

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING PATHWAYS FOR AFGHAN WOMEN



English Learning at Yolo County Children's Alliance Family Resource Center, West Sacramento.

**PART OF A TRI-COUNTY PARTNERSHIP FOR THE
NEWCOMER SUPPORT PILOT PROJECT FUNDED AND LED
BY F5 PLACER CHILDREN AND FAMILIES COMMISSION**



TABLE OF CONTENT

Cover	1
Table of Contents	2
Introduction	3
Addressing Barriers to Learning	4
Three Learning Pathways	6
Curriculum Adaptations	8
Recommendations for Educators	12

Author:

Elke Damesyn, English Language Specialist, International House Davis

Contributors:

Shelly Gilbride and Johanna Abasto, International House Davis

In collaboration with:

International House Davis, Yolo County Children's Alliance, and First 5 Yolo

INTRODUCTION

Afghan women who have recently immigrated to the United States (between 2020 and 2023) are learning the English language with unique challenges. These women often encounter obstacles while trying to learn English due to limited educational opportunities, a high rate of illiteracy, exposure to violence and trauma, and adherence to some Afghan socio-cultural norms for women. They struggle in standard learning environments that have large, mixed-gender, multicultural classrooms with peers who have more formal educational backgrounds. Afghan women often drop out of these programs or do not progress in their language acquisition or social integration. In response to these challenges, International House Davis, in collaboration with Yolo County Children's Alliance and First Five Yolo, has developed culturally-responsive learning pathways to address these barriers and facilitate the integration of Afghan women into English-speaking communities.

International House Davis conducted two 10-week pilot English Learning programs, one in the Spring of 2022 and the other in the Spring of 2023 with recent Afghan arrivals at the West Gateway Apartment Complex in West Sacramento, CA where the Yolo County Children's Alliance has a Family Resource Center. These pilot programs explored culturally-responsive teaching methodologies influenced by trauma-informed care. The 2022 program was conducted primarily online via Zoom in two learning cohorts of 6-8 women each. The 2023 program was conducted in person at the Family Resource Center with six women that were living in West Sacramento.

The 10-week session length was predicated on grant funding and was only enough time to begin to see tangible progress. However, in each pilot program, over 80% of participants that consistently attended class indicated that they are more comfortable speaking English and that they feel better able to meet their own needs and the needs of their children after the program. The three learning pathways and related recommendations in this report were developed throughout the 2023 pilot program.

ADDRESSING BARRIERS TO LEARNING

Some socio-cultural norms for women in Afghanistan create barriers to learning English in an American classroom environment. Many of the barriers are most prevalent in the first year after arrival in the U.S., in elderly women and in women with no educational background. To address these barriers, the learning environment, curriculum, and academic expectations need to be adapted to foster success.



English Learning at the Yolo County Children's Alliance Family Resource Center, West Sacramento.

Afghan Socio-Cultural Norms for Women	Impact on Afghan Women Learning English in American Context	Adapted Learning Environment
Gender separation in public spaces.	Discomfort speaking in the presence of men and talking to men outside of family.	Provide gender separated classroom.
Highly patriarchal family structure in which the men of the household make the decisions.	Inability to make decisions for themselves.	Encourage good decision making and boost self esteem through praise for small successes.
Dress code in public places in Afghanistan mandates full coverage.	Preoccupied with hiding hair and body in the presence of men.	Provide a female teacher.
Women not allowed to go outside their homes without a male guardian of the immediate family or do any public recreation.	Unable and afraid to travel to and from school, a doctor's office, a grocery store etc alone.	Distribute free bus passes. Show students how to take a bus and accompany them for the first time to alleviate fear.
Many women have limited formal education, and many have never been in a classroom environment. ¹	Need to learn basic study habits, often attend classes irregularly, and self-conscious to speak or learn in a group setting.	Provide Dari assistance and address basic study habits in the curriculum. Avoid group work with the students who don't have a high school degree.
Life experience has been of trauma, war and the aftermath.	Physical pain, psychological distress, and difficulty in time management.	Create a welcoming, friendly, and predictable environment.
Professional or educated Afghan women have not had access to work or education since August of 2021.	Loss of professional opportunities and loss of hope for the future of their daughters.	Provide guidance about professional and educational opportunities available to provide hope for the future.
Women primarily take care of their children.	Children are a priority.	Provide childcare.
Highly value socializing with family and serving guests in the home.	Social isolation and no time to develop friendships.	Allow time to socialize and develop friendships in the classroom and during break.

