

Kaitlan Spencer, an English teacher with the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) Vermont, sends a text message: “Hi everyone. Class is at 1:00 p.m.” At 1:00, she sends another message: “Class is now.” Slowly students join her online meeting and pop onto the screen. Kaitlan welcomes students by name, cajoles them into turning on their cameras, and offers friendly reminders to mute microphones. Students greet one another in English. The students on the screen come from four countries and speak 11 languages, but in English they are all beginners. Although eight people are officially enrolled in this class, spouses, friends, and children pop in to say hello.



Kaitlan Spencer conducts an online class for English language learners at the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) Vermont. Facial expressions—including smiles—and props make Kaitlan's classes effective and fun.

The atmosphere of this virtual class is an interesting mix of distant yet personal. The teacher and students are physically farther apart than they have ever been, yet they are intimately connected to one another's homes and lives. At the start of the COVID pandemic, Kaitlan migrated from Vermont (in the northeastern part of the United States) to Michigan (in the Midwest) to be closer to family. From her new location 700 miles away, she has a weekly window into the homes of her students in Vermont. "Sometimes students are lying on the floor or holding babies," she says. "Occasionally, there is a student cooking while they are also taking class. There may be children in the background, conversations going on in the house, or babies crying. Using the mute button is one of the first skills we practice."

USCRI is one of nine agencies in the United States that welcome refugees—providing housing, employment, and education support to help them become self-sufficient and contributing members of their new communities. One step on the path to self-sufficiency is learning English. However, community English classes for new arrivals in Vermont have not always looked like Kaitlan's virtual classroom. Flash back to February 2020, when a recently arrived refugee would enter a community classroom bundled in layers of winter clothing, having braved snow, slippery sidewalks, and frigid temperatures to get there. Vermont winter weather spares no one, and its polar welcome to refugees arriving from hot climates and warm sunshine made getting to English class the first hurdle to learning a new language and integrating into the community.

Today, the eight students, who have developed a close virtual-classroom community, chat confidently before Kaitlan gets things started. They didn't have to bundle up or find childcare. They didn't have to learn the bus route and spend time navigating their way across town. These students simply clicked on a link and joined the class.

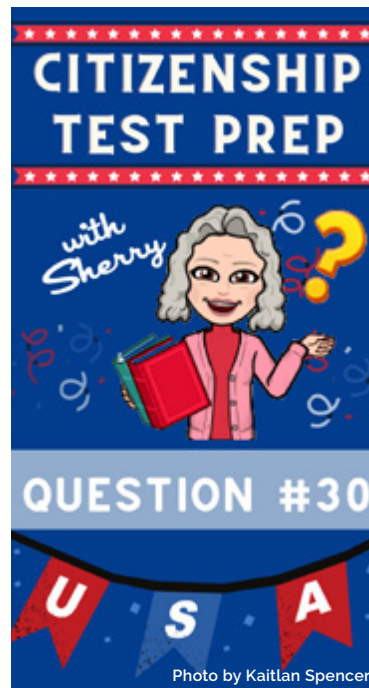
USCRI Vermont's transition from in-person to online learning in response to the pandemic

didn't happen with the wave of a wand. Kaitlan's diverse background and skills in film, video editing, and English language teaching (ELT) were integral to the transition to digital learning for refugees in the local community and beyond.

After community classes were paused in March 2020, it quickly became clear that in-person instruction would not return anytime soon. Kaitlan swooped in to spark a collection of online learning efforts that kept students connected, improved attendance, and expanded USCRI Vermont's educational reach.

Kaitlan joined USCRI Vermont in 2019 through AmeriCorps, a national service program in which American citizens serve at nonprofit organizations across the country. She served as an Economic Empowerment Program Developer, supporting education and employment programs at USCRI Vermont. Prior to that, Kaitlan had diverse educational, travel, and work experiences. As an undergraduate, she studied Film at Cornerstone University in Michigan and studied abroad in Kenya. After college, Kaitlan worked on film and video projects for a development organization in East Africa and Jordan before traveling to Mexico to earn her TEFL certificate and practice Spanish. Her spirit of adventure eventually led her to Vietnam, where she taught in language schools, tutored students, and, eventually, taught children online. Kaitlan's decision to spend a year with USCRI Vermont through AmeriCorps was prompted by her desire "to see if I wanted to be more involved in the administrative side of nonprofits." By the time the pandemic hit, Kaitlan knew the answer was a resounding "no." She missed the classroom. She missed the students. She wanted to make a direct impact. The pandemic presented the perfect opportunity for her to shift gears. Kaitlan put her online teaching experience and background in film and video production to use in spearheading USCRI Vermont's online educational efforts.

