



Refugees balance learning English with work

The Oakland Tribune

Section: News

April 4, 2008

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OAKLAND On a recent Thursday, three people sat on the floor of a studio apartment in East Oakland. One day a week, this small space turns into a makeshift classroom.

“Go to the sink,” the teacher, Debbie Brown says, motioning. “Turn on the hot water.”

The trio repeat the phrases and motions after her with enthusiasm. Most of the students are in their late-20s, recent refugees from Thailand and Malaysia who do not speak English. Nearly 300 Karen, Chin and Kachinn refugees have arrived in the Bay Area since summer 2007, many resettling in Oakland's Eastlake district, according to resettlement agencies. Another 200 are expected to arrive by the end of the year. Many of the refugees, displaced by a decades-long, violent conflict in their home country of Burma, lived in camps in Thailand for years—some more than 20 years—and some were born and raised there. Many arrive in this country with limited English skills.

The challenges of learning a new language is tough for any new immigrant, but are harder for refugees who are a relatively new—and small—population. Existing agencies may not be used to serving these groups. Without resources in the refugee camps to learn English and arriving here needing to find a job right away, refugees face the challenge of balancing learning a new language and making ends meet. And unlike immigrants, some refugees had only a few months notice before arriving in the United States.

“In general, the quality of education is not good,” said Janet Zan, a case worker at the IRC, about the education refugees receive in Thai camps. “There is no requirement for learning English. It's up to the individual to see how far they can go with the subject.”

Only about 5 percent of the 130,000 refugees in seven Karen refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border finished Standard 10, the highest level of school offered in the camps, according to a 2005 ZOA Refugee Care education survey. It is equivalent to about a 10th grade education in the United States.

So when refugees arrive in the states, many are playing catch up and are forced to learn English while trying to find work and acclimate themselves to their new home. "Most come to the U.S. with limited language skills," said Laura Vaudreuil, executive director of the nonprofit Refugee Transitions, with offices in San Francisco and Oakland, which provides volunteer teachers like Brown. "We go into the homes and try to meet the needs of the individual refugee students, in the comfort of their homes."

Funded by a mix of individual, private and government donations, the group serves refugees and immigrants from all over, including Afghanistan, Bosnia, Iraq and Somalia. The tutoring sessions are a part of the group's overall mission to help new arrivals become self-sufficient, by learning English and other life skills.

Since summer, 15,000 ethnic minorities from Burma—categorized as Burmese refugees—have arrived in the United States. Mang No, 28, who arrived in August, said learning English is one of his main goals.

"We want to be able to speak English so we can get a better job," he said through an interpreter one day after his tutoring session.

Tutoring is a way for new arrivals to learn without having to trek to school and without the pressures of a large classroom.

"For adults, if they have limited educational backgrounds, having supplemental tutoring is very important," Vaudreuil said.

Refugee Transitions trains about 100 tutors each year, but could use 50 more, the director said, in part because of the recent influx of Burmese refugees. The nonprofit provides training, curriculum and support for tutors and mentors, who should commit to volunteering for at least six months.

While most refugees are enrolled in English classes at local adult schools soon after arriving in this country, some students found that the classes were full or conflicted with their work schedule.

No said he attended adult school for about a month, but that it was interrupted when he found a job, so now finds the home tutoring more convenient.

"Even if you do not need to language skills for the job, you still need to fill out an application in English, you still need to talk to your boss in English, you still need to fill out your taxes," Vaudreuil said.

For some other students, Saturday English classes at the Oakland Burmese Mission Baptist Church are the answer. The younger arrivals are enrolled in public school. Some refugees do speak English, such as Eh Kaw Heh. He takes English classes at the English Center at Mills College, which offers classes for people learning English as a second language. Though Heh was brought up in the same refugee camps as his two

younger brothers, they do not speak much English at all. Heh hopes to receive a master's degree, something he would not have been able to do in the Thai refugee camp.

“I really like it because I would like to speak fluent English,” Heh, 24, said in English. “I have a very strong desire to go to university. I try very hard in English class.”

Local Burmese resident Nyunt Than provided translation. Contact Momo Chang at momo.y.chang@gmail.com.