

Welcome to American Mosaic from VOA Learning English!

I'm June Simms.

On the show today, we play songs from a new album by Edward Sharpe and the Magnetic Zeros.

We also hear about a creative way one American school is making English classes more available to immigrants.

But first, we learn about a project to protect endangered languages.

There are about 7,000 languages in the world. Experts say half could disappear by the end of the century. But an effort called the Rosetta Project is working to protect them for future generations. Kelly Jean Kelly reports.

These two American linguistics students can speak several languages, including French. They are among 12 students taking part in a summer internship program with the Rosetta Project in San Francisco, California. They are working with trained linguists to expand a digital record of endangered languages.

The project's name comes from the Rosetta Stone, the ancient stone marker kept at the British Museum in London. The marker has examples of writing in two different Egyptian writing systems and an early form of Greek. It helped experts understand Egyptian hieroglyphs.

Rosetta Project is creating an online collection and an optical disc of writings in different languages. The disc version can be held in the palm of a hand. But it contains 13,000 pages representing 1,500 languages. The Long Now Foundation, a non-profit group, launched the Rosetta Project. Alexander Rose is the Executive Director.

"A single parallel text, a description, a map of where it's from, these types of things that just give you enough that you can compare to another language that you know or have studied or scholars have figured out, you can start pulling parallels between the two and reconstruct the basics of a language."

The Smithsonian Institution recently organized a demonstration of endangered languages at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington. Crowds heard examples of Hawaiian and other disappearing languages like Tuvan, which can still be heard in southern Siberia.

Many languages are spoken by small groups, says Rosetta Project director Laura Welcher.

“They’re spoken by thousands of people or even smaller-sized groups and a lot of those languages are in remote parts of the world. They haven’t been well documented.”

Linguists at universities and research centers are in a race against time to record these languages before all speakers are gone.

“The idea is to purposely create a massively parallel collection that is broadly representative of all our human languages, that can be that kind of secret decoder ring for human languages and what we leave for the future.”

And, Ms. Welcher says linguists and student interns at the Rosetta Project are doing their part.

Immigrants and refugees arriving in the United States often have trouble with the way many Americans move from place to place. Only the biggest American cities have good public transportation systems. So you need a car to get to school or work in other parts of the country.

This can be a problem for some immigrants. To pass a driver's test, they need to speak and understand English. But to learn English, they might need to take classes that they can only get to by driving. One school has found a creative solution to the problem.

On a recent Saturday morning, students gathered at the Foreign Language Institute in Nashville, Tennessee. They came for training in English-as-a-second-language, or ESL. The building where the class was held is hard to get to on foot, and there are no sidewalks.

More than 1,200 refugees settle in Nashville each year. Like many American cities, Nashville was built for drivers and their vehicles, not people on foot or bicycles. That makes things difficult for the refugees, since many of them can neither drive nor speak English.

Many refugees in Nashville live in apartment buildings 20 kilometers away from the Foreign Language Institute. The Institute decided that if the ESL students could not get to the classroom, the classroom would come to the students.

The organization purchased a delivery van and made the back of the truck into a classroom. Officials call it “ESL-to-GO.” It visits communities where immigrants and refugees usually gather. Ashley Ekers is the ESL-to-GO Curriculum Coordinator.

“A lot of the time they just couldn’t get to the classes. It was too far for them to walk. They were unfamiliar with the bus system. It was just a barrier that a lot of them couldn’t get over.”

Lulu Nhkum is a refugee from Burma. She was one of the people who urged the Institute to bring ESL classes into the community.

“They want to go to the ESL class, but especially in the winter they are also working. For our people - they don’t need to travel. The truck is really helpful to our community.”

ESL-to-GO was launched in May. But there is already a waiting list. Even some adults in their 70s are signing up for the classes.

“I would be very hesitant probably at that age to attempt to learn a language, but they just believe that they can and they want the skills. They’re very eager to learn.”

Ashley Ekers says the refugees she teaches are hard-working students. They want to be independent. And they see learning English as the key to success.

The Los Angeles group Edward Sharpe and the Magnetic Zeros released their third album last week. The self-titled album brings back some of the sounds from American music of the 1960s. Madeline Smith plays some of the new music.

Edward Sharpe may be in the band’s name, but the lead singer is really called Alex Ebert. He came up with the character of Edward Sharpe when he was dealing with a drug addiction, and used it as inspiration for the band.

The Magnetic Zeros is the name for the other 10 group members. They include the singer Jade Castrinos, who helped Alex Ebert start the band. The other musicians play instruments and make a chorus of back-up vocals, like on the song "Better Days."

Edward Sharpe and the Magnetic Zeros first became famous in 2009 with their single "Home," a song with a happy chorus and a catchy whistled melody. Now, their sound has become more like popular music from the 1960s, with folk and psychedelic influences.

Love and hopefulness are common ideas in their songs, and the large group of band members all work together. The lyrics of the song "Life is Hard" talk about celebrating and being thankful for life although it might sometimes be painful.

We leave you with one of the sadder songs from the new album. Here is the final track from Edward Sharpe and the Magnetic Zeros, called "This Life."

I'm June Simms. Our program was written by Caty Weaver and Madeline Smith, who was also the producer. Mike Osbourne and Mike O'Sullivan contributed to this report.



Do you have a question about American life, people or places? Send an e-mail to learningenglish@voanews.com. We might answer your question in a future show. You can also visit our website at learningenglish.voanews.com to find transcripts and audio of our shows.

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