

COMMUNITY: Stouffville church meeting place for newcomers

English students sink teeth into language, cookies

BY SANDRA BOLAN
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"We teach them English, but we're offering them friendship and fellowship," explained Wanda Knights, a co-ordinator of the English as a Second Language program at EastRidge Evangelical Missionary Church.

Huddled together over coffee and cookies during break time are two women — one from Romania, the other from Sri Lanka. They communicate in their common language of English.

Russian Tatiana Shitikova and China's Li Ying Gu have become inseparable.

All of the students came to Canada for various reasons, but typically to be with other family members and live a better life.

Jessey Liu, a 42-year-old former IT network analyst, arrived in 2000.

"Young people in China want a new life. It's work and work. Work really hard and make more money," she said.

'People can be here in Canada for years and years and they've never been invited into other people's homes'

Ms Liu arrived a year after her husband. She speaks excellent English, despite only taking ESL classes for a few months.

"I want to have more confidence with English," she said.

Also in the class is her mother, Ying Gu, who left her husband behind in China 10 years ago to be with her daughter, son-in-law and grandchildren.

Like Ms Liu, Eric Guo had to give up a good job as an engineer in China in order to come here and keep his family together.

He thought learning English would be easy.

"Without English, you can't do nothing," he said.

Conversations over the phone are particularly difficult, he admitted. As is shopping.

Mr. Guo, 59, has had three interviews for engineering positions this year but in each case he was told he needed to improve his English.

He has been taking ESL classes since 2010.

While adults from around the world speak to each other in their best English during class breaks and when they see each other socially, when it comes to the language spoken at home, it's their mother tongues.

"It's important, culturally, it's part of their background to speak their mother tongue at



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEEN

Marrian Boongaling (left) and Jin Yang converse using the double line technique at ESL class at EastRidge Church in Stouffville. One will ask questions, the other will answer and then they switch.

home," Ms Knights said.

The one exception is Ms Shitikova, 67, who came to be with her daughter who married an English-speaking Canadian so "I must speak English at home"

In census data issued last month by Statistics Canada, non-official languages were the second most spoken mother tongues in Whitchurch-Stouffville homes, after English.

"I encourage that. I think it's wonderful," Ms Knights said.

Ms Liu, 52, has two children born in Canada, who learn English at school and speak Mandarin at home.

"We hope they will speak both languages when they grow up," she said.

Through the ESL classes, Ms Knights not only teaches the students English, but also some typical Canadian things, such as baking chocolate chip cookies, the finer points of hot dog and marshmallow roasts as well as

Christmas traditions. Pot luck dinners take place in students' homes.

"People can be here in Canada for years and years and they've never been invited into other people's homes," she said. "We try to introduce them to things we do as Canadians and Stouffville people," she said.

When it comes to educating the students on Stouffville specifically, representatives from the Terry Fox run as well as Stouffville Igoma Project have made presentations. Councillor Clyde Smith has also spoken to the group, as has Paul Calandra, MP for Oak Ridges-Markham.

"We're showing how we all blend together to form one community," she said.

It will be four years this January that Ms Knights has been offering the free ESL classes at EastRidge.

After noticing a shift in Whitchurch-Stouffville's demographics, she just felt there

was a great need for it.

According to Ms Knights, most of the town's immigrant population did not come directly here from their native countries.

Ms Lui, Mrs. Ying Gu, Ms Shitikova and Mr. Guo all went to Toronto first.

Ms Liu and her family moved to Stouffville last year because the houses are larger.

Mr. Guo originally moved to a Scarborough neighbourhood in 2006 where all of his neighbours were also Chinese.

"Very crowded. Is this China or Canada?" he joked. "Easy to communicate, but harder to learn English," he said.

He moved to Stouffville in 2010.

"This place is quiet and very friendly," he said.

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