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**MFA Design for Social Innovation  
School of Visual Arts**

**Cohort 2017**

# **KARAOKE CLUB TO LEARN ENGLISH**

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## **SUMMARY**

**New York is one of the most diverse cities in the world. There are around 4 million immigrants who arrive to live and work in this city, but almost half of them are not proficient in English.**

**Through talking to immigrants and English instructors, we found that, in order to learn English, immigrants must practice outside of their English classes. We wanted to meet students where they are, finding ways of learning that are social and fun.**

**We developed Karaoke Club, an alternative space to learn English through singing. In this workshop students get together to study the lyrics, get familiar with new words, practice pronunciation and improve fluency, phonetics and the cultural context of a song. Who would have thought that Frank Sinatra, The Beatles and Stevie Wonder could be great English teachers?**

**“All change begins with language. If you can’t say it, you’ll never get there.”**

**- Cheryl Heller, Chair, MFA Design for Social Innovation**

# immigrants & language

Language is fundamental to communication. As social beings, we need to express our thoughts and exchange ideas. Language is crucial to understand complex information and learn new things. It enriches the human experience and creates a connection to culture.

As Hispanic immigrants living in New York City, we understand the difficulty of adjusting to a new country, culture, and language. From our personal experience of living in neighborhoods with large immigrant populations in New York, we have witnessed the struggle that immigrants face in order to communicate when they are not proficient in English. Simple undertakings such as ordering food, asking for directions or listening to announcements in the train become stressful moments for someone who does not understand or speak English. The fact that immigrants move to a new country where a different language is spoken shows their courage and determination to achieve a better life for themselves and their families. We decided to work on the issue of language learning for immigrants because this population tends to be a hard working yet undervalued and underserved. We wanted to create an innovative approach that would suit their needs.



**Carmen Rosa López**  
*Ecuador*



**Irene Rojas Sotres**  
*Mexico*

**im·mi·grant**

*noun*

a person who comes to live permanently in a foreign country.

# NEIGHBORHOOD CRIME WATCH



WE IMMEDIATELY REPORT  
ALL SUSPICIOUS ACTIVITIES  
TO OUR POLICE DEPARTMENT

**Not knowing the language creates  
confusion and frustration.**

**please clean up  
after your dog**



**dog waste bags**



# ATTENTION

ANY VEHICLE  
LEFT OVER 30 DAYS  
WILL BE SUBJECT  
TO STORAGE FEE  
OF \$10

-against- Plaintiffs,

VERNA EGGLESTON, as Commissioner of the  
New York City Human Resources Administration;  
LINDA GIBBS, as Commissioner of the New York  
City Department of Homeless Services;  
BRIAN J. WING, as Commissioner of the New  
York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance;  
JOHN A. JOHNSON, as Commissioner of the New  
York State Office of Children and Family Services;  
ANTONIA NOVELLO, as Commissioner of the  
New York State Department of Health,

Defendants.

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**UP TO \$2,500 REWARD**  
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**TWO PEOPLE SHOT**

Monday, May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2015 at approximately 11:55 P.M., in front of 370 Lenox Avenue, within the confines of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Precinct in Manhattan, an unknown perpetrator shot and injured a 27-year old female and a 34-year old male causing serious physical injuries.

**1-800-577-8477 (TIPS)**

POSTER YEAR: 2005  
POSTER PCT: 02  
POSTER NUMBER: 0022

**NYC**  
Human Resources Administration  
Department of Social Services

**East End Job Center**  
Business Hours:  
Monday to Friday  
8:30 AM to 5:00 PM

**East End Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program**  
Business Hours:  
Monday to Friday  
8:30 AM to 5:00 PM

**WARNING**

**DRINKING ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES DURING PREGNANCY CAN CAUSE BIRTH DEFECTS**

NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND MENTAL HYGIENE  
THE CITY COUNCIL, Local Law 43

**SALE of**  
cigarettes, cigars,  
chewing tobacco, powdered tobacco,  
shisha or other tobacco products,  
herbal cigarettes, rolling papers  
or smoking paraphernalia,  
to persons UNDER 18 years of  
age is PROHIBITED BY LAW.

## Context: Immigrants & Language

Immigration has a significant role in the configuration of the United States. Historically, this nation was built on immigrants, and it continues to be largely shaped by them. Approximately 41.3 million immigrants lived in the United States in 2013, accounting for 13% of the overall U.S. population.[2] In New York the same year, immigrants were a 37% of the city's population.[3] Most foreign-born people migrate to the United States to find better work opportunities and livelihoods. Creating services and opportunities that cater to this population equals to creating services and opportunities to a large portion of the inhabitants in this country.

For immigrants, language is one of the main obstacles when arriving at a new country, and it is the main barrier to adapting and accessing opportunities. In 2015, approximately 49 percent (21.2 million) of the 43 million immigrants were Limited English Proficient (LEP) individuals.[4] This means that almost half of the immigrant population is in need of ways to learn English. Although immigrants tend to live in neighborhoods where their own language is mostly spoken, their inability to speak English adds to their social isolation. The Encyclopedia of Immigrant Health expands on the effects of migration: "After migration, many immigrants may feel a lack of social support in their new country. They lack the support of the extended family left behind and may feel socially isolated." [5]

**In New York, immigrants represent  
37% of the city's population.**

**49% of the 43 million immigrants  
were Limited English Proficient**









## Implications of Language

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On the other hand, learning English creates many advantages, according to the Migration Policy Institute: “Immigrants who learn English well make their way much more easily in the United States than those who do not. They can obtain a higher level of education and better-paying jobs than people with limited English language skills. They can navigate complex paperwork, understand political debates and introduce themselves to their neighbors. Knowing some English is a requirement for citizenship, the ultimate bond with the United States.”[6]

From our ethnographic research with immigrants, we learned that, regardless of whether they speak English or not, many of them believe that learning English is important and allows access to opportunities.