¹<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/03/afghanistan-quality-education-must-be-equally-accessible-all-un-experts-say#:~:text=The%20Taliban%20denied%20women%20and,introduced%20as%20a%20temporary%20measure.>

THREE ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING PATHWAYS

The English Language learning pathways are specifically designed for female learners in a gender-segregated classroom environment. These pathways are led by a female instructor in a safe and familiar space, supplemented by the provision of childcare services facilitated by trusted members of the community. The lesson content helps women build essential life skills and integrate successfully into mainstream English classrooms.

The pathways were developed for three student profiles with diverse needs for a culturally sensitive learning environment. Learning Pathway 1 serves women with no prior education in Afghanistan in their first language. Learning Pathway 2 is administered to women with one to six years of schooling who are familiar with the school environment. Learning Pathway 3 serves students with high school and college degrees from Afghanistan and focuses on building self-confidence when speaking as well as building an understanding of the differences between the Afghan and American educational systems and cultures.

Pathway 1: Non-Literate English Learners with No Formal Education

This pathway is tailored for individuals who possess no formal educational background and accommodates their unique learning needs and circumstances. Accommodations include:

- Individualized work with no group exercises
- Time and attention to handwriting to address lack of writing experience
- Patience and sensitivity to address difficulty concentrating.

Pathway 2: Beginner English Learners with 1 to 6 Years of Formal Education

The second pathway is intended for students with one to six years of prior education. It aims to build upon foundational knowledge and skills while addressing any cultural barriers that may hinder progress.

Pathway 3: Elementary English Learners Holding a High School or College Degree

The third pathway is designed for individuals who have completed high school or have a university education. These students may have had professional experience in Afghanistan. This pathway aligns closely with the conventional English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom setting, encompassing core elements necessary to integrate into mainstream educational environments. This pathway emphasizes confidence-building strategies but also supplements general knowledge areas with critical thinking that may not have been previously addressed in their educational experiences in Afghanistan.

STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS FOR THE LEARNING PATHWAYS

Student Characteristics	Pathway 1	Pathway 2	Pathway 3
Doubting ability to succeed	✓	✓	✓
Unfamiliarity with concept of homework	✓	✓	
Difficulties concentrating for a longer period (> 45 minutes)	✓	✓	
Social anxiety in public spaces	✓		
Deficiency in study skills*	✓		
Hesitancy to engage in learning	✓		
Irregular attendance	✓		

*Examples of study skills - organization, collaborating and group work, time management, active listening, and staying on task.

The overarching objective of these learning pathways is to facilitate a smooth transition into mainstream English learning classrooms and accelerate English acquisition while also addressing specific cultural considerations. The culturally specific approach helps to cultivate a desire to learn English and integrate into the local community.

A supportive learning environment is helpful to overcome these barriers and promote learning. Teachers encourage self-awareness and personal growth by valuing the students' input, fostering kindness, laughing together, and promoting the exploration of the world without being critical. Recognizing the student's needs and providing a space to recharge is part of this culturally responsive teaching philosophy. Additionally, it is important that the teachers recognize that Afghan women face persistent stress at home while navigating a new life in the U.S. and fulfilling their responsibilities to their families.

CURRICULUM ADAPTATION

All three learning pathways use the Ventures textbook and workbook series, which are readily available. The following are examples of adaptations to deliver the Ventures curriculum in a culturally-responsive way for Afghan women. For each of the three pathways, a table describes the teaching topics and barriers with suggestions for the instructor to address the barriers.

Pathway 1: Non-Literate Learners with No Formal Education

Teaching Language: English with Dari Translator

Textbook and Workbook: Ventures Basic - Cambridge University Press, 3rd edition

In Pathway 1, the teacher helps students feel comfortable in the English Language learning environment.

