

## Library Tours with ESL Classes

### Introduction

Not long after immigrants and refugees settle in the United States, they discover that their local public library can be a valuable resource in their lives. Besides adult education programs and other schools, libraries have traditionally been one of the first places that new arrivals visit to learn about the United States and their community. Even if they are not familiar with library settings, many soon realize that this is a



place that is welcoming and available to all, regardless of age, ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic status. Some immigrants may have had access to libraries in their own country while others may have never visited one.

Since library systems around the world differ greatly, some may think that libraries are only for people with higher education or special privileges. For those immigrants, it is exciting to discover that local public libraries have many different services and are free and available to serve everyone.

To better serve the growing immigrant communities and attract immigrants and their families, today's libraries offer a broad range of English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction from small non-intensive conversation classes with tutors to long-established programs of leveled ESL classes. In areas with a large immigrant population, libraries may have large collections of ESL books and **Citizenship Corners**. Some may provide citizenship preparation classes as well.

In your own community, many adult ESL programs include a library unit as a part of their life-skills curriculum. Teachers explain that the public library is free to all and encourage their students to take advantage of this resource. As part of the unit, the teachers often arrange a field trip and tour of the local library so that their students can become more familiar with all that a library has to offer. This is a terrific opportunity for you to invite new patrons to your library and help them explore the vast range of services and resources you provide.

### Where to Find ESL or Citizenship Programs in Your Area

Most likely, you are already familiar with local well-publicized adult education programs, but you may be surprised to learn about the smaller programs being offered by community-based organizations, faith-based institutions, service and charitable organizations, and K-12 public schools. To find a range of adult education programs in your area, explore the U.S. Citizenship and

Immigration Services (USCIS) website called **myUSCIS Home Page** under **Locate a class**. If your library's adult education classes are not already listed there, register your program information online at **America's Literacy Directory**. Contact administrators directly at any local adult education program to invite their teachers and volunteers to bring their classes for a tour.

### How to Prepare for a Library Tour

- Before the tour, invite the teacher to your branch to discuss the students' needs and interests and determine what to highlight

during the class tour. Especially if the teacher is unfamiliar with your particular branch, you may want to give a brief tour so that the

teacher knows what to share with the students before their visit. Since libraries are changing and evolving all the time, the teacher may not be aware of the broad range of activities and services your library currently offers. This initial conversation can also give you an opportunity to learn about the students' background before you meet them. This preparation smooths the way for your first meeting with the class and gives you some topics of conversation to break the ice before the actual tour begins. Some questions you might ask the teacher are:

- What countries are the students from?
- What languages do they speak?
- What is their level of English, including their speaking and reading skills?



*The Elkins Randolph County Public Library, Elkins, West Virginia  
Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-DIG-highsm-31631.*

- What is their education level in their native country? How strong are their reading skills in their native language?
- What is the age range of the students?
- How many have visited a library in the United States?
- How many already have a library card?
- Do some of the students have children here in the United States?
- Do the students have any special interests, such as sports, cooking, cars, and so on?
- What aspects of the library does the teacher want you to highlight?
- Share library pamphlets with the teacher for class discussion prior to the tour:
  - Provide copies of pamphlets with information about branch locations and hours of operation. Practicing map reading and reading schedules and charts are good activities for students with a lower level of English language proficiency.
  - Offer copies of any materials written in other languages.
  - Provide pamphlets on special activities and services offered at the library, such as story-time for toddlers, free wi-fi, or computers for public use.
  - Be aware that even though the teacher may have reviewed this information in class, it bears repeating during the tour. Please keep in mind that adult ESL students will need to hear the same information a number of times in a number of different ways before they can remember and learn it.

## **How to Break the Ice and Get Your Tour Started**

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While some of the following ideas may be adapted for tours with intermediate or advanced ESL students, the suggestions here target lower level or beginning level students.

It may seem obvious to give your name when introducing yourself to the group; however, when working with low-level ESL students, you may also want to wear a name tag. If your name is unfamiliar to them, it is helpful to model your name out loud several

times and have them repeat after you. This repetition is a routine teaching strategy in any low-level ESL class and the students will appreciate learning your name and saying it correctly.

Of course, if you have experience giving tours to ESL classes before, you have already come up with creative ways to start off your tour. One effective way to engage the students and put them at ease is to ask them basic

familiar questions to get to know them. Consider trying this icebreaker:

1. Display a world map on the wall or hold up a globe.
2. Ask the student nearest you, "Where are you from?" If that student says, "Mexico," for example, point it out on the map (or ask the student to point it out).
3. Ask the rest of the class, "Is anyone else here from Mexico?" When the students answer or raise their hands, you can count how many, acknowledge them, say hello, and so on.
4. Tell them if you have ever visited Mexico, or if you like the food or music. If you've never been to a certain country, offer a comment or ask a simple question about it to show interest.
5. Ask someone who did not raise his or her hand where that person is from.
6. Continue around the room until you have acknowledged everyone in the group.

This activity may take a few minutes but doing it is a valuable step in breaking the ice. It benefits everyone in several ways:

- It includes everyone in the group without putting too much attention on one student only. It also reassures the students that they will have a simple, yet meaningful conversation with you about a familiar topic.



