



## Peabody Institute Library Conversation Circles

### Insight from ESL Instructors

#### Comments from Neil Keefe:

**Expect erratic attendance.** It's nothing personal. Since it's free, there's little downside to missing a class, so people don't need much reason to skip it.

**Take any discussion where it "wants to go".** Sometimes you stumble on a topic people really want to talk about. For example last year I mentioned the ballot question about casino gambling sparked a surprising (to me) amount of conversation. People had quite strong opinions about it. Let them talk!

**Don't you talk too much.** Hard to avoid, but try.

**Make a conscious effort to speak clearly.** Try to develop some awareness of how you talk. Speak more slowly and clearly than you normally do.

**Take note of common errors.** Typically if one person who speaks a native language makes an error, everyone who speaks that language will make the same error. Try to notice these, and use them as a basis for exercises later. This way you don't have to be correcting one person.

**Conversation plus some grammar.** For some people, this might be their only chance to speak English. For others, they speak English constantly, without correction, often for years. Try to encourage conversation but look for opportunities to provide some correction, too.

**Have some material.** For each class, have some theme in mind. If things go poorly, have some material at hand that you can look at together as a class, and discuss.

**Be sensitive** to different reading levels, often out of proportion to speaking level.

## Comments from Omar Longus:

I recommend the book: *Keys to Teaching Grammar to English Language Learners: A Practical Handbook*. The reason I like the book is because it explains grammar principles and gives examples of errors students might make based on their language background.

However, I think as Conversation Circle leaders you do not need to focus on teaching grammar, but rather getting people speaking and communicating with each other. For that I have 3 pieces of advice:

1. **\*Gradual release of responsibility\***- You want to give your students whatever crutches or scaffolds they need to communicate effectively. That could be a prompt, it could be a sentence starter, it could be a script, but your goal is to get them to be part of the conversation. Little by little, as they get comfortable you want to take away that support so they can do things on their own. When your students are able to communicate with you, you want to make sure they can communicate with others outside of the group (You can use the librarians for help to get them talking to other people). Once they're at a point where they're comfortable using English in general, you can have much more advanced conversations and talk about whatever you or your students find interesting.

Gradually releasing responsibilities also includes class routines like attendance, punctuality, journaling, etc. You start by doing things for students and slowly transition until they can do everything on their own.

2. **\*Error correction\***- As Neil said, you want to keep the conversation going. I would recommend only stopping to correct students on the spot if what they are saying doesn't make sense to you or other people in the group. If it doesn't make sense to you, work with the student to understand what they are trying to say and give them the correct way of saying it once you've figured it out. If it doesn't make sense to others, you can clarify or restate what the student said, and if your students are advanced enough, you want to teach them how to ask each other to repeat things or clarify things when they don't understand.

The other time to make corrections is when you see a pattern of errors (maybe a student always says "I going" instead of "I'm going"). Once you recognize an error they always make you can bring that up later during the meeting or make it a point of emphasis in the next meeting (e.g. have an activity where students use the tenses they're confusing like "I go" and "I'm going" or just focus on one of those phrases and drill it in their heads).

3. **It's a long process.** Sometimes your students will take two steps forward. Sometimes they will take two steps forward and one step back. Sometimes they will take one step forward and two steps back. That doesn't necessarily reflect the job you are doing. Learning languages is weird and we don't learn it in the nice and neat order of the textbook. The important thing is to keep them talking (or even just listening if they're not ready to

speak) and pushing them more and more to use their English when you meet and outside of your classes.

Here are some links to websites I have used to develop lessons or work with students:

<https://sites.google.com/site/salemhighadultes/links>