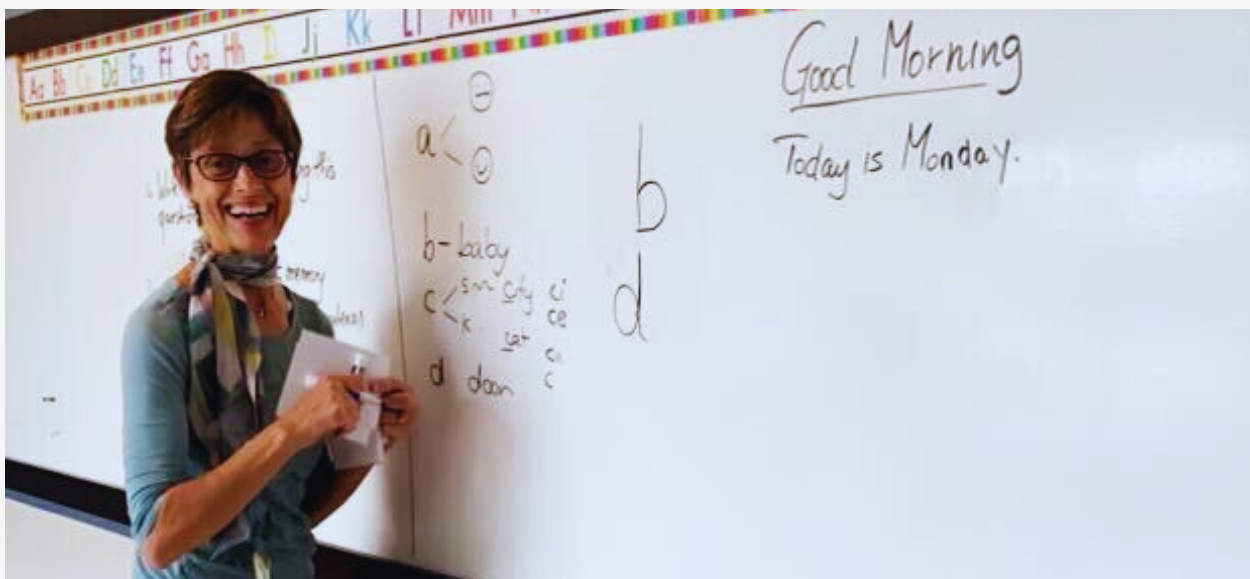
Unit	Teaching Topic	Barrier	Adaptation
Welcome	Alphabet	Little to no experience with a written script or numbers.	Demonstrate writing letters and numbers and offer time to learn basic writing skills.
Unit 1 Personal Information	Identifying countries of origin	Many have never seen a world map.	Explain that Afghanistan is a country and Kabul is a city.
Unit 3 Friends and Family	Identifying family relationships	Feelings of loss or missing family members might come up due to the war and migration	Teacher sensitivity to loss. Talk about family currently living in the U.S. Focus on living children.
Unit 4 Health	Describing health problems	Stress and trauma from war causes headaches, stomach pain, muscle tightness and insomnia.	Explanation of headache, stomach pain, insomnia, and tight muscles. Discussion of bedtime routines for children and adults.

Pathway 2: Beginner Learners with one to six Years of Formal Education

Teaching language: English with Dari Translator

Textbook and Workbook: Ventures 1 - Cambridge University Press, 3rd edition

In Pathway 2, the teacher works to expand general knowledge and increase critical thinking related to each topic area.



Author and teacher Elke Damesyn.

