

Learning ESL in the Community

By Wendy Terry

If you are an ESL learner, you need much more practice speaking English than is possible in the class room. By attending programs in the community not only will you practise your English but you will also meet new people with similar interests. Incidentally you will develop a personal network that could help you find a job.

Library General Interest Programs

As many newcomers know, libraries hold ESL conversation circles and ESL classes, but did you know that libraries also offer general interest programs, where you have an opportunity to meet Canadians who share similar interests and where you can practice your English with native speakers.

To find out about these courses, go to your nearest library and pick up a copy of *What's On*. This is a guide to programs at the Toronto Public Library. You will find numerous discussion groups on books and films, presentations on Canadian and local history and lectures by guest speakers. As well there are story time and seasonal holiday programs for children and their parents. At these events you can practise your English when meeting other parents and children. These library programs are mostly free.

Libraries use volunteers. For example, the people checking your books in and out are often volunteers. You too could volunteer and gain experience dealing with the public in English.

Parks and Recreation Centre Programs

One student insists that he made all of his Canadian friends by attending Parks and Recreation programs. The City of Toronto runs community and recreation centres for residents of Toronto. You can find out about these programs by picking up a copy of *Toronto Fun* at your local library.

Parks and Recreation offers many programs for people of all ages. Program areas include Arts and Heritage, Fitness and Wellness, Sports, Swimming, Skating and Skiing programs. Note that there are 'learn to skate' programs for adults.

You should know that the programs listed in Toronto Fun are organized by age group. To find the programs for adults start at the bottom of the list looking for programs for those 18 years and older.

In Toronto Fun you will also find cultural centres listed such as small art galleries and community groups like sport clubs and choirs.

Parks and Recreation Centres use volunteers too. You could volunteer to be on an advisory council, help in a recreation or sports program or a community group project. Ask for a copy of the Toronto Volunteer Opportunities Guide for Toronto at your local community or recreation centre.

Parks and Recreation programs are low cost, but if you are on a low income like Social Assistance, there is financial assistance available. Just ask the staff at your local recreation centre how to apply.

Volunteering in Community Agencies

Giving your time to a community agency is a very Canadian thing to do. In citizenship education books there is a whole section on how much Canadians value giving time to agencies helping those in need: seniors, children with disabilities, the homeless etc.

When you volunteer your time as a newcomer, Canadians are impressed. Moreover, the people who work at the agency where you volunteer can act as references for you with Canadian employers. And, of course, you are practicing your English all the while.

How do you find these community agencies? There are two ways. You can go to your local library and ask to see **The Blue Book which is a **Directory of Community Services** in Toronto. By spending an afternoon looking through this book you will see over 1200 community agencies listed. Most take volunteers. Or to find a volunteer job, you can call the Volunteer Centre of Toronto 416-961-6888.**

Volunteering in Schools

Most elementary schools use volunteers. Walk over to your local school and ask about volunteering in a classroom, the lunch room, in the playground etc. Many volunteers wind up in paid work as educational assistants.

Volunteering in Professional Associations

There is a professional or interest group for almost every possible type of work, business or hobby. People belong to these associations because they want to talk to people in their field. Newcomers need to establish contacts with people from their field of work or interest.

You can find these associations in a directory called *Associations Canada* which is available in every library. Spend an afternoon looking through this directory, and you will see over 14,000 associations listed. You should be able to find one if not several that will help you meet other people in your career area. For example, most newcomer engineers know that PEO (Professional Engineers of Ontario) must license them in order for them to work as engineers, but they don't realize that there are membership-based organizations they can join without being licensed. There are engineering associations for mechanical, civil, industrial, chemical, and electrical and so on.

These associations are extremely valuable for meeting people... All these associations hold events like dinners, guest speaker events, conferences etc. They also have job banks where members list job vacancies at their companies. Even if you have not paid a membership fee, you can often pay to attend events as a visitor. When you attend association events, take a few business cards and a couple of resumes with you. Often newcomers get their first job through these professional events. Remember that over 80% of Canadian jobs are never advertised. The people who attend these events know about these unadvertised jobs.

And you can volunteer for these associations. These groups are often run on volunteer labour. Association members will volunteer to help update the membership data base, or send a mailing to members, or staff a sign-in desk at a monthly event, or set up or clean up for the yearly conference. And so could you.

Furthermore, these associations are always looking for guest speakers, workshop presenters and newsletter writers. Perhaps you could write an interesting article about software development in your country for the Canadian Information Processing Society or on product markets in China for a provincial exporters association. You could give

an after dinner lecture on forestry in Romania to the Ontario Forestry Association or jewelry making in Turkey to the Canadian Jewelers' Association. Professionals are always interested in how their work is done in other countries. If you can tackle such a task you will be demonstrating your skills and knowledge to potential employers.

Survival jobs in customer service

Survival jobs are the ones you do to earn some money while you are learning English and getting back into your field of work. Many newcomers take customer service work such as cashier, sales clerk, pizza delivery driver and so on. You can use these jobs to improve your English as you are in an English speaking environment for several hours at a time, several days a week.

Telephone Surfing

Once a day for fifteen minutes or so call up small companies listed in the Yellow Pages and ask them to tell you more about what they do. These small retail (like your local hardware store) or service (like movers or painters) companies quite often will have a real person answer the phone, not voice-mail. So you can practice your English by asking him or her more about what the company does. Two or three five minute phone calls every day for several weeks will do wonders for your telephone English.

Church Conversation Groups

Check out your neighbourhood churches to see which ones offer conversation groups. The churches see these groups as a community service not as a religious activity. Their members volunteer to hold a conversation group to help newcomers practice English with native speakers.

General Interest Courses at the School Board

Many newcomers take an ESL course from the school board not realizing that there is another whole group of courses Toronto adults take called General Interest programs. You can find out about these by picking up Learn for Life, a calendar about TDSB (Toronto District School Board) Continuing Education and Community programs, available at your local school or library.

There are courses in Art, Business, Child Rearing, Communications, Computers, Crafts, Dancing, Fitness, Food, Games

and Hobbies, Health and Safety, Interior Design, Languages, Music, Sewing, Sports, Theatre. Each costs under \$ 100. There is only a \$10 fee if you have a low income.

Courses at the Royal Ontario Museum, Art Gallery of Ontario and the Ontario Science Centre

Each of these groups offers programs for children and adults. Ask for a copy of their course calendars when visiting their exhibits.

Musical Events and Groups

If you are interested in musical groups or events, you will want to look at *Whole Note*, a community publication listing musical groups and events in Toronto. . Again you can find this publication in most local libraries

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