**Most immigrants believe that English is the door to opportunities such as finding a better job.**

**“I would have liked to learn English. Sometimes you go to places and you are not understood.”**

*Lupita, 64 years old, 25 years living in USA.*

**“I couldn’t devote myself to study 100% because I was the head of my house and had to pay rent and expenses, but I needed to learn a little English to help my daughter.”**

*Miriam A., 50 years old, 10 years living in USA.*



**English is important for immigrants  
and allows access to opportunities.**



ESOL Class in Adhikaar, a Nepalese Community Organization in Flushing, Queens

## Preliminary Research: Language Learning

Despite the desire for immigrants to learn the language of their newly adopted country, the learning process is often challenging and requires long-term commitment. This applies especially to adults. From our interview with Haniff Toussaint, ESOL (English for Students of Other Languages) Program Coordinator at the Brooklyn Public Library, we learned that “It takes about six years to master a new language, and about 1500 hours per year of practice.”[7]

After talking to various ESOL teachers, including Judy Shack from the Queens Public Library at Corona, we came to the conclusion that, as she mentioned, “the best way to learn a language is by practicing.” We also learned that adults are relevancy-oriented, meaning that they are more likely to engage in the education process if they feel connected with their knowledge and experience.

**“It takes about six years to master a new language, and about 1500 hours per year of practice.”**

*- Haniff Toussaint, ESOL Program Coordinator at the Brooklyn Public Library*

**“The best way to learn a language is by practicing.”**

*- Judy Shack, ESOL Teacher at Queens Public Library*

## **Barriers to Learning English for Immigrants**

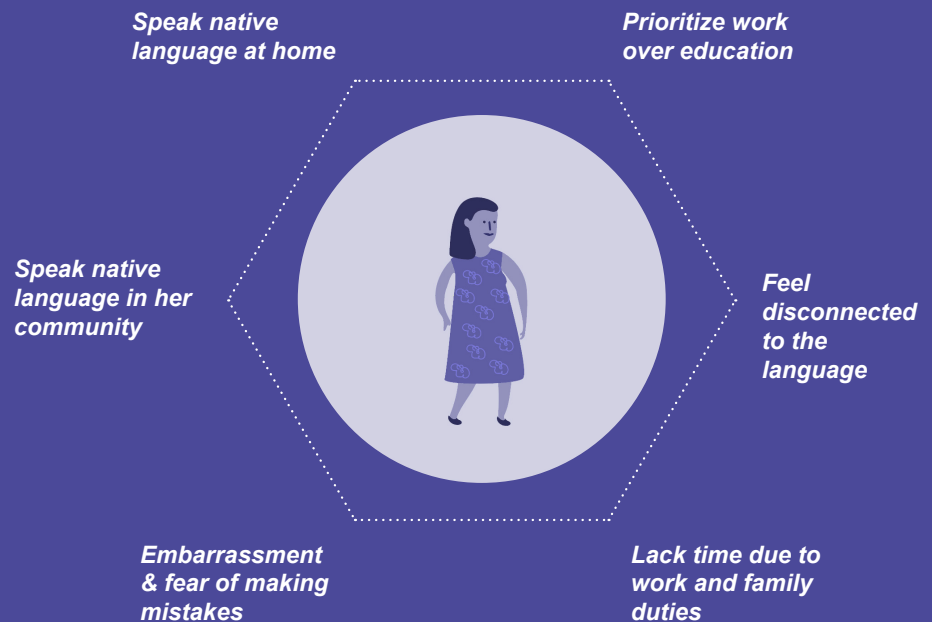
From speaking to immigrants whose first language is not English, we learned that the barriers to learn include embarrassment or shame, fear of making mistakes, and feeling disconnected with the language and the culture. We also learned that people tend to stay within their own ethnic enclaves, in communities where their mother tongue is mainly spoken and where there are less opportunities to practice or learn English in everyday tasks. If people speak their native language at home, they are less likely to learn English.

An article about English learning mentions that “exposure to hearing English is crucial. If someone is working only with people of their own nationality, or at home not meeting English

speakers, they will not learn quickly.” [8] Other barriers include choosing work over education, lacking a safe space to practice the English they already have, and not committing to a long-term learning process.

We approached the Brooklyn Public Library to learn more about the learning process of people who are already enrolled in beginner and intermediate classes. From our research, we realized that, even if people choose to take English classes, the time they spend on a regular class of two days a week and a total of six hours per week is not enough to practice what they learn. In order to learn, they need to complement their English classes with practicing outside of the class.

**If people speak their native language at home, they are less likely to learn English.**




## The Problem

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**Immigrants who are learning English tend to remain in environments in which their native language is spoken and lack a safe space where they can further practice English.**





**We visited Corona in Queens,  
where 64.2% of residents are  
foreign-born.**







**Create a safe space where people can practice English beyond their class and develop the confidence to speak.**



## PROCESS

### Design Research

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We conducted our design research through interviews, intercepts and participant observation.

