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## Lingua Franca? Yes, It's English

By NINA BERNSTEIN

**"E**asy" was one of a dozen vocabulary words pasted on the board, and someone in the back of the Brooklyn classroom offered it in a sentence: "To learn English is easy."

Amid rueful laughter from 35 adults who knew better, the teacher asked Hussein Saleh, 34, to express the same idea, starting with "It is."

"It is learn English," Mr. Saleh stumbled, visibly wilted from a 12-hour shift in the laundromat where he has been working seven days a week for three years, ever since he arrived from Yemen.

A confusing murmur arose in the accents of Haiti, Guatemala, Russia, El Salvador and Panama, above the bass line of an air-conditioner with more clank than cool.

Manuel Chavarria, 39, whose schooling in El Salvador stopped at the sixth grade, took up his pencil with hands that had painted hallways and mopped floors all day. Elvia Villacis, 46, whose college degree from Ecuador had left her struggling as a house cleaner to support a teenage son in New York, stared at other words on the list - "terrible, impossible, important, necessary" - as though decoding a secret that could change both her life and America.

To learn English is not easy, but more immigrants than ever are trying. All over the city, literacy experts say, they crowd the free or low-cost English programs offered at public libraries, schools and community organizations like this one, the Church Avenue Merchants Block Association, better known as Camba.

"What can we do, turn them away?" asked Jude Pierre, manager of adult literacy programs at the association, which was started to improve the Flatbush business area 27 years ago but soon branched into an array of social services in a new version of the settlement house. "They're kicking our doors down, they want to come in. We have the space, but we can't hire the teachers - we just don't have the money."

Such programs are part of a network of adult literacy and work force development efforts supported by a fluctuating mix of federal, state and city money. Officials at the Literary Assistance Center, an umbrella research group for many of the programs, counted 31,000 English class slots last year, up from 26,000 three years ago. Unions, colleges and jobs programs may account for several thousand more. But untapped demand is more than 1.5 million, according to recent surveys.

Like most such programs, Camba does not advertise the free English classes it offers morning, noon and night.

But word of mouth alone brings so many applicants, Mr. Pierre said, that students who do not progress

to the next level are asked to withdraw for at least a trimester to let someone else have a chance. Mr. Chavarria, for example, had waited six months for another turn.

In the classroom where Mr. Saleh struggled, the teacher, Jovy De La Paz, seized the moment. It was only the second week, and those dreaming of more than wordless toil at meager wages were expected to attend four evenings a week all through the summer.

With an energetic pantomime to match his words, he coaxed Mr. Saleh into a new start, stopped him short with a chopping motion and pointed to the vocabulary list again. Pouncing on the halting words that emerged from the student's lips, the teacher used an extravagant pulling gesture to draw out a repetition and offered a hearty handshake when, at last, Mr. Saleh said the words again: "It is easy to learn English."

The class burst into applause.

"You get to be an artist, a kind of magician," Mr. De La Paz said later. "They are so highly motivated, it also serves as an inspiration to me."

To some older New Yorkers, the thought of an evening English class for immigrants may evoke memories of "The Education of H\*Y\*M\*A\*N K\*A\*P\*L\*A\*N," a collection of humorous stories first published in the 1930's by Leo G. Rosten under the pseudonym Leonard Q. Ross. Starring Mr. Kaplan, an irrepressible Middle European immigrant whose mangled but expressive use of English torments his pedantic teacher, Mr. Parkhill ("Pockheel" in Kaplan-speak), the stories depict a universe where anxious native-born Americans with Anglo-Saxon names do their best to drum the parts of speech into Kaplans, Mitnicks and Caravellos.

But at Camba and many similar programs, the teachers, too, are likely to be immigrants. Beginners in a predominantly Haitian afternoon class at the agency, for example, were learning polite commands like "Please give me my change" from Irina Logrvinova, 27, who said she was in an English class for foreigners herself only six years ago, when she arrived from Russia.

"Been there, done that," she shrugged with idiomatic nonchalance, noting that she had gone on to graduate from Brooklyn College and earn a master's degree from New York University.

