

Bridging the Language Gap for Refugees: the Role of Electronics



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Project Summary

The aim of this project is to add English language learning software such as Rosetta Stone to the current education curriculum at Mary's Place in an effort to help refugees improve their English proficiency. The hope is that by bridging this language gap, refugee families can adjust and thrive better in their new home.

Background

Each year, tens of thousands of refugees are resettled in the US, which is only a fraction of the millions of people that get displaced from their homes worldwide. Coming from dangerous, sometimes war-torn countries, this population is faced with innumerable challenges, even after arriving to this land of opportunity. Some of these struggles stem from the presence of a language barrier, which creates limitations in communication and leads to decreased job opportunities, increased isolation, and worse health outcomes for refugees and their children.

Mary's Place is a refugee outreach center in Rochester whose mission is to serve as "an enrichment center for refugees to find independence and gain citizenship." Among many of its services, Mary's Place offers teacher-run didactic English language learning classes. While this is a wonderful resource, the number of refugees in these classes and their varied backgrounds and language skills create multiple challenges for both teacher and student. One method that may alleviate some of these stressors is incorporating computers into the classroom. Several studies have shown that combining electronic language-learning software, such as Rosetta Stone, with didactic teaching, especially in the dedicated student, may be more beneficial for learning a foreign language than didactic teaching alone.

Goals

- Improve English language proficiency within the refugee community in Rochester by combining English language software with didactic teaching
- Enhance familiarity with the use of computers in the refugee population
- Facilitate the gap in communication between refugees and native English speakers to alleviate one of the countless challenges that come with living in a foreign country

Methods

1. Obtain supplies:
 - Funding through grants and donations
 - Laptops, Rosetta Stone, headsets, and laptop cases
2. Assess feasibility
 - Pilot the program with 4 units
3. Create software familiarity among users
 - Leave computers at Mary's Place for ~1 month
4. Lend computers to 4 dedicated learners to take home
 - Visit Mary's Place regularly to gauge progress
 - Reward tokens to promote motivation
5. If the program proves feasible, recruit 4 additional students
 - Implement pre- and post-program proficiency testing

Current Progress

- Funding:
 - Website: wordsthatunite.com
 - Hoekelman Center Grant
- Supplies:
 - Laptops purchased through E-Waste, a local refurbishing company
- **Pilot program implemented in late January 2018**
 - Mary's Place teacher introducing software
 - Recruiting volunteers to work with individuals during Rosetta Stone lessons

Future Directions

- Create an assessment to objectively measure English proficiency at the start vs the end of the program
 - Those receiving didactic teaching alone to serve as controls
- Recruit graduates from the program to mentor new participants
 - Enhance relationships among refugees
- Built on acquired knowledge of how to use computers
 - Career building
 - Easier navigation of society

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