#### *Interviews & Intercepts*

In order to understand our target audience and the process of learning a new language, we held interviews and intercepts with foreign-born people about learning English. Our initial approach to finding our audience was through interviewing people in Spanish-speaking neighborhoods such as Corona, Queens.

As we progressed with our research, we approached students who are learning English at public libraries, including the Central Brooklyn Public Library and the Queens Library at Corona, where free English classes are held. There, we had the opportunity to talk to both students and teachers about the learning process, and found insights about motivation and barriers to learn English.

#### *Participant Observation*

We attended ESOL classes at Queens Public Library, Brooklyn Public Library and Adhikaar, a Nepalese Community Organization to observe classes and the behavior of students. These guided our findings about the learning process.

Motivations:

**Why do people want to learn English?**

Barriers:

**Why are people not able to learn?**

**“I would like to learn English because I want to be able to talk to my sons.”**

This is Ruth. She works and lives in Bushwick, in a Spanish speaking community. She has been living in the United States for more than 20 years. She would like to learn English, but she hasn't been able to continue with her classes and is unable to learn or practice with her family members, who are bilingual. Throughout the years, she has prioritized her family responsibilities and work over learning English.



Ruth, lives and works in Bushwick

## MOTIVATIONS

- 1 WANT TO COMMUNICATE ON THEIR OWN.
- 2 WANT TO HELP THEIR CHILDREN AND FAMILY.
- 3 WANT TO EXPERIENCE A FEELING OF BELONGING TO A NEW CULTURE AND SOCIETY.
- 4 WANT TO HAVE A BETTER FUTURE FOR THEMSELVES AND THEIR FAMILIES.

*Why do people want to learn English?*

"I'd like to be able to communicate everywhere I go. I have a baby and sometimes is difficult to find a person who speaks Spanish. It is indispensable to speak English."

*Beatriz J., ESOL student at Queens Library at Corona*

"With knowing the language, you can stand up for yourself. You don't need a translator and can express yourself. It seems like speaking English changes your life and you get better opportunities."

*Jaime, ESOL student at Queens Library at Corona*

"I had an ugly experience at Macy's with an employee who didn't want to talk to me because I didn't speak English. I felt bad because people see that I am Hispanic and I don't speak the language and they don't treat me in the same way."

*Aleida, ESOL student at Queens Library at Corona*

"I want to learn English to help my children with their homework, talk to the doctor and ask for directions."

*Juana, ESOL student at Queens Library at Corona*

## BARRIERS

- 1 SPEAKING THEIR OWN LANGUAGE IN THEIR COMMUNITIES.
- 2 EMBARRASSMENT TO SPEAK.
- 3 PRIORITIZING WORK OVER STUDYING ENGLISH.
- 4 MOST IMMIGRANTS ARE HEAD OF THEIR HOUSEHOLD AND SPEND LONG HOURS AT WORK.

*Why are people not able to learn?*

"At the beginning I found a job where everyone spoke Spanish, so I didn't learn English."

*Maria, 35 years old*

"I couldn't take classes at the beginning because the class schedules didn't allow me and I prefer to work."

*Beatriz J., ESOL student at Queens Library at Corona*

"The hardest thing for me was getting used to another language, after 20 years I'm still shy to speak English."

*Tina, 47 years old, 20 years living in U.S.*

"I couldn't devote myself to study 100% because I was the head of the house and had to pay rent and expenses, but I needed to learn a little English to help my daughter."

*Miriam A., 50 years old, 10 years living in U.S.*



## Target audience

The target audience for our intervention was students who are enrolled in an English (ESOL) class, who want to increase the amount of time they practice English outside of the class. We worked with students from beginner to intermediate English levels from the Queens Public Library and Brooklyn Public Library, who are taking free English Language classes.



Central Brooklyn Public Library



Queens Public Library at Corona



Talking to one of the students at Brooklyn Public Library



## Initial Prototypes

After interviewing several ESOL students, we created three workshops at the Queens Public Library and Brooklyn Public Library to further understand the students' weekly schedules, their interests and the opportunities that they have to practice English but have not yet identified.

### WORKSHOP 1: A Day in the Life

For our first workshop at the Queens Public Library, we asked the ESOL students to map what they do during the week and identify the moments in which they practice English in an exercise that we called “A day in the life.” They categorized the feelings they have when speaking English and found patterns about the places where they practice and don’t practice.

#### *Learnings from WORKSHOP 1*

*We found that most students practice English during class, but rarely practice English outside of the class. If they practice outside of the class, the places we identified where they are most likely to practice are public spaces and at home with their children who are bilingual, especially if their children are young. If their children are teenagers or older, they tend to not practice with their parents). Students don’t usually practice English with their partners at home or by themselves. We learned that people are motivated to learn but lack options to practice outside of class. We also understood that people can make any time of day a “practice moment.”*

