B·R·L
BLUE RIDGE LITERACY

**Reading Between the Lines:
Understanding Cultural Diversity in ESOL programs**

Ahoo Salem, Ph.D.
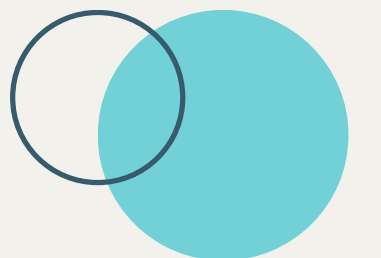Executive Director Blue Ridge Literacy

6/22/2024

**Literacy Volunteers of
Charlottesville/ Albemarle**

LV
LITERACY VOLUNTEERS
CHARLOTTESVILLE / ALBEMARLE
LITERACY VOLUNTEERS
40th Anniversary

Email: asalem@brlit.org
Phone: 540-265-9339

An overview:

- Introductions
- Language and culture in ESOL instruction
  - Interconnection of language and culture
  - Impact of cultural backgrounds on classroom interactions
  - Social norms and structures in language learning
- Understanding Culture as Dynamic
  - Avoiding the risk of essentializing culture
- Identity, Belonging, and Relationships
- Conclusion and Q&A

Blue Ridge Literacy

Roanoke, VA

Executive Director

Ahoo Salem

Ahoo has been involved with Blue Ridge Literacy since 2016. As Executive Director, she brings unique academic and professional experience working with vulnerable populations, including refugee and immigrant groups in the Roanoke Valley.
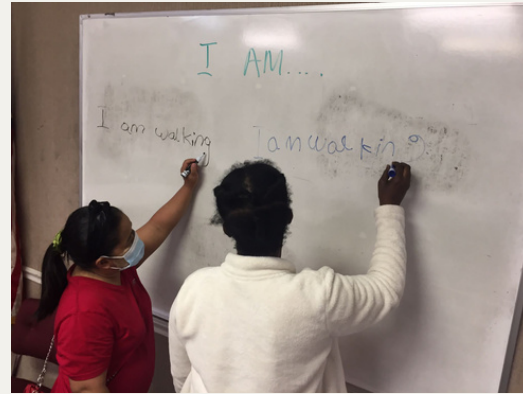
asalem@brlit.org

Program Director

Sara Geres

Sara has been with Blue Ridge Literacy since 2015. She brings her expertise in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages and experience teaching in the United States and abroad to develop sustainable language programs to adults in our area.

sgeres@brlit.org

CERTIFIED WELCOMING

City of Roanoke
A Certified Welcoming place for all of us to call home.

Blue Ridge Literacy through the Time

1993
ESOL services were implemented

2003
BRL became a Proliteracy member

2014
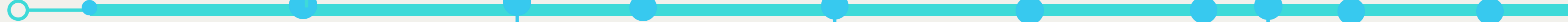BRL moved into the main library downtown

2019
English & Health Litercy
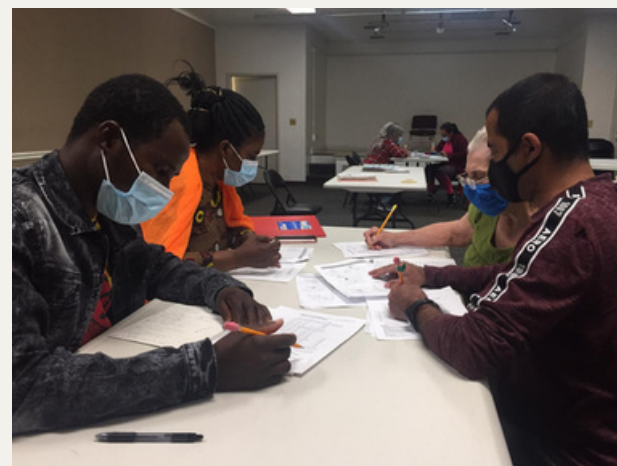
2022
English & Digital Literacy

1985
Blue Ridge Literacy was founded by two local librarians

2001
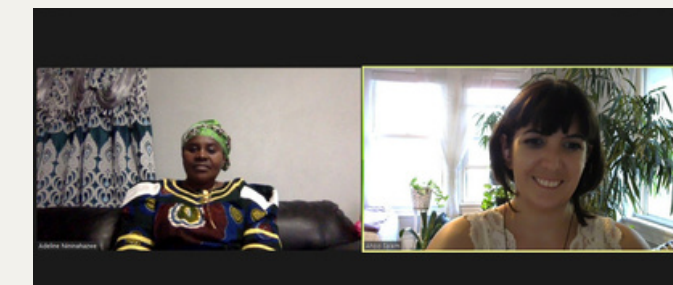ESOL Classes Introduced

2005
Citizenship Preparation Classes Introduced

2020
Online services incorporated

2024
Certified Welcoming Designation

Language and Culture in ESOL Instruction

Interconnection of Language and Culture

Language is often seen as the window into a **culture**, and this is because language reflects the values, beliefs, and attitudes of the people who use it.

