



*The Insider*, the monthly newsletter of LVA Essex & Passaic Counties, will keep you in the loop on all the organization's upcoming events.



We are so grateful to Alisa Takeuchi, a Subject Matter Expert in technology integration and Content Developer for a California state leadership project housed at the Sacramento County Office of Education. She joined us to share with our tutors the USA Learns resource with a varied range of activities they can use with their students.

### Literacy Volunteers of America, Essex & Passaic Counties

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## *The Insider*

Greetings LVA family!

As the year draws to a close, December offers us a moment to pause, reflect, and celebrate the many journeys -large and small- that have unfolded across our LVAEP community. It is also a season marked by diverse holidays, traditions, and beliefs, reminding us of the richness that comes from honoring one another's cultures while finding common ground in shared values of learning, dignity, and belonging.

This month's newsletter highlights two stories that beautifully capture the heart of our work. Stepher's journey as an English learner speaks to the quiet determination required to rebuild academic and professional dreams in a new language and country. His commitment to improving his English so he can return to college and pursue a nursing career reflects not only personal ambition, but also a desire to give back through care and service. Marisol's story, meanwhile, reminds us of the power of empathy shaped by lived experience. As Student Coordinator, she brings both professional expertise and deep personal understanding to her role, having once faced many of the same language barriers as the learners she now supports.

We also invite you to explore a featured article that challenges how literacy is measured and understood, especially for adults whose skills, knowledge, and resilience may not be fully captured by standardized assessments.

As we celebrate the holidays, we extend once again our heartfelt thanks to everyone who makes LVAEP possible: our students, whose courage inspire us; our tutors and volunteers, who gift us their time and care; our staff, partners, and supporters, who sustain this mission day in and day out. Thank you for helping build a community where learning opens doors and creates connection.

We wish you peace, joy, and meaningful moments of reflection as we close out the year and look ahead with hope.

### *In the News*

Copy and paste the highlighted website into an internet search bar to view the following stories.

**"Instant Support": Why We Should Embrace AI Tools for English Learners** Education Week.  
<https://bit.ly/3MHBsge>

**"14 best books of 2025."** PBS. <https://bit.ly/4pHu572>

**"Setting Up Essential Lesson Tasks for Multilingual Learner Access and Success."** Language Magazine.  
<https://bit.ly/48HMMS9>



## Getting to Know Us Stepher, LVA student

When Stepher talks about his journey to the United States, she tells it plainly—just the steps, one after another. She’s originally from Haiti, where she grew up speaking Creole and French. In February 2023, she left home. The journey was long, she says, but good and full of hope.

Back in Haiti, Stepher went to college and studied nursing. It was more than a degree; it was a way to care for others and build a future with purpose. When she arrived in the U.S., she carried that goal with him. But one thing stood in the way: English.

A friend told her about Literacy Volunteers of America–Essex & Passaic Counties. Her sister had been a student. Stepher enrolled because learning English felt essential—not just for returning to school, but for daily life. Understanding, writing, and speaking weren’t academic goals; they were necessities. “I want to speak English fluently,” she says.

Stepher had learned some basic English in high school, but for the past two years she has been studying seriously here. Slowly, she noticed progress. Her vocabulary expanded. Her understanding improved. Her writing became clearer. Pronunciation, she says, is what she still wants to work on.

Stepher believes every book carries a message for a particular moment. But one stayed with her: *Le Miracle de l’Honnêteté* (The Miracle of Honesty), by a Haitian author. The book describes honesty as a virtue powerful enough to make the world better, even in difficult circumstances

“Life is a challenge,” Stepher says. When obstacles appear, she prays, looks for solutions, and asks for help.

Learning English has changed her daily life. She can communicate with others, read medication labels, make appointments, and ask questions—things that once felt out of reach.

When asked about a moment she will never forget, Stepher doesn’t mention lessons or tests. She talks about people. “The courage and the patience of the tutors,” she says. “They are wonderful.”

Stepher makes time for English every day—reading, listening, watching, and writing. LVA teachers and tutors helped her practice speaking when it felt hardest.

Her advice to other students is simple: stay focused and don’t give up.

Looking ahead, Stepher plans to return to college and earn a nursing degree here in the U.S. Learning English opens doors—to education, opportunity, and a future she is still building. “It’s amazing,” she says.

Stepher dreams of going back to school to practice the career she had aimed for in Haiti – becoming a nurse. And she’s working towards this dream by making sure to improve her English, steadily progressing in expanding her vocabulary and writing, while emphasizing bettering her pronunciation.

