

Bold Action Ministry to Immigrants

Sr. Joyce Schramm

For several years I have volunteered for the Immigrant and Refugee Women's Program (IRWP), tutoring women in their homes. For over two years I have been working with Selsa, meeting with her twice a week. Teaching English has made me realize how hard it is to learn English! I am full of admiration for Selsa.

Occasionally the IRWP staff invites all the students and teachers together to the office (in the old St. John the Baptist High School) to meet with students from many countries and to practice speaking English with each other. That experience proves to be encouraging and enriching for Selsa. Some students have just begun studying English and they speak only a few words. It helps Selsa to see how far she herself has come. Other students are quite fluent; they drive a car, or they are preparing to take the citizenship test. And Selsa sees that: yes, all this can be accomplished if she wants it.

For me, it is an inspiration chatting with the students. I appreciate, all the more, the effort and the determination shown by these women, both young and old, to learn a foreign language, to learn the different culture, and to adjust to it.

Now in these times of the *nuevo corona virus*, we cannot meet in the home for classes. I call my student, and we practice speaking by telephone. This is much more difficult than speaking person to person, and that presents another set of skills to be mastered. For example, I realize I need to work on pronunciation with my student. Cot, cut, and cat can all sound the same!

I give Selsa an assignment to read a story. Then she gives me a summary on the phone. The story is usually written in present tense, and sometimes I ask her to tell it to me in present tense, and then again in past tense. Do you realize how difficult that is, with all our irregular verbs?

Selsa has also encountered her school-aged children being embarrassed by her faulty English. When the school had a parent day, one of her children didn't want her to come to his class. I had thought that it would be teenage children, who are so bent on being like their friends. But even the very young child didn't want to be different from the other children. That, too, is a challenge for these mothers.

I try to be a listener for my student, as well as a teacher. I have great respect for her, and we have become friends. Such a blessing for me.

Reflection questions

1. Have you ever been in a situation where you did not fully understand what was being said because of content or accent and no one attempted to interpret or explain...or someone did take the time to explain? What effect did that have on you?
2. If English is your first language, how easy or difficult is it for you to use grammatically correct speech and writing, and correct spelling of all words?
3. Have you had the opportunity to practice English with someone learning it? What was that like for you?
4. There are many accents and vocabulary differences in spoken English across the globe. How does that impact communication and the ability to learn English?