

outbursts

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Free English conversation sessions speak volumes at Blacksburg Library

Program helps develop international partnerships to enrich teaching, research

By Samantha Drew

A library is a place to check out books, skim magazines, and search the Internet. At the Blacksburg Library, people who want to be better conversationalists in English can also practice, talk, and learn.

After hearing requests from the community for increased support for speakers of English as a second language, the Blacksburg Library paired with the Virginia Tech Language and Culture Institute (LCI) to offer a free series of English sessions. The sessions, which run during the fall and spring semesters, are open to library patrons, community residents, and Virginia Tech students.

Adil Bentahar, one of the rotating group of LCI instructors who lead the sessions, opened one by distributing handouts containing questions about immigration. Each weekly session covers a different topic.

"I wanted them to share examples from their own culture and be comfortable talking about their own countries," said Bentahar, a native of Morocco. "I also want them to start thinking about what it takes for people to come here."

Motivations for attending differ. Metin Yikar, a TV journalist from Turkey, said greater facility in English will make him



Metin Yikar, left, a TV journalist from Turkey, practices his English at the Blacksburg Library during weekly sessions led by Virginia Tech Language and Culture Institute instructors; also pictured is Maria Cucinotta, who was born in Italy and grew up in Switzerland.

a more versatile journalist. "I want to practice conversations. I especially want to improve my listening — which can be very hard — and speaking."

In the past, the library had offered volunteer-driven sessions, turning to the LCI to formalize the program. "We were hopeful to have the support of an established organization as interest grew," said Elizabeth Sensabaugh, the library's supervisor. "When we contacted Virginia Tech, they were so willing and eager to help."

At the session, participants paired off and asked each other questions Bentahar had

prepared, prompting discussions. After 10 minutes, Bentahar brought the group back together and led a group discussion about immigration issues. People from Turkey, Switzerland, Egypt, and South Korea offered their perspectives.

Bentahar said he doesn't correct every mistake he hears participants make. "Mostly, it's about building self-confidence

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in them as English speakers and listeners and about giving them a space where they can practice their English," he said.

Like all the program's volunteers, Bentahar is an LCI staff member trained to deal with people who are not native English speakers. He moved to Blacksburg in 2015 after earning his doctorate at the University of Wyoming.

"I want to promote the spirit of volunteering," he said. "It's my responsibility to my new community. I want the participants to feel free to speak up here — that's the whole point."

LCI instructor Donita Moore helped organize the program. She pointed out the value of interactions that take place during the sessions.

"This kind of connection fosters important relationships between people and nations that are, and will remain to be, crucial to global understanding, compassion, and cooperation," she said.

The gatherings serve to promote learning along with building friendships, Moore said.

"One of the most rewarding experiences I have had was in February when all the LCI session leaders and the participants met together over snacks and warm drinks to get to know each other," she said. "At the end, everyone wanted to exchange email addresses so that they could keep in touch and do things with each other outside of our meetings."

Maria Cucinotta, born in Italy and raised in Switzerland, said she enjoys



Adil Bentahar, an instructor at the Virginia Tech Language and Culture Institute instructor, leads a conversation session at the library. "I want the participants to feel free to speak up here — that's the whole point," he says.

the conversational aspect of the library sessions that leads to greater insights into English. "It's a really rich language if you can get all the many words and many meanings. There's a poetry to it."

Sayed Kenawy, originally from Saudi Arabia, took a break from a two-week visit with friends in Blacksburg to stop by the library. "Even though I'm here for just a short time, I thought it was a good opportunity to improve my English. Hearing about people's views on immigration was interesting," he said.

The program is called English Conversation and More. Sensabaugh said she hopes people will learn about the library's other

services during the process.

"The library offers various methods of support including tutors for one-on-one assistance, also through a Virginia Tech group, and other local resources including our digital collection and databases," she said.

Samantha Drew of Herndon, Virginia, is a senior majoring in literature and language, professional and technical writing and political science in the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences.

LCI program caters to international spouses

In addition to the library conversation program, the LCI offers an English language program for international spouses. This program allows spouses of international faculty members, researchers, or students to take classes in the LCI's Intensive English Program at a greatly reduced rate.

The institute launched the program in March 2015 as part of the president's InclusiveVT initiative, a universitywide effort to advance inclusion and diversity initiatives on campus.

In addition to helping participants improve



their English, the classes enable them to better develop a sense of belonging within the university community.

Program admission is subject to appropriate testing placement and space availability.

► For more information on this program, go to www.lci.vt.edu/spouses

www.outreach.vt.edu

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