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An Observational Study Among Refugee Students Over 60 Years Old

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Abstract

Refugees who come to the United States of America are culturally and linguistically diverse. Adopting a new culture and learning new languages are always a challenge and this is particularly true for older adults. The English Language Center (ELC) and the SHINE program at Boise State University is a platform for older adult refugees to learn and overcome the challenges of adapting to a new place. The observational study is going with the help of center of Aging, Boise State University. The purpose of this observational study is to gather information about the experiences of refugees over the age of 60 in the language classes from a social and health perspective. Preliminary findings indicate that the challenges include hearing and vision problems, difficulty in understanding and learning English, and lack of social interaction. Additionally, due to language barriers between the teachers, volunteers and students the transition process has not been as smooth as expected.

Keywords

refugees, bilingual, language classes, health services

Disciplines

Public Health Education and Promotion



An Observational Review of Elder Refugees

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Introduction

Refugees are people who have been forced to flee their country because of persecution, war, or violence.¹ More than 87,000 people were resettled as refugees in the United States or were granted asylum status during 2012.² Adopting a new culture and learning new languages are always a challenge and this is particularly true for older adults. The Department of Homeland Security reported the following age demographics of older refugees in 2012: 55-60, 2,441 (4.2 %); 65 years and older, 1,816 (3.1 %) of the total 58,179 refugees.³

The purpose of this study was to gather information regarding the experiences of elder refugees in the language class from a social and health perspective and to monitor the attendance and participation of students in class as a means of exploring achievements. The study identifies weaknesses and strengths and offers potential solutions.



Methods and Approach

This observational project was conducted with 27-33 participants in the elders class delivered by English Language Center with support from the Boise State University SHINE Program. The elders participating in this study were from Iraq, Burundi, Burma, Somalia, Bhutan, and Congo.

The research was conducted primarily during the second hour of language class. The focus of this portion of the class is on social interactions and engaging students in out-of-classroom activities, such as trips to the Boise Public Library. Information was gathered through conversations with and observations of students.

Findings

Social Interaction

Students appeared to be well adjusted to the class setting and exhibited friendly behaviors regardless of their different backgrounds. Students preferred to sit with a person who speaks the same or a similar language. Out-of-class activities provided an opportunity to socialize and appeared to be most effective if groups were small.

Learning Observations

Writing and reading are among the biggest challenges facing students. Students are at different levels making it difficult to teach, plus language barriers between students and teacher slows the learning process.

Potential Health Concerns

- Vision
 - o 6 of 15 with glasses continue to have problems vision
- Hearing
 - o 3 of 31 have evident hearing problems
 - o None of the students had a hearing aid
- Stress and Anxiety
 - o 7 of 31 appeared stressed and expressed concerns about language, work, potential loss of benefits
- Lack of Confidence and Self-Esteem
 - o 18 of 31 expressed concern for memory, interacting or talking to others outside of class



Conclusion

- Students face multiple challenges that impact their ability to learn.
- Having students enroll throughout the year makes instruction difficult. Standardizing the registration period would help minimize this challenge.
- Health check-ups would be a valuable out-of-class activity.
- SHINE volunteers, family, friends, neighbors, doctors and others play a important role in helping elder refugees.
- More bilingual volunteers need to be available.

Suggestions

- Create groups of students with a similar level of English during reading and writing in class.
- Group students with similar languages when explaining new materials.
- Create in-class activities that require participation and interaction.
- Involve family members in the out-of-class activities.

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