Learning a language goes beyond learning
- the alphabet
- the meaning
- the grammar rules
- the arrangement of words

Learning a language includes learning
- the behavior of the society
- and its cultural customs.

Language and Culture in ESOL Instruction

Interconnection of Language and Culture

Culture is a fuzzy set of attitudes, beliefs, behavioral conventions, basic assumptions, and values that are shared by a group of people and that influence each member's behavior and each member's interpretations of the meanings of other people's behavior.

Culture is important for:
- Shaping social relationships
- Maintaining and challenging social order
- Determining how we make sense of the world
- Shaping our everyday actions and experiences in society

s
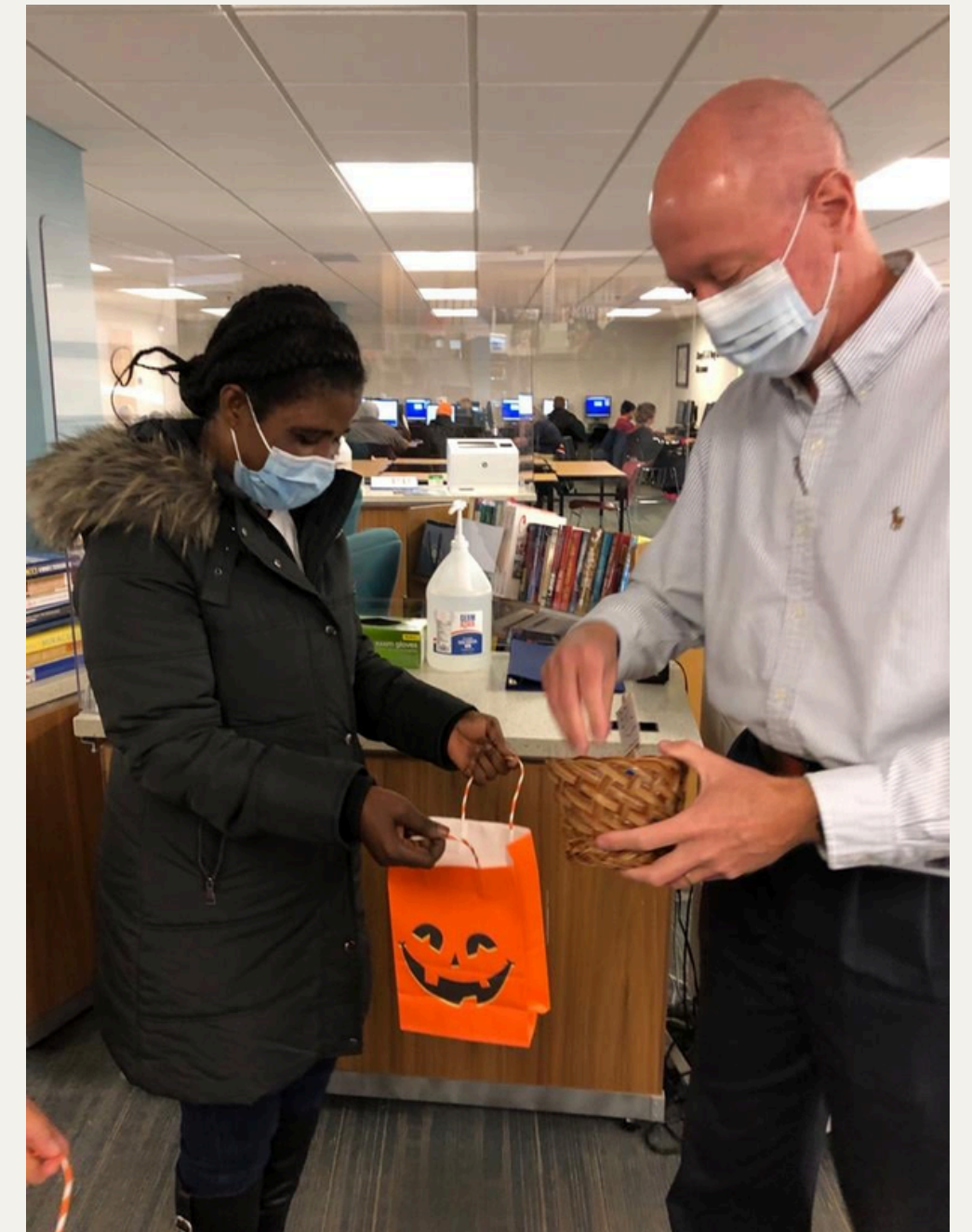
Language and Culture in ESOL Instruction

