Welcoming the Stranger: A Guide to the ESL Breakfast Club

Jane Wilson Barboza

In honor of Nancy Mullio, the first to believe in the possibility of the ESL Breakfast Club, and all the loving volunteers and tutors who made the project possible.

This book is written in hopes of inspiring other ESL Breakfast Clubs to take root and grow according to the interests, strengths, and passions of their members.
About the Author and Director

Jane Wilson Barboza, M.S., has spent her educational career teaching students from Kindergarten through graduate school level. She has taught or served in elementary, middle school, and high school levels, both in public and charter schools. A decade devoted to teaching students and training teachers in a program of early literacy intervention convinced her of the power of one-on-one instruction, interactive writing, contingent conversations between teacher and student, and building upon the strengths of students. Of particular interest to her throughout her career has been bilingual education, supporting English Learners, and serving students with mild to moderate disabilities. She has demonstrated her firm commitment to supporting educators while teaching courses to graduate and undergraduate students at California State University Long Beach and Loyola Marymount University.

Jane is an artist and musician, active in social justice groups, mother of two adult children and grandmother of one, soon-to-be three.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction to the ESL Breakfast Club</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whom Would We Teach?</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Would We Teach?</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Materials</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Babysitting</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And For Breakfast?</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteer Tutors</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparing the Tutors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting the Tutors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diagnostic Assessment</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music As Centerpiece</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Projects and Field Trips</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions and Answers</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Closing</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction to the ESL Breakfast Club

The City of Long Beach is host to numbers of immigrants who bring with them their families. Whether Cambodian, Korean, Latino, Filipino, or Hmong, the dedication to making better lives for their children is universal. The women in these cultures typically provide the unpaid labor needed to raise the children and run the households and are supported in some but not all cases by men who work long hours in low-paying jobs. Their courage in the face of seemingly unrelenting adversity is not the stuff of newspaper headlines, but it is no less remarkable.

The ESL Breakfast Club arose five years ago in response to the need of immigrant women to improve their English skills in order both to enter the world of work once their children are of school age and to support their children in English-medium instruction. Under the auspices of local United Methodist Churches, Founder and Director Jane Wilson Barboza recruited volunteer English-speaking tutors and assigned each to an immigrant parent or grandparent. With backgrounds in education, medicine, engineering, and parenting, these tutors found themselves learning as much as their students. The tutors came to know the immigration stories, the love of family, the challenges on the path to citizenship, the heartaches and resilience of people who had left their homes and families behind in war-torn countries wracked with poverty. In return, the students gave back
of whatever they possessed, reflected in their writing, their growing confidence, and their singular accomplishments. The resulting bridge forged between the cultures is one that can never be destroyed by hatred, prejudice, or cruelty.

In Part 1 of this guide we provide a history the ESL Breakfast Club and its attendant challenges and triumphs. Part 2 is a blueprint for individuals and groups inspired to set up similar projects in their communities. It is our hope that at least some of our readers will find the guide useful in bringing together in a spirit of joy and creativity people whose paths might never have crossed. We dedicate the guide to the community—tutors and students— that is the ESL Breakfast Club.
A History of the ESL Breakfast Club

The Call to Action

Stirring words issued by the United Methodist Church in 2012 inspired the formation of the Breakfast Club. They are worth quoting at length:

The United Methodist Church affirms the worth, dignity, and inherent value and rights of all persons regardless of their nationality or legal status. United Methodist churches throughout the United States are urged to build bridges with migrants in their local communities, to learn from them, celebrate their presence in the United States and recognize and appreciate the contributions in all areas of life that migrants bring.

(The Book of Resolutions of the United Methodist Church 2012, Resolution 3281)
Numerous calls to action follow, including the one below:

*Begin English as a second language classes as part of a ministry to migrant communities*

Stirring words indeed. When I read them, I saw the whole thing—volunteer tutors working one-on-one, copious amounts of singing aloud together, and an opportunity to apply all that I had learned and experienced in my life. It drew upon years of teaching and learning in bilingual contexts, as well as the experience of watching wise and powerful people grow older. I knew what to do.
Whom Would We Teach?

