



**English Community
Conversations**

DIGITAL NEWCOMER ENGLISH CONVERSATION TOOLKIT: “ENGLISH COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS” PROJECT

**Aiming to enhance community resources that support english language
facilitation and learning among newcomers to BC**

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The author acknowledges that the work for this project took place on the unceded ancestral lands of the xwməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), Stó:lō and Səlilwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil- Waututh) Nations. While creating English language topics that focus on settlement, the importance of the land acknowledgement should be reflected upon to communicate to newcomers in community conversations how the land we seek to build a new life upon is taken land rather than inherited. The resources found in the toolkit are based on settlement and cultural nuances when living in Canada. When facilitating conversational sessions with newcomers, topics should include Canadian history and conversations behind it, including many essential terms that are unfamiliar to many, such as ‘unceded’ and what that means; it is meaningful and can inspire informed and reflective community building.

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Executive Summary

The “English Community Conversations” project was established in response to the growing rate of newcomers joining Vancouver's community. It was created as a resource tool to support the numerous community members who support newcomers with their English language learning, working in capacities such as volunteers, mentors, family members and friends to help newcomers become acquainted with everyday English that can help them settle into new communities as they establish a new life in a new place, and for many, a new language. The objective is to create an online webpage that houses settlement-related topics related to building community in Canada, with resources ranging from making community connections to talking about food and expressing culture to professional networking in Canada. Resources take form in vocabulary decks, conversation topics, and idioms, with categories divided into language proficiency levels, beginner, intermediate, and advanced, to accommodate the varying English levels. The primary target audience is language supporters who take time to run conversations or use English language learning as an easily accessible and valuable tool when supporting family, friends, and community members. The second target audience is newcomers who attend conversation circles or are looking for additional practice resources and vocabulary outside of the resources and day-to-day social connections they have.

The project's inspiration came from my volunteer work as an English conversation circle facilitator at the Immigrant Services Society of BC, a role I started in August 2022. Two critical observations over the months in this role motivated the initiative. Firstly, the program at ISSofBC needed a communal resource where volunteers could access resources. Furthermore, not all clients are eligible to enroll in language courses called the LINC (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada) program, so a platform has been needed to support such clients. When I talked with my project supervisor, he expressed the desire to have something like this made. Secondly, additional resources and notes are requested by participants in the group. While that can be provided via email, volunteers cannot always research and commit to weekly additional support. To resolve both issues, the idea of a singular platform with pre-uploading resources could enable volunteers and newcomers to access additional materials without going the extra mile of weekly research. Details of the resources can be found in the report's section titled [‘Background.’](#)

My Community Project Supervisor at ISSofBC and I have worked together since August 2022; I have been a volunteer conversation circle facilitator at one of the programs he runs at ISSofBC

called 'Conversation Circles', a free conversational group that runs for an hour and a half each week. My community partner runs many of these circles, working alongside volunteer facilitators for different levels of English groups. Our conversations prior to the project headed significant inquiries about this project. Collaboratively, we discussed the importance of a collective space where materials could be uploaded; considerable effort over the years from volunteers had gone into building slideshows and learning materials that could support new and existing volunteers with ideas, yet none of them had been organized into something of a collective. Furthermore, tools to support onboarding new volunteers were minimal, and he expressed how the conversation program could benefit from a resource that supported such tasks.

Another critical part of the collaborative efforts of this project was my web development team, Zeba and Hassan. They created mood boards from our consultations and provided insights into how best to structure the website, considering my target audience and project objectives. Their inputs contributed not only to the technical applications, such as coding sections of the website but also by gifting their project management experience, listening to my goals and keeping accessibility at the forefront of their decisions. One example of this work was creating a homepage that would be easy for low-level English speakers to navigate, avoiding large amounts of text concentrated in one area.

Finally, a handful of ISSofBC conversation circle facilitators gave me their time and shared the resources used for group discussions and the challenges they faced over the years delivering the programs. Their insights were significant contributions to the project's deliverables, specifically when planning what content to make and how the units (topic categories) should be decided upon.