Interconnection of Language and Culture

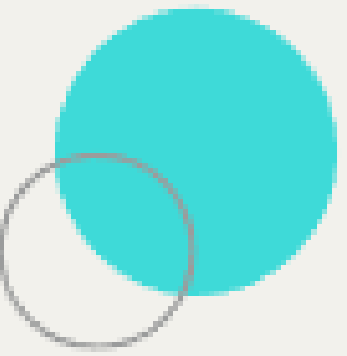|		
Values and beliefs	Knowlege	Rules
Languages	Common Sense	Laws
Communication	Assumptions	Norms
Shared Practices	Expectations	Morals

Interconnection of Language and Culture

Differences in ways languages frame and phrase topics: Example 1

1

2

Interconnection of Language and Culture

Differences in ways languages frame and phrase topics: Example 1

Interconnection of Language and Culture

Differences in ways languages frame and phrase topics

Our learners are likely to translate directly from their primary language

International English Speakers have an advantage point!

Interconnection of Language and Culture

Differences in ways languages frame and phrase and topics: Example 2

Gender Pronouns

English	Farsi
I	من Man / I
You	تو To/ You
She	او Ou / Other person
He	او Ou/ Other person

Familial Relations

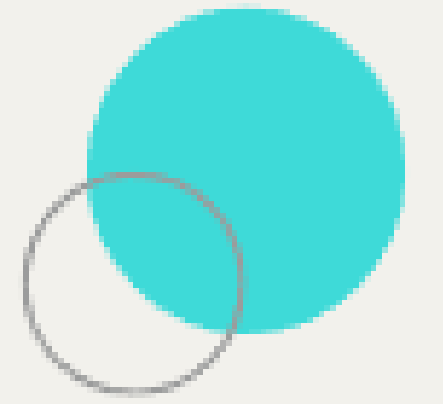| English	Farsi
Niece	
	برادر زاده Baradr Zade Brother's child
Nephew	
	خواهر زاده Khahar Zade Sister's child

Interconnection of Language and Culture

Learning a language involves learning about cultural values and ways of thinking

In addition to learning the grammar and terminology, our learners are learning how to "think and feel" in English.

Impact of Cultural Backgrounds on Interactions

Diverse populations: diverse norms, customs, and ways of interacting

Cultural norms and traditions influence forms of interaction and power hierarchies

Teacher–Learner Interactions

High level of Respect   **More casual interactions**

Formal titles   Standing when teacher enters   Casual interactions

Seeking Clarification and Asking Questions

High Context Cultures   **Low Context Cultures**

Avoid asking questions publicly   Seeking clarification openly

Impact of Cultural Backgrounds

Diverse populations: diverse structures and contexts

Familiarity with institutional forms of schooling
- Learning practices
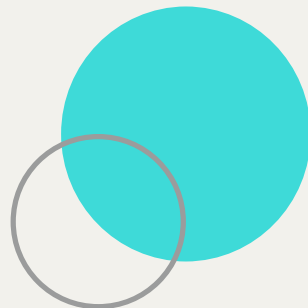- Test Taking
- Classroom rules

Context of learning and evaluation
- Critical and analytical thinking
- Different and new types of assignments
- Speed of reading
- Comparison with other classmates' performances
- Loss of prestige and perception of self-performance

The transition goes beyond language and academic skills
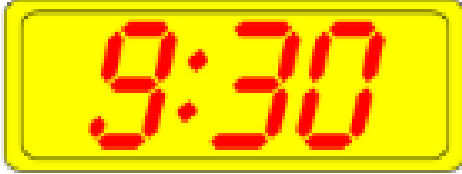
Impact of Cultural Backgrounds

Learning a language involves learning about social norms and sturctures

In the context of ESOL learning, understanding social norms and structures such as classroom rules, punctuality, and communication protocols teaches learners what is expected in professional settings. These practices ensure they are prepared to meet cultural and workplace expectations.

B·R·L

In-person ESOL Class Rules

1. Be on-time! Class starts at 9:30 am

9:30

2. No Cell Phones in class!

3. Be kind to your classmates

Welcome!   Hi there!
What's Up?   Thanks!