We located a body of Latina mothers and grandmothers enrolled in classes at the Neighborhood Church/La Vecindad. This Church, supported by five sister Methodist churches, had set as its mission to meet the needs of urban residents. It was located in a community of low-income families on the west side of Long Beach, California. Most of the parents had emigrated from Mexico and Central America. The statistics were ours for the finding. For the years 2010-2014, 67% of the population in the encompassing zip code was Latino; 11%, African American; 15%, Asian; and 5% Caucasian. Of the Latino population, 85% came from Mexico; 5%, from Guatemala; 4%, from Honduras; and 3%, from El Salvador. While 43% of the residents older than 18 were born in other countries, 92% of their children (those under 18) were born in the United States. (Claremont Graduate University, lbcdb.cgu.edu). Those children attend school in the Long Beach Unified School District, where, with the exception of several dual-immersion schools, they are taught almost exclusively in English. Consequently, their parents need to learn English well in order to communicate with their children and their children’s teachers, to help with homework and to understand the
expectations of schools very different from the ones they attended in their home countries
Compounding the challenges of learning English are poverty, extremely high cost of housing, overcrowding, and crime. Between 2010 and 2014, thirty-six per cent (36%) of the population in the surrounding zip code lived below the poverty level—the highest percentage of all the Long Beach zip codes. A scarcity of affordable housing causes families to live in tiny cramped apartments, making the population density of 394 people per acre the highest in the City. Incidents of violent crime (murder, rape, assault, battery) were 83.4 per 10,000 people. Battery and narcotic crimes occurred at 100 per 10,000 population; crimes against family and children were the highest in the City, at 35 per 10,000.

Immigration status has been an ever-present concern in an area where 69% of those over the age of 18 are not yet U.S. citizens. Since the election of 2016, concerns about possible deportation have heightened a very real fear of being separated from family. This anxiety has had direct impact many of our students. When our original site was sold to a developer, rumors abounded in the neighborhood that agents from Immigration and Customs Enforcement were pounding on the doors at night, searching for people in the United States without documents. We closed down classes mid-term and found a welcoming location in a nearby church. Even walking to this supposedly “safe” environment, some students continue to fear being stopped and questioned.
How would we teach?

“... to teach is to learn, so that teacher and learner are the same”

— from Accept This Gift: Selections From A Course in Miracles

The challenges facing parents and grandparents seeking to improve their English are many. The general burdens of poverty, high costs of housing, overcrowding, crime, and immigration status create specific obstacles to schooling. Many English Learners—particularly women—function almost completely separately from mainstream culture, keeping to their own and generally not participating in English-speaking community events or neighborhood meetings. As a result, the opportunities to learn and practice the new language shrink dramatically. Parents with pre-school age children need to bring those children to class with them, and babysitters are needed to allow time to concentrate on learning. Resources for tuition and books are so meager that parents are discouraged from enrolling in area community college classes. In addition, transportation is mostly on foot, so that students had to be able to walk to class. Finally, food shortage looms large even for families with working fathers. Students and their pre-school children often arrive in class hungry. The task of supplying high-quality teaching that would encourage and allow students to attend consistently seemed enormous.

At the outset, our questions were numerous: Where to locate the classes so that students could avoid bus rides? What to do about books and materials? How to provide babysitting for pre-school age children? How could we feed hungry bodies and brains? How could we penetrate the barriers created by lack of confidence and opportunities to practice the new language? Most importantly, how could we find teachers to address widely divergent levels of English mastery?

Location. Proceeding one obstacle at a time, we set about creating solutions. More than a little serendipity descended on us as we organized for action. First, we began the project in a downtown Methodist hub of social services called the Neighborhood Church/La Vecindad, located in an area dense with low-income families—all within walking distance. A
bilingual pastor-in-training, Jacqueline Vives, had been conducting classes for parents living in the area and was seeking to begin an ESL class. Her dilemma was finding a teacher willing to work gratis with English Learners whose mastery of English ranged from beginning to intermediate levels. Ms. Vives seized upon our solution and harnessed her energy and resources to the task of opening a class.

