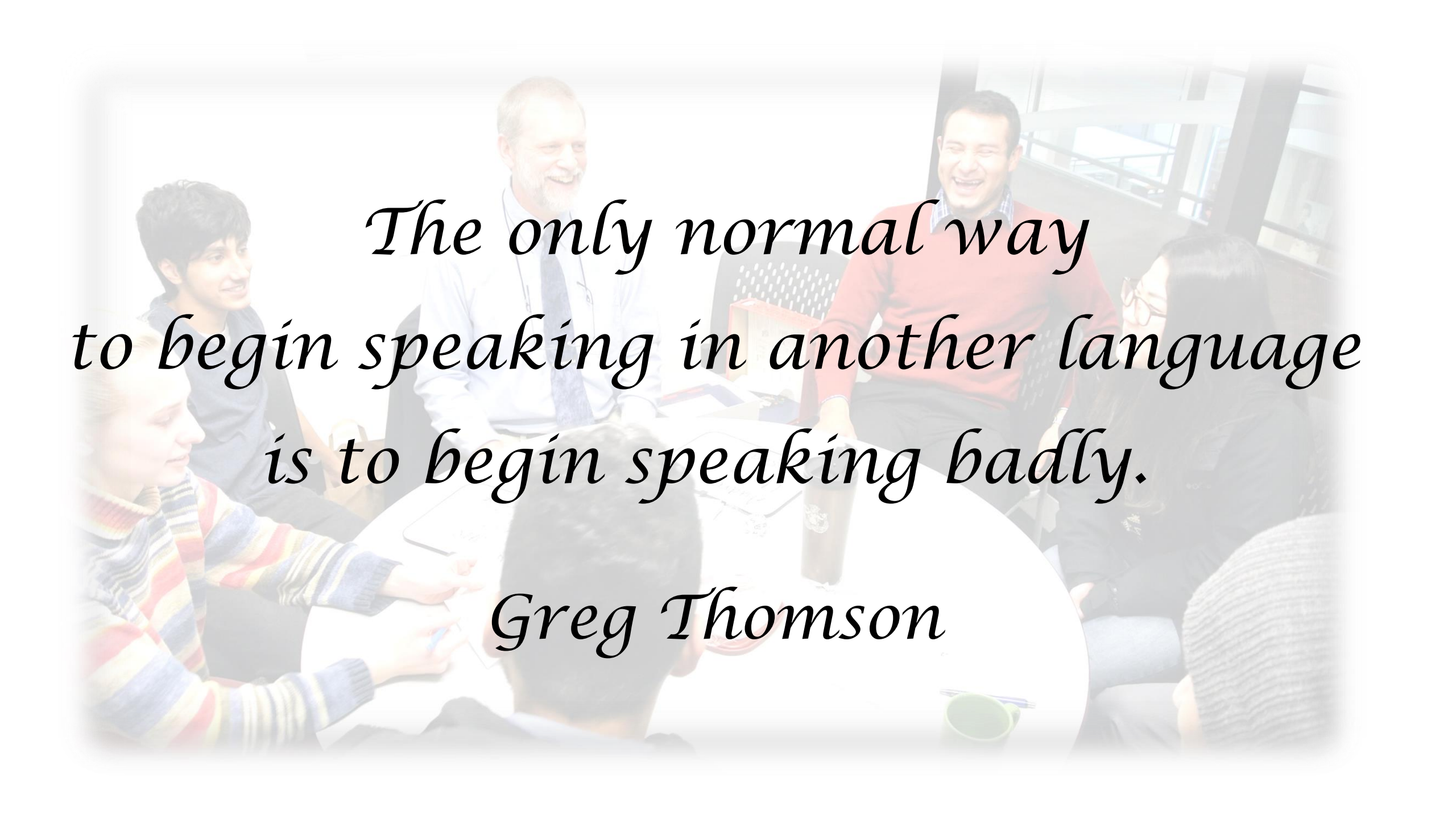


# ESL Conversation Groups: Up Close and Personal

Claudia Ratay, Ph.D.  
Pasco County Libraries  
South Holiday Branch

A group of five people are seated around a white circular table in a modern office setting. They are all smiling and appear to be in a collaborative meeting. One man in a light blue shirt and tie is looking towards the center. A man in a red sweater is laughing. A woman with glasses is looking towards the center. A woman in a colorful striped sweater is looking down at a document. A man in a dark shirt is looking towards the center. The background shows office windows and a railing.