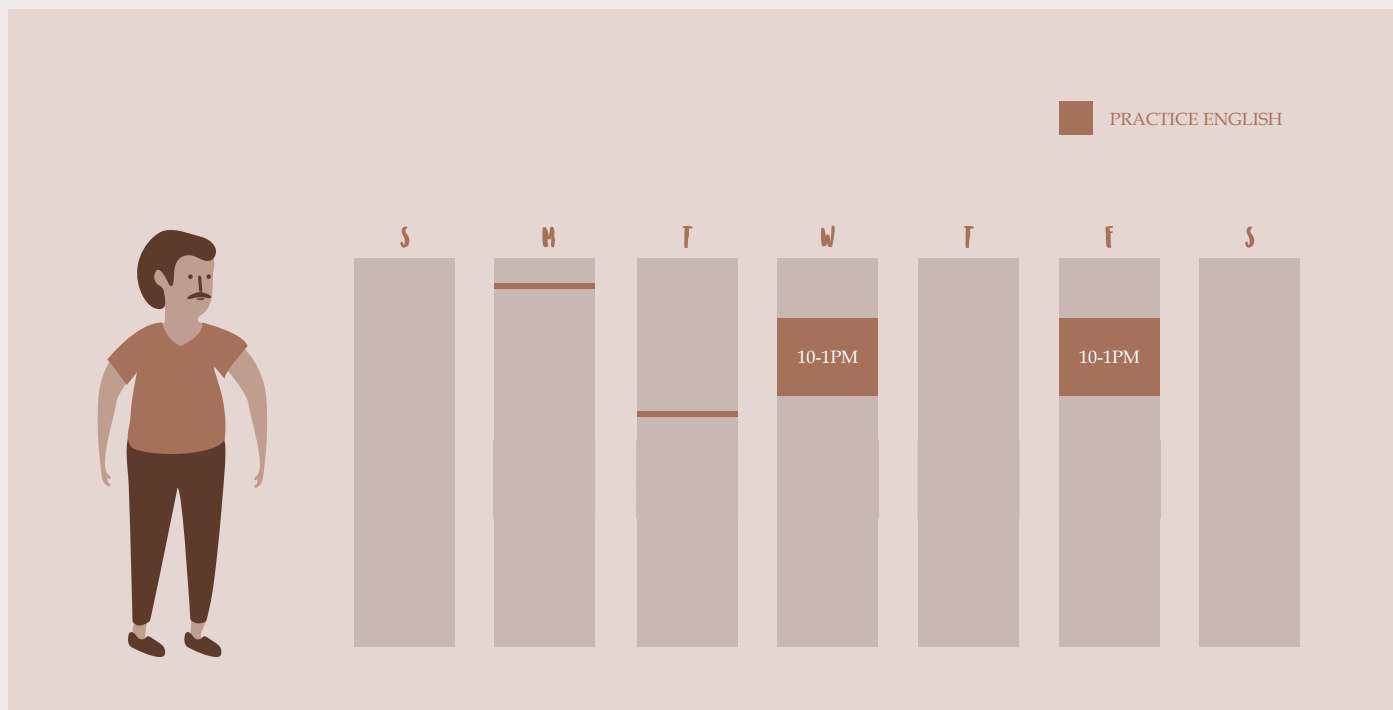
**We believe that immigrants can make any time of their day a “practice moment.”**

