



English Conversation Groups at the Salem State Writing Center

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INTRODUCTION

In order to better serve Salem State's ESL/ELL and international student populations, the Mary G. Walsh Writing Center has begun providing English conversation groups.

Conversation groups provide students with a relaxed, low-stakes environment in which they can practice English skills while familiarizing themselves with the nuance and structure of communicating in an academic setting.

DESCRIPTION

English conversation groups are an effective means of improving the experience of ESL/ELL members of our campus communities. Conversation groups are an especially valuable service to international students, as they offer a safe and comfortable environment in which students can meet people while having frank and open discussions about their campus and community. Most importantly, the low-stakes nature of conversation groups can help alleviate the "L2 speaking anxiety" (Al-Shboul et al) of participants, which is an area of concern that cannot be adequately addressed within classrooms.

Generally, conversation groups are informal meetings between ESL/ELL community members and a trained facilitator. During these meetings, people talk. Sometimes there's a theme to be discussed, or an activity to help generate conversation, but overall groups consist simply of people speaking to one another. The following bullet-pointed list, taken from the website of the Writing Center at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, discusses what groups tend to entail:

- The facilitator introduces a topic around American culture, University life, or language learning
- Group members discuss the topic, ask questions, and suggest strategies or resources
- Group members can ask for feedback on their speaking
- The facilitator might teach a new technique, strategy, or game

As L2 anxiety is caused by a perceived lack of linguistic competence pertaining to specific circumstances, attention has recently been paid to the difficulties faced by many international students within unfamiliar social situations. Such situations are manifold within participatory, conversation-based, and/or decentralized classrooms.

Commonplace classroom practices, such as prompting students to answer questions or even arranging class desks in a circle, might be disorienting to international students. Such disorientation is magnified by the fact that classrooms are a high-stakes environment, where student anxiety is compounded by fear of being negatively assessed by one's instructor or judged by one's peers.

International and L2 students entering an English-speaking classroom face something of a catch-22: students need to be socialized into academic situations before they can be expected to succeed in them, but the high-stakes nature of most academic situations can result in anxiety, which hampers socialization. Conversation groups, particularly when facilitated by peers or specialists who have been trained to interact effectively with L2 students, are an ideal means of helping students out of this conundrum.

APPLICATION

Conversation groups are undertheorized, and this makes it difficult to justify allocating scarce institutional resources to fund them. There is no need for this lack of discussion, however. Conversation groups provide an important service that ESL and international students cannot receive elsewhere on campus, and their efficacy can be demonstrated by bringing the concepts and findings of existing TESOL into the institutional documentation of writing centers. This research provides us with a concrete means of explaining the value of conversation groups, and also opens up spaces for future research that can potentially verify the efficacy of groups within writing centers.

APPROACH

While most teachers can intuit the value of conversation groups, the groups have been under-theorized within TESOL, Writing Studies, and Writing Center scholarship.

The Center therefore decided to take a loosely structured approach to group design based around best practices gleaned from other writing centers. Groups are facilitated by trained tutors who already possess experience with ESL/international students and who agree to additional practicum training. Groups were justified institutionally via a narrative explaining their unique value in alleviating L2 anxiety.

Al-Shboul, Murad M. & Ismail Sheikh Ahmand & Mohamad Sahari Nordin & Zainurin Abdul Rhaman. "Foreign Language Anxiety and Achievement: Systematic Review." *International Journal of English Linguistics* 3.2. (2013). 32-45. Pdf.

Cheng, Yuh-show "A Measure of Second Language Writing Anxiety: Scale Development and Preliminary Validation." *Journal of Second Language Writing* 13. (2004). 313-335. Pdf.

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