**Materials**

Although the Neighborhood Church had collected a few discarded, out-of-date ESL texts and a notebook full of transparencies, there were not enough resources to supply a class. A professional contact who has sworn us to anonymity was retiring from years of representing publishers serving bilingual communities. She arrived with a truck filled with English and bilingual dictionaries, and excellent, recently-published ESL texts written expressly for adults. Six years later, we are still drawing on that inventory. And as students began to create their own books, we became less reliant upon published texts.

Simultaneously with teaching tutors to create books in collaboration with their students, we collected published books that adults could read to their
children. For our audience, such books solved several problems. Books for beginning readers with strong story lines, clear illustrations, and understandable language lend themselves to learning English sentence structure. They are short, so that the language load is not unduly heavy, and the stories are interesting enough that children at home are attracted to them—giving their parents multiple opportunities to re-read them.

Babysitting

In order to allow mothers to concentrate on their learning, we hired bilingual childcare workers and situated them in a room not far from the class. Their job was to see to the safety of their young charges, read them stories written in Spanish and English, and begin to weave a caring community around them. Although they had ready access to the parents studying close by for diaper changes and visits to the bathroom, the babysitters relied on
years of experience in childcare settings. They worked in pairs and were patient enough to allow parents and children to separate gradually, as several of the youngest children had never been cared for in a group with other children.

Excellent babysitting was crucial to the success of the ESL Breakfast Club. Parents find it possible to focus on new learning only when they know their children are safe and in loving and capable hands.

And for breakfast?

Until we found funding for food and coffee, all our breakfast food came from volunteers. Before anyone at the Los Altos United Methodist Church understood what the ESL Breakfast Club really was, they showered us with scones, peanut butter and jelly, and enough bottles of juice to last for two years. For instance, Esther, an experienced baker, took on the task of preparing nutritious breakfast bars and cookies that would appeal to our students and their children. Her husband, Jim, a volunteer tutor, appeared each week with trays of mouth-watering food. For Thanksgiving in 2015, Esther and Jim prepared two turkeys and fed nearly 100 people, including students and their children, tutors, and invited guests.

Breakfast time was an ideal beginning for each class. Not only were people fed, but tutors and students had opportunities to converse in a relaxed and informal setting. Children joined their parents until class began, at which point they transitioned to babysitting.
Volunteer tutors

Tutors were unanimous in their wish to teach enough English to their students to make a difference in their lives. Several were retired teachers who knew how to adapt their teaching to individual needs. Others were parents of adult children, church members, retired engineers, or university students. One city council staffer was so taken with the program that she volunteered to tutor despite an almost impossibly hectic schedule.

Preparing the tutors. Without teaching backgrounds, however, many tutors were tentative and nervous about serving as ESL tutors. We devised a four-hour interactive preparation in basic ESL teaching techniques and produced a tutor’s handbook (see Appendix 1) to accompany the training (see Appendix 2). A description of each student’s levels and accompanying materials were included in the notebooks.

Supporting the tutors. Ongoing support to the tutors was vital. The director made herself available to coach and demonstrate, encourage and observe. As they met their students and began to feel at ease with them, most tutors gained in confidence and could initiate teaching activities without much guidance. On many class days tutors stayed for 30 minutes to compare experiences, share ideas, and ask for assistance. In these
sessions, leaders emerged who brought in new ideas, additional resources, and encouragement to their peers.

Even with this level of support, however, not every volunteer felt successful. Some were disconcerted by the lack of a fixed curriculum or frustrated with their own limitations. University students were usually in transition to permanent jobs and would have to give up the volunteering after one or two rounds of classes. Other tutors were incapacitated by ill health or difficulties in walking.

