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HEADLINE: Nun's English classes really about survival

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BODY:

Sister Mary Ann Cunningham never thought she'd be teaching again, nearly 20 years after retiring from Mullen High School.

But every Saturday morning, the 69-year-old nun shuffles into **El Centro Humanitario Para Los Trabajadores** (The Humanitarian Center for Workers), balancing her steps with an aluminum cane.

This class - teaching English to immigrant adults - is turning out to be her toughest challenge as a teacher. She suspects it may also be her greatest calling.

She arrives at 8 a.m. and is greeted by a dozen men who have been there for hours.

The center is their conduit to jobs, a place where day laborers can be sure they won't get ripped off by contractors who have no intention of paying them.

The men arrive early, hoping to get hired for the day through the center. They sign in, get a ticket and wait their turn. Many days, there is no turn. If they don't get hired by noon, it usually means there's no work. And no pay.

As they wait, they play cards, read the newspaper, or chat.

Until Sister Cunningham arrives.

'Buenos dias,' she announces and walks into a room. Nine men and one woman follow her. Inside, there are 10 chairs - some wooden, some metal, all of them used, some of them wobbly - surrounding a huge table that looks like it came from a junkyard.

It's just Sister Cunningham and her students. There are no textbooks. Just scraps of paper and pencils she hands out and collects at the end of each class.

'Yo soy la profesora, Mariana,' she says, converting her name to Spanish. 'I am the professor, Mary Ann.'

She writes 'professor' on the board. And everyone copies it.

She tries to avoid using her Spanish, which is a bit rusty, because she wants them to think in English. So instead, she finds herself playing charades, acting out the words she wants to convey.

She points to a headline in the newspaper: 'Isabel hits, runs.' Then she asks the students if they know what Isabel is, while twirling her arm around.

'El huracn,' someone says. 'Yes! A hurricane,' Sister Cunningham says. They all take turns saying her-a-KANE.

It doesn't matter that the word's etymology traces back to the Taino 'Indians' of Puerto Rico who pronounced it hor-a-KAN. Language evolves, just as people do, so here in America, it's going to be 'her-a-KANE.'

Explaining the next two words is a little tricky. Sister Cunningham balls her fingers into a fist and strikes an imaginary person. 'iAh, golpe!' a student exclaims.

Then she starts pretending she is running away. 'iCorrer!' a few students say.

They write the words down.

Then she points to a story about the rebuilding of Iraq.

'Has the war in Iraq ended?' she asks.

Most of the students knew what the word 'war' meant, from American movies. But some are stumped by the word 'ended.'

'Oh, yes, kaput!' a man named Mauricio says.

'Well, that's right, but that's German,' Sister Cunningham says. 'Esa palabra es alemn.'

It's tricky teaching English. There are words we've incorporated from other languages, colloquialisms, slang and sayings that trip up any newcomer to the language.

But the men are fascinated with the oddities of the language. They're eager to learn what they can as a way to better understand American culture.

As Sister Cunningham puts it, 'This is really about survival. If they don't learn English, everything they do here is going to be that much harder.'

Anyone who claims that immigrants don't want to learn English is mistaken, she says. The economic incentive alone of finding better jobs is enough to get any immigrant into an English class.

But as anyone who has ever studied a second language has learned, it's incredibly hard.

In class, a man named Hector raises his hand to speak. 'Professor, how come I can read this but I have a hard time to say it?'

'That's because it's easier to read,' she says. 'You have to practice.'

At the end of class, she knows she's given them just a smidgen of what they need to know. Learning a new language is tough, she says, especially when you're squeezing classes in between jobs.

Classes are offered every morning at the center. There are three teachers who alternate days. So there isn't a lot of consistency, but that's the best the center can hope for, considering they are all volunteers.

Learning a new language, especially when you're an adult, is a huge undertaking.

That doesn't seem to stop any of the workers who come to the center. Sister Cunningham's class is always full. And she bets that if there were a second class, or third, at the same time, those would be full, too.

Cindy Rodriguez's column appears Mondays and Fridays. Contact her at crodriguez@denverpost.com.

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