#### WORKSHOP 1

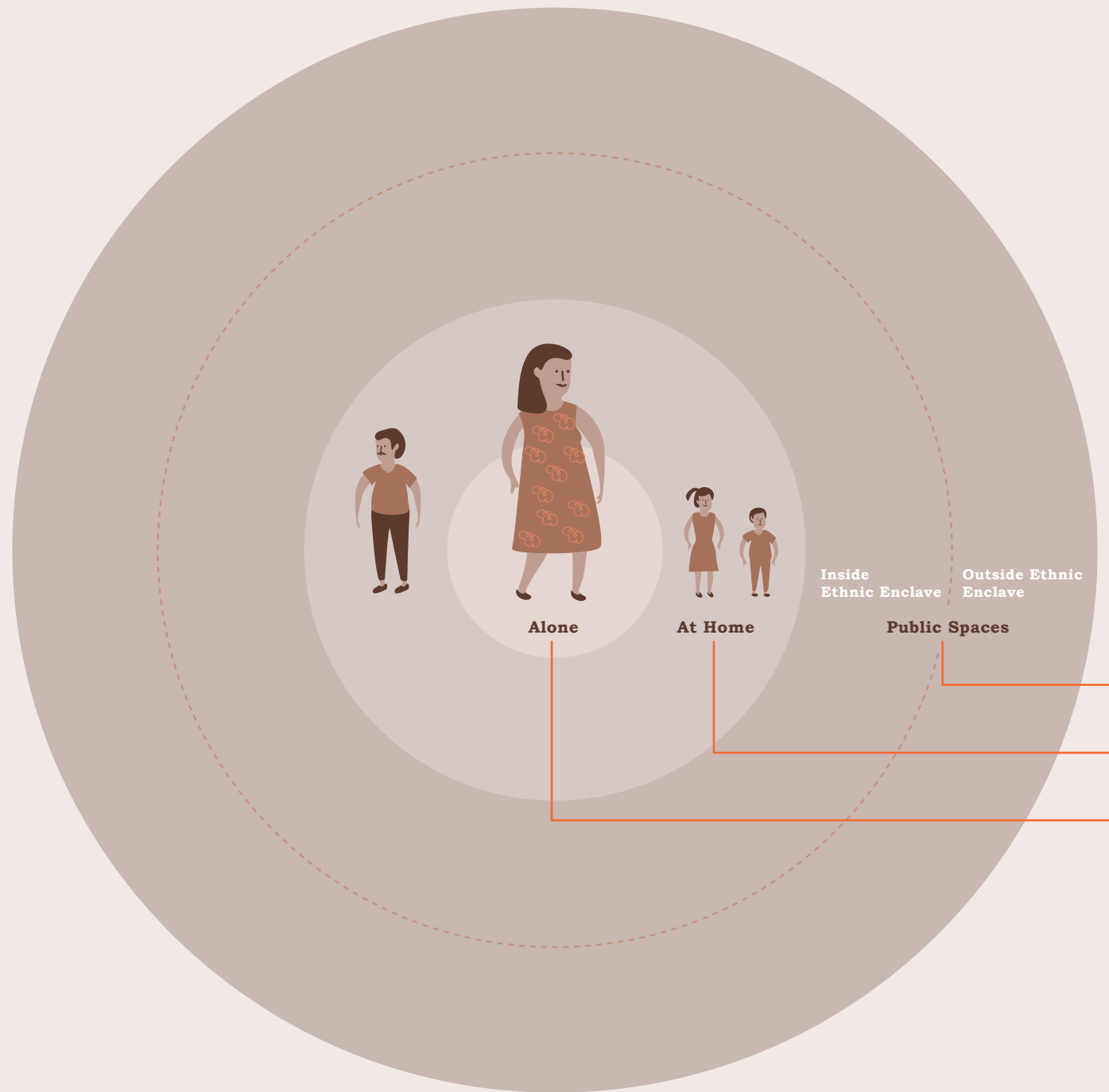


**Students rarely practice English outside of the class.**

*Learnings from WORKSHOP 1*



# Where do ESOL students practice English?





↙ = Places where most students speak English

## WORKSHOP 2: Booklet - Exercises to Practice English

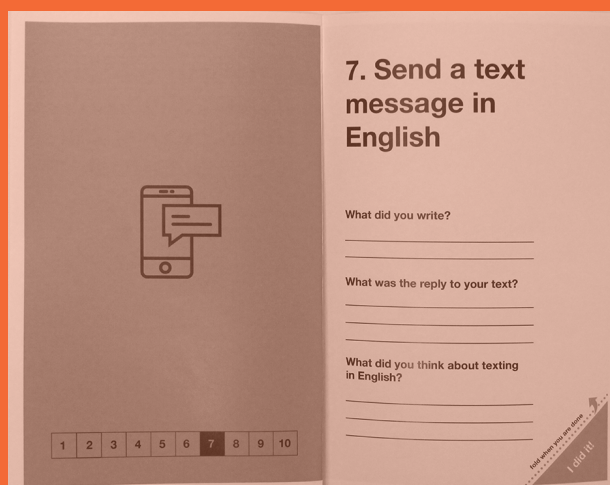
Based on the understanding that students can make any time of the day a moment to practice English, we created a “10 Exercises to Practice English” booklet that included easy and everyday ways to practice. The purpose for this booklet was to provide ideas for students to practice outside of the class on their own with easy practice exercises.

### Learnings

We found that self-learning tools and exercises are difficult to follow because they require a high level of self-discipline. People prefer to practice English in a social environment with other people, where they can learn from each other and feel accountable to each other for their learning.



**Students prefer to practice in a social environment instead of by themselves**



### WORKSHOP 3: Co-creation workshop with students to find creative ways to practice English

In our third workshop we worked with students at the Brooklyn Public Library to involve them in the ideation process to come up with creative ways in which they can practice English during their day. To hear their perspective, we created an exercise in which we asked the students to fill a list of three words: NEED / INTEREST / SKILL and asked them to combine the three to create a new and creative opportunity for them to learn English in a way that is interesting to them.

#### Learnings

From the activities that the students like, we found that many fall into three main categories: entertainment, social and personal care. Some of the activities that the students came up in the exercise were: reading, listening to the radio, shopping, watching soap operas, hanging out with friends, dancing, and singing, among others.

#### Conclusion from Workshops

Through this human-centered creative process, music and pop culture emerged as a key element to be part of our intervention.

**Activities that students enjoy include singing and listening to music**



# Insights from Research

From our interviews and prototypes with ESOL instructors and students, we learned five keys about the learning process to keep in mind for our intervention.



## practice

*The key to learning a language is through continuous practice.*



## social

*Learning is social.*



## safe space

*People are more likely to learn when they feel comfortable.*

From interviews



“Learning a language really depends on the student. There’s really no answer for that because it really depends on each student and how much time they spend practicing English. [...] The key to really learning a language is to practice.”

- Judy Shack , *ESOL Teacher at Queens Library*

“The best way to learn is by practicing. Research shows that it takes 1500 hours and approximately 6 years to master another language.”

- Haniff Toussaint, *ESOL Coordinator of the Brooklyn Public Library*

“Many people prefer to come to class because they can learn more from their teacher and peers than alone.”

- Marco Castillo, *ESOL Coordinator at Queens Library*

“I’ve tried to learn virtually, but I started a course and didn’t finish. In the end is not the same, having personal contact is better.”

- Claudia, *ESOL student at Queens Library*

“People think that if they don’t speak very well, they are going to be laughed at. For this reason, they refrain from trying. We want to change that to: mistakes are beautiful.”