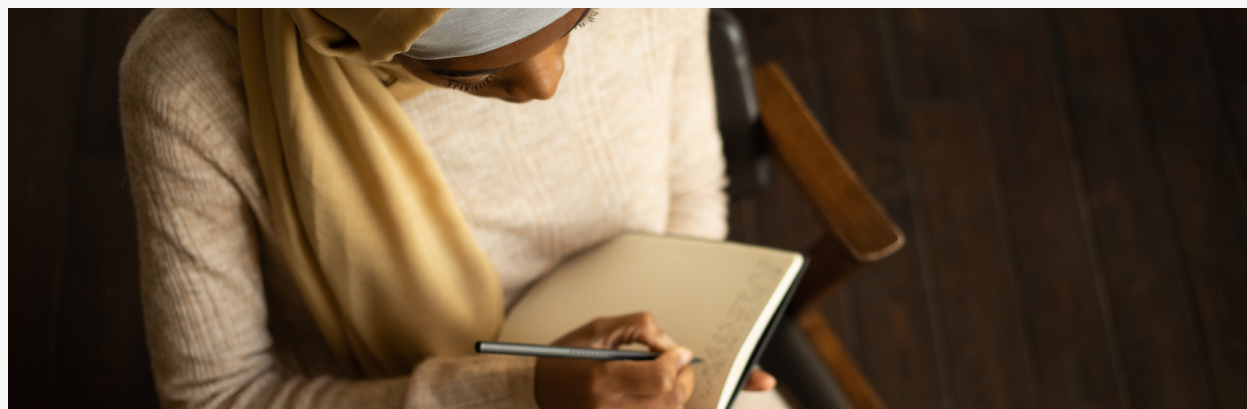
Unit	Teaching Topic	Barrier	Teacher's Adaptation
Welcome	Alphabet	Dari is written from right to left.	Emphasize writing from left to right. Show how books and notebooks open on the right side.
Unit 1 Personal Information	Identifying countries of origin.	Tension between tribal affiliations and experience of tribal and religious persecution.	Avoid asking about tribal differences. Expand conversation to cultures of origin.
Unit 3 Friends and Family	Talking about family members	Anxiety and association with negative feelings due to loss.	Only ask about family currently living in the U.S. Focus on living children.
Unit 10 Free Time	Discussing plans	Feeling of confusion due to lack of knowledge about the US public school system and post secondary education.	Explain the educational system in the US. Discuss how to set realistic goals. Talk about time management and online school options.

Pathway 3: Elementary Learners holding a High School or College Degree

Teacher language: English - No Dari Translator

Textbook and Workbook : Ventures 2 - Cambridge University Press, 3rd edition

In Pathway 3, the teacher continues to focus on critical thinking while working with the students to set educational and personal goals for the future.



Unit	Teaching Topic	Barrier	Teacher's Adaptation
Unit 2 At School	Describing future plans	Difficulty thinking about the future due to experience of war, occupation, migration, and trauma.	Talk about the possibilities for women in the U.S., including educational and professional options.
Unit 6 Time	Inquiring about life events	Feelings of loss and trauma may arise due to decades of war.	Ask for positive memories from childhood.
Unit 5 Around Town	Identifying methods of transportation	Feelings of being trapped at home because women are not allowed to go outside alone without a male guardian.	Discuss the driving and car culture in the U.S. Emphasize studying for the driver's license exam to become self-sufficient and independent.
Unit 8 Work	Identifying job duties	Afghan professional women recognize a loss of professional opportunities in their fields.	Ask about job duties of positions students had in Afghanistan. Discuss various professional opportunities in the U.S.

After Pathway 3, students will hopefully be prepared to enter mainstream English classrooms at the pre-intermediate level. Often students' speaking level is higher than their writing level.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATORS

English language instruction for Afghan women can be challenging. During the initial two to four-month period, attendance is likely to be inconsistent and the level of student engagement fluctuates with frequent entry and exiting of students. Following the recommendations below will lead to successful integration into mainstream classrooms and society, greater learning capacity, and increased self-confidence.

Basic Recommendations

- Keep lessons simple
- Provide Dari translation for pathways 1 and 2
- Give students ample opportunities to participate and to demonstrate their understanding and progress.
- Give ample explanations and examples related to Afghan life and culture
- Implement consistent writing practice and quizzes
- Use positive reinforcement
- Repeat, repeat, repeat

A safe, positive, and inviting learning environment allows individuals to feel secure and comfortable. Furthermore, flexibility in accommodating students' needs for self-expression and communication is important. Building a strong teacher-student relationship of trust and rapport is essential to create an environment where individuals feel supported and valued.

Teacher Specifications: It is recommended that English language teachers have studied a second language, know some basics about Afghan culture, and have a basic understanding of trauma-informed care methodologies and ACES (Adverse Childhood Experiences)². Trauma-informed teaching English to adult learners has the potential of being a healing experience, and it can be implemented₂ using various strategies.

²Trauma's Effect On English Learners' Language Acquisition: On English Learners' Language Acquisition: Best Practices for a trauma-informed classroom by Sydney Mason 2021
https://digitalcommons.hamline.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1638&context=hse_cp

Provide Childcare: Afghan women are fully responsible for their children's care. Therefore, incorporating childcare provisions within the instructional setting enables women to participate fully in their English learning and is essential for the success of the program.

