

The many ways to wrap Americanization

Hojung Deena Lee
Young D.C.

Marriottsville, Md. – In a skit to entertain her students, Julie Baugh, 54, wraps herself in white fabric and spouts water at her fellow church members – one of whom is her husband. The students are not teenagers, nor are they Americans. Generally in their 50s, they are a throng of Koreans, Chinese, Peruvians, Egyptians, Guatemalans, and Iranians who now live in Howard County, Md.

Everybody bursts into laughter but Baugh does not care. She would do anything to make her students laugh and relax.

Baugh has been volunteering at the church's Conversational English International Ministry for eight years. A former college professor who taught biology and pre-nursing for ten years, she quit her job two years ago in order to volunteer full-time. Though money might be a continuous temptation, she is determined to work with adults who face linguistic barriers in their daily lives.

"I walk into my classroom and get hugged to death," Baugh said. The students are so appreciative of the sacrifice she makes that they even have her food preferences and hobbies memorized.

Sunhwa Lee, 47, for example, has studied under Baugh for a year and frequently delivers Korean food to her and her husband. "Providing kimchi is the least thing I can do for her," Lee said in Korean. "I appreciate her sacrifice and this is why I keep returning to her classes every week."

ESL programs at Chapelgate Presbyterian Church date back ten years to when Terri Graham and Diana Mood, who now serve as missionaries in Ethiopia, founded the program for underprivileged immigrants.

Only 17 students attended the initial classes. However, the number has grown ever since and reached 110 this fall. Not surprisingly, her students are an eclectic bunch, representing 30 different ethnic backgrounds.

"When I started, I was amazed at the students and just how much they appreciated it," Baugh said. "Learning so much about other countries and their cultures was exciting and still is."

Baugh teaches the lowest levels of the program and people oftentimes wonder how she communicates with her class without any difficulty. "Even though [the

student's] English is limited, I use pictures and body languages or anything I can to make myself understood," she said. "Then it's not hard anymore."

Repetition is the linchpin of Baugh's teaching style. She repeats a certain set of vocabulary 40 times with the class and then uses it in sentences that apply to real life situations. According to Baugh, a former biology professor, this is how the brain absorbs information the quickest.

But her influence does not stop there. Baugh also trains instructors across the world about her teaching methods in efforts to help immigrants outside her immediate reach. A traveler herself, Baugh's passion for teaching has reached countries such as China, Japan and Mexico – locations where she has taught anywhere from one week to almost two months.

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The church subsequently constructed more programs and expanded its role as demand for learning English increased. In addition to the regular ESL classes, it now offers Bible Study (held at the Baughs' own home in Sykesville), outreach to the University of Maryland Baltimore County through the English Language Center, Hispanic ministry, and various entertaining, summer-long clubs, open to any immigrant who wishes to participate.

"It is widely known among the international students at UMBC that if you want to be cared about in America, you need to go to Chapelgate," said Nancy Booher, the director of ESL ministry at Missions North America, a nationwide Presbyterian organization.

Immigrants today encounter even greater need to attend ESL workshops as jobs become more and more scarce. Yet even in this economic tailspin, the church has been financially generous to a select group of underprivileged immigrants who could not otherwise afford rent, medical bills, groceries and the like.

The hallmark of support, however, may be the dinner parties Chapelgate provides every semester. The biggest celebration is held at Thanksgiving when the teachers have an opportunity to share their culture with their students. It was at one of these parties that Lee experienced her first-ever Thanksgiving feast.

But for her this is not enough. She goes beyond what the church provides. Her husband, David Baugh, 60, a research statistician for the government, is right there alongside her every step of the way, providing rides for some students, helping them understand car insurance contracts, and even arranging one student's surgery by talking to her doctor.

"You are not just sitting in the classrooms," he said. "You are really helping people with real problems."