Introduction

The “English Community Conversations” project aims to enhance collective resources accessible to volunteers and mentors to support newcomers to the English language and settlement in Canada. “The third quarter of 2023 saw B.C. break the previous historic record for quarterly international migration, set in the previous quarter. B.C. welcomed 66,190 net migrants from countries outside of Canada” (“*Quarterly Population Highlights*”). In response to integration efforts, community programs offering free language conversational training run in non-profit, community centers, local libraries and other spaces. Such programs are in high demand; therefore, resource support should be provided to volunteers who set time aside in their week to run them.

Background

The “English Community Conversations” project aims to promote community building by offering a range of interactional resources that can support facilitation efforts of conversation, whether in classroom settings, one-on-one conversations or online group calls. Using the website platform “squarespace.com,” a website was built to house slide decks, YouTube videos, question prompts, activity templates and facilitating tips that are free and accessible to all community members supporting newcomers with English language learning for conversational purposes. While the resource is predominantly made to support these community members, it also provides vocabulary and reading resources for newcomers who need additional materials to support self-learning. The reason for co-developing this section as part of the resource kit is to respond to the demand from newcomer participants who ask for additional resources from volunteers or community members; this website can be a resource volunteers can share with newcomers to ease the pressure to self-produce materials in addition to the voluntary time to deliver conversation circles or language training services. The materials developed on the website are community-orientated, meaning that questions and activities aim to evoke knowledge and cultural sharing; prompts have been created for support and insight so that volunteers can pick and choose what they would like to incorporate into their conversational activities. This project does not aim to teach volunteers and community members how to facilitate their community English conversational groups, as the authenticity and style differ, rather it is an aid for support and, at times, perhaps inspiration.

Community is a central value to this grant initiative and is genuinely embedded in each aspect of the project deliverables. Planning the project's content entailed meeting with volunteers

across ISSofBC locations, from Vancouver to Maple Ridge and staff members who support clients. Furthermore, surveys will be issued to newcomer clients and volunteers to ask what materials they want to see on the website. Sharing the initiative through surveys had a positive effect. While the website has not been published, many volunteers and participants wrote to me, expressing how valuable such a resource tool would be to them.

Summary of Project Impacts

Highlights of the overall project include:

- Creating a plethora of English language resources that can support newcomers and community members supporting English language learning for settlement purposes
- Collaborating with community volunteers and staff and newcomer settlement service agencies to listen and engage with their experiences to build resources in response to community needs
- Learning how to utilize digital spaces to enhance newcomer settlement support

Reflection

Knowledge has been a critical asset in the community collaborations and conversations I have had with members at ISSofBC. My supervisor has been a volunteer coordinator for the conversation circles for over five years and has provided me with various language support resources prepared by volunteers. Furthermore, his ability to connect me to the staff at different ISSofBC centres was vital to developing resources. The volunteers and staff had years of experience at ISSofBC and asked important questions such as: how can tensions be defused when participants of cultural/political differences face disagreement? This navigated the materials I created and orientated what would be helpful to the community. The conversations I have had with the community at ISSofBC gave me perspectives that enhanced my approaches to cultivating purposeful resources.

Reflection on my role in the project

Having almost a year's worth of volunteering experience supporting newcomers in an English conversation circle setting was a strength in having background knowledge of the areas of additional support newcomers often request and how this project idea could be a beneficial space. In addition to this, as a member of the target audience (a weekly volunteer creating conversational topics for newcomers), I ran into the issue of timing; trying to develop weekly materials that support a mixed group of language learners can sometimes require great time. Furthermore, having a background in teaching IELTS and ESL, I transitioned into the volunteer role quite smoothly, a strength that also embedded itself in this project's content creation stages. Over the years of working with newcomers in English language learning settings, it has supported the decisions to know what materials to create, such as listening, writing, reading and conversational questions.

A turning point in my learning came at the preliminary research stage when I connected with ISSofBC staff, such as my supervisor, a volunteer coordinator, and an experienced volunteer. Learning what has been most difficult for them, as the challenges expressed by language learning participants, was of such value and became crucial for developing the resources. While my teaching and volunteering experience was a key strength in the project, I had yet to anticipate the breadth of ideas provided by community members I connected with via Zoom calls and surveys. I learned that being comfortable with my strengths can sometimes limit the space of creativity and that seeking collaboration in tasks you feel confident about pursuing independently can elevate this skill. For example, before connecting with a long-term conversation facilitator (volunteer), I created a template of advanced learning materials to ensure that language was advanced and that topics were of greater complexity. During the call, the volunteer informed me how simple topics can prompt participants to express themselves the most and, in turn, encourage them to talk in detail. Learning that complexity was not everything for initiating conversations for advanced learners altered the wording of my prepared materials.