Her approach was multifaceted. With her knowledge of USCRI Vermont's audience



Kaitlan's skills in film production and video editing have added to the success of these instructional video series.

(refugees who have recently arrived in the United States with limited English and little experience with computers), Kaitlan suggested reaching out on familiar digital platforms that could be accessed by cell phone. She began with a WhatsApp English conversation group—simply connecting with students and letting them know that this group was a place to practice English with other local learners. She posed a question of the day to get conversation started—for example, “What are you having for breakfast?” Kaitlan wrote the question, made a voice recording of the question, and included pictures related to new vocabulary. She also shared a sample response—“I’m having a smoothie!”—and included a video about breakfast foods. Students replied with pictures, texts, and voice notes about their own breakfasts. One student shared that he was on a diet and only drinking tea for breakfast; he sent a picture of his lemon tea. In this way, students were engaged with the content, relating it to their lives, and growing comfortable in the learning environment.

Recognizing that clients—that is, the students—were adept Facebook users, Kaitlan

immersed herself in developing USCRI Vermont’s English learning Facebook page to keep students engaged with language learning that focused on local places and faces. USCRI Vermont teachers and tutors recorded welcoming videos to introduce the page to learners, and they recorded mini-lessons from their homes. Kaitlan’s skills in film production and video editing helped transform homemade videos into scaffolded learning tools. She provided teachers with tips on how to position themselves in front of the camera, incorporate props, and write on a whiteboard at awkward angles. Video series such as *Phrasal Verbs with Nancy*, *Cooking with Sherry*, and *Citizenship Test Prep with Sherry* all garnered a loyal following.

As Kaitlan got these phone-friendly efforts off the ground, USCRI Vermont worked to secure COVID relief funding to get computers into the hands of their clients, connect them to the Internet, and provide digital-literacy training. Kaitlan wove together her ELT experience with her technology and video-editing skills to develop tutorials that model digital skills for English learners and introduce essential “English for computers” vocabulary.

Kaitlan’s online teaching experience made her the perfect candidate to adapt USCRI Vermont’s newcomer curriculum to a virtual format and launch their online English classes. Although adult learners are different from children, many of the skills that Kaitlan mastered while teaching children online transferred to her adult English classes. Her enthusiasm, facial expressions, patience, extended wait time, props, clear pronunciation, and uncanny ability to alternate between showing a whiteboard, showing her face, and sharing a screen are all part of Kaitlan’s magical mix. She cites a lot of preparation, exaggerated facial expressions and gestures, and an understanding of her audience as keys to her success: “I have all kinds of props that I like to use. I have flashcards, whiteboards, and a tablet. I have a document camera that I use to share a workbook with students. I like to have a neutral background if possible, and I have

artificial lighting because I am not facing a window and some of my classes are at night. I also like to share a lot of materials via the share-screen option on Zoom.

“I’ll share documents, videos, worksheets, and activities for listening. For example, at the newcomer level, when I am introducing new vocabulary and students aren’t quite ready to produce it on their own, I can show a table of pictures labeled with letters of the alphabet, and, as students listen to new words, they can say or type the letter of the matching picture. Sometimes it takes creativity to reimagine activities for online learning, but most everything can be adapted in some way to build the same skills that we would target in the traditional classroom.”

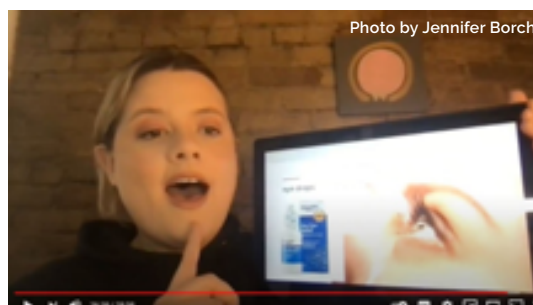
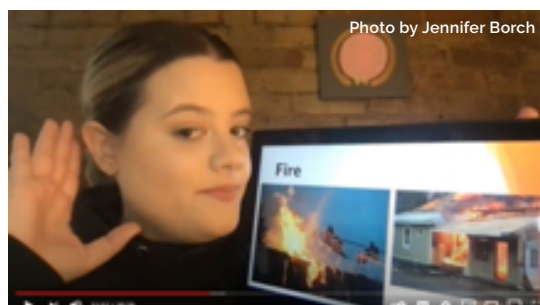
Kaitlan relies heavily on instructional Total Physical Response (TPR) strategies when teaching online. Although she finds that adults can be reluctant to engage in TPR or pantomime new vocabulary, she feels that communicating instructions with gestures like cupping her ear (*listen*), pointing to her mouth (*speak*), or writing in the air (*write*) are helpful to communicate a process without unnecessary incidental language.

