

NY program uses phone calls, text messages to teach English

November 30 2015, by Deepti Hajela

Candelaria Lopez had tried to learn English before, but it didn't work. She couldn't always make it to class, and when she could, it was hard to find the energy to sit through a three-hour session after her long days as a farmworker in the Hudson Valley region. So even after 20 years in the United States, the Mexican immigrant was still pretty much comfortable only saying "Hi."

Not these days, though, thanks to a unique pilot English language learning program offered by New York state that works through phone calls and text messages. The 38-year-old mother of four said she has had a whole new world open up for her in recent months—new responsibilities at work, talking to her daughter's teacher without needing a translator, even helping another Spanish-speaking family find an apartment to rent.

"For me, it's happy," she said. "For me, it's exciting."

New York state launched the pilot through its Office for New Americans earlier this year. The premise is simple—those who have signed up call a number whenever they want to hear recorded lessons. They are then asked questions they answer via text messages to show they've understood what's being taught. Get the questions right, move on to the next unit. Answer incorrectly, and a coach will call to help clarify the concept.

It's low-tech enough—no apps, no need for fancy smartphones. Anyone

with even the most basic phone can access it and it's flexible enough that users can go at whatever speed they're comfortable with. It's free, aside from whatever their phone plans would charge for cellphone minutes or sending and receiving texts.

"We really wanted to make this as accessible as possible," said Jorge Montalvo, who oversees the Office for New Americans as deputy Secretary of State for Economic Opportunity. The goal for anyone who makes it through the entire program would be to get to the point where "you'll be doing well enough to pass the English requirement for the naturalization exam, that's the level we're looking at."

In this initial program, about 300 people signed up in three parts of the state—the Hudson Valley, the New York City area and the Finger Lakes/North Country region. Montalvo said the state would see how it was going after about a year to figure out any plans for expansion.

New York is the first state to fund a cellphone language learning program for immigrant populations, said Jessica Rothenberg-Aalami, CEO of Cell-Ed, the company providing the lessons.

The San Francisco Bay Area company has been in business about two years, and Rothenberg-Aalami said it was trying to fill a need for adult education that worked in the modern world.

The "demand is definitely not being met with classroom-based adult education today," she said.

The flexibility was key for Lopez, who didn't have to find child care for her daughters or set aside time for a formal class. "This is only my phone," she said. "It's very easy, maybe I cook and I put on the class."

Rothenberg-Aalami said it took an average of about 25 hours to finish a

level of classes; New York is offering Level I and Level II classes, as well as a citizenship class. The instruction starts out mostly in Spanish, shifting to more English as it gets more advanced.

By Level IV, the lessons are conversational English, she said. But even by the end of Level II, users are able to navigate in English much more confidently than they were before, she said.

"What we provide is a bridge to a lot of other resources that are unavailable to those who are missing the first and second rung of the education ladder," she said.

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