Reflection of project planning

The initial goals of the project:

Over six months, I hope to build, alongside 5-6 team members, an English conversation curriculum designed as an aid for ISSofBC volunteers and staff to develop lesson plans that engage newcomers in English practice on topics related to helpful information topics such as health, transport, volunteer, and work opportunities to support practical lessons for newcomers.

Objects from the initial project proposal:

- Collaborating with volunteer coordinators and staff members in the settlement services department at ISSofBC in locations of Vancouver and New Westminster to inquire what topics of conversation are beneficial to newcomer support
- Design a resource package that includes eight critical themes across beginner, intermediate and advanced levels that can be used as lesson guides for volunteer coordinators conducting conversation circles
- Building an online package including PowerPoint, short videos and vocabulary pages that help facilitate speaking, listening and reading skills

Reflecting on the initial goals set

The project outcomes outlined in the initial project were achieved through collaboration with community members. To measure how beneficial these resources are to newcomer support, additional time (outside of the 6-month project period) to give time for resources to be used and promoted to the broader community. The size of the team supporting this project has undoubtedly yet to be achieved. This has been due to my ability to collaborate within the organization with individuals who are target members of the resource and, therefore, provide insights that will be most essential to the resource being of support.

One major challenge was creating the proposed number of units. Creating quality materials for each unit took considerable time, which was not anticipated in the original proposal. A reason for this was the size of the team unit for the project; being alone to create materials reduced the rate at which content could be made. However, working alone enabled me to develop consistency in materials; each page follows the same layout and volume of resources. Reducing the number of units for the official launch of the website was a critical decision I made in response to working with a small team and has been great to ensure that each unit is revised and developed to a quality standard.

Furthermore, prolonging the project timeline has been an unforeseen necessity. Sometimes, adhering to strict timelines can reduce the quality of the project; for example, the development of ideas or the design efforts need to be cut short in response to making original deadlines. Communicating with the team, including my supervisor, website developer and CCEL staff, has been crucial in ensuring the reason for extensions was understood.

Reflecting on professional growth

This opportunity to work on the C2C grant has shown the power of outreach and how, when supporting community initiatives, the stories of others can elevate your ideas and paths to creative thinking. The power to collaborate can occur from a straightforward conversation, sharing some resources or even connecting you to an individual who can support you; how much value you gain from this is a form of collaborative effort. In terms of professional growth, I have improved my ability to apply research skills from formulating questions to accumulating data and responding to findings in a community-based setting, which is valuable as moving forward, I would like to continue professionally working in a role related to evaluating newcomer integrative programs in BC and how initiatives can be improved upon to support members. Being a volunteer within the community clarified my goals for the initiative; from my challenges/learning experiences with the conversation circle programs before starting the initiative, I had a clear intentionality, which showed me the power of community involvement. The ease of having insightful conversations and connections with staff, with volunteers running other circles and participants, came from my knowledge and prior involvement with the community at ISSofBC. Relationships take time to cultivate, and I advise future students who are interested in the C2C grant to start their journey to working with their partner organization early in advance. Hence, creating a sense of belonging in a community before creating a project is a process that has enabled me to work with rather than for a target audience or a target audience working for me.

Recommendations [Next Steps]

While creating the materials, I realized that not all topics requested by each participant could be made and uploaded to the website. When creating surveys to send to participants and volunteers, I asked which issues related to Canadian settlement would like to be covered. Due to the inability to make all that was requested, I will continue working on the toolkit even after the C2C grant expires. To have the toolkit continuously open to revision, adding content and files will be a continuous process to keep materials updated and reflect the community's needs. To do so, I will stay connected to my supervisor, volunteers running circles, and participants attending ISSofBC. One strategy to maintain this connectivity to the non-profit, along with my continued role as a volunteer, will be to send out annual surveys to keep up to date with current needs to inspire materials created. Regarding finances, I plan to continue looking for community-centred grants to support newcomer integrative initiatives from non-profit settlement services and other funders.

References

Quarterly Population Highlights - Gov.Bc.Ca,
www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/data/statistics/people-population-community/population/quarterly_population_highlights.pdf. Accessed 23 Feb. 2024.