

### 3.6 Teacher Feature: Barbara Hicks



**Barbara Hicks is an instructor with Arlington Education and Employment Program (REEP). She was nominated for the Progress Teacher Feature by REEP ESOL Lead Teacher Emily Beckett.**

Pop hits from “Volare” to Seal’s “Kiss from a Rose” sound from the computer speakers in a second floor room of the Clarendon Education Center as the adults in Barbara Hicks’ 150-level ESOL class arrive. The first few students find seats and immediately begin to work on the cloze exercise that has been written out on the blackboard, several sentences including conversational basics like:

\_\_i th\_\_re! H\_\_w w\_\_y\_\_d\_\_?  
Th\_\_w\_\_th\_\_r w\_\_a lit\_\_le b\_\_t w\_\_rm t\_\_d\_\_y.

REEP’s 150-level class is for beginners. “If level 100 [was] working our way into first gear, we’re in first gear now; we’re going,” explains Hicks. Her class of 11 (9 women, 2 men) meets four nights a week, from 7 p.m. to 9:45 p.m., and includes Spanish speakers as well as students from Turkey, Algeria, Egypt, and Albania.

More students arrive, greeting each other with “Good evening” and looking curiously at me, the visitor. As one student enters the room, Hicks calls out, “How is your toothache?” The student approaches the desk, and Hicks shares information about a low-cost local dentist, including directions on how to call for a referral. Another female student explains that she missed an earlier class because she was sick with a fever. Hicks informs her that, per REEP policy, she can bring a doctor’s note to excuse her absence, then says with a smile, “I have some medicine for you.” She brings out a container of chocolate candies. The other student, sitting at the same round table, jokes: “not good for a toothache.”

Shortly after seven o’clock, though a few students are still arriving, Hicks begins to move around the room, checking learners’ progress on the cloze exercise. She makes a few corrections on individual papers and, after noticing a phrase the class is having trouble with, fills in a few of the missing letters on the board.

Then, Hicks moves to the front of the class: “Hi there! How was your day?” The group repeats the phrases a few times; then, Hicks poses the question



to individual students. One student replies that his day was “great.” To the follow-up question “What did you do?”, he shares that he slept, after having worked a night shift.

Hicks turns to the whole class. “When did he sleep? Did he sleep at night?” There are mixed responses, so she repeats, “He worked at night. He slept at day. When did he sleep?” This time, the class is unanimous in replying, “at day.”

The next student responds that her day was “fine.” She explains that she didn’t get to see her husband, who was working. “I’m sorry,” Hicks replies, going on to elicit the husband’s work schedule (6 a.m. to 2 p.m. at Panera and 3 p.m. to midnight at Whole Foods) as a review of time and numbers.

Then Hicks announces, “Stand up!” The students are to find 5 different people to talk to, asking and answering the questions “How was your day?” and “What did you do?” The room is quickly filled with noise as learners pair.

When learners have finished several conversational exchanges, Hicks hands out pieces of chalk. Some students fill in the blank spaces in the cloze exercise, while others write out verbs under some drawings of stick figures engaged in different activities. (Today, they are instructed to write the verbs in past tense; then, one student is asked to change them to present.) As Hicks goes over the cloze sentences, reviewing the phrase “a little bit,” the class repeats them to practice pronunciation. She quizzes the group on a few vowels, asking one student to name different vowels as she points to them, beginning slowly but building up speed.



When Hicks comes to the final sentences of the cloze, she frowns dramatically. (The sentences explain that a volunteer is to visit the class. The volunteer, however, has not arrived.) Taking an eraser, Hicks changes the sentence: “Somebody is here.” She introduces me, and I answer a few friendly questions about my day, sharing that I’ve driven up from Richmond to observe the class. Though the students seem eager to interrogate the stranger in their midst, Hicks refers to the agenda written out one of the classroom blackboards. She has to cut the conversation short so the class can move on to other activities, beginning with a homework check.

Students pull out their copies of *Very Easy True Stories* while Hicks circulates the tables and individually looks over the work. Those who haven't completed the exercises use the time to work on them; then Hicks quickly reviews the answers with the whole group. As soon as she has pulled out the overhead projector and adjusted the classroom lighting, Hicks moves on to the topic of the evening, introducing [the "Emergency!" health literacy picture story](#) (written by Kate Singleton). The class discusses the pictures, naming the cartoon protagonist. Hicks introduces the term "check up"; when she asks the class whether they have ever had a check up, only a few indicate that they have. At the end of the picture story, the cartoon character looks in shock at a bill for his emergency room visit. Hicks adds the term "financial advisor" to the class word wall, drawing in another figure in the last frame of the story.



After discussing the role of a financial advisor, it is time to get students up on their feet. Hicks distributes a worksheet illustrating directions a doctor might give during a check up (open your mouth; breathe in/out; raise your arm; lie down on your back/stomach). Hicks dons a doctor's headlamp made out of copy paper and begins to elicit the vocabulary from the class, demonstrating the various actions and supplying less familiar words like "bend" and "straighten." This leads into a

kind of Simon Says activity, in which the students follow the commands as she calls them out.

After a while, Hicks declares, "Class, you're the doctor." Students begin to call out actions, which Hicks carries out enthusiastically. After the class calls out several commands in the order they are written on the worksheet, Hicks exclaims, "Class, this is boring. Change it!" Given permission to mix things up, the class takes good-hearted enjoyment in having Hicks lie down on the floor and hold her breath.

