

## Center For Immigrant Education Teaches More Than Just English

by Jessica Marmor, Chronicle Correspondent

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Teacher Emine Karatas (c.) works with students Gloriz Turzio and U. Wannasara at the Center for Immigrant Education and Training in Long Island City. (photo by Randy Fader-Smith)

**On a Wednesday afternoon, the students in Hillary Gardner's English for Speakers of Other Languages class struggled over a series of grammar exercises on possessive pronouns: the difference between his and hers, theirs and ours.**

**Although this is a typical exercise for an ESOL class, for Gardner, it represented a rare foray into fill-in-the-blank**

**grammar. At the Center for Immigrant Education and Training in Long Island City, where she teaches, the focus is not just on grammar or vocabulary, but on teaching students to become active members of their communities.**

"What we do is try and connect classes and what we teach to people's everyday roles and needs as family members, working adults and members of the community," said Suma Kurien, director of the center.

And, as she has seen, the center's classes impact students in very immediate ways, in some cases helping students transition off welfare or apply for American citizenship; in others, helping them to get a better job or use the public library.

Kurien estimates that citywide, 20,000 to 30,000 people are on waiting lists for English-language courses. And, she points out, many have not even made it onto a waiting list. Because all of the center's programs are free, they are that much more popular and fill up rapidly.

The course Gardner teaches, ESOL and civics, has about 200 places per semester plus a 2,000-name-long waiting list. More would sign up if they could. "We got to 2,000 and we just stopped taking names," Gardner said.

There are no requirements to qualify for this program: students can be legal citizens, undocumented, 18- or 80-year-olds. But the state Department of Education grant funding the program will run out in June, and unless it is renewed, something that is far from certain, those on the waiting list may not get a chance to take the class.

Like all programs at the center, ESOL-civics is constantly in danger of getting cut, due to the unpredictability of government funding for ESOL programs.

With their excellent track record, Kurien has no doubt that when funds are allocated to ESOL education, the center will receive grants for its programs. But the legislative process of allocating money in the first place, "is the tricky part," she said.

Gardner said that ever since she joined the center, since the start of the ESOL-civics program in April 2002, the funding has "kind of been at risk." On the way to class, she dragged a large red cart piled high with newspapers into an elevator already crammed with students (the center operates out of the Division of Adult and Continuing Education at LaGuardia Community College).

Gardner brings newspapers to class daily to encourage her students to read

in English instead of their native languages. Often her class is the only time students break outside their network and meet people from other countries.

The walls of the center's tiny library are papered with fliers and posters on how to use a dictionary, how to take notes and the sections of a newspaper. One such poster outlines vocational slang from the television show *I Love Lucy*: "Let her roll!" and "Step on it!"

Learning grammar and vocabulary through real-world applications, students analyze Queens demographics and talk about the history of Queens. They learn the difference between a country and a county or a city and a neighborhood. They read stories about famous immigrants, like the founder of Dial-a-Mattress, Napoleon Barragan, who immigrated to the United States from Ecuador, and attend weekly computer labs.

When asked about their favorite class activities, the students in Gardner's class all included history.

Given the large foreign-born population of Queens, there are numerous English language programs in the borough. There are private institutions, especially in Jackson Heights and Astoria; many churches offer classes and the Queens Library runs free ESOL programs. As Queens Library ESL program manager Susan Dalmas put it, in Queens, there are never enough programs to accommodate the immigrant community.

Opened in September 2001, the center currently runs four programs: ESOL and civics, ESOL for workers, the Immigrant Family Learning Project and vocational English intensive.

Many legislators recognize the need for low-cost immigrant education and support the center, but there is always the possibility that funding availability will change as budgeting priorities change in Albany.

Also frustrating to school officials is the tendency for requirements and mandates accompanying funding to suddenly change, usually, for the worse. The ESOL for workers program, which teaches English within the context of the workplace, will undergo such a change next year.

Currently, adult immigrants who are at or below 200 percent of the poverty level (that works out to an annual salary of about \$35,000 for a family of four) are eligible for the program. Next year, in accordance with new Department of Labor mandates, only those on public assistance will be eligible for the course.

Because there is no way for the center to know who is on public assistance, it will rely on city agencies to refer potential students and, in Kurien's experience, city agencies are notoriously bad about providing people on public assistance with access to education programs.

The center's goal is to serve the widest possible range of students, and, with this change, Kurien worries that the course will no longer be able to do that.

But she is "cautiously optimistic" that the popular ESOL-civics program will continue past June, even though the funding may come with greater restrictions.

"I imagine there will be funding," she said. "But I hope it's in the form that will allow us to serve the students we want to serve."

For further information, call the center at 718-482-5460, Monday to Thursday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.