*The only normal way  
to begin speaking in another language  
is to begin speaking badly.*

*Greg Thomson*

# A Little Bit of Background

## English as a Second Language at South Holiday Library

1. One-on-one lessons
2. Conversation group
  - 90 minute sessions
  - Twice weekly
  - 15 – 20+ attendees





# Goals for Today

Choose Appropriate Topics  
Manage Common Issues



# Nuts and Bolts of Conversation Groups

## What they are...

A place for language learners  
to practice speaking and listening skills  
in a safe, welcoming environment.

## What they are not...

A classroom experience in which participants  
can expect a structured lesson and individualized attention.



# Conversation Facilitator's Mantra

These sessions are for the students.





# Conversation Group Challenges

## 1. Topic Issues

Students choose topics

## 2. Conversation Management

When things go awry



# Topic Challenges: Choosing a Topic

Here are some winners.

Foods from your culture\*\*\*

Favorite books and authors

Favorite television shows and/or movies

Qualities you look for in friends

Cultural superstitions

Stress management

Vacations and places to visit \*\*

Your bucket list

Studying English





# Topic Challenges: Choosing a Topic

Here are some losers.



Politics

Sex

Religion

# Dealing with Discussion Topics

Suggestions that lead to religion, sex, politics

Examples:

Marriage customs

Festivals and holidays

Environmental issues

Risks:

Arguments

People become offended.

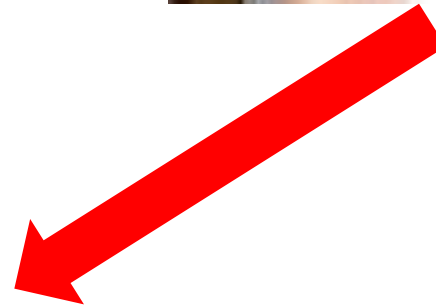
Participants don't return.



# Dealing with Discussion Topics

Suggestions that lead to religion, sex, politics:  
Solution

Let's focus on cultural aspects  
and/or personal experiences.





# Dealing with Discussion Topics

## Overly negative suggestions

### Examples:

A decision you regret

Dealing with hurt feelings

### Risks:

Conversation becomes a therapy session.


People are turned off and don't return.