Despite these challenges, however, a community of 15-20 dedicated and inspired volunteers and students has developed over the years and continues to sustain the ESL Breakfast Club.
Diagnostic Assessment

Despite the preliminary training, even very experienced teachers felt apprehensive as the first day of classes approached. Each new student was asked to come in for a one-on-one interview, so that we could learn more about their families, their goals, their talents and experiences. We spoke all in Spanish at first (except with Korean and Russian students) and probed as sensitively as possible to understand why each wanted to learn English and what each hoped to achieve. With very few exceptions, all were literate in their home languages and had attended at least four years of school as children. As students relaxed into conversation, trust began to build; and doors to open. Every so gently, we introduced prompts in English, surveyed understanding of the language, read books together and worked together to form and write sentences. As soon as each began to falter, we retreated and engaged with them at a level where they felt comfortable.

Each interview lasted 45 minutes to one hour and yielded much productive information. We summarized the results, assigned each to a tutor, and wrote out a few simple suggestions for getting started. At the orientation each tutor received a packet of materials he or she might choose to use with the assigned student. Even though the program for each was different from all the others, the starting points helped to put the tutors at ease. Some chose different routes and never looked back, but others relied on the suggestions to get started, until they gained the confidence to move forward on their own. Crucial to the support of the tutors, however, was the presence of the director circulating among the tutoring tables, demonstrating, observing, answering questions, and suggesting other resources. 
(See supplemental appendix for description of tools used in diagnosis)
Music cemented our growth as a community: singing together is a joyful way to begin classes. Music provides opportunities to learn and repeat many times the phrases and words contained in each song. There is safety and comfort in singing in a group, particularly when people are not confident of their musical abilities. Numbers of tutors are musicians and happy to contribute their talents, and media sources abound with lyrics, music, and accompaniments to thousands of tunes.

The choice of repertoire matters greatly. There are numerous pieces, by both contemporary and 20th century artists, that carry messages of love, hope, community, and resistance to tyranny. Lyrics, charts, and recorded accompaniments can be found digitally, allowing access to thousands of tunes. Websites such as musicnotes.com, for instance provide such access for modest prices. *See Appendix 4 for a list of suggested titles.*

In the photo above, a pastor of the Los Altos United Methodist Church, accompanies us. His presence in the early stages of the Breakfast Club not only bolstered our singing, but sent a message that our work together was important and inspiring.
As we got to know one another, ideas for projects and field trips proliferated. A small shrine for Día de los Muertos blossomed to fill the entire corner of a room, where lights, candles, photos and works of art created by students delighted the eye. Tutors caught on to the notion of honoring those who preceded us and brought in their photos as well. The students demonstrated by example the strong ties that strengthen the resilience of immigrants from Mexico and Central America. The shrine remained in place for months afterward and was only reluctantly dismantled when we had to move from our original location.
At the beginning of one school year, we walked to the Long Beach Main Library, where we learned how to access ESL materials, computers, books on tape, videos with subtitles, and children’s books in English and Spanish.

Students took vivid interest in visiting Rancho Los Cerritos, a sprawling farm not far from our classroom. Here stories of the Spanish and Mexican inhabitants of our City intermingle with those of the white settlers who took over much later. Numbers of us commented on the similarities between lodging for the workers and those they had lived at in their countries of origin.

Tutors began to take ownership of the Breakfast Club, engaging students in quilting and sewing book bags. Once again we saw evidence of the prowess and resourcefulness of our students. Even though instructions
were all in English, many tutors found themselves learning sewing skills from their charges.
At the end of more recent rounds, we began to savor splendid potluck lunches. Students and tutors alike delighted in sharing in pots of homemade Korean sweets, tamales, posole, rice, quiche, casseroles, and tres leches. Each shared meal knit us more closely together as a community, reminding us that to give is to receive.

Venturing even farther afield, a group of tutors and students traveled to see a play about immigration, “The New Colossus,” by Tim Robbins’ Actors Gang, in west Los Angeles. The actors on stage had each researched their own family immigration stories and dramatized them in 13 different languages. Tim Robbins queried the audience about their stories afterward, and our students spoke up in English about their heritage and crossings into the United States. An unforgettable night at the theatre reminded us of the power of the arts and strengthened our resolve to continue bringing arts, music, and theatre to the Breakfast Club.
Results

“Teaching and learning are your greatest strengths now, because they enable you to change your mind and help others to change theirs.”

