

## HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND LOVE TUTORING



*by Richard D. Lieberman, Tutor*

The Literacy Council of Montgomery County operates with approximately 13 professional staff and 330 active volunteer tutors. Together they provide literacy training and tutoring to more than 500 adults at any given time. When I initially read a recruiting advertisement about the Literacy Council tutoring program, it sounded interesting and rewarding, but I wasn't sure how successful I would be as a tutor. Although I had taught professional courses to adults before, I had never tutored and I had some concerns about potential language barriers. But in 2012 I signed up and took two days of training that convinced me I should try it. If I could make a connection with my students, I thought, I could help them improve their English.

You should know that tutoring isn't just teaching someone to speak English. You can, of course, do that and nothing more. But if you want to experience the full benefits of teaching English to foreign-born students, you will open yourself up to learning about other cultures as well as share information with your students about American cultures, traditions, and holidays. You might find yourself helping someone through the often daunting paperwork involved in applying for a job or applying for U.S. citizenship, for example.

I confess I didn't have the full picture of what being a tutor could actually mean when I began this process, but having done it for 3 years, I'm confident I know what it entails now! And I wouldn't trade it for anything.

I met my first student at the end of my training. I have tutored eight students over the past three years. Ranging in age from 35 to 64, they came: they came from China, Iran, and Bolivia. All were eager to learn.

Here are a few things I have learned from my tutoring experiences.

**Recruiting Tutors.** There is a chronic shortage of tutors. As I write this, there are 150 potential students on the list waiting for tutors. Unfortunately, the average time they must wait for a tutor is 3 to 6 months. It is not surprising that the first thing a person says when I ask them to tutor is: "I have never tutored and I'm not a teacher; I don't think I could do it." But by explaining the training and the materials, I've found that people frequently overcome their initial reluctance and are willing to give it a try.

**Day of the Book.** A good example of successful recruiting occurred in 2015 at the Day of the Book (a street fair in Kensington, Maryland covering everything related to books). I had promised the Literacy Council staff that I would set up our booth, and was advised that "everything would be set up for us by the Day of the Book organizers." Unfortunately (or fortunately, if you read further), nothing was set up when I arrived. However, I found a very friendly and helpful organizer who told me that she could help us. Not only did she help, but we got a better location on the street! Further, the same organizer had a seemingly endless supply of friends and acquaintances and asked all of them to visit our booth and sign up for tutoring. We signed up 25 new recruits that day, a record number.

**Speak English at Home!** During our training, the instructors always urged us to have our students speak English at home. Most students from other countries are not comfortable speaking English, or don't have many opportunities to practice. They normally speak their native language in the home. But many students have children or friends who speak English quite well and can practice with them for at least an hour a day. I encourage everyone to use their English even if this takes longer to convey what they mean.

**Easy English News.** One of my students brought me a 12-page newspaper called "Easy English News." Every month this newspaper discusses American traditions, holidays and current news, such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, Martin Luther King Day, gun control, and how the criminal justice system works. It is written at a junior high/high school level with every "difficult" word printed in bold letters. The last page contains a definition of every difficult word. Even though students have a limited vocabulary, they can often understand the articles. This newspaper is a fantastic resource and I recommend that every tutor use it.

**Picture Dictionary/Smartphone.** Two of my most useful teaching tools are a picture dictionary and a smartphone for finding relevant pictures. When a student doesn't understand something, many times showing a picture will help. For anything not in the picture dictionary (and that is a small subset of words), one can always find a picture on a smartphone.

**Intangible Concepts.** While it's easy to show a student a picture, it's often not easy to explain abstract concepts like *early* or *late*, *happy* or *sad*, *helpful* and *creative*. I use clocks to explain early and late, smiley faces for happy or sad, and I'm still not sure I have fully conveyed what helpful or creative means.

**Voice of America (VOA) Learning English.** I encourage students to watch American television, and in particular, to listen to the news. But the "regular" news is very hard to understand: the concepts are difficult and the broadcasters speak very fast. I discovered that VOA has hundreds of broadcasts on different smartphone applications and websites that are geared to teaching English to foreign students. The broadcasters speak slowly and distinctly, and there is a very clear "text" version of their speech that scrolls at the bottom of the screen. It is a very useful resource.

**Writing.** The Literacy Council training is wonderful, but most of the emphasis is on speaking and reading. I insist that all my students learn to write short paragraphs and essays. I teach them to write an introduction or topic sentence, followed by 5-6 "discussion" sentences, and then a conclusion. And they must do it that way every time. I am not training them to write novels or scholarly papers, but believe me, they can write understandable English.

**Read and Think.** Our workbooks contain stories or essays, all with follow up questions to check comprehension. It isn't enough for the students to be able to read; they must fully comprehend what the words mean. I tell them to make "mental images" of the words as they read. For example, if the text says "she floated in the air," I tell the students to picture a woman floating along on a white, fluffy cloud in the sky.

