

My American English Lessons

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Mezimene's sonorous singing rang clearly above the voices of her classmates. A, B, C, D . . . L-M-N-O-P . . . W, X, Y, and Z. Wednesday night language classes all started the same way; we introduced ourselves and a neighbor: I am Mezimene. He is Francisco. All eighteen students came for the same reasons. Learning American English would allow them to pass the U.S. citizenship exam and interview, to advance at work, or to find better employment.

Listening, speaking, and writing were our tasks. The women did very well; they learned to collaborate and worked together filling the [gaps](#) in their understanding of the reading or writing assignments. Most of the men struggled to stay awake as we worked into the late evening hours, lagging behind in their lessons-but Francisco managed to excel and always stayed on track. Tired, weary-the students trickled in before 6:10 pm, coming from work or taking care of children. They paid forty dollars for six months of classes, money invested toward achieving their goals and dreams in America.

I had never taught adults before, but embarked on the endeavor full of idealistic hope and fervor. My students came to America from Ethiopia, Somalia, Haiti, and Cape Verde. None were younger than forty and some were already in their sixties, but that, for me, was the

charm of teaching the class: [nurturing](#) the desire to find new opportunities through citizenship or assimilation into the American way of life.

I saw the class as an avenue of passage, a beacon, a training ground, where the students could complete the difficult passage from being seen as outsiders to becoming full-fledged Americans, even of a hyphenated variety: Ethiopian-American, Somali-American, [Haitian](#)-American, and Cape Verde-American. Finding out the goals and aspirations of my students was as important as marking down progress notes about their reading and writing skills. I was not there to teach language in isolation, or phonics alone; I felt called to teach my class about American English in the real world, in their world.

Yet there were those who disagreed with me: the alphabet and kinesthetics practitioners, who touted the importance of writing the alphabet over and over again at each class session and engaged in physical activities that would reinforce classroom learning. The program director was one of these devotees, and I watched as she began instruction one week.

The program director was a tall, bony woman with wild, frizzy hair and a smile that seemed more snide than kind.

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