- Judy Shack, *ESOL Teacher at Queens Library*



**From our learnings, we realized that our intervention needs to include these five keys.**



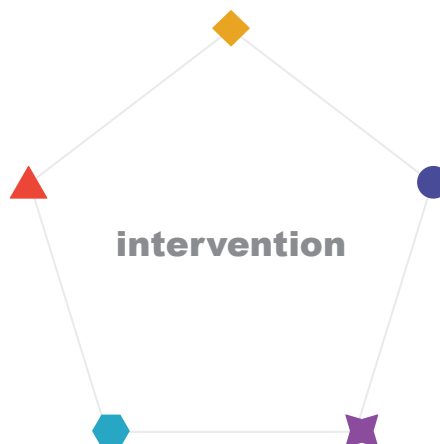
## **empowerment**

*Knowing the language empowers immigrants.*



## **fun**

*Meet them where they are.*



We involved the students in the design process and included what they like to do in the language learning process.



From our prototypes

Most educational experiences stop here

“The most important thing for immigrants is to have a value as a human being. They have to assimilate the system in this country and they have to develop different things: business, professional, educational, etc. They have to assimilate the system and learn English to have a better life in the future.”

- Vilma Daza, Coordinator at Corona Queens Public Library

Theory of Change

How we think we will fulfill our promise:

Immigrants in New York are able to live fully: have better jobs, find better opportunities, have a sense of belonging and contribute to this country with their full capacities and are able to participate as citizens.

Immigrants feel comfortable with English, understand and are able to communicate.

Immigrants learn English in a safe space, create social bonds and are able to practice often.

Immigrants enroll in an ESOL class to learn English and regularly practice outside of the class.

Immigrants are accountable for their English learning, commit to practice and enjoy the learning process while they create social bonds.

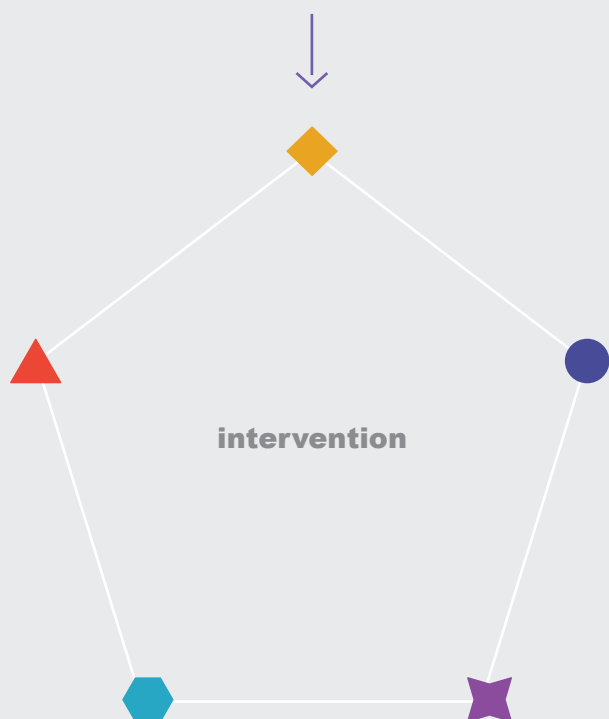
OUR VISION ..... What needs to happen to make this vision possible? .....

Immigrants practice English in an alternative space outside of the traditional class.

Immigrants have a safe space in which they can practice English in a way that is social and fun.

Our main goal is to make people excited about learning English and increase their level of comfort when speaking.

OUR PROMISE



# **THE INTERVENTION**





KARL  
CUL



NOCKE  
B

## INTERVENTION

### Addressing the Problem Through Music

Music connects across cultures and can break down barriers. The United States is an influencer worldwide, and much of the popular culture from this country has global exposure.

When immigrants come to the United States, some of them have previous knowledge of music and songs in English. Without necessarily understanding the lyrics, many people feel connected to American culture through music.



IF I CAN MAKE IT HERE,  
I CAN MAKE IT ANYWHERE...











## Why Karaoke?

Music can offer repetition for learning. Also, learning the lyrics of a song can help expand vocabulary and exposes people to colloquial phrases. Ultimately, getting to know the music of a country is getting to know the culture and language.

### Goals

Our objectives with Karaoke Club are to provide an alternative space in which students can:

- practice English outside of the traditional class
- lose the fear of making mistakes
- learn new vocabulary

Through studying and understanding the music lyrics of songs that they like and are familiar with, they will feel empowered to speak up and practice English while developing social ties and getting more comfortable with American culture.

### Partnership

We presented this idea to the Brooklyn Public Library's ESOL Coordinator, Haniff Toussaint and partnered with the library to prototype this idea with their ESOL students who voluntarily signed up for the sessions.





## Repetition

**Let it be, let it be, let it be...**

The Beatles



## Vocabulary

**and find I'm king of the hill, top of  
the heap...**

Frank Sinatra



## Colloquial Phrases

**cause if you liked it, then you  
should have put a ring on it...**

Beyonce



## Culture

**Bye, bye Miss American Pie...**

Don McLean

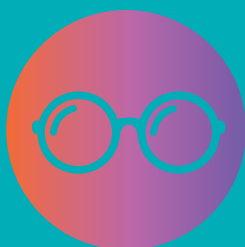
## Description of the intervention

Karaoke Club to practice English is a safe space in which students can practice English through singing.

Students get together to: study the lyrics, get familiar with new words, practice pronunciation and improve fluency, phonetics and the cultural context of a song. We created a safe space where mistakes are accepted and where we celebrate the effort of trying. This workshop provides an alternative space to practice English in addition to traditional English classes.



