

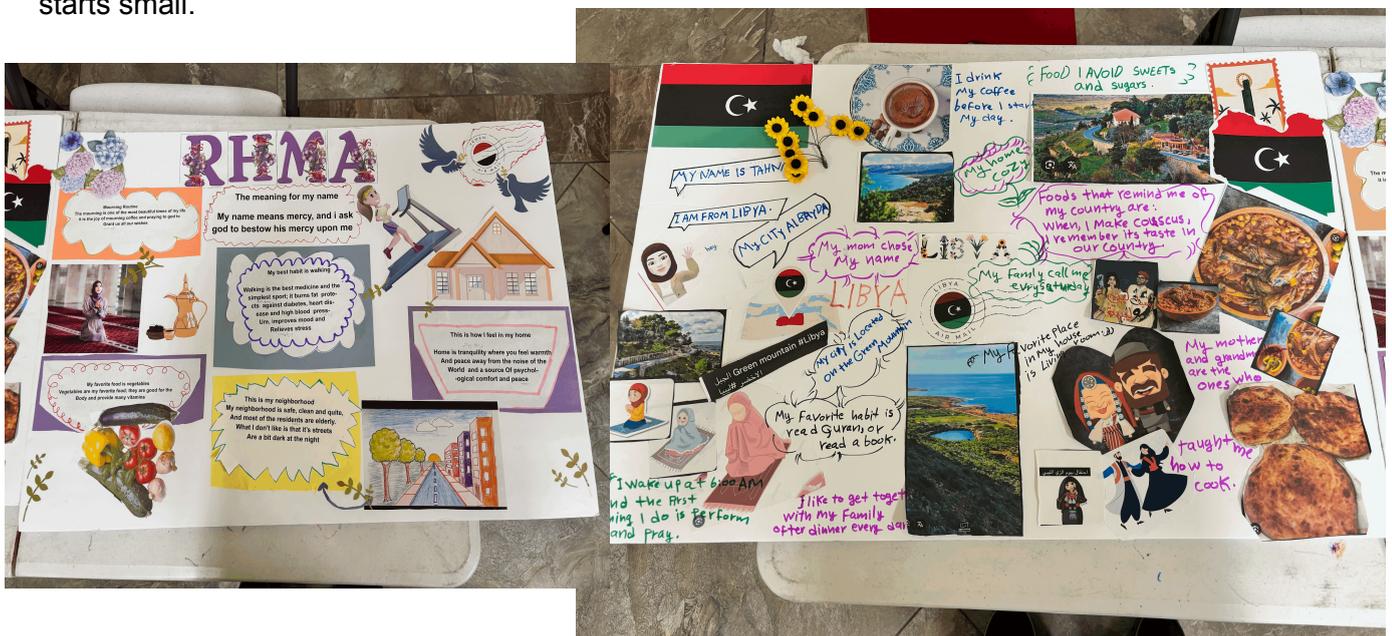
Finding Confidence through English

By Ines Villalobos Finigan

On a quiet afternoon in Southern New Mexico, a group of women sit in a classroom sharing their colorfully worded posters. On the big screen above them another smaller group of women gather on Zoom to become a part of the commotion. Laughter mixes with careful pronunciation of words. For many of the women, this class is not just about language—it is about finding their voice in a new country.

At the front of the room stands Miss Alison, an ESL teacher who works with immigrant and refugee women from different backgrounds and skill levels.

“We start with letters, then words, then sentences, and then conversations,” she said. “So it starts small.”



Miss Alison explained that her students come with very different experiences. Some have studied before, while others are learning to read and write in English for the first time.

“My role was to figure out how we were going to do the class,” she said. “The women are all at different levels.”

Instead of following a fixed curriculum, she shapes lessons around the women’s everyday lives. Once, the students asked for a lesson about skincare, so she made a class centered on this topic.

“I ask them what they want to learn,” she said.

Among her students are Afghan women who recently arrived in the United States. Many of them are beginners in English and face multiple challenges.

“All of it—language, culture, emotional, practical,” Miss Alison said.

She noticed that many Afghan women struggle with confidence.

“They have a lower self-confidence than the other ladies,” she said. “One of my goals is to build that confidence.”

Despite these challenges, she described them as highly motivated learners.

“Very dedicated students,” she said. “High respect for learning and the teacher.”

Teaching them requires patience and flexibility. Miss Alison often slows down lessons and repeats material many times.

“Slower, more patience, lots of repetition,” she said. “I don’t like for my students to not know what’s happening.”

Beyond language skills, Miss Alison sees changes in how the women carry themselves.

“Confidence. That’s the biggest one,” she said. “To be able to express yourself in and of itself is empowering.”

She also highlighted the importance of social connection.

“Everyone needs a tribe,” she said.

The classes are not without challenges. Attendance can be irregular, and teaching students who speak many different languages can be difficult. Online lessons also created obstacles.

“Online learning at first was difficult,” she said.



Still, Miss Alison said the work is deeply rewarding.

“It’s the highlight of my week,” she said. “They want to learn, they’re eager.”

She believes language learning goes beyond the classroom.

“Language is power, knowledge is power,” she said.

For the women in the classroom, each new word and sentence represents more than academic progress. It is a step toward independence in a new country—one conversation at