— from Accept This Gift: Selections From A Course in Miracles

Assessing the results of the project requires multiple metrics. Numbers tell one story. In six years time, over 100 students have participated and 50 tutors oriented. Recruitment of new students has consisted entirely by word-of-mouth communication. We have held 133 classes and served up breakfast for students, their children and tutors each time. Students and their tutors have made four field trips, changed class locations once, and conducted 13 graduations at which each student spoke in English. Originally funded out-of-pocket from interested donors, we are now financially self-sustaining.

Numbers, however, describe only one part of our success. With tutors sharing the pen at the hard spots, students have produced and read their
own books. Nowhere is progress more evident than in those pages. Each sentence springs from the student’s own life, and is then shaped, in collaboration with the tutor, into grammatically correct utterances and recorded. Each week the entire book is re-read, providing practice in speaking and reading. Tutors who protest that they themselves find writing arduous have become skillful in this interactive writing.

The words of participants cast yet another light on the Breakfast Club. One mother of a son identified with autism said,

“I want to improve my English. My son now speaking [sic] ‘my mom,’ ‘my dad.’ Thank you so much.”

Another student:

“When I start here I don’t know anything about English, but when I go to the college, I grew a lot in my English, and I finish a two-year program in one year. Now I can speak and I know the person can understand me. For me it’s a wonderful place and a wonderful tutor. I feel very special . . . . here.”

Tutor formally skeptical about “illegal immigration”:

It’s made me realize that the Latino community (and other nationalities that are here) can become a better part of our overall city life by improving their English. They are part of us—
whether they’re here legally or not. That part doesn’t matter. They’re here, and we need to make them feel welcome."

A student with three daughters in English-medium instruction: 
*My life is getting better because it’s easier for me to speak. I speak to the teachers of my children, to my doctor. That’s really important to me. I can help to translate for another person*

Tutor, when asked what is the ESL Breakfast Club: 
*It’s the most wonderful invention! We begin with breakfast. We sit around tables and we chat in English. Then we do some singing or choral reading to practice accent and rhythm. Then we tutor [one-on-one], and we’re always surprised at how fast the time goes. I’m impressed that very few of the tutors spent their lives teaching. Now they’re seeing the joy of teaching something they know to someone who wants to learn.*

*This is the best thing that I do every single week. I absolutely love having one student with me. I don’t have to do anything except listen to her and help her with what she wants to do. I feel so important: I am one more step in her journey.*
Most of the tutors are retired professionals, eager to make a difference: 
*My experience is that finally I have found something to do in retirement that is meaningful. It reminds me of the Peace Corps, which was a very empowering experience for me.*
Our students report accomplishing goals they had only dreamed of reaching—passing a citizenship exam, enrolling in community college, leading a school site council, communicating with a child with a disability for the first time in English. Perhaps the most enduring legacy of the ESL Breakfast Club, however, is the way in which it changes the hearts and minds of all who participate. “This is about much more than teaching English!” exclaimed a new tutor after her first session with her student. A student inspired a Church group by saying, “The ESL Breakfast Club changes lives.” A pastor retiring from service singled out the Breakfast Club volunteers as a group who have particularly inspired his ministry. The director, who recently lost a much loved father, found solace in the community that has grown up in this mission. In one way or another, each of us has relived the truth of the Old Testament verse:

“. . . . and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?”
—Micah 6:8

With these photos and descriptions, you have seen the fruits of five years of collaboration. The following section provides answers to questions you might have as you dream your own unique version of the ESL Breakfast Club.

A moderately-priced series of appendices under separate cover contains a tutor handbook, a procedure for diagnostic assessment of students, a guide to orientation for the tutors, a sample budget, and a list of suggested song titles. Visit eslbreakfastclub.com janewbarboza@gmail.com for more information, with the header “ESL Appendices”.
Questions and Answers

Who leads the ESL Breakfast Club?

