

LEARNING the LINGO

County's foreign language speakers navigate English

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Da Chung flipped through a hot pink, hardcover children's book as she sat inside the Asian American Center of Frederick on Thursday night.

"Banana." She read a word aloud and pointed to the corresponding word on a plastic page. "Ball."

She was practicing alone, sounding out words of a language she knew nothing about when she arrived in the United States from her native Vietnam.

In the intervening 40 years, she has picked up the vernacular mostly through informal methods: interacting with English speakers at her job and in day-to-day activities. She has mastered enough to com-



municate the basics.

"I speak English, but sometimes it not correct," she explained.

She can understand what English speakers say, but they can't always understand her heavily accented responses.

"Sometimes, when I talk, they just look at

(See **LANGUAGE A6**)

Editor's note

This is the first in an occasional series about Frederick County residents whose primary or native language is not English. Their struggles to overcome the language gap touch many aspects of their daily lives, including their interactions with schools, businesses, courts, the health care system and social services.



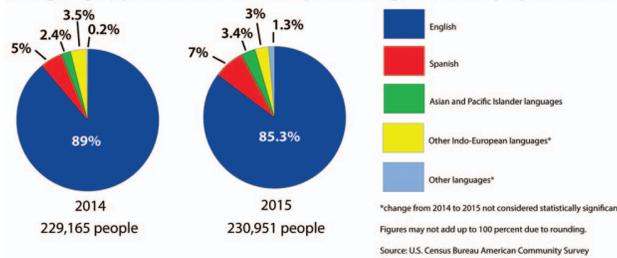
ABOVE: Student teacher Hyejeong Lee teaches an advanced English class Thursday night at the Asian American Center of Frederick.



LEFT: Alex Biggs teaches an English class at Centro Hispano de Frederick recently.

Staff photos by Sam Yu

Language spoken at home (as percentage of total population)



Language

(Continued from A1)

me, not understand," she said.

Da Chung is among a growing number of foreign language speakers who live in Frederick County, navigating the language barrier on a daily basis.

The number of county residents who speak a language other than English at home increased 33.6 percent from 2014 to 2015, according to U.S. Census Bureau estimates.

About 14.7 percent of the 230,951 county residents as of 2015 — 33,949 people — spoke a language other than English at home.

The Census data is aimed at capturing the number of people whose primary language is not English, but could include English speakers who know a second language. In 2014, 11 percent of the county's population spoke a language other than English at home, according to the data.

Frederick's many languages

At least two local places that offer English classes to foreign language speakers — the Asian American Center and Centro Hispano de Frederick — have seen an uptick in participation, or organization leaders said.

The number of students in Centro Hispano's English classes doubled in two years, from 51 in 2014 to 101 in 2016, according to Maria Shuck, Centro's director.

The Asian American Center also experienced a recent spike in demand for its classes, according to Elizabeth Chung, the center's executive director, who is not related to Da Chung.

More prospective students wanted to enroll in the basic English class for 2017 than there were available spots. The organization is considering starting a second beginner-level class, she said.

The Asian American Center currently offers one weekly class each for beginner, intermediate and advanced-level students.

Frederick Community College, the Literacy Council of Frederick County and the Family Partnership of Frederick County also offer English classes. Family Partnership's classes are limited to teenagers and parents of young children the agency serves.

Spanish dominates the foreign languages of Frederick, spoken at home by 7 percent of the county's total population and 47.6 percent of the foreign language-speaking population as of 2015, according to Census data.

Spanish is also the most prevalent language spoken among Centro Hispano's clients, according to Shuck. In recent years, there has been a shift in the Spanish-speaking countries from which people emigrate.

A majority of current clients hail from Central American countries, Guatemala and El Salvador, as well as Mexico, are the most common countries of origin among Centro Hispano clients, Shuck said. The organization previously served more people from South American countries, Shuck said.

Spanish speakers also are a majority of students in the Asian American Center's English classes. Of the 50 students currently enrolled in classes, 40 speak Spanish, according to Matthew Nimpspon, the Center's citizenship coordinator.



Staff photo by Sam Yu

Teacher Sandra Doggett, left, goes over a handout Thursday night with Da Chung during an advanced English class at the Asian American Center of Frederick.

Frederick County's foreign language speakers, by the numbers

Language spoken at home (out of 230,951 residents)

- **85.3 percent** spoke English
- **7 percent** spoke Spanish
- **34.7 percent** spoke another Indo-European language
- **3.4 percent** spoke an Asian or Pacific Islander language
- **1.3 percent** spoke another language

Characteristics of foreign language speakers (34,003 people)

- **85.3 percent** spoke English "very well"
- **34.7 percent** spoke English "less than very well"
- **35.9 percent** were native-born citizens
- **30 percent** were born outside the country, but have become U.S. citizens
- **34.1 percent** were not U.S. citizens (includes those with visas and undocumented immigrants)
- **14.9 percent** live below the poverty level
- **85.1 percent** live at or above the poverty level
- **14.2 percent** of those 25 years and older have less education than the equivalent of a high school diploma
- **25.8 percent** have the equivalent of a high school diploma
- **28.1 percent** have some type of college or associate's degree
- **31.9 percent** have a bachelor's degree or higher

Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2015 American Community Survey

The remaining 10 know Asian languages: seven speak Burmese, two speak Chinese and one, Da Chung, speaks Vietnamese.