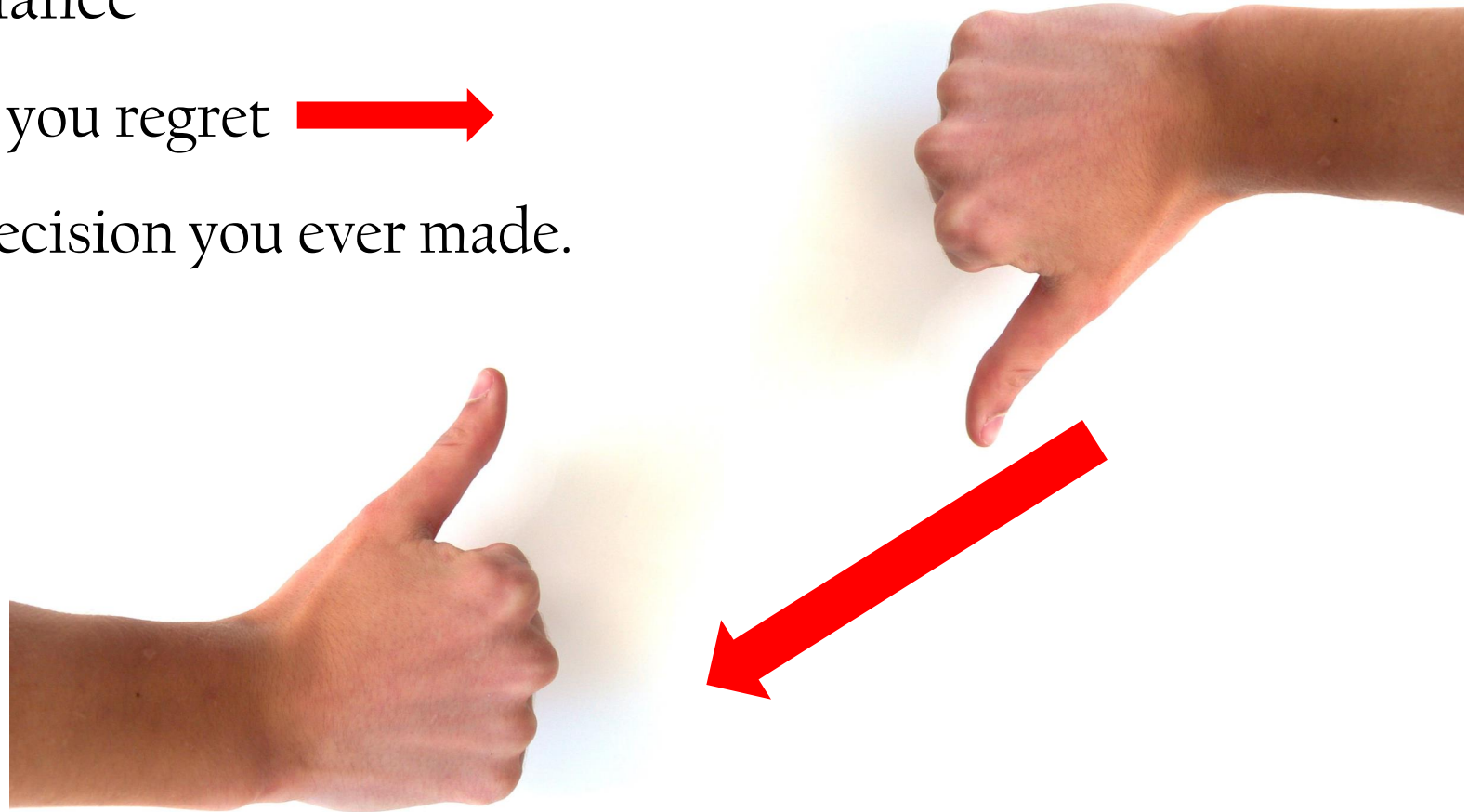
# Dealing with Discussion Topics

Overly negative suggestion: Solution

Create balance

A decision you regret 

The best decision you ever made.



# Dealing with Discussion Topics

## Questionable suggestions

### Examples:

1. Mindfulness
2. Stereotypes

### Risks:

1. People don't understand topic.
  2. They become offended.
- \*\*\*Participants don't return.



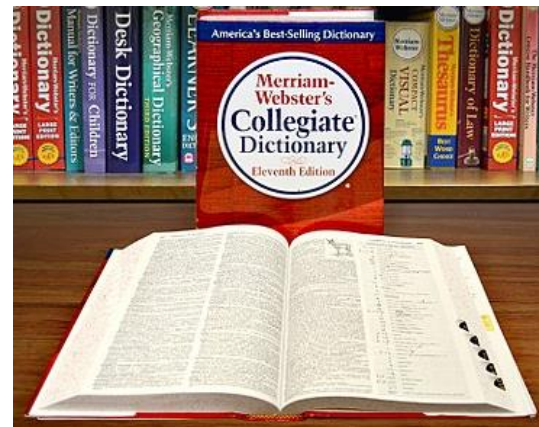


# Dealing with Discussion Topics

Questionable suggestions: Solution

Mindfulness  Provide a simple definition.

Stereotypes: Sometimes you just have to say “no”.



# Dealing with Discussion Topics

Déjà vu all over again

Examples:

Food

Books

Risks:

Rehashing the same old thing.



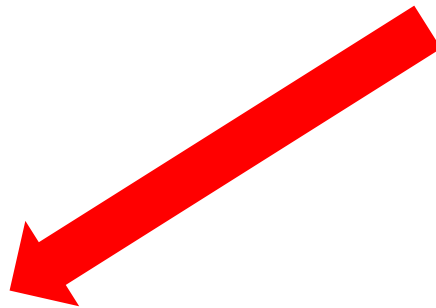
# Dealing with Discussion Topics

Déjà vu all over again: Solution

Is this a new group of people?

New twist on the topic.

Food  Share a favorite recipe





# Dealing with Discussion Topics

No one is interested

Example: Volunteering

They don't know anything about it.