**The Accuplacer.** A student wanted to become a professional in a field that required a college degree. I soon determined that ESOL students could be admitted to college (e.g. Montgomery College) only if they demonstrated a good command of English by taking the ESOL Accuplacer test. I tried for almost a year to convince that student to take the test (there's no penalty if you take it several times). My student was very reluctant, and always said she wasn't ready. One day, she came into tutoring and told me she had signed up to take the Accuplacer. We spent the next two weeks writing paragraphs and taking multiple choice reading comprehension tests. After completing the test, she told me: "Because of tutoring, I wasn't afraid any more, and that's why I signed up to take it."

**Little Women.** One of my students wanted to read *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott. The original version is nearly 500 pages and was written in a complex style that my students could not understand. One student, however, found a 97 page version abridged by Deanna McFadden that is written in simpler English. Both of my students purchased it for \$4, and we spent weeks going through it. The book provided a pleasant diversion from our regular workbooks.

**Chinese Menu.** One of my students was a waitress in a Chinese restaurant. I asked her if she had English-speaking patrons. She said most spoke Chinese, but some spoke only English. Then she told me that she had a difficult time answering the English questions about the menu, such as what kind of fish is the "Fish of the Day," is this dish spicy or not, is this dish made with garlic. I asked her to bring me a paper copy of the menu. I went over it with my wife and we developed 30 questions my student should be able to answer. Although she was able to answer some of the questions, she asked the Chinese chefs for answers to the others. She told me it really helped her do her work at the restaurant.

**"Ditto."** I was working with my level 1 student, and thought I'd try something new. I wrote a sentence on the whiteboard, then used ditto marks to repeat the first part of the sentence. I explained to the student that ditto marks meant "same as" the sentence or word above it. I even showed her a YouTube clip of the famous "ditto" scene in the movie *Ghost*. In that scene, after Patrick Swayze is killed by foul play, he tries to have psychic Whoopi Goldberg communicate with his wife, Demi Moore, to let her know how he died. Swayze, a ghost sitting by Whoopi's side, says: "Tell her I love her" and Whoopi repeats that. Moore begins to walk out, saying: "He would never say that." Swayze then says to Whoopi: "Tell her 'ditto'." Whoopi says "ditto" and Moore immediately returns, knowing that her husband would always respond with "ditto" when she told him that she loved him. Several months later, my student and her daughter, who spoke excellent English, were having lunch with my wife and me. Near the end of the meal, my wife told them how much she had enjoyed talking with them. My student immediately said: "Dillo, dillo" and I realized she was saying "ditto." I told her daughter about the movie *Ghost*, the use of ditto, and we all had a wonderful laugh.

**The Birthday Party.** I thought all cultures celebrated birthdays with a party as we do in America. Not true. I tutored two students together for about one year, and they became good friends. One student had a birthday coming up. The other student and I wanted to surprise her with birthday cards and a cake. When the birthday celebrant arrived, we sang the "Happy Birthday" song, and learned that this was not done in China. Both students loved it, and I had the opportunity to impart an American tradition to them.

**What Difference Does It Make?** I remembered the following scene and shared it with several Literacy Council staffers. In the movie *A League of Their Own*, which is about women's professional baseball during World War II, Madonna is diligently teaching another player how to read while traveling on the team bus. However, they are reading from a trashy novel. Another player overhears the words and indignantly says "Mae, what are you giving her to read?" Madonna replies: "What difference does it make, she's reading isn't she? That's the important thing." And the staffers all agreed completely with Madonna.

**Annual Potluck.** Every year, the Literacy Council holds an annual potluck dinner which more than 100 students, teachers, and staff attend. Students are encouraged to dress in clothing of their native country and to bring native dishes as well. It's an amazing, multi-cultural, multi-food potpourri. Everyone mingles—tutors and students—and the students' satisfaction with their improved English is very evident. Students are awarded achievement certificates as they finish workbooks, and the students often give short speeches about their literacy tutoring.

I see the results of the Literacy Council's efforts every day. One skeptical daughter (who spoke perfect English) came to her mother's first tutoring session. She expressed uncertainty that her mother would benefit from the tutoring. I encouraged her to permit me to tutor her mother for a few months. At the end of that time, the daughter called me and said: "I can really see some results."

The Literacy Council program benefits the student in obvious ways. But it also provides a tutor with tremendous benefits and satisfaction. When a staff member repeatedly asked me to have my students write for the newsletter, I was proud of them. And when a family member tells me: "I can see amazing improvements in his (or her) English as a result of tutoring." I know that my efforts have been worthwhile.

There's a decades-old TV advertisement with the tag line: "Try it, you'll like it." The same sentiment works to this day. That is why I tell all prospective tutors who say they cannot tutor, "Try it, you'll like it!"