4. If you will be absent from class, text your class WhatsApp group to inform your teacher

B·R·L

Online ESOL Class Rules

1. Sit down, in a quiet space with your book and login at 6:00 pm

2. Keep your camera on

3. If you have a lot of noise in the background, mute yourself

4. If you will be absent from class, text your class WhatsApp group to inform your teacher

5. Your last class on August 15th will be an in-person exam at Blue Ridge Literacy

Culture is Dynamic

Avoiding the risk of essenzialing culture

Culture is dynamic. It changes over time and from place to place!
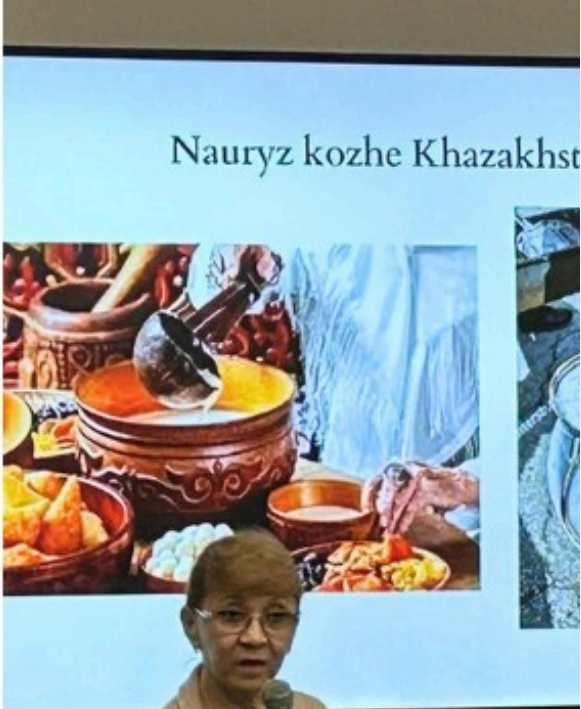
Risk of essentializing culture/ religion
- over-generalization, stereotyping, and undermining the actor's agency

Culture is Dynamic

Avoiding the risk of essenzialing culture

- Many factors, including socioeconomic status, level of education, life experiences, and even place of residence (urban vs. rural), shape the ways in which people interact with their surrounding environments.

- Social norms and power hierarchies impact relationships with others. These relationships may differ from one group to another.

Avoiding the Risk of Essentializing Culture

Cultural identity and religious identity

Religion is often viewed as interchangeable with culture. This view undermines that:

- Individuals can have multiple identities simultaneously
- Individuals may have varying degrees of devotion
- Structures and power hierarchies promote certain religious behavior

It's important not to impose religious practices on English language learners based on assumptions about their culture.

It Goes Beyond Culture

Identity, belonging and relationships

- Moving to a new place comes with changes
  - Loss of identifiers of status
  - Opportunity for a fresh start
  - Different roles and responsibilities

- Our learners are parents, siblings, children, and neighbors
  - Caregiving responsibilities
  - Loss and death
  - Inner group dynamics and norms

- National and global affairs
  - War
  - Ethnic conflict

Language and Culture in ESOL Instruction

Conclusions

- **Language** is often seen as the window into a **culture**, and this is because language reflects the values, beliefs, and attitudes of the people who use it.
  - When our learners learn a new language, they also learn about the cultural context in which that language is spoken.

- As educators, we must understand various factors that shape and impact our learners' learning process and their inclusion in their new host community.
  - This helps us create inclusive and effective learning environments and respect our learner's diverse backgrounds.

Questions and discussions

For comments, feedback, and further questions email Ahoo Salem
asalem@brlit.org

https://www.blueridgeliteracy.org/

Additional resources

Cole, N. L. (2024, June 4). So what is culture, exactly? ThoughtCo. Retrieved June 21, 2024, from https://www.thoughtco.com/culture-definition-4135409

Guessabi, F. (2024). Blurring the line between language and culture. Language Magazine. Retrieved June 21, 2024, from https://www.languagemagazine.com/blurring-the-line-between-language-and-culture/

Jones, O. (2012, August 5). Different languages express emotion differently. Big Think. Retrieved June 21, 2024, from https://bigthink.com/surprising-science/different-languages-express-emotion-differently/

Manolache, M. (2023, August 15). Religion as cultural identity: Addressing misconceptions and examining attitudes. LEVEL. Retrieved June 21, 2024, from https://different-level.com/religion-as-cultural-identity-addressing-misconceptions-and-examining-attitudes/

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. (2020, January 2). The meaning of emotions may differ across the world, new research shows. UNC Global Affairs. Retrieved June 21, 2024, from https://global.unc.edu/news-story/the-meaning-of-emotions-may-differ-across-the-world-new-research-shows/