It's just a dud.

Risks:

Conversation fails.

People don't attend or don't return.



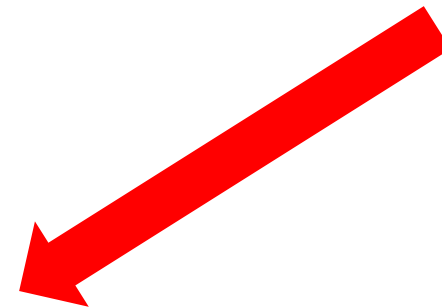
# Dealing with Discussion Topics

No one is interested: Solution

Give the topic a spin.

Volunteerism  Sense of community,

Random acts of kindness



# Dealing with Discussion Topics

Let's talk about politics, sex, religion (Yippee!)

Reiterate topic guidelines.

Provide reasons.





# Conversation Management

Running the show

Facilitating the flow of discussion

Dealing with personalities and behavior



# Conversation Management

Get the conversation rolling.

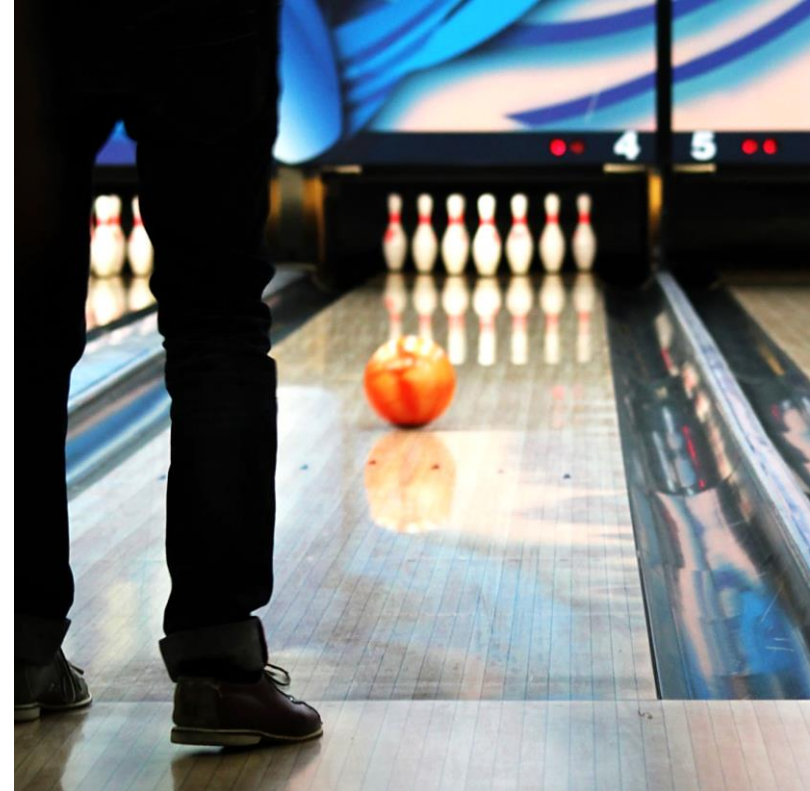
Nobody wants to be first.

More listeners than speakers.

Risks:

Conversation never gets started.

People don't return.



# Conversation Management

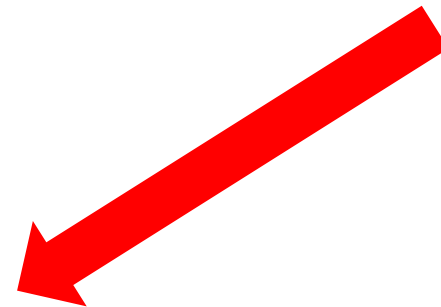
Get the conversation rolling:

Solution

Host starts the conversation.

Ask a basic question.

Participation can grow.





# Conversation Management

Raise your hand, please.

Most common with new participants

## Risks:

Multiple people speaking at once

Participants become frustrated

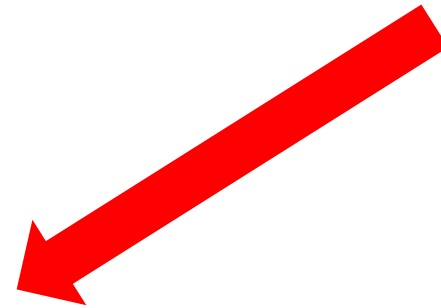


# Conversation Management

## Raise your hand, please: Solution

Review when you have new students.