For Director Jane Wilson Barboza, the Breakfast Club has been a labor of love. With her background in languages and the arts, and a lifetime of experience as a teacher and teacher educator, she feels that the Breakfast Club is a culmination of her interests and experiences. Since its beginning, however, tutors, students, and friends of the ESL Breakfast Club have stepped in to help with food, music, materials, projects, ideas for field trips, and logistics. Its success could not have happened without these generous hands and hearts.

No two ESL Breakfast Clubs could ever look exactly the same: the project is a reflection of the interests and personalities of its participants. Others who take up the ideas described here will create innovations and projects particular to the resources at hand and the needs of the students.

Is this a faith-based organization?

We began the Breakfast Club as a project of the Los Altos United Methodist Church (UMC), in Long Beach, California. Inspired by the Call to Action found in the UMC Book of Resolutions, most of our first volunteers did indeed belong to that Church. As the project grew, however, volunteers from many different sources came to us—temples, other churches, neighbors, friends and families of the tutors. Our message of inclusion and celebration of all people transcends church divisions, and music is drawn mostly from non-liturgical sources. Our aim is not to proselytize, but to build community.

How is the ESL Breakfast Club funded?

For the first few months the Breakfast Club was funded out-of-pocket. When leaders of the Los Altos United Methodist (LAUM) Foundation got wind of the success of the project, however, modest grants began to flow. In addition to continuing support from the LAUM Foundation, we have
received funding from an innovative District-level UMC project titled “Living Into The Future Foundation,” as well as donations from friends and supporters. Major expenses include paying for rental space in our host church, hiring babysitters, and securing assistance in setting up and cleaning up. A sample annual budget of approximately $6,200 is included in an appendix that is available for purchase.

How are classes scheduled?

Classes are held once weekly for 90 minutes, in rounds of 10 weeks during the school year. In one calendar year we conduct three (3) rounds, and are dark during the summer months. The 10-week cycles, with breaks between each round, allow tutors to take the time they need to travel, attend to family, or simply rest. One advantage of this arrangement is that tutors don’t feel tied down by expectations of weekly attendance all through the year. It is important that they remain rested and enthusiastic without feeling they are letting down the group.

A disadvantage of the once-weekly class is the very limited time allowed for instruction. When learning a new language, practice and repetition are critical. For this reason, we give homework assignments that can be easily accomplished, even with caregiving responsibilities. Assignments range from watching television 30 minutes daily in English to reading children’s books to family, to singing the words of the songs used in class. Just before the long vacation, we help the students to form plans for continuing their learning independently during the summer. Suggested homework activities can be found among the supplemental appendices.

How do we make music if we are not musicians ourselves?

Music in the ESL Breakfast Club has come through many channels. In our case, the Director is a musician raised among music educators and passionate about sharing music with others. Lyrics are written out on Power Point, illustrated and projected on a large screen, so that tutors and students can see what they are hearing. These lyrics can play a key part in students’ learning. In our program, each student notebook contains a section for lyrics, so that students can use them not only in the group, but
with their tutors, and again as homework practice. Suggested titles for songs that lend themselves well to novice singers are available in a supplemental appendix.

Several tutors have come forward with musical skills of their own, and chances are excellent that any group will contain a tutor or student with musical talents around which a program can be crafted. Lyrics and simple accompaniments can be purchased on musicnotes.com for modest fees.

In spring of 2016, we gathered up recorders and taught all the participants to play simple tunes, also written out with fingerings. Although being a musician helped in this endeavor, there are excellent instructional resources for novice teachers willing to stay just one step ahead of their students. (One such course is titled “The Recorder Karate,” a high-motivational teaching tool that comes with website accompaniments and is available from Plank Road Publishing, Inc. www.MusicK8.com)

Failing any of the resources described above, most songs can be found on YouTube.com. With speakers attached to a computer, the songs and their accompaniments can be projected. Googling, printing out, and distributing the lyrics increases manyfold the power of the activity.

