

## Assisting English Language Learners in Your Library

### Introduction

Public libraries offer a great deal to English language learners (ELLs) and students in English as a Second Language (ESL) programs. At the same time, immigrants enrich their communities and libraries in many ways. Many libraries, large and small, have ESL classes in their branches and provide rooms for students to work with tutors to learn and improve their English.

Once immigrant patrons are familiar with all the resources, activities, and services that their public library has to offer, they become enthusiastic supporters, and bring family and friends to visit.



In ESL programs, ESL professionals assess their students' level of proficiency quite quickly when first interacting with them. Later, the students are usually tested in all four language skills: listening, speaking,

reading, and writing. Upon meeting them at intake or in class, ESL teachers adjust the level of their language in order to better communicate with the ELL student. It is helpful to remember that an immigrant may be fluent in spoken English but less proficient in reading and writing, or vice versa.

The immigrant patrons that you encounter in your library may come with very different library experiences. Some may have experience with library systems in their native countries while others may find a library a very new and exciting, but intimidating, place. You may find that helping immigrants in a library setting is somewhat different from assisting native English speakers.

Below, you will find a few points to keep in mind and some suggestions for helping your ELL patrons.

### Levels of Language Proficiency

Fluency and vocabulary levels vary greatly among ELLs. Some may have studied in their home country for years but are unaccustomed to how Americans speak in day-to-day life. Others may have never been exposed to English until they arrived here but

have learned to communicate orally at work and in their community. Depending on their educational experience here and in their home country, their literacy skills in their native language and in English may vary quite a bit.

### Cross-Cultural Considerations

Cultural differences often play an important role when interacting with immigrant patrons. Here are a few suggestions when considering cross-cultural issues:

- **Preparation for an ESL class tour:** If you are working with an ESL teacher who will bring a class for a library tour, ask about the students' levels of English proficiency, ages, and educational backgrounds. You may also want to ask about the students' countries of origin to learn more about those cultures and how you can best help them.
- **Help from a cultural consultant:** If there is a large population of immigrants from specific countries or language groups in your community, you may want to find a "cultural consultant." A cultural consultant is a person who understands the cultures of both the United States and the targeted population well enough to be able to advise you on points to

keep in mind when interacting with people from that target population.

- **Awareness of non-verbal cues:** Non-verbal cues and gestures can be interpreted differently from culture to culture. For example, you may be aware that the common American hand gesture for “next”

or “come here” (motioning with a curled index finger motioning toward you) might be considered disrespectful to use with adults from certain cultures. Sitting on a desktop or table may seem normal to Americans, but for people from some other cultures, it might not be considered polite.

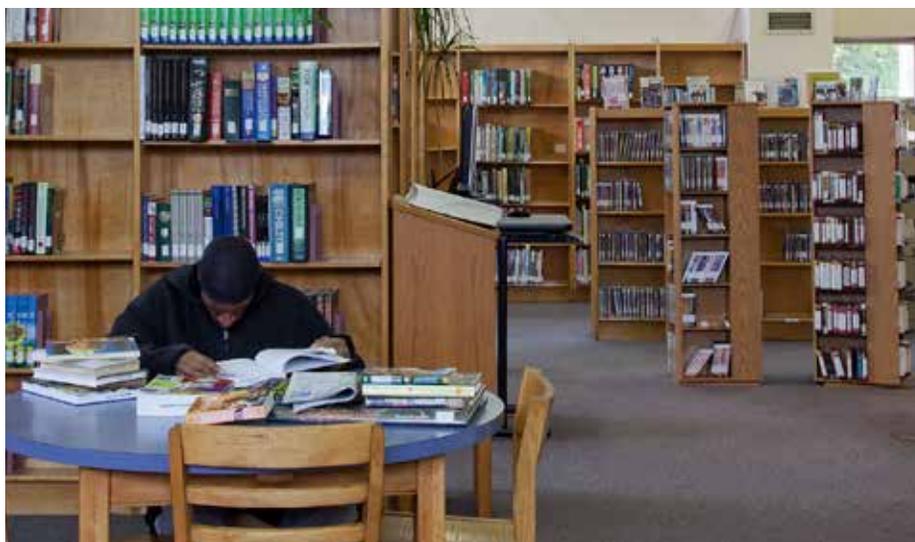
## Welcoming First-Time Immigrant Patrons