Others model appropriate behavior.



# Conversation Management

Filling dead air

Nobody is volunteering to speak or asking questions.

The conversation is dying.

Risks:

Conversation fails.

People don't return.

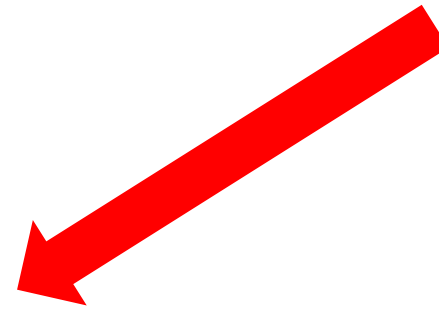
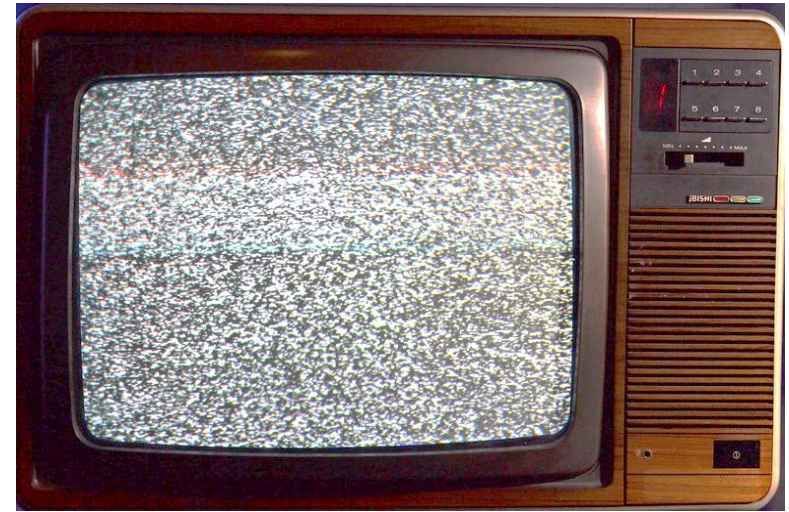




# Conversation Management

## Filling dead air: Solution

1. Ask open ended questions.
2. Summarize speaker's main idea.
3. Discuss vocabulary and idioms.
4. Share your own experience.



# Conversation Management

It's fourth down

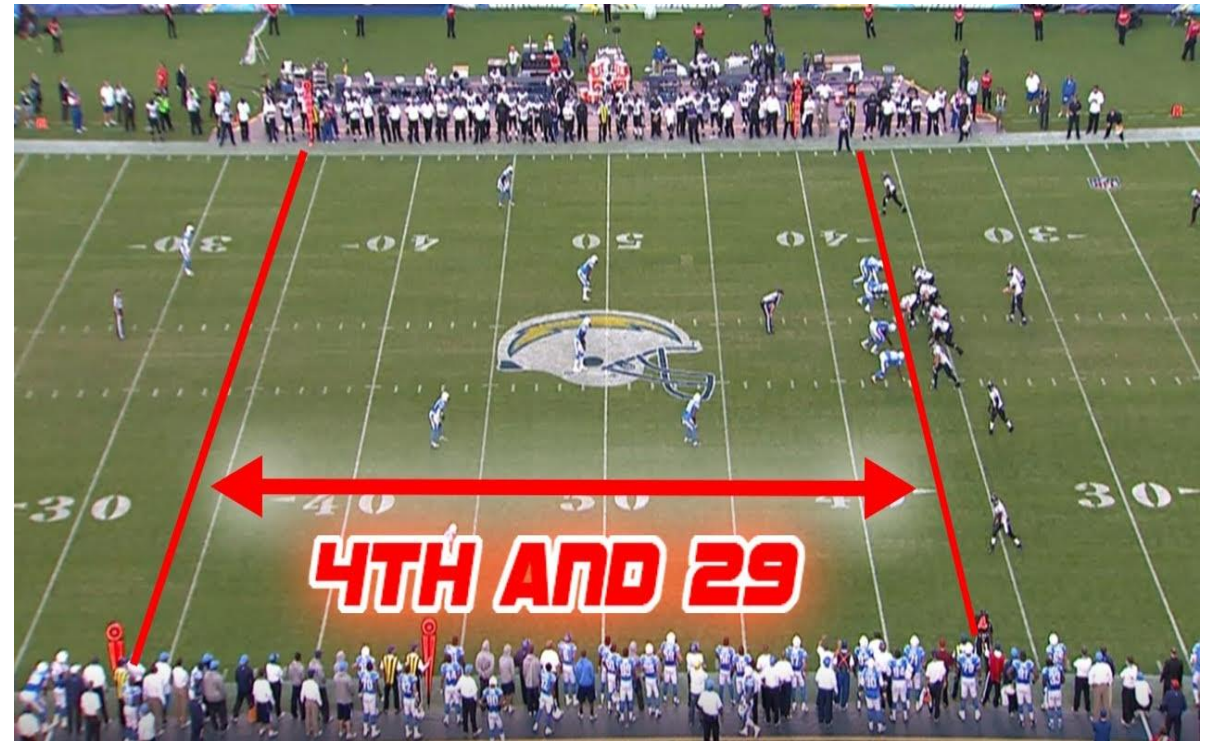
And the conversation is failing.

