Words Paint Pictures  by Elsa Roberts Auerbach

Nelson Mandela was a leader of the movement fighting against the apartheid system of government in South Africa. Under apartheid, whites (who made up only 13% of the population) controlled the government of South Africa and people of different racial backgrounds were segregated in every aspect of their lives. By law, Blacks had no rights: they were not allowed to vote, to live in the cities without special permission, or to marry someone of another race. Nelson Mandela was part of a movement to bring democracy and rights for all races to South Africa. Because of his activity, he was imprisoned for 18 years. He was elected President of South Africa in its first democratic election in 1994 after apartheid ended.

The language that is used to describe people who were born in one country but live in another country also paints pictures of those people. What comes to mind when you hear the word alien? Brainstorm all the words you think of:

illegal, immigrant, international visitor, foreigner, native, newcomer, refugee, undocumented worker, citizen

What words have been used to describe you? Add them to this list.

1. Which of these words have positive meanings?
2. Which have negative meanings?
3. Which do you like better? Why? Which are most commonly used? By whom? Where? Why?

Elsa Roberts Auerbach, Professor of English at the University of Massachusetts Boston, has worked to link adult education for English language learners and social justice in workplace, community, and higher education contexts for many years. She is the author of numerous books and articles about participatory approaches to adult ESOL.