

Leading English Conversation Groups at Bloor Street United Church

The Refugee Outreach Program at Bloor Street United Church

The Refugee Outreach Program (ROP) supports families with links to services, practical supports and pastoral care. Our major weekly activity is English conversation groups for adults and a social gathering on Zoom.

Volunteers from the congregation and the community lead the adult conversation groups on a rotating basis. Since Covid-19 started in March 2020, conversation groups have been held on Zoom, with beginner and intermediate level groups. Volunteer leaders spend about 1 hour with their group, focusing on stories, current news, maybe a book they are reading together, or questions from the participants about life in Canada. After the conversation groups, all the participants join in a larger discussion in Spanish for an hour, for a social time together to combat the isolation and worries of the pandemic. While most of the participants have Spanish as a first language, everyone is welcome.



Martha Reyes Huependo, Refugee Outreach Worker, coordinates this ROP program and also supports families with links to services, problem solving and pastoral care. The ROP program is part of the Social Justice activities of the church, and works to support families whose lives have been disrupted by violence, global conflicts and economic injustice.

What is a conversation group?

Refugees and newcomers arrive in Toronto with varying abilities to speak English. Conversation groups are a chance to practice and learn in a free and informal environment.

Groups meet at 11am for about 1 hour. Participants may be studying English full or part-time during the week in ESL for newcomers or private language schools. Conversation groups will have people at different levels, and people learn from each other.

Leader's role: The conversation group leader's role is to create a comfortable atmosphere where people can practice and improve their English. Group leaders are there to facilitate conversation, not to lecture. The group leaders are from the BSUC congregation and the community. Leaders bring a variety of personal experiences to the groups and offer participants the chance to talk informally with people from many walks of life, outside of their usual work, school or institutional settings.

Group 1: This is the beginner group (building basic skills). There are some people in this group who have not had a chance/desire to go to formal school. This may be because they have been working or are not comfortable in a formal school setting. There may be some people who are very recent arrivals, or some who arrived in Canada later in life as part of family reunification. This group will benefit from vocabulary building for everyday situations. This group averages about 4-7 participants.

Group 2: Participants will have various levels of skill, but all will benefit from a chance to listen to conversation and participate in questions or comments or discussion, no matter how basic. Overcoming the fear of speaking is a major benefit of the group. In language learning terms, think about people at the advanced beginner/level 2/early intermediate stages. Recently, this group size has ranged from 7-13 people. When we have group leaders available, we will work to have smaller groups.

Who are the conversation group leaders?

Conversation group leaders are volunteers who like to meet new people and support their process of settling in Canada. Some are teachers with ESL or other teaching background, but teaching experience is not required. Some group leaders have the experience of learning English themselves as newcomers to Canada. It helps if group leaders are good conversationalists, active listeners, radically patient, and interested in meeting new people! Effective group leaders bring themselves and their interests and abilities to the group. In addition to volunteering on Saturday, group leaders should plan to do some preparation for their group. Assistance is available for preparation.

Leading the conversation group

Start with introductions: there may be new participants every time. You can do some kind of ice-breaker, such as asking people to say one thing about themselves. For example: Where they live now, how they travelled to the program that morning, etc) This gives the leader a chance to get a rough idea of people's capacity.

Introduce a topic: Bring something to talk about. If there is a holiday or event or news item, that helps people understand the larger community and build vocabulary that can be used in other parts of their lives.

For example: You can link topics to the calendar (January—New Year's resolutions, Martin Luther King day) or to the news cycle (elections or TTC expansion) or current issues (changes in the Landlord Tenant Act). You can do "show and tell" related to your own activities (souvenirs from your travels, celebrating a family event). Sometimes the class members will bring their own questions which may initiate a discussion. You can be open to whatever seems to engage the group. While sharing information is important, helping people express opinions and share things that are important to them is equally important.

Participants may have had challenging experiences on their journey to Canada, so be flexible about the topics you introduce. Violence against women, family separation at the US Mexico border, Canada immigration policy are examples of topics that may be emotionally challenging.

Preparation: The level of preparation you do will depend on your time and interest. If you are not an experienced teacher, you may find this list of ways to engage the participants helpful.

1. Ask everyone, in turn to comment on something they did that week
2. Ask everyone to share a new vocabulary word they learned during the week. (say the word, spell the word, define the word, ask others for comments or questions or "use it in a sentence.")
3. Take a newspaper article that everyone takes turns reading out loud. Review the vocabulary so everyone understands the information. Review any pronunciation that gives difficulty. Then move into more open ended questions or discussion of the article. (What do you think should happen? Did the reporter tell us everything we need to know? Is this a problem you are concerned about? etc etc.) The Toronto Star is written at a grade 5-8 level so it is both accessible and a good "stretch goal" for English learners.
4. Take a song or spoken word recording for people to listen to. This helps with comprehension. Have a written version of the song lyrics or recording as well, to help people learn visually and aurally.
5. Handouts are always welcome. You can send things in advance or we can photocopy on Saturdays. (It helps to come early if you need copying.)

No pressure! If someone does not want to speak up, that is OK. They can be given another opportunity later in the group. Most times the other participants are supportive and gentle with each other. Speak slowly and clearly. Repeat things you have said, in the same way to help people learn to listen, then in different ways to help people build vocabulary and comprehension. Be patient while people are thinking about responding.

A word about grammar—Not all English speakers know how to explain grammar to English learners. It is helpful to brush up on the very basics (nouns, verbs, articles, present, past and future) since many

learners will be thinking in those terms. If there is a grammar question that you cannot address, be straight-forward and tell people you do not know the grammar explanation.

Ideas from one of the current group leaders:

- *Don't be afraid of using whiteboard (or flipchart) or, in the case of Zoom screen sharing or hand written slides to show on camera. For example: here's the new word; what's another easy word that means kind of the same thing? What words are confusingly similar but mean something completely different? There are lots of laughs, always.*
- *Have a topic change up your sleeve for when things bog down, but don't be afraid of small lulls and pauses... people are thinking really hard. Let things flow.*
- *Rhyming words are really good. Near Halloween I mentioned 'trick or treat, smell my feet, give me something good to eat' and that was a hit!*
- *Good to end with a question to everyone in the group; what did we cover today? What did we learn? What should we do more of next time?*
- *Summarize on the whiteboard. Congratulate everybody for working so hard!*

If you are interested in knowing more about being a group leader, let us know. You can attend on Saturday to observe classes in progress. We also welcome people who want to help in other ways. Please contact Sue Kaiser (kaisersue@hotmail.com 416-599-0689) or Martha Reyes Huependo (mcrhuependo@bloorstreetunited.org 416 924-7439 X32).