

That's how it is for the 7.3 percent of Anne Arundel County residents who speak a language other than English at home. In Calvert County that number is 4.4 percent. With the 2010 Census, the percentages in both counties are certain to grow.

Who Are Our New Neighbors?

Hispanics and Koreans are the prevalent immigrants in Chesapeake Country. 2009's enrollment statistics for the 1,024 students of English as a Second Language at Anne Arundel Community College turned up speakers of 53 languages representing 70 countries. These English students range in age from 16 to 86 and come from every walk of life. They are au pairs, landscape and restaurant workers, educated and uneducated, even former professionals in their homelands.

The little book-English they may have learned in school is not the language they hear in the real world. So learning English matters to them a great deal. Indeed, it ranked so high for one student in Anne Arundel's Basic Skills class — the catchall course that is free to county residents — that she declined her first job offer in this country because it conflicted with class.

When it comes to learning English, one Americanism these students have taken to heart is the aphorism use it or lose it.

Rosalies Ramirez's Elevator to Success

Rosalies Toledo Ramirez emigrated from Puerto Rico in 1997 as a newly-wed with a bachelor's degree in elementary education. She began ESL classes right away, but she screened her phone calls so that she wouldn't have to speak English with strangers. Three months later, she found employment as a childcare assistant, working with supportive people to whom she credits much of her language progress.

"Whenever I struggled with a phrase, they taught me five ways to say it," she recalls.

Fast-forward a couple years: Ramirez is running her own kindergarten classroom in a Washington neighborhood of predominantly bilingual families. The next nine years are pretty much non-stop work as she earns a certificate in bilingual education from American University and starts a family. She now has three children.

Her success sounds like a fairy tale as she tells the story from her office at Anne Arundel Community College, where she is the enrollment specialist for multiethnic recruitment. But there was nothing magical about her hard-won success.



photo by Jane C. Elkin

When Rosalies Toledo Ramirez immigrated from Puerto Rico 13 years ago, she screened her phone calls so that she wouldn't have to speak English with strangers. Now she is the enrollment specialist for multiethnic recruitment at Anne Arundel Community College.

Winding Routes

For others, the path is not so direct. Maria Coronado moved here from Honduras 16 years ago with a secretarial degree. But she began ESL classes only one year ago because she was always too busy working. Her last position was as a housekeeper.

“I learned all my English from the street,” Coronado explains. “It was very hard.”

Living at first in Los Angeles, she was surrounded by Spanish speakers, so she could put off learning English. In Anne Arundel County, the Hispanic community is much smaller, and her discomfort much greater. Still, she put off beginning ESL classes until her daughter, an honors student, was well established in middle school.

Now Coronado is on a self-imposed program of total immersion, attending writing classes at night in addition to 12 weekly hours of morning ESL classes. Medicine interests her a great deal. She investigates medications online in her free time.

“It’s hard,” she says, “but I’ll continue.” Her immediate goal is to earn her GED. She dreams of then studying radiology.

Parenting often gives the push across the language barrier.

Hae Oh, who immigrated 10 years ago to join her husband, found a Korean culture so vibrant that she was able to exist without English for nine years. But she lived in isolation from her new nation. She knew it was time to take action when her daughter came home from school to make fun of her mother’s English. It’s a common, yet grim, experience for many foreign-born parents.

Iris Lazo of El Salvador spent two years as a stay-at-home mother, her only English basic greetings. When she went to work bussing tables for two years, she found that she needed English. And not only there but with all her doctors except the pediatrician.

Frustrated as she was by lacking the words to speak to people, she was driven to desperation and action by the

Where to Learn



Free adult instruction in English as a Second Language is still offered in many places in Chesapeake Country. Here’s a partial list of classes, followed by two sources for free one-on-one literacy training.