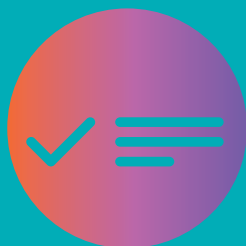
**Listen to a song**



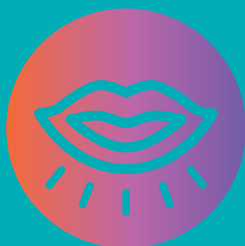
**Read the lyrics**



**Learn new vocabulary**



**Test**



**Practice pronunciation**



**Sing**

# Sessions



Karaoke Club to practice English

Carmen Rosa López & Irene Rojas

Design for Social Innovation at the School of Visual Arts

We held six sessions of two classes per week, each one lasting 1.5 hours. 13 ESOL students voluntarily signed up for the workshop and a total of 8 people came to our prototype after their regular classes.

After the 6 sessions, students presented in front of a small audience at the Dweck Auditorium at the Brooklyn Public Library.



## Learnings from our prototypes and iterations

In each session, we became more familiar with the teaching process and gained knowledge on how to improve the sessions to balance between the learning process and the fun aspect of karaoke. We iterated each session adding what we had learned.

### • EMOTIONAL CONNECTION

Students chose songs that they liked and had an emotional connection to, but didn't understand the meaning of. It was powerful to see their reaction when they understood the meaning of the songs they like.

### • ONLY SINGING IS NOT ENOUGH

In order to learn pronunciation, students read the lyrics out loud so they heard themselves and listened to their pronunciation. That way, we could correct their pronunciation if they make mistakes.

### • INTERACTIVE LEARNING

When we were teaching a new word, providing a visual guide or photo helped them understand, but asking them to use it in a sentence or give us an example of when to use the word made the learning process more engaging.

### • SMALL DETAILS ARE IMPORTANT

Karaoke has a specific atmosphere that is important to build on with elements that include: microphone, spotlight, decorations and props.

### • MORE SESSIONS & MORE TIME

Our student's feedback after session four was that they would like to have more sessions, they wanted this program to be a regular program.





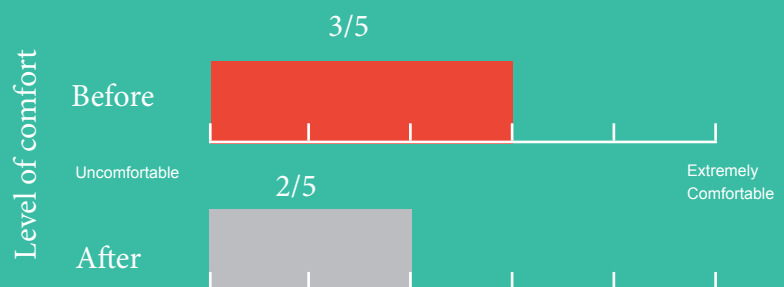
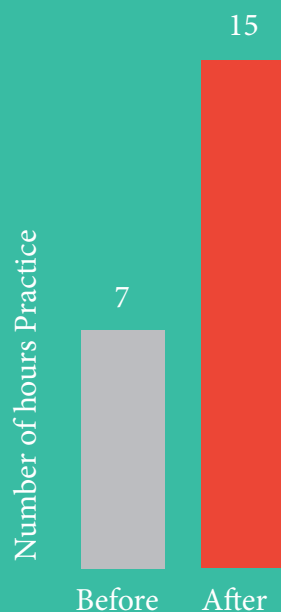
## Results

In our first prototype at the Brooklyn Public Library, we worked with six students from different parts of the world including Haiti, Bangladesh, El Salvador, Peru, Colombia, and Iran. We created an informal space where the students could talk about the songs we studied, ask questions about pronunciation and new vocabulary, practice conversation, sing, and even, tell jokes. Students were able to double the time that they invested in learning English by coming to the class as well as studying the songs on their own, practicing music or studying the lyrics of a song any time of the day.

**One of the greatest outcomes was that people were able to understand the meaning of the songs that they had known their entire lives. Studying the songs they like and are familiar with made them feel more empowered and comfortable with English.**

At the beginning of the workshop, we asked students to tell us the number of hours they practice English per week, the average was 6-8 hours per week. Their level of comfort with the language had an average of 2.2 over 5. Using the results of the students that were constant throughout the six sessions to measure we had an 83% of attendance, the level of comfort with English language had an increased from 2 to 3 but the main increase was in the hours of practice, which doubled from 7 to 15 per week.

# Practice made fun



practice



social



empowerment



fun



safe space





"The small group is good because it is a personal learning. Correcting the words."

"All the songs have to do with a message. Many people don't see the message."

"I think it's very good. I learned new words, for example maize."



**EUGENIO**

El Salvador



**JORGE**

Peru



**FOROGH**

Iran



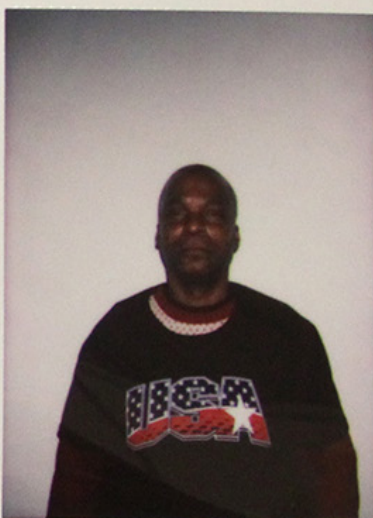
# 1st Cohort

"I think the class is good for the tongue, exercise and speak fast."

