

9-2018

## Meaningful conversations

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### Recommended Citation

Gallant, Hannah, "Meaningful conversations" (2018). *Lake Union Herald*. 805.  
<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/luh-pubs/805>

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# Meaningful conversations

Learning another language can be a challenging, tedious process. One of the ways Andrews University helps their English as a Second Language (ESL) students is with the Conversation Partners program. Organized and directed in the Center for Intensive English Programs (CIEP), this program pairs a fluent English speaker with an ESL student. The two meet to converse with each other at least once every week for 10 weeks during a semester.

“The students that it works best for do it on a regular basis. It’s very helpful to them,” says Asta LaBianca, assistant professor of English and coordinator of the Conversation Partners program. “I have had some volunteers come back again and again because they have found it to be very enriching to their own experience.”

LaBianca explains that most ESL students in the program are at or above the intermediate level in the CIEP program. In fact, she requires the students in her pronunciation class to participate. Other department teachers sometimes require it of students who wish to volunteer as well, or give extra credit as an incentive.

In developing the program, LaBianca says, “I wanted to provide a way for my students to make at least one English-speaking friend and then hopefully be able to enlarge their circle of English-speaking friends more easily.”

Daley Lin, who has completed the ESL program and is currently a freshman Music Performance major, shares that the two times he was in the program helped him make friends and learn about different cultures.

“Sometimes students whose first language is not English have a hard time making friends with native students



Dave Sherwin

▲ Conversation Partners program participant and MA TESOL student Karey Messina with Asta LaBianca, assistant professor of English and coordinator of the Conversation Partners program.

because we speak and understand slowly. This program helps us make friends with native students who love to help us and love to listen to us,” he says.

Lin also has seen the program broaden his vocabulary so he can understand a wider variety of subjects. He advises others who hope to learn English, “Don’t be afraid to make friends by using English to communicate. Be confident in what culture you have and who you are.”

Another program participant, Karey Messina, is an MA TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) student. Messina has served as a conversation partner three times and says, “It has made me feel like I don’t know anything. I feel humbled because these people are learning new languages, and I barely know a second language. I’m so happy that I can help individuals in their process to really learn English. I have a lot of respect for them. I don’t feel like I could do it.”

Messina notes that her involvement in the Conversation Partners program has not only taught her new things but also established lasting international relationships. “I was able to see Adventism in a new light. I always knew there were Adventists all around the world, but I never knew them personally until now.”

Ultimately, the Conversation Partners program is so much more than just a class requirement or a volunteer opportunity — it is a chance to make a lasting friendship, ease someone’s transition into another language, learn new things and explore other cultures.

LaBianca reflects on the program’s impact. “It’s exciting to think of all the international connections and friendships that have been formed over the years this program has existed. Without a doubt, language learning and practice has happened, but that’s just the beginning.” ■

Hannah Gallant, IMC student writer