The impact of music during group time is that it creates community. If music seems too daunting an undertaking, consider chorally read chants. They can be found on numerous online resources, and they yield similar results to singing—learning English sentence order, inflection, rhythm, phrasing, and idiomatic expressions. Many are rhymed and cleverly written, so that they can be enjoyed and even memorized over massive numbers of repetitions.

Although music has been a centerpiece of the ESL Breakfast Club since its inception, there are other art forms that bring people together using language. Easy-to-read conversations can be practiced over and over again as students move from tutor to tutor. Readers’ theatre, with several people reading the same parts simultaneously, provides access to English in a secure and non-threatening way. Creating art together using clay, paint, mosaics, and weaving paves the way for English-medium instruction, and students love learning techniques that they can share with their children. Tutors have assembled Power Point presentations of photos from
their travels. Our quilting and sewing projects have allowed us to appreciate our students’ talents, as has cooking with easy no-bake recipes. Yoga and meditation have created a calming and serene environment, especially given the level of stress born by many of us.

In summary, 20-30 minutes of whole-group time at the beginning of each class is vital to setting the students and their tutors at ease so that learning can take place. The talents and needs of both students and teachers will guide the planning of it.

What did not work, and what changes have been made since the Breakfast Club began?
Adjustments have been ongoing since the program began in 2013. It seems every session offers opportunities for refinement. Following are among the most valuable lessons learned.

Having retired professionals serve as volunteers means paying extra attention to their comfort and ease. Dancing may not be possible for every older person. Font sizes in printed materials need to be no smaller than 12, and preferably 14. Larger fonts also benefit our students, many of whom need glasses but cannot afford eye care. Accompany all audio signals with visual information, so that those who are learning the language, or who have difficulty hearing, can follow. Amplify information presented aloud, so that both students and teachers can hear clear and deliberate English speech. Finally, avoid stairs if at all possible, or choose locations with working elevators. Stairs are a hazard both to older volunteers and to young children.

We now choose babysitters with great care; not every volunteer manages capably and projects the message of inclusion we wish to instill. They need to have background in working with young children and to speak the language of the children’s home as well as English. Equip them with books, supplies and activities appropriate for the ages of the children. Insure that babysitters have been tested for TB and passed a live screen background check.
Finally, the whole group activities that typically take place in the first 20-30 minutes of class may not appeal to everyone. One man, for instance, opted out of singing: it was difficult for him to see, even with enlarged print, and he felt embarrassed singing aloud. This man and his tutor simply began their one-on-one work shortly after breakfast. They forged a warm bond avoiding almost all whole-group activities—except for taking breakfast!

What are some of the ongoing challenges of directing an ESL Breakfast Club?

By far the largest continuing challenge is insuring consistent student attendance. All of our students are highly motivated, but they lead complicated lives. Despite their commitment to weekly attendance, last-minute illnesses in the family, emergencies at their children’s schools, sudden opportunities to take on housecleaning gigs, or their own poor health make consistency difficult for some students.

In response, we have developed a policy that students must phone the Director if they are unable to attend a class. This allows time to alert the tutor, and save him or her a trip to class. If more than one class is missed without notification, his or her seat goes to the next student on the waiting list.

Linked to consistency is turnover among students. Again, economic circumstances are usually at play. Affordable housing in our city is extremely hard to find, as are jobs for people with spotty employment history and few credentials. Most often a student is forced to drop out because he or she has found a job, or because of a move out of the area. Such changes are daunting, both for tutors and students, and require a great deal of patience, perseverance, and understanding.

The need for self-care among students has come to number among our highest priorities. As mentioned in the Introduction, our students face a great deal of adversity, including insufficient income, crowded housing, crime, hunger, and fear of family separation. Uninsured or underinsured, all of the women we teach are under tremendous stress, and many of them are overweight, suffering from diabetes and other ailments, or are victims of
past domestic abuse. When we added a period of guided meditation at the beginning of each class, students responded that they found it calming and had never before experienced anything like it.