"I like it. I learned new words, new lyrics. I appreciate this program."



**JESUS**  
Colombia



**JEAN-ROBERT**  
Haiti



# KARAOKE CLUB





## Conclusion & Learning

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**“Talk to the people who have the problem and listen to what they have to say.”**

- Paul Polak



We never imagined that Frank Sinatra, the Beatles and Stevie Wonder would be excellent teachers. We realized that, in order to get to this outcome, we have to listen carefully to what our audiences have to say, and involve them in the creative process. Ethnographic research is a fundamental part of the process in order to design for an audience. Instead of imposing an idea of what we think people need, we need to listen to what they are saying and meet them where they are.

It was gratifying to see how the students in Karaoke Club were learning and experienced empowerment through challenging themselves and each other to sing out loud in front of other people and in a different language. The class became a community or group of friends that got together to learn and have fun.

From listening to the students, we understood what they liked to do and we were able to add an educational value to fun activities, in this case, singing. With this approach, we were able to make them understand that they can practice English any time of the day by listening to music.

One of our biggest surprises was that students chose to sing songs in English that they knew even before migrating to the United States, and learning the meaning of these songs that they were emotionally connected to gave them a whole new dimension to the learning process. For them, it was like listening to the songs for the first time and understanding what they had always known but hadn't understand.

Ultimately, this project is not only about music, we see Karaoke Club as an example of an alternative program to make education fun by using five components, including: social, repetition, empowerment, safe space and fun. We believe that these can manifest in different ways, not only with music but with any other forms of pop culture.



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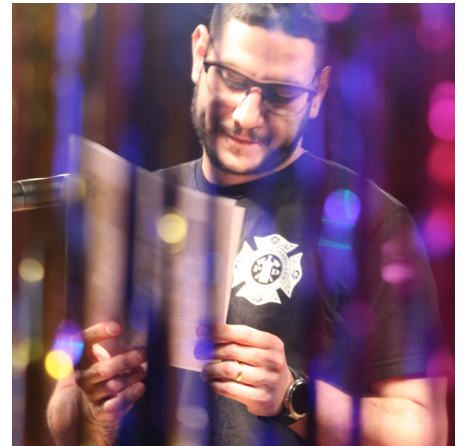
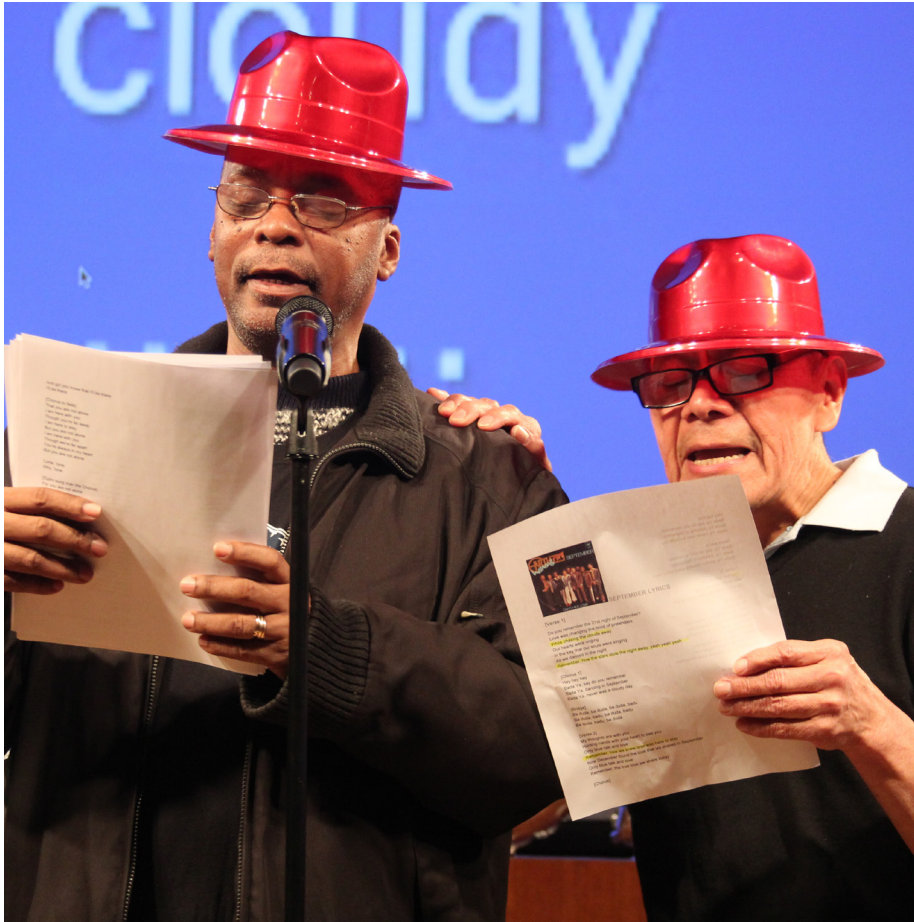




















## Looking Forward

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The Brooklyn Public Library has shown interest in adopting this program. For this reason, we created a manual that contains information about how to hold Karaoke Club sessions that they can use to create their own club with teachers or volunteers. The manual includes information about suggested songs for both beginner and intermediate students and information about the steps to take in order to create a class. We see this project expanding to many libraries in Brooklyn and Queens.





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