

Online Conversation Club Enhances ESL Skills

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The four key skills of English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction are reading, writing, speaking and listening. When DCLC shifted to online classes this year due to the COVID-19 pandemic, ESL teachers worked hard to make sure students were building all four skills through the Zoom class sessions, assigned homework, and online resources.

But, not surprisingly, some of the benefits of in-person teaching were lost in the online translation. For one, DCLC’s adult ESL students weren’t engaging in the typical interaction that comes from being in a classroom setting—interaction that helps them build their speaking and listening abilities. According to DCLC Instructor Marisa Russo, in-person classes offer built-in opportunities for communication. “We were doing a great deal of group work and students had opportunities for informal communication before and after class, along with break time, but it’s more challenging to do that online.” She adds, “We were looking for ways to supplement the ESL classes, give the students more practice.” This search resulted in Russo facilitating weekly Conversation Club sessions.

Under the guidance of Jenn Kacimi, DCLC's Director of Instruction & Curriculum, the virtual Conversation Club sessions were offered to current DCLC ESL students starting in October. There are three sessions each week. Two are divided according to the students' level of language proficiency and the third is a mixed-level group.

Rather than have lessons, Russo comes up with topics that generate lively discussions. One tried and true topic is food.

"We talk about typical meals or foods in their home country," Russo explains. She also tries more creative conversation-starters such as what foods the students eat when they're sick. Answers ranged from lemon and garlic to even dates!

During one session she asked the students to share something in their kitchen that they couldn't live without—an ingredient or a utensil, for example. "One student who is normally very quiet came back from her kitchen with a smile on her face excited to talk," Russo says. The indispensable items? An onion and a habanero pepper! Proof that simple steps can be the gateway to significant progress.

Other topics also help get the students talking. Russo has asked students about their native countries or where they've traveled. "I'll pull up visuals such as a map or photo while they're speaking."

ESL students enrolled at DCLC are able to participate in the Conversation Club sessions in addition to their online classes. Students participating hail from a wide variety of countries, including Yemen, China, Ukraine, Russia, Ecuador, Venezuela, Bangladesh, and Haiti. Russo divides each session into two parts: meeting as a whole group and being divided into smaller groups using Zoom breakout rooms. When assigning the small groups, Russo likes to group students who aren't in the same DCLC class. "It's a chance for the students to meet someone new"—another chance for fruitful conversation.

In addition to helping the students practice their speaking and listening skills, the sessions are also a way for Russo to learn more about the students, both their personalities and language level. "In a classroom, you can gauge what's going on," she explains. With Zoom, "I can't read the room. You can't read body language as well."

Adding Conversation Club sessions for ESL students is just one way DCLC has been innovating and adapting to the new realities created by the pandemic. Thanks

to Russo, the Conversation Club has been a way for DCLC's adult students to build skills, make friends, and stay encouraged during this difficult time.