The most natural and welcoming thing you can do is smile and offer assistance. Some ELLs new to libraries may feel quite intimidated and overwhelmed by the setting. Here are some things that you can do to help ELLs feel more at home:

- **Stand up and greet the patron** to help put him or her at ease.
- **Slow down your rate of speech and simplify your language.** Try to avoid using library jargon, long complex sentences, and phrasal verbs.
- **Consider carefully the level of language that you use with an ELL.** Words that are very familiar and ordinary to you as a librarian are often new for ELLs, or they recognize those words by a different definition. For example, common library terms such as “branch” and “fine” may be words that an ELL knows, but he or she may immediately think of a “part of a tree” or something that is “good.”
- **Make and maintain direct eye contact,** rather than remaining seated looking at a computer screen. It is much easier for an ELL to understand you if you look directly at that person.
- **Check often for comprehension.** For example, watch the person’s face to determine if he or she seems to understand what you are saying. It is fine to ask whether the person understands what you just said.
- **Try to avoid talking with your back to the patron** when you are walking through the library to show something. If you project your voice toward that person and he or she can

see your mouth and face while you are talking, communication will be much more effective.

- **Show and demonstrate** rather than tell and explain. For example, to show an ELL how to reserve a computer, take the person through the steps by showing how and where to do so. Telling that person the steps, rather than showing them, may not be as helpful even if you think that you have explained everything quite clearly. Explaining the check-out and return process will be more effective if you walk and show the ELL exactly how to check out a book and where exactly to return it.
- **Limit the amount of information you provide** for the ELL as that can be overwhelming. Give the person the information requested and ask if there are other questions. Offer to answer any other questions anytime during the library visit. However, if there is time and you think the patron might be interested, there are a few sections you may want to point out as you take an ELL patron around your library:



Patterson Park Branch of the Enoch Pratt Free Library System in Baltimore, Maryland  
Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-DIG-highsm-20482.

- **English as a Second Language and Citizenship Corners:** Some ELLs spend a great deal of their spare time studying English or preparing for the citizenship test on their own. They are eager to find resources beyond their classroom textbooks.
- **Foreign languages:** Many will be pleased to find books in their native language.
- **Audio visual materials:** ELLs new to libraries may be surprised to learn that libraries offer much more than books.
- **Children’s and Young Adults’ sections:** If there are children at home, the ELL patron will be happy to bring them to the library to take advantage of these resources. Let the patron know if your library has any reading times or other activities for children and families.
- **How-to books:** These resources are quite popular among immigrants because they can get ideas and learn information quickly from pictures and diagrams. Find out about the patron’s interests and show where to find books on car repair, sports, or interior decoration, for example.
- **Library pamphlets:** Review the information on your library pamphlets such as the branch locations and hours and the book return policy. Determine how easy this information is for an ELL patron to understand. Consider asking an ESL teacher for feedback on your pamphlets and other announcements. Then visit local adult ESL programs and offer copies so teachers can prepare their students for a class field trip to the library. Ask yourself these questions:
  - Is the level of language used easy to understand?
  - Could it be written in simpler terms?
  - Is the font simple and large enough to read?
  - Are there simple charts to give information?
  - Is there a lot of white space?
  - Are there pictures to illustrate the information provided?
  - Is it printed in color or on colored paper?
  - Would it be useful to translate the pamphlet into other languages?
- **Signage:** Review the signage in your library. Are there pictures or photos to help make signs easier to understand? A good example is if you have separate bins for returned books and DVDs — are there illustrations to show which bin is which?
- **Extra help needed:** One common challenge that librarians face is recognizing that an ELL patron may need extra help with a request when there is a long line of other patrons waiting behind. One possible solution is to ask that the ELL patron wait nearby for a few minutes, reassuring him or her that you will return to help shortly.
- **Who and how to ask for help:** One challenge that ELL patrons often encounter is wondering who is a librarian and who is a patron. They may not know whom to ask, or how to ask, for help. They also may not know exactly what they need, especially if they are unfamiliar with the many resources, activities, and services that libraries offer. For example, they may have heard that the library has computers for public use, but when they enter, they do not see any computers. If you see an immigrant patron looking bewildered, do not hesitate to approach him or her and ask how you can help.

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



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