
School of Education

Introduction

As part of the Cormier Honors Program, Longwood's Diversity goal is satisfied through a study abroad program. Due to my medical condition however, I was instead given the opportunity to work with Literacy For Life over the course of 5 weeks to understand America's immigration process through the eyes of immigrants themselves.

Literacy For Life is a non-profit organization associated with William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. While not directly under William & Mary, Literacy For Life fosters a close relationship with the college and help visiting scholars, exchange students, and local immigrants learn English, American culture & government, and daily customs to help facilitate their citizenship process and acclimation into American society.

Over the course of 5 weeks, I attended multiple classes and worked with immigrants and staff to get a further understanding of what challenges immigrants face when assimilating into society. In addition, I got to hear some of their immigration stories and reasoning for leaving their homeland to come to America.

Mary O'Brien: Staff

How long have you been teaching?

*11 years as a Spanish/ESL teacher
3 years with Literacy For Life*

What made you join Literacy For Life?

Her old boss referred her to Literacy For Life.

A struggle you see most with immigrants?

Dependency on children to translate & being able to speak English confidently.

Is Williamsburg an accurate picture of what it's like to immigrate to the U.S.?

It's a little different, Williamsburg has a larger immigration of scholars and students because of William & Mary. Newport News is more accurate.

Best thing about Literacy For Life?

Being trusted by supervisors to help the learners & helping in the collaboration of class curriculum.

Average time a learner is in Literacy For Life?

Most stay for multiple years & improvement shows with every class.

Is it harder to teach speaking or writing?

Depends on where the student is from originally, listening/reading first then speaking second.

English & Conversation

The most popular of their classes, Literacy For Life offers a multiple of English and Conversational classes designed to help immigrants unfamiliar with the English language, become comfortable in daily routines and interactions while in the United States. After taking a placement test, learners are recommended to be placed in one of three levels of English classes. The staff provide short, paper booklets with course activities divided into units, with vocabulary in every unit. One of the unique aspects about the structure of the Literacy For Life classes is the concise nature of the course materials. Most learners only had one booklet for the entire duration of the class, so it was very easy to maintain and work with. Each unit would average about 2 days worth of material, as half of the class duration was spent reiterating and discussing certain unit concepts that the class had trouble with.

In addition, Literacy For Life also offers a "Building Confidence Through Conversation" class where learners suggest class material to help them practice speaking the language. For the first class I sat in on, learners had suggested using Netflix to help them understand the concept of American comedy. The class watched scenes from "Frazier" as the teacher had them discuss what they thought certain phrases implied. They discuss concepts and phrases like "a bowl full of jelly" and unusual words like "bedewed." The class was almost entirely discussion based, which allowed learners to practice communicating with each other in English, despite language barriers. Since class material was often suggested, each class would be entirely different from one to the next, which made it more interesting and engaging for learners.

American Culture & Citizenship

The second largest section of classes offered by Literacy For Life primarily targets those immigrants who were preparing to take the U.S. Citizenship test, as well as those interested in learning more about American culture. These classes are structured as discuss-based classes with minimal input from the teacher. "Conversation: U.S. Culture" taught learners about the history of the American Government, the U.S. Constitution, American literature, & discussed American culture as it pertains to the current age. Classes usually had a single sheet of paper related to the day's lesson with vocabulary if needed. Immigrants would share stories on the differences between their homeland and America, why they chose to immigrate, and why they prefer the American legal system over their homeland's.

The second class offered, "News For You" is also a discussion-based class, but discusses current events through an English-as-a-second-language (ESL) friendly newspaper. The short newspaper, titled "News For You", is written in simplified English and provides a summary of America's most important and interesting news events as it pertains to immigrants. Certain words will also be broken down and spelled out phonetically to help aid in understanding. The class discussed their views on political events, recent disasters, and American policy.

Pronunciation

Pronunciation is an extra class offered to those immigrants who have difficulty with speaking the English language. The class goes through a syllable packet daily and practices pronouncing certain syllables and letters like "th", "r", and "ch." The class structure is the exact same for every session, so it gives learners the ability to consistently practice the technical aspect of English speaking.

Literacy For Life Learners

➤921 learners registered with Literacy For Life (2016-17)

➤12 U.S. citizenship statuses gained through Literacy For Life (2016-17)

➤333 volunteers with Literacy For Life (2016-17)

➤Homeland countries included: Kazakhstan, Russia, Thailand, China, Japan, Germany, Peru, Columbia, North & South Korea, Brazil

➤Age range from high-school to mid-80's

➤Immigration dates as far back as 1982 to as recent as a month

➤Primary learner demographic: late 20's to mid 50's Asian, often associated with the William & Mary scholar/exchange program

➤Nearly all immigrated for increased opportunities and "the American Dream", in addition to some escaping a harsher, totalitarian government

➤Vast majority have a positive outlook on the U.S. and its policies

Conclusion

Over my 5 weeks spent with Literacy For Life, I have earned a renewed appreciation for individuals taking the necessary legal steps to immigrate into America and become citizens. It was an amazing experience being able to talk to and work with some of the students, who come from a variety of homelands. While their reasoning for immigrating to America may differ, all of them shared one common ideology: the American Dream.

Getting to view America from an outsider's perspective makes me even further appreciate being born in such an opportunistic country.