The activity wraps up, and learners file into the hall to end the evening with their weekly visit to the computer lab. Hicks leads the pack, asking the students to give directions ("turn right") to the lab as they walk. In the lab, an assistant has already launched the Internet and navigated to the U.S.A. Learns website (<http://www.usalearns.org>). Using a projector, Hicks familiarizes students with the instructions of the "Doctors and Medicine" Unit, which includes video and follow-up vocabulary exercises. Students,





wearing headphones and using microphones, work individually, with the lab assistant floating to offer guidance. Hicks takes the opportunity to pull a student aside for a mid-term review, going over her attendance and progress in speaking, listening, reading, and writing. She encourages the student to ask questions if she doesn't understand something in class and asks, "What is difficult for you?" When the student expresses difficulty practicing her speaking, explaining that she spends most of the day home alone, Hicks refers her to a conversational class at a local library.

After two student conferences, Hicks notices that some students are finishing the computer-based activities. She passes out worksheets related to medical vocabulary and asks pairs of students who are finished with the U.S.A. Learns lesson to practice the written dialogue. Soon, it is 9:45, and time for students to leave.

After class, I sit down with Hicks for a short interview. "I was in love with a Belgian," Hicks says, when asked how she came to the field of adult education. "I went into the Peace Corps, came out, and wanted to have a job where I could travel the world." She decided to teach English, became CELTA certified in Turkey, stayed there for 5 months, then came back to the U.S., where her first job was with the Arlington Education and Employment Program (REEP).

Hicks has worked at REEP for about 5 years, not always but often teaching the 150-level beginner group. After observing the high energy in Hicks' nearly three-hour evening class (Hicks was so animated throughout that it was difficult to capture her in a photograph), it is easy for me to see why ESOL Lead Teacher Emily Beckett nominated Hicks for the *Progress* Teacher Feature. Beckett described Hicks as "thoughtful, creative, daring, and very engaging in her craft," but above all, she cited her reflective approach to lesson planning and implementation as a model for other teachers.

REEP teaches a life skills curriculum (Hicks covers about four different topics each term), and at the beginning of the term, the students help set the curriculum. "Obviously, now we're in English for health, for the doctor," says Hicks. Within each life skills unit, Hicks begins with a needs assessment. (For example, if students want to learn English for shopping, what does that look like? Do they want to talk to the cashier, read labels, understand coupons, comparison shop?)



Sometimes, Hicks finds she has materials that will address students' needs. When learners expressed that they wanted to use English for the doctor, she was able to pull out the handout of directions a doctor might give. Although she knew much of the class was already familiar with some of the basic vocabulary (e.g., "lie down"), the activity was fun, would fill in vocabulary gaps, and dovetailed with resources available in the computer lab. In conversation, she discovered that many of the students were communicating with the doctor through family intermediaries, so she included a lesson on asking for and using an interpreter. She has been corresponding with Kate Singleton since attending one of her professional development presentations, so she knew about the health literacy picture stories.

For other topics, Hicks has found she has to invent more of the curriculum for herself. In one class, many learners were concerned about the question: What do I do if I'm pulled over? "There's no materials geared toward this level for that sort of language function," Hicks shared, "so basically we made a little story about it." Hicks pulled out a half dozen vocabulary items related to things to do if you are pulled over and created pictures that the students could identify: which picture is "license and registration, please"? which is "put your hands on the wheel"? which is "say 'sir' or 'ma'am'"? Students read and acted out the story, playing the characters of officer and driver. "I try to give them exactly what they want whenever possible," said Hicks.

Hicks has never taught a class where English for work was not the first life skill requested, but, in a class where students all work different industries, the topic can be a frustrating one for the instructor. To address this problem, Hicks developed a needs-based personal dictionary project: students form small groups based on their occupations or occupational goals (e.g. child care, construction, restaurant work) and create customized picture dictionaries divided into four categories: things at work, actions at work, places at work, problems at work. Students use materials including the *Oxford Picture Dictionary* and *Oxford Picture Dictionary CD-ROM*, magazines, and construction paper. Hicks builds on students' self-selected vocabulary through short cloze dialogues in each category. The project has been successful; Hicks showed me the latest crop of workplace vocabulary posters on the hallway bulletin board. Emily Beckett explained that the personal dictionaries are "motivating to students because they are able to practice vocabulary that is immediately applicable or necessary for their particular job goals. Their practice with the vocabulary and dialogues allows students to help each other and collaborate on solutions for real issues they have at work."



The habit of questioning the class and constantly checking for comprehension is something Hicks has learned: "It's part of just keeping them with you. We're in this together; we're all at different levels, but we're going somewhere." Teaching "feels a little like a sideshow sometimes," but Hicks has found success in learning to pay attention to the physical environment (music, lights, etc.) and biology. Most students come to her class after working eight or nine hours, so she tries to get them up and moving. "Feed the human need," she says, smiling. "That's why I give them chocolate."

She tries to celebrate successes, like the "shake hands with 5 people" exercise. "[I] congratulate them: you spoke in English for 10 minutes! [I try to] give them joy in what's going on." When asked her advice for other instructors, Hicks looks surprised for a minute, then nods firmly: "Keep learning, keep listening. Have fun whenever possible."

*This article was written by Hillary Major, Communications and Publications Specialist at the Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center. It originally appeared in [Progress](#), Virginia's adult education professional development newsletter (Vol. 23, no. 2; Winter 2011).*