Providing sufficient training and support for tutors is always a challenge. Most tutors find their way quickly once they have begun working with a student, but for a few the tutoring remains quite demanding, even frustrating. Key is providing sufficient support without causing the teacher to lose face with the student. A very few find an instructional path to which they adhere no matter who the student and his or her response to instruction. It is easy for a frustrated teacher to become demanding and impatient. In these cases, sensitive intervention is always called for in order to protect the student and change the trajectory of the teaching.

All tutors learn by communicating with other tutors. At the beginning of the ESLBC, a practice titled “sifting and sorting” often takes place after class among tutors who wish to stay an extra 20-30 minutes. Here we demonstrate techniques, answer questions, share successes and resolve frustrations. The sessions are led by tutors and entirely voluntary. Sifting and sorting provides another level of support and brings closure to some of the tutors’ questions and concerns.

Securing skilled babysitters and providing them with supervision sufficient to ensure the safety and well-being of the children constitutes an on-going challenge. It is important that the children be close by, but not in the same room as their parents or grandparents. Their space must be safe, child-proof, and adequately stocked with materials and toys. Two babysitters are better than one, even if the number of children is quite low, and they need to be in constant communication with the Director. Although the babysitters are thoroughly vetted and paid a living wage, these requirements are difficult to meet in borrowed spaces. We are always searching for better babysitting arrangements.

Storage of materials requires creative thinking. Our teaching takes place in spaces that are used for multiple purposes, so that each class must be set up and taken down on the day of our meeting. Materials such as toolboxes (equipped with pens, pencils, highlighters, coins for counting and post-it notes), reading books, writing materials, dictionaries, maps, small
whiteboards, music, and coffeemaker, are packed in marked boxes each week and carried to storage in an office, church attic, or home. Computer, LCD projector and speakers are plucked from the Director’s garage the morning of each class and driven to the site. A helper, paid to set up and take down all this equipment, is highly recommended.

Finally, the challenge of leadership has to be mentioned. In our case, the Breakfast Club has been a labor of love for the Director, but the responsibilities are extensive, complex, and at times exhausting. In view of the inspiring outcomes and the many loving hands and hearts that have made those outcomes possible, leadership must be distributed so that it does not fall solely on the shoulders of one person. In the next section (Plans for the Future), we address one promising solution.

What are plans for the future?

Through crowd-funding or grant-writing, we intend to raise money for a part-time Assistant Director. This person would have several responsibilities: assisting with fund-raising, strengthening our presence on social media, assisting with planning, and carrying out administrative functions. Having a person in this capacity will free up the Director to continue diagnostic assessments of the students, support the tutors, and assist other groups interested in beginning ESL Breakfast Clubs of their own. Once an Assistant Director is in place, we can expand the number of tutors and students served.

How can we visit an ESL Breakfast Club class?

Visitors are always welcomed to the Breakfast Club classes. Set aside a Wednesday morning, allowing two hours to observe an entire class and debrief with the Director. Contact Jane Wilson Barboza at janewbarboza@gmail.com

How do I access more specific information about preparing the tutors, diagnosing the students, and budgeting?

If you are interested in beginning an ESL Breakfast Club of your own, understand from the outset that your version of it will differ substantially
from the model laid out in this handbook. The following materials are made available as a starting point and can be purchased by visiting www.eslbreakfastclub.com

Appendix 1—Tutor Handbook
Appendix 2—Orientation
Appendix 3—Diagnostic Assessment Tools
Appendix 4—Suggested songs
Appendix 5—Sample budget

In Closing

The ESL Breakfast Club offers an example of love and acceptance at a time when both are sorely missing from our national conversations. Engaging in its activities has shown us not only how a teacher transforms lives, but how a student transforms her teacher. Over the course of six years, we have tried out ideas, discarded some, expanded on others, but always kept the mission of welcoming the stranger our central tenet. If this story inspires just one person to try something similar, its effects will multiply, making our world a more peaceful and joyful place.

May you have a mind that loves frontiers
So that you can evoke the bright fields
That lie beyond the view of the regular eye.

May you have good friends
To mirror your blind spots.

May leadership be for you
A true adventure of growth.

Excerpt from “For a Leader,” by John O’Donahue, in “To Bless the Space Between Us”