In CUNY Language Immersion Program, Students

Anne Lun, 20, set out five years ago from Hong Kong and settled in with relatives in a place she’s come to love and call home: Brooklyn, New York.

When no time, she enrolled at local public schools and in short order graduated from John Dewey High. These days Lun smiles the smile of ambition, as if knowing she will one day have the thing she really wants — a college degree that will lead to a job as an accountant.

One big hurdle stands in the way: She still doesn’t have a strong command of English.

Lun is thus like tens of thousands of immigrants in this town who are stymied in their desire to speak and read English proficiently. But Lun is different from most of them, and in a sense she is very privileged.

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In addition to class lectures, discussions and writing assignments, CLIP students spend several hours a week in a computer lab, El Museo del Barrio. "Besides word processing skills, they do a lot of research, because we want them to become autonomous learners, so that they can astudy of the content that you’re likely to want to miss them. But when you’re in a country and they speak a different language, it’s not easy."

Fortune works up to 40 hours a week at a security job. He spends another 25 hours in his CLIP class, and countless more hours studying and practicing English. "Sometimes I feel very tired," he said.

Fortune is optimistic he’ll soon be ready to pass the so-called ACT reading and writing tests and then go on to take courses toward his associate’s degree and then his bachelor’s degree at City Tech. "Before I could have an idea but I could not know how to write it in English. But . . . Now I understand much better."

CLIP began operating 10 years ago in the Theresa Hotel, the Harlem building that Fidel Castro made famous in 1960, when he stayed there accompanied by live chickens. "I was a teacher in the program the very first night of operation at the Teresa," Hellman, now a CLIP administrator, wrote in an email recently. "I liked to imagine that I was teaching in the Castro Suite!"

The CLIP program expanded steadily, from 663 students at six colleges in 1996, to more than 3,000 a year at nine colleges today.

There are currently CLIP programs at:
- the Borough of Manhattan Community College
- Bronx Community College
- the College of Staten Island
- Hostos Community College
- Kingsborough Community College
- LaGuardia Community College
- The New York City College of Technology
- Queensborough Community College
- York College.

The language immersion program technically falls under the broad umbrella of ESL, meaning it is for English Language Learners.

But, at CUNY, ESL is very different from CLIP. While — like CLIP — it is for foreign language students who fail the ACT test, it is actually more advanced. ESL classes are credit-bearing courses that meet several hours a week. CLIP, though non-credit bearing, is a full time job, with students spending 25 hours a week in the classroom, in addition to homework.

"The work that CLIP does cannot be undertaken in any other program, because of the sheer number of contact hours involved, the level of intensity," said Hamid Kherief, who directs the CLIP and ESL programs at York College.

Students Produce Book of Essays on Paintings

Last year, CLIP students wrote essays about paintings they had seen at El Museo del Barrio. Dozens of the essays were included in a 60-page book titled Writing in Response to Latin American and Caribbean Art. Below are excerpts from two essays on "Listening to the Living," by Roberto Sebastian Antonio Matta Echaurren in 1941.

Nancy Bravo, York College

This whirlwind evokes fury, confusion, and fear. It makes me think that our world is in constant chaos...The off-whites in the painting reflect the terrifying gases in our atmosphere. This scary situation infuriates me and I can see...that this painting “Listening to Living” is a warning sign. Matta and other surrealist artists intended to shock us and make us reflect about the consequences of our actions against nature.

It is a shame that our language is so limited. Sometimes words are not enough to express what we perceive.

Sandra Juarez, York College

This artwork reminds me of when I first went to the ocean in my country...My father and I sat there to admire the view. We remained there quietly listening to the waves and the whistling of the whales in the ocean...We could listen to the different echoes from the ocean...We could listen to the different echoes from the waves and the whistling of the whales in the ocean...We could...
Learn English the Right Way, the Hard Way

New York is an immigrant town, and it probably always will be. But statisticians have noticed something interesting about immigrant students coming to CUNY in recent years: Their English proficiency on average is much stronger.

"The immigrant students from foreign language households are coming to us with stronger English skills than in the past," said David Crook, the University Dean for Institutional Research and Assessment.

The apparent reason, say Crook and others, is that there are increasing numbers of immigrants who came to New York at a young age and went to schools here in their pre-teen and teenage years.

Sociologists call them the "1.5 (one-point-five) generation."

According to University surveys: in 1995, 81.1 percent of senior college freshmen said English was their language of comfort; in 2004, following steady increases, the figure was 92.5 percent.

Indeed, Crook and others say that CLIP and other ESL programs deserve much of the credit. They say that across the country, there has been a stronger focus on the teaching of English to foreign language-speaking students, using tough approaches like the immersion method of CLIP.

Hamid Khereif, director of the CLIP and ESL programs at York College, agreed that a key factor in the increasing English proficiency is emergence of the "1.5 generation."

Crook said it was important to note that the number of immigrants coming to CUNY continues to rise. Even as comfort levels in English went from 81.1 percent to 92.5 percent, the number of freshmen from foreign language-speaking households went from 53.8 percent to 59.1. Crook said:

"We're still able to attract immigrants but they've become more comfortable with the English language over time," Crook said.

But statistics surely counts for a lot; but as Liss' students know, it takes a lot of hard work — and step-by-step planning — to reach one's goal in life. Surely a reader of The Alchemist knows that. "You can't leap up and get there," Liss told her class of voyagers to the American dream. "You have to prepare yourself each step. You need to be focused."

Programs That Teach English to English Language Learners (ELL's)

CLIP — an intensive English language program for admitted freshman who need help with their academic reading, writing and oral communication skills. CLIP uses an "immersion" approach requiring students to work on language skills 25 hours a week. The program is low cost, and students can stay up to a year.

ESL (English as a Second Language) — traditional non-credit and credit classes for strengthening the language skills of admitted freshmen. ESL classes generally meet fewer hours per week than CLIP and have a range of instructional emphases. ESL classes are part of a student's program of study and regular tuition applies.

Bi-lingual — In the bi-lingual approach, students read, write and speak their native language as they learn English. Proponents say that if students learn to use their first language well, they will learn English more effectively. Hostos Community College is the only bi-lingual public college in the region.