Perhaps French and Creole speakers, who tend to lack the "h" sound in English, would pick up a somewhat guttural, Slavic way of saying "home sweet home." But would it matter? Not in the view of Mr. De La Paz, who is from the Philippines and works in an administrative job at the agency during the day, placing and tracking students.

Only communication counts in New York's Babel of accents, says Mr. De La Paz, whose teaching experience ranges from an elite boys school in Manila to a camp for Vietnamese refugees. Besides his evening class at Camba, he teaches an all-day English class at a public library every Saturday and is urging his church, All Nations Baptist in Woodhaven, Queens, to offer English lessons to its increasingly diverse congregation.

"You have to use all your creativity," he said of helping people move from embarrassed silence to self-expression. "You cannot equate it to money. It's a kind of happiness that can be shared with others."

Not everyone sees it that way. "A lot of the time, the people who hire them really don't want them to go to school," Mr. Pierre said, referring to employers paying below the minimum wage, off the books.

"They might become wiser, demand their rights. We've had a lot of students coming here and saying. 'My boss is making it difficult for me.' "

Others argue that given limited resources, only legal immigrants should be in class. "It's just a matter of common sense that you would give the slots to people who played by the rules," said Steven Camarota, director of research at the Center for Immigration Studies, a Washington-based group that favors more restrictions on immigration.

The city's traditional programs of English for immigrants have never asked applicants about their legal immigration status, but experts like Elyse B. Rudolph, executive director of the Literacy Assistance Center, worry about new forms of restriction on the horizon. More of the varied streams of government money used for such programs are being tied to eligibility for public assistance or to quick job placement, not just progress in learning English.

The goals and potential of immigrants striving to learn English are not easily pigeonholed. The students in Mr. De La Paz's evening class were of all ages and levels of education and had widely varying abilities to speak English, despite all having tested orally as "Level 3," the most advanced.

Yvrose Souffrant, 50, a home health care aide born in Haiti, has lived in New York for 26 years, raising three children and becoming a naturalized citizen, she said. Now she wants to communicate better with her elderly patients and increase her part-time hours.

Jose Juarez, 24, who keeps a Mets cap low over his eyes, has been working at day labor - construction, cleaning gutters, hauling debris - since he came from Guatemala at 16 but has not given up the hope of college.

Both know much more English than Mr. Saleh, an Arabic-speaker who taught seventh grade in Yemen, or Ms. Villacis, who watched her middle-class life and her son's prospects of education implode when the currency in Ecuador collapsed, taking her job and bank account with it.

In New York, she and her son, now 16, eventually landed in a shelter for victims of domestic violence before she could sell her house in Ecuador and cobble together money from cleaning work and a boarder to rent an apartment.

"Without English, I can't defend myself," she said fiercely in Spanish before class. She ventured one sentence in English to show what she had often longed to say during four years in New York: "The work is hard, I need you pay more!"

Later, she added another: "I write my book." It was a reference to her ambition to collect the stories of the women she met in the domestic violence shelter, where she won a \$1,500 prize for an essay on her experience that a social worker translated from Spanish.

In this part of Flatbush, English is less the native language than the lingua franca, easing the intersections between Creole, Spanish, Arabic and Russian.

The following afternoon, at a sweltering laundromat that stays open 24 hours, Mr. Saleh was folding clothes, making change and trouble-shooting rows of coin-operated machines for customers from many lands.

From a pay phone in the back, he had already made his daily call to his wife in Yemen, to hear about

their 3-year-old daughter, born just after he left for the United States. He had been on duty since 5:30 a.m.

"Too much tired," he shouted above the roar.

But back in class, there was the chance to vent, to laugh, to hope.

"To work in a laundry is terrible," Mr. Saleh offered with glee.

"To become a U.S. citizen is excellent," a dressmaker from Haiti said.

And when Mr. De La Paz introduced the idea of a verb that needed to be completed - to change - the answers flew.

"To change the oil," one said. Another declared, "To change my life!"

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