

Learning the language

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Ozgur Sanli has had her affection for Ottawa tested, many times over. But this place, this "green and blue" place, as Ms. Sanli poetically puts it, is home.

Two years ago, she and her family moved here, leaving behind their life in Istanbul. Two weeks after she arrived, she hurt her back during a visit to Gatineau Park. She found herself in the health-care system, unable to communicate to anyone. Her desire to learn English suddenly became urgent.

Even now, with several physiotherapy sessions a week and two young children, her time is limited. Nonetheless, she's spent much of the past two years improving her English, to the point where she can talk to her language tutor about her feelings, her anxieties and her dreams.

Her tutor, Linda Gaucher, is a volunteer for an organization called English Language Tutoring for the Ottawa Community, or ELTOC, which is funded by Citizenship and Immigration Canada. The program helps newcomers who can't make it out to language classes, because of work schedules, health problems or disabilities, or because they're caring for children or elderly parents.

Ms. Gaucher is a retired public servant who was looking for a way to help her community. She started tutoring Ms. Sanli a few months ago.

"I think I'm learning more than Ozgur is learning. I've become more interested in Turkey. And Ozgur asks me the greatest questions. I don't have the answers, so she helps me reflect on Canadian culture, on the way things are here. That's been very valuable for me."

Ms. Sanli was a physics teacher in Turkey and her husband was a mechanical engineer for a big multinational. He speaks English, but he's had trouble finding work here (he's now getting his master's degree). The children, aged 4 and 9, learned English within a few months, are in French immersion and already feel at home.

And Ms. Sanli does too, despite the rocky start. She credits ELTOC for that. In the aftermath of the accident, she says: "Canada was bad dream. After that I see ELTOC, I see teachers, I see people very nice, good people. I am getting to know Canada."

Indeed, she says that in Ms. Gaucher, she has found her "Canadian family." A year ago, she says, she never wanted to talk, and would cry all the time. "But now, I am smiling." It's one of the most brilliant smiles I've seen.

David Luke and his family moved here as part of the Canadian government's resettlement of Karen refugees from the Thai-Burma border. He lived in refugee camps from 1991 until he moved here 10 months ago. He and his wife, Ah Nay Htoo, have jobs that keep them busy, not to mention their three children. So ELTOC sends a tutor, Justin Stefanik, a teacher who's going back to school and has some flexibility in his schedule.

Everyone who learns a new language has his or own challenges to overcome, as so many Ottawans know well from their experiences learning French or English. Ms. Sanli finds writing English more difficult than speaking, and in conversation she will charge her way through a sentence even if she has to make mistakes to do it. Mr. Luke finds speaking more difficult than writing, and seems to gear himself up to get out perfect sentences. I empathize with him,

IMAGES



Pat McGrath, The Ottawa Citizen
 Linda Gaucher, left, volunteers for an organization called English Language Tutoring for the Ottawa Community. Gaucher is teaching Ozgur Sanli who moved here with her family two years ago from Istanbul. **(FPinfomart: Allowed, Canada.com: Allowed)**

as I'm the same in French.

"I want to go to school because I have three kids," he says. He has to earn an income, and while he's able to work now as a cleaner, he knows English skills will help his prospects for the long term.

Besides, he dreams of taking his driving test.

Mr. Stefanik has some experience teaching English as a second language in classrooms, but he's found that teaching individuals or families in their homes has its own rewards and challenges. "You have to have patience. You have to be a good listener, rather than a good talker."

Not all volunteers have to have backgrounds in ESL, as Mr. Stefanik does. ELTOC asks its volunteers for a six-month commitment of two hours a week, and it provides training and materials.

ELTOC expanded in the spring, allowing it to bring its waiting times down. Now, if a newcomer is referred to ELTOC, he or she only has to wait a few weeks or a few months at most. But there's a constant stream of new referrals; there are about 40 people on the waiting list now. That means ELTOC needs at least that many volunteers, and it prefers to have more volunteers than waiting students, so it can offer students tutors of their own gender who live nearby.

When Canadians think about "language training for immigrants," we probably think of it as a sterile requirement, a chore for both parties. It can be, instead, the way that newcomers put down roots in Ottawa, the way they start to make this place their home.

Ozgur Sanli keeps in touch with her family in Turkey by instant-message. I want to know how other immigrants and refugees in Ottawa are keeping in touch with friends and family back home. E-mail me at kheartfield@thecitizen.canwest.com, and I'll post the responses on my blog, at ottawacitizen.com/worldnextdoor. Tell me what kind of news you share and how you share it.

Kate Heartfield is a member of the Citizen's editorial board.

Illustration:

• Colour Photo: Pat McGrath, The Ottawa Citizen / Linda Gaucher, left, volunteers for an organization called English Language Tutoring for the Ottawa Community. Gaucher is teaching Ozgur Sanli who moved here with her family two years ago from Istanbul.

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