



Although they may have similar characteristics, there is **no typical** English Language Learner. Learners come from a wide range of cultures and have many different skills and interests. In this lesson you will meet some of these students, hear their stories and find out not only what their most immediate needs are, but also their hopes and dreams for the future of their families.

## What Question Would You Ask First?

You are getting off an airplane in a new country, your new home. You've never been there before, although you've read and heard about the country and its people. You may even speak a little of the language. Everything looks new and different, and everyone is speaking the new language very fast! What do you think would be the first thing you might want to know?



How Do I Say Hello?



How Do I Count My Money?



How Do I Ask for Food and Drink?



Where Are the Rest Rooms?



How Do I Ask for Directions?



Where will I be staying?

You probably had a hard time choosing which question would be the most important to have answered. English Language Learners have that same problem. They need and want the answers to many questions.



## General Characteristics

Although they come from a variety of backgrounds, cultures, countries and languages, adult language learners want to learn to **understand, speak, read and write the English language**. They usually are highly motivated. They often have immediate goals to reach, such as, getting a job or becoming eligible for a promotion in their present job; learning how to help their children with schoolwork or to communicate with teachers. In general, they want to learn how to participate more fully in the life in their new country.

Let's meet a few of these English Language Learners.



**Mercedes** always wanted to be a mother and to have a large family; she is the younger of two children and grew up in Puerto Rico. Mercedes was never encouraged to excel in school but rather was told to learn how to be a good wife and mother. She only reached the third grade before she was removed from school to help the family when her mother became ill. Mercedes was happy as a homemaker and never gave a second thought to education. When her husband decided to immigrate to the United States, Mercedes refused to join him. She asked him to send for them when he was established. After five years of waiting, Mercedes finally decided her children needed a father and followed her husband. Life was very different here, she felt homesick and the language barrier did not help. When her youngest child entered kindergarten, Mercedes decided it was time for her to learn as well. She wants to help her children with their homework and to learn how to communicate to get what she and her family needs. Mercedes likes the idea of being a school teacher and now feels she may one day reach her dream if she continues to study and learn English.



**Mai** is the mother of three children and the eldest of six. Mai immigrated to the United States from northern China with her husband when they were very young. She and her husband Chu wanted a better life for themselves and their children. Mai was unable to finish her schooling and only reached the sixth grade. Chu was more fortunate and was able to finish high school. Mai decided to enroll in English classes when she could no longer help her twelve year old son with his homework. She knew then that to be able to help her other two children she needed to improve her English skills. Mai was able to improve her English skills and looks forward to earning her GED. Her favorite time of the day is when she is able to spend time with her four-year-old son reading or playing a board game. Mai dreams of fulfilling her life-long dream of becoming a nurse.



**Jose** is the youngest of four and the father of two children, Alicia who is six years old and Janette who is ten. Although José was a professional in Mexico, he and his wife immigrated to the United States seeking better healthcare for their youngest daughter who has cerebral palsy. José's older brother had been in the United States for fifteen years and continually encouraged José to "try his luck" here. When José was laid off he decided to move his family and heed his brother's advice. Circumstances have not been easy for José and his family. Due to the language barrier, José has been unable to find a professional position here in the States and has worked in several minimum wage jobs. He found a position at a small car dealership as a mechanic and through hard work began working as a salesman. José is the only Spanish speaking salesman and has been promoted. José's goal is to improve his English skills enough to return to his field of engineering.

## Why Do They Attend?

Adult learners attend ELL classes because they choose to, not because they are required to. It is important that the classes help meet their needs to keep them motivated. Some of the major motivating forces for students in ELL classes are:

- Students realize that learning English is essential to satisfying their most **basic day to day and social needs**. They must speak English in order to get food, clothing, shelter, medical attention, as well as to participate in social and political affairs.
- In many instances they need to be able to speak English in order to get a **job**. Sometimes they have a job but need better English skills in order to keep the job or to advance in their employment or change careers.
- Many students attend ELL programs in order to complete their General Educational Development (**GED**), or in some cases, to prepare for **college or vocational programs**.
- Some students attend ELL programs for **social reasons**. They enjoy meeting and getting to know new people, and the English class is a place where they can fulfill those needs.
- Retired individuals may be taking the lessons because they finally **have the time and want to learn a new language**.

## How Long Does It Take To Learn A New Language?



A question often asked is, "How long will it take a student to learn the new language?" Research done for the Mainstream English Language Training (MELT) project (1985) indicated that it would take from **500 -1,000 hours of instruction** for an adult who is literate in her native language, but has had no prior English instruction, to reach a level where she can satisfy her basic needs, survive on the job, and have social interaction in English.

The amount of time it takes an adult to learn English varies from person to person and depends on such factors as the individual's age, educational background, level of literacy in the native language, and opportunities to interact with native English speakers. However, it is generally accepted that it takes from **5-7 years** to go from not knowing any English at all to being able to accomplish most communication tasks ([Collier, 1989](#)).

As a volunteer, you can make the most of the learners' time by choosing materials related to the learner's needs. There are books, websites, and other supplemental materials available. As a volunteer you may need guidance in choosing appropriate new material and resources. Your coordinator will be available to help you with this.