*The Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore, Maryland  
Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-DIG-highsm-20520.*

- The students get used to your rate of speed, accent, and intonation. They are used to their teacher in their own classroom setting but listening to an unfamiliar person in new surroundings can be overwhelming and intimidating.
- While talking to the class, you can check the students' comprehension by watching facial expressions and other non-verbal cues like nodding and smiling. If the students don't seem to be engaged, they may not understand you, or may not be able to hear or see you well.
- The teacher may assist by rephrasing or clarifying if he or she thinks that you have said something that was too advanced or confusing for the class. In the meantime, you can observe how the teacher addresses the students and match your level of vocabulary and grammar, rate of speed, and amount of repetition in your speech.

## **How to Communicate With Low-Level English Language Learners**

Here are a few pointers to keep in mind when talking with English language learners:

- Speak naturally but clearly.
- Use short sentences with a lot of pauses. Avoid complex sentences.
- Use a normal volume when talking with one person. When speaking to a group, raise your voice and project it to the people in the back of the room. Ask if everyone in the group can hear you.
- Try not to talk with your back to the listeners. They will be able to understand you better if they can see your mouth and facial expressions when you speak.
- Don't be afraid to repeat an important point. Try rephrasing your sentence to make sure everyone understands.
- Don't worry if the students cannot understand every word you say. They just need to get the general idea of what you are saying.
- Ask the group what a particular key word means before starting to explain it.

- Avoid using slang, idioms, phrasal verbs, and library jargon. Remember that ordinary library terms like “branch” and “fine” also have non-library meanings that might be much more familiar to the students.
- Avoid contractions such as “can’t” and “shouldn’t.” For many English language learners, it is very difficult to distinguish between “can” and “can’t.”
- Avoid negative questions, such as “You’ve never had a library card?” The “yes” or “no” response you get might not convey the correct information and can cause confusion. Instead, try asking, “Did you ever have a library card before?” to elicit a more accurate answer.

## What Library Props to Assemble and How to Use Them Throughout the Tour

Before considering the library props to use in your tour, think how you can best introduce what may or may not be new vocabulary. When working with adult language learners, it is most effective to start with the “known.” You do this for a couple of reasons: to determine how much they already know, and to build confidence in the learners. Keep in mind that although English language learners may have limited proficiency in English, adults come with a great deal of life experience and knowledge. For low-level ESL students, an effective

way to discuss an object is to first make sure everyone can identify it in English. So, as a class, have them first identify key library objects, or props. Starting with the “known,” hold up a common prop, such as a book or CD, and ask the students what it is. If no one can tell you, then you can tell, or specifically teach them the new vocabulary. If the word is new, repeat it several times and encourage them to repeat after you. If they know the English word, then you can simply validate their answer and move on.

## How to Give an Interactive Library Tour

Just as you did with your ice breaker, you want to give an interactive tour that engages the students. When giving a tour, it is tempting to want to tell and explain. However, with low-level ESL students, it can be more effective to **show and demonstrate**. Reinforcing what you say by using props is a good way to do that, and it helps the students understand what they will see during the tour. It also helps set up anticipation and create

interest. For example, if you plan to show them the ESL or the children’s section, have some of those items on hand. Consider assembling several items from each category listed below. When you hold up one item for the class to identify, you can hand a few out for students to hold until the end of the tour. Here’s one example:

Students from other countries are often surprised that U.S. public libraries lend music CDs and movie DVDs and videos. During your introduction, hold up a music CD of a well-known artist and ask, “Does anyone know what this is?” Some will answer, “music,” “songs,” “CD,” or “Michael Jackson.” Acknowledge their answers, and follow up with “Who likes Michael Jackson?” or “Who is your favorite singer?” Here are some categories that you can gather for library props:

- ESL textbooks
- **Citizenship Corner** or citizenship preparation materials
- Easy-to-read books for adults
- Graphic novels
- Magazines
- Books in other languages



Echo Park Library’s Citizenship Corner, Los Angeles, California  
Courtesy of the Los Angeles Public Library

- Children’s books
- Dictionaries (English and bilingual)
- Music CDs
- Movie DVDs or videos
- Maps and atlases

As you start moving around the library to the different sections, name that section and ask who has that item and have the student hold it up. This engages the students because they must actively listen to you and try to follow what you are saying. At the end of the tour, collect each item and ask the students to point out the section of the library where it can be found. While this may sound like unnecessary repetition, it is very helpful for low-level learners. Once the students return to their classroom, they will discuss the tour with their teacher to review what they learned during their tour.

Because of the vast range of resources and services today’s libraries have to offer, it is tempting to want to

show the students as much as possible. Since you do not want to overwhelm the students with too much information during that first visit, try to limit the topics or sections you cover. Besides the topics of interest you discussed with their teacher, point out the community bulletin board, computer room, and free book section. Encourage them to get a free library card and show them how to check out and return materials.

As a final note, the tour you give to these first-time visitors will be enjoyable, informative, and welcoming. It will have a great impact on them, their families, and their communities. Once you have shown them what a terrific resource their public library is, they will become loyal and enthusiastic patrons and will share all they have learned about the library with others.

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To find additional citizenship education materials and instructional resources, visit the [USCIS Citizenship Resource Center](https://uscis.gov/citizenship) at [www.uscis.gov/citizenship](https://www.uscis.gov/citizenship).



**U.S. Citizenship  
and Immigration  
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[www.uscis.gov/citizenship](https://www.uscis.gov/citizenship)