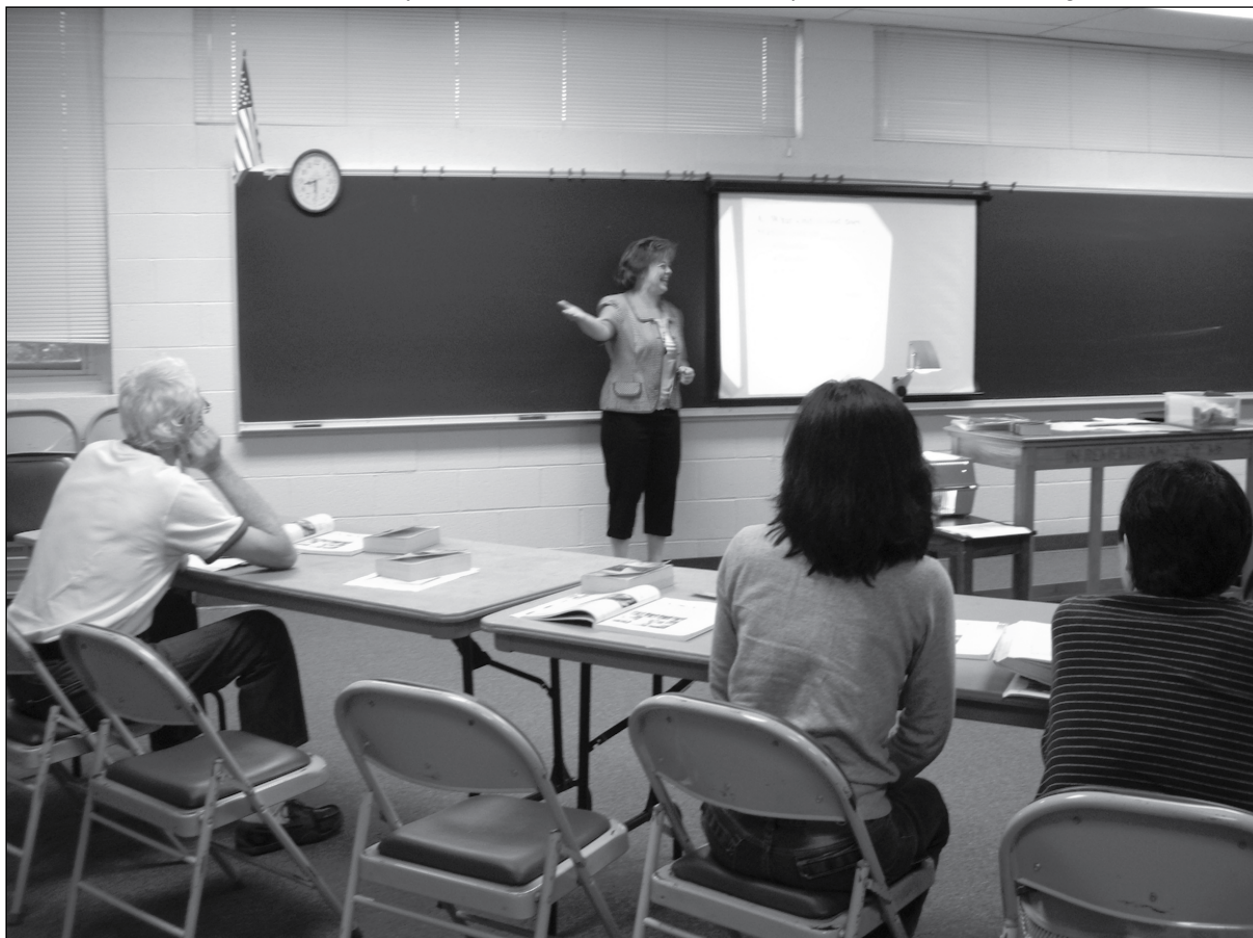
Take Lee, for instance, who emigrated from Korea two years ago not knowing any English when she first arrived in the U.S.. "I was always afraid to go outside of my house," she said. "[But] after attending the program, I gained a lot of confidence in speaking English." Lee can now communicate with her neighbors, grocery store cashiers, vendors and Comcast agents -- all due to Baugh's class.

Dubbed an "angel" by her students, Julie Baugh has provided hope for more than 100 students – all of whom have expressed appreciation for her dedication and sacrifice. Many have said it is a blessing to have a teacher like her.

But for Baugh, it's the opposite.

"I love what I do," she said. "I am very happy and blessed in teaching English to my students."

Hojung Deena Lee, 17, is a rising senior at Mt. Hebron HS in Ellicott City, Md.



Julie Baugh engages adults learning English as a second language at Chapelgate Presbyterian Church in Marriottsville, Md.

Photo courtesy of Julie Baugh