### Tutor Training Workshops

**Online Training**, by Ally Schmidt

Platform: Zoom (*sponsored by LNJ*)

Wednesdays, 6 to 8 pm

Feb. 11, 18, 25, and Mar. 4 and 11, 2026

**Online Training**, by Marilyn Bellis/Laura Pistoia

Platform: Zoom (*sponsored by LNJ*)

Wednesdays and Mondays, 9:30 to 11:30 am

Jan. 21, 26, 28, and Feb. 2 and 4, 2026

**Online Training**, by Jo Krish

Platform: Zoom (*sponsored by LNJ*)

Thursdays, 6 to 8 pm

Jan. 15, 22, 29, and Feb. 5 and 12, 2026

### Tutor Support Workshops

**"Tips & Tricks: Reading Skills,"** with Barbara Trueger

Platform: Google Meet

Wednesday, January 14, 2026, 1:00 pm – 2:30 pm

**Tutor Study Circle**

Facilitator: Cheryl Locastro

Thursday, March 12, 2026, at 3pm

(General in-person meeting)

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*Thanks in large part to you, we are able to aid hundreds of students each year. Please continue your efforts to improve the lives of others by giving the gift of literacy.*

<http://www.lvaep.org/donate.html>



## When Reading Measures Miss the Mark: Rethinking How We Assess Comprehension

International Literacy Association, December 10, 2025

Written by: Catherine Gibbons

In classrooms across the country, teachers encounter a puzzling situation: A student reads fluently, even confidently, yet struggles to make sense of the text. It's a disconnect that can leave educators frustrated and puzzled. How can a "good" reader still miss the meaning of what they read? In an era when schools are under pressure to produce data-driven results, the meaning behind those numbers often gets lost.

This dilemma, explored by Mary DeKonty Applegate, Anthony J. Applegate, and Virginia B. Modla in an article for *The Reading Teacher*, highlights a core problem in literacy assessment. The tools we use to measure reading are not always aligned with what it truly means to read. For many schools, Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) and other curriculum-based measures (CBMs) have become the primary way of monitoring student progress. These assessments track how quickly and accurately students can read connected text.

On the surface, this seems useful. After all, a child who struggles to read fluently will likely struggle to comprehend. But here's the catch: Fluency assessments alone tell us little about whether students actually understand what they read. A student who races through text at an impressive words-per-minute rate may still be unable to make inferences, connect ideas, or construct meaning. This is the goal of reading and what we do as adults. When this happens, we risk confusing fast reading with real reading.

This challenge isn't new. In an article for *Literacy Now*, Peter Johnston warned that while CBMs provide a quick snapshot of fluency, they are often treated as comprehensive measures of reading. They are not. As Johnston argued, comprehension is not an "add-on" to fluency; rather, it is the heart of reading.

Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory offers a powerful lens for understanding why these measures fall short. Rosenblatt argued that reading is a transaction between the reader and the text, where meaning is constructed through engagement, reflection, and response. Similarly, researchers such as P. David Pearson and Gina N. Cervetti as well as Nell Duke and Kelly Cartwright have reinforced that the end goal of reading is comprehension [...].

For the full study please copy and paste this link on your browser: <https://bit.ly/49etLa0>

*Learning a new culture is more than studying a language. Tutoring is more than learning techniques. Our "Resources" webpage covers everything from legal matters, health care, & scholarships for immigrants, to professional development for tutors. Give us a look: <http://www.lvaep.org/students.html>*

## Staff Spotlight Marisol Ramirez, Student Coordinator

Marisol still remembers a small moment that shaped her life in the United States. Newly arrived and unfamiliar with English, she stood in a deli unable to order a sandwich and a soda. Instead, she pointed to the bread, the fillings, and the drink she wanted.

"I felt deaf and dumb," she recalls—not with bitterness, but clarity. "That's when I learned that knowledge is a powerful tool in every aspect of life."



That memory quietly informs her work as Student Coordinator for LVA. Marisol has been connected to LVA for more than a decade, first through her work as an NCC teacher and by attending annual awards ceremonies. One year, she heard a student speak about how learning to read, write, and speak English had transformed her life. The story felt deeply familiar.

In 2014, when LVA began strengthening its staff, Marisol was invited to step into the Student Coordinator role. She was told it wasn't just a job, but an invitation into a family—something she has seen proven over the years.

When Marisol started, tutoring typically meant one student paired with one tutor. As demand grew, evening and morning groups expanded, filling libraries across Essex and Passaic counties with learners. To support tutors, LVA launched gatherings called "Coffee and Friends," creating space for shared ideas, encouragement, and new approaches. Watching this network grow has been one of the most rewarding parts of her work.

Asked to name a tutor who stands out, Marisol resists singling anyone out. "Every tutor makes a difference," she says. "In a world where indifference is common, they choose to care."

The most challenging period came during the COVID pandemic. With offices closed in 2020, tutoring quickly moved online. Tutors adapted using Zoom, WhatsApp, phone calls—whatever worked. One tutor even delivered and collected homework from students' mailboxes. Marisol called students daily, offering encouragement and listening through uncertainty.

What many may not know is how deeply Marisol believes in teamwork. Tutors, students, and staff work together toward a shared purpose: helping learners prepare for jobs, citizenship tests, driver's licenses, or simply reading to their children. For Marisol, that steady transformation—quiet, human, and collective—is the heart of LVA's work.