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 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 volun-
teering,” 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
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.

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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