Census estimates also point to an increase in the percentage of county residents who speak Asian and Pacific Island languages, which are grouped together in Census data. Speakers of Asian and Pacific Island languages grew from 2.4 percent of the population in 2014 to 3.4 percent in 2015, according to the data.

Frederick County had the third-largest Burmese community in Maryland in 2016, according to the International Rescue Committee, a nonprofit that resettles predominately Burmese refugees.

Practicality vs. perfection

Among Frederick's foreign language speakers, English proficiency varies. Census estimates from 2015 show that 65.3 percent speak English "very well." The remaining 34.7 percent speak English "less than very well."

Da Chung was one of five students who attended the Asian American Center's advanced class Thursday night. The others, like her, can speak and understand English, but struggle to communicate in some situations.

"When I want to express myself, sometimes, I don't know how to say in English," explained Pung Jang, another student in the class. "The most use sentence we use is, 'how do you say?'"

Jang, a doctor, came to Frederick from his native China to do research at the National Institutes of Health laboratories. He

knew some English before he arrived in the country, but he's picked up a lot more in the two months he's been here.

Sonia De Perez Melendez, a Centro Hispano client who moved to the United States from El Salvador 32 years ago, speaks little to no English. She understands quite a bit, but can't speak more than just basic phrases, she said in an interview conducted through an interpreter.

When she came to the U.S., she took classes to improve her English. But once she got a job, she didn't have time to keep studying.

She wants to improve her English to better communicate in day-to-day life. Speaking English might help her secure a job. She has been unable to find one since moving to Frederick, she said.

Most students who take English classes at Centro Hispano are beginners, "starting from scratch," Shuck said.

Shuck emphasized practicality over perfection as the mission of the classes. "We're realistic," she said. "We don't worry about verbs, grammar. We want to teach them how to go to the grocery, words to know for work, that kind of thing."

She added, "A lot of these people are illiterate in their own language. We have our work cut out for us."

Getting the message across

Even those who speak little English, like De Perez Melendez, find ways to communicate.

"These people, they're very resourceful," Shuck said. "They have to be.

"They're in survival mode."

An interpreter has helped De Perez Melendez communicate with her doctor. Other times she anticipates communication challenges, she might bring a bilingual friend.

She has yet to encounter a situation where her limited English abilities posed a problem. But the possibility worries her, she said. Edras Martinez also spoke of the workarounds he's developed.

Martinez, who moved to Frederick from Guatemala seven years ago, speaks conversational English. In an interview with a *Frederick News-Post* reporter in February, he started off speaking in English, then switched to Spanish. An interpreter helped with that portion of the interview.

Martinez is a handyman on a Middletown farm owned by a couple who speaks only English, he said. They taught each other basic phrases in their respective languages, and his bosses help him practice his English.

When these techniques prove unsuccessful, he relies on a cellphone app that translates spoken Spanish to English, and vice versa. It's not perfect, but it gets the message across.

Despite his limited English, he's been able to communicate well enough to help another non-English speaker in crisis. He recalled a time when he walked by the scene of a car crash. He realized the person involved in the crash could not communicate in English at all, even to phone for help. He went to a house near the scene of the crash, and asked the woman who answered the door to call 911.

He also spoke to the police officers when they arrived at the scene, describing what he saw.

For Ying Yu, talking on the phone is perhaps the most prominent example of times when she can't overcome the language barrier. Yu, a medical student from China, who also takes the advanced English class at the Asian American Center, said the lack of visual cues combined with the rapid speed of English speakers makes communicating by phone particularly difficult.

If she doesn't understand, she will ask the speaker to slow down, or repeat the phrase. Sometimes that works. Other times, it doesn't.

Still, Yu emphasized that most American speakers she's encountered since she arrived in the U.S. 11 months ago are patient, willing to repeat themselves or rephrase their words to communicate with her.

Other foreign language speakers agreed. "Americans, they are kind to us," Jang said. "This positive outlook, combined with a motivation to learn, struck a chord with Sandra Doggett, a volunteer who teaches the Asian American Center's advanced English class.

"They're just so happy to be here, and so driven to learn the language and to assimilate into our culture," Doggett said. "They sacrifice a lot to be here, working all day then coming to class and studying."

Although she's the designated teacher, she's learned from her students, too. "They see the good things in America," she said. "It's made me look at my country through a new lens."

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