Anne Arundel Community College — multiple day, evening and weekend classes: 410-777-232; www.aacc.edu/coned

Centro de Ayuda — 1906 Forest Dr., Annapolis: Tu-Th, 10am-noon: 410-295-3434; <http://centrodeayuda.org/>

St. Mary’s Parish — 109 Duke of Gloucester St., Annapolis: TuWTh, 7-8:45pm: 410-800-4717; eneida_green@yahoo.com

Maryland Adult Literacy Center — Prince Frederick Library: Day and evening classes, Tu/Th: 410-535-7382

Anne Arundel County Literacy Council — free one-on-one literacy training: 410-269-4419; <http://icanread.org>

Calvert County Literacy Council — free one-on-one literacy training: 410-535-3233; calvertliteracy@somd.lib.md.us

labyrinth of bureaucratic paperwork that tangled her as she enrolled her daughter in the Head Start Program.

Recalling the experience one year later, she throws her head back, pretending to pull her hair out, and gasps, "Oh my God! It was so hard!" She felt anxious every morning just contemplating the day ahead.

Now, after one year of ESL classes, she says, "Before, I was afraid and felt bad. Now I understand!"

Cesar Belmontes, an insulation worker currently on disability, is one of only two men in the upper level Basic Skills ESL morning class he attends. The other is retired. Belmontes, who emigrated from Mexico seven years ago for work, finds that his physical misfortune has been a blessing in disguise. He has four months to improve his language skills while he recuperates. He used to come to class only on Saturdays because of work, but now attends four mornings a week. So he predicts his coworkers are in for a big surprise when he returns to work.

"It helps so much," he says, explaining his former frustration at being unable to explain things on the job. With an eye toward his unscripted future, he finds comfort in the knowledge that, if he ever does decide to move back home, a bilingual worker in Mexico has a distinct advantage in the job market.

The New One-Room School

Word games may be fun and parts of speech important, but real life demands spontaneous communication. So how does the ESL teacher help students of varying levels, all in the same class, to practice what they'll need to read, write and say outside the classroom?

Like teachers in the one-room schoolhouses of old, ESL teachers plan their activities with everyone in mind: visual, kinesthetic and musical learners, beginners and advanced students. They center their lessons on topics of universal interest: captioning family photos, clipping coupons, using advertising flyers for comparison shopping, simulating interviews, reading the TV guide, swapping recipes, reviewing films or cars.



photo by Eneida Green

Graduates from a recent ESL class in St. Mary's Parish in downtown Annapolis span several generations with representatives from around the globe.

One morning's lesson on birth order and its influence on success leads to an animated discussion of the students' own families — and practice in thinking in English, reading aloud and writing.

The teacher asks the students to pair up with someone who does not speak their language, then presents them with the article, a list of six luminaries like Bill Gates and Vincent van Gogh and a comment sheet on which to explain their likely birth order. As the students consider, the teacher works the room, pantomiming, coaxing and running to the board to write useful vocabulary words like eldest and only child. One student concludes that middle children are "strong at chance" which, after much discussion, the teacher takes to mean opportunistic. A good ESL teacher can read minds.

America, the Melting Pot

I was six years old the first time I ate spaghetti in Boston's Little Italy. Though I've forgotten the taste of the food, I still remember asking the owner for directions to the bathroom. "The bath-a-room, she is down the hall at the left," he told me.

Settling back into our booth afterward, I couldn't wait to tell my mother about the funny way that man talked. She fixed me with a withering stare. "He speaks two languages," she said. "How many do you know?"

It was a concept I'd never considered. My parents only knew English, though their parents were bilingual. Languages have changed for second- and third- and fourth-generation families, but new immigrants are now in our grandparents' shoes — learning the new language that's still the ticket to the American dream.

Like the restaurateur I underestimated, many are still taking their lumps for not speaking perfect English. Five years ago, former Comptroller William Donald Schaefer made headlines for criticizing a McDonald's employee for just that reason. Perhaps he had forgotten that the Baltimore of his grandfather's youth offered free bilingual education to German-Americans.

America is a melting pot, and any good cook will tell you that the best fondue blends several cheeses. Language education is the way to blend cultures — without turning up the heat to scorching.