Recommended Teaching Tools: Include repetition, visuals with pictures, and practical activities that involve touch and Total Physical Response (TPR)³ Repetition aids in reinforcing new information, while visuals and TPR enhance comprehension, and facilitate engagement. Practical activities involving tactile experiences and visual aids can be particularly beneficial for non-literate students for vocabulary acquisition. Furthermore, utilizing objects during demonstrations can tap into students' existing knowledge and experiences, making the learning process more accessible and relatable. Examples should relate to Afghan life and students' experiences.

Use Effective Outreach and Communication Strategies: The Afghan community relies on word of mouth from within the community for information. To effectively promote the program, it is recommended to enlist a prominent figure within the Afghan community to advocate for the class. Recruitment for students usually happens when students have had a positive lesson experience and then talk to their friends about the class.

Provide Hospitality and Socialization Opportunities in Class: Hospitality is highly valued in Afghan culture. Afghan women not only seek education but also value opportunities for socialization, as their domestic responsibilities limit their ability to forge friendships beyond their households. For example, providing green tea and snacks during breaks contributes to fostering a welcoming and comfortable environment.

Establish Personal Connections: Greeting each student individually at the beginning of class, remembering their names, and inquiring about their children serves to establish a personal connection. Demonstrating genuine care and dedicating ample time to instruction are essential for fostering a sense of support among the students.

³<https://www.fluentu.com/blog/educator-english/total-physical-response-esl/>

In the Spring 2023 program, the initial English aptitude assessment was given during the second week of class rather than the first week in recognition of the stress of a testing environment and the need to establish rapport before an assessment.

Establish Consistency: Establishing consistent daily routines that incorporate quizzes and assessments based on regular attendance and performance is important. Establishing clear lesson routines and a preview of the daily schedule help provide structure and predictability which can be reassuring for learners who have experienced trauma. Maintaining an ample supply of topic-related materials at all times during lessons facilitates the seamless integration of new students into the class. Learning English is a long-term, difficult endeavor that necessitates a consistent learning environment.

Provide Learning Incentives: Certificates and assessments hold significant importance within the Afghan culture and therefore enhance the perceived credibility of the English program. Recognition of achievement with small gifts like pens, notebooks, and other items is useful. In the 2022 program, certificates of achievement were distributed to those who completed the course. For the 2023 cohort, students were given the Ventures textbook and workbook after two weeks of consistent attendance and certificates after completion of the course.

Prepare Effectively and Exercise Adaptability: Prior to the commencement of each session, adequately equipping each student's table with pens, paper, and a small whiteboard demonstrates preparedness. While adhering to a predetermined daily lesson plan is advisable, it is prudent to remain adaptable as the nature of the class dynamics during the initial stage may necessitate modifications. A multi-level class is likely to form within the first week. It is difficult to simultaneously teach more than two proficiency levels in a single classroom. Additionally, designating a paraeducator as a "teacher" can elicit greater respect and attention from students.

Show Respect for Afghan Religious and Cultural Traditions: It is important to foster an environment that embraces Afghan culture, enabling students to express their cultural identity. Upholding the tradition of drinking green tea during breaks and greeting each other and the teacher as women do in Afghanistan is encouraged. It is advised to account for Islamic holidays such as Eid Al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, and Nowruz and refrain from conducting classes during those observances.

Maintain a Small Class Size and Give Adequate Teaching Time: Maintaining an ideal class size of no more than 20 students is recommended. Non-literate and beginner students need substantial attention, positive reinforcement, and commendation. Furthermore, maintaining a low noise level within the classroom environment is recommended to enable students to comprehend the instruction provided. It is recommended to offer classes at least four days per week with two teaching hours per day. Many students often miss one or more days per week due to life circumstances.



English Learning at Yolo County Children's Alliance Family Resource Center, West Sacramento.

THANK YOU

Author:

Elke Damesyn, English Language Specialist, International House Davis

Contributors:

Shelly Gilbride and Johanna Abasto, International House Davis

In collaboration with:

International House Davis, Yolo County Children's Alliance and First 5 Yolo

DAVIS
International
house