As students adjusted to the online routine, Kaitlan saw a need to provide additional English practice opportunities. Thus, USCRI Vermont’s weekly Facebook Live English Class lessons were born. Kaitlan’s Thursday afternoon Live lessons follow the same newcomer curriculum that she practices in class. Students can tune in to review in a low-anxiety environment. There is no pressure to respond, but in the

chat box, a lively conversation takes place. The lessons attract USCRI Vermont regulars who attend Kaitlan’s classes, along with a global audience.

According to Kaitlan, “The Facebook Live class was designed to be accessible to anyone. We wanted a beginner-level class that would live online for the public to access. This also led us to create a YouTube channel where all the Facebook Live videos can also be accessed by students who do not have a Facebook account.” When asked about tips for teaching on Facebook Live, Kaitlan laughs. “On a very practical level, you have to get used to the lag time,” she says. “The amount of wait time is huge if you are waiting for comments to appear. Sometimes, I celebrate correct answers even before they come in just to keep things moving! Another practical thing is that I like to ask a question and then type the question into the chat for people who are better at listening and for others who are better at reading. I like to give them options.”

USCRI Vermont realized that Kaitlan was a valuable training asset. She shared tips with the agency’s online tutors, using video clips from her classes to demonstrate online teaching techniques, model wait time, and provide a sense of what to expect when working with newcomers online. Kaitlan’s growth mindset is contagious. Teachers and tutors who model risk-taking by jumping into the online teaching world are demonstrating the same vulnerability that they ask students to risk in practicing a new language; Kaitlan’s support and reassurance give them the nudge they may need to take on the challenge of teaching in a whole new way.



Communicating with gestures: *listen* (left) and *speak*

In addition to practical teaching tips, Kaitlan highlights the importance of cultivating a social and emotional connection online and practicing positive reinforcement even when teaching adults. She dedicates the first and last five minutes of class to open conversation. Students discuss everyday concerns, and topics include community COVID resources, technology issues, citizenship classes, and family updates. In class, Kaitlan encourages students to dialogue with and help one another, often coming to the rescue when Kaitlan's wait time seems infinite. "I think that the habit of encouraging comes from teaching children online," she says, "and I now recognize it's really important when teaching adults, too." Kaitlan also understands that a little positive feedback goes a long way in keeping her students coming back to class despite the myriad responsibilities they have.

On the question of whether online learning is here to stay for refugee-background students, Kaitlan says, "Initially these online classes gave students an opportunity to take a weekly class without having to leave home, which was really important at the beginning when we wanted everyone to stay home and stay safe. Now, we have realized the virtual classroom is beneficial to our students in so many ways. I recognize how important these classes are to women who are home tending to children; they are some of my most dedicated students. Today I saw one baby whose mom was pregnant when we started class. He's six months old now."

Kaitlan adds that virtual learning helps students fit classes around their work schedules. "I have one student who works third shift [overnight], joins our online class in the morning, and then goes to sleep. For him, it's much easier, when he's exhausted after a 12-hour shift, to sit in his house and take a class rather than having to go to a classroom. People who are sick, have had an injury, or are mobility impaired are also benefitting from these classes. This effort started out as a necessity, but, at this point, I think we have seen the benefits of having this option continue even when in-person classes can resume."

Kaitlan appreciates the effort that many of her students make to attend class consistently. She points out that for a refugee-background student, "there are so many things that require your daily attention. Relocating to another country is incredibly challenging. My students are so dedicated to learning despite the many other demands on their energy. I am always just in awe of them for continuing to show up."

Kaitlan's students would likely say that they are in awe of her, too. She has carved a niche for herself with her unique combination of skills and has made an enormous impact on the Vermont refugee community and beyond. There is no limit to what might come next for Kaitlan. Always looking for ways to grow and build new skills, she is currently pursuing her MATESOL degree and envisioning the content she will create for YouTube to better meet the needs of beginning adult English learners. Right now, though, Kaitlan is happy to be where she is. She says, "It's so amazing to be teaching at the same time as I am doing my master's degree because I get to use everything I learn right away. I also feel like learning about teaching while I am teaching has made me a much more gracious teacher."

Being gracious, creative, enthusiastic, and flexible are all qualities that have endeared Kaitlan to her teaching team and her students. USCRI Vermont and its students have benefitted immensely from her expertise, creativity, and enthusiasm. With online learning as the new norm, there will be an ongoing need for English language teachers who can work their magic online as well as they do in the classroom. Kaitlan is one of those teachers.

This article was written by **Jennifer Borch**, an English Language Teaching Consultant based in Jericho, Vermont. Jennifer served as an English Language Fellow in Morocco from 2016 to 2018 and an English Language Specialist in Egypt and Nepal in 2019. She currently teaches in the MATESOL program at Saint Michael's College and works with the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants in Vermont.