The topic is a complete dud.

Risks:

Bad impression of your class.

People don't return.





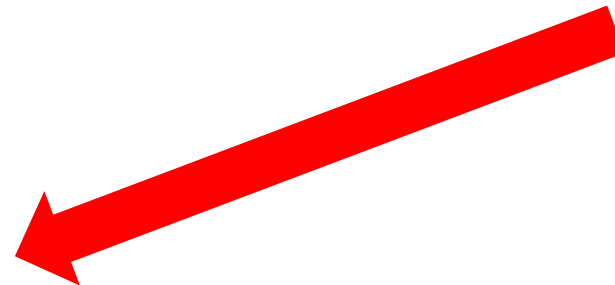
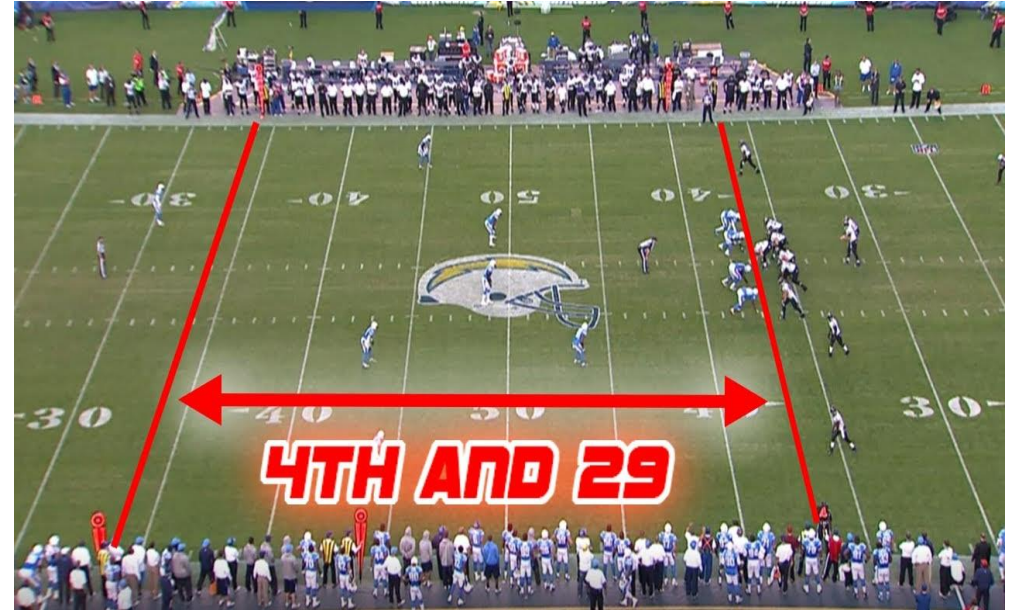
# Conversation Management

It's fourth down: Solution

It's time to punt!

Change the topic.

Do it before it's too late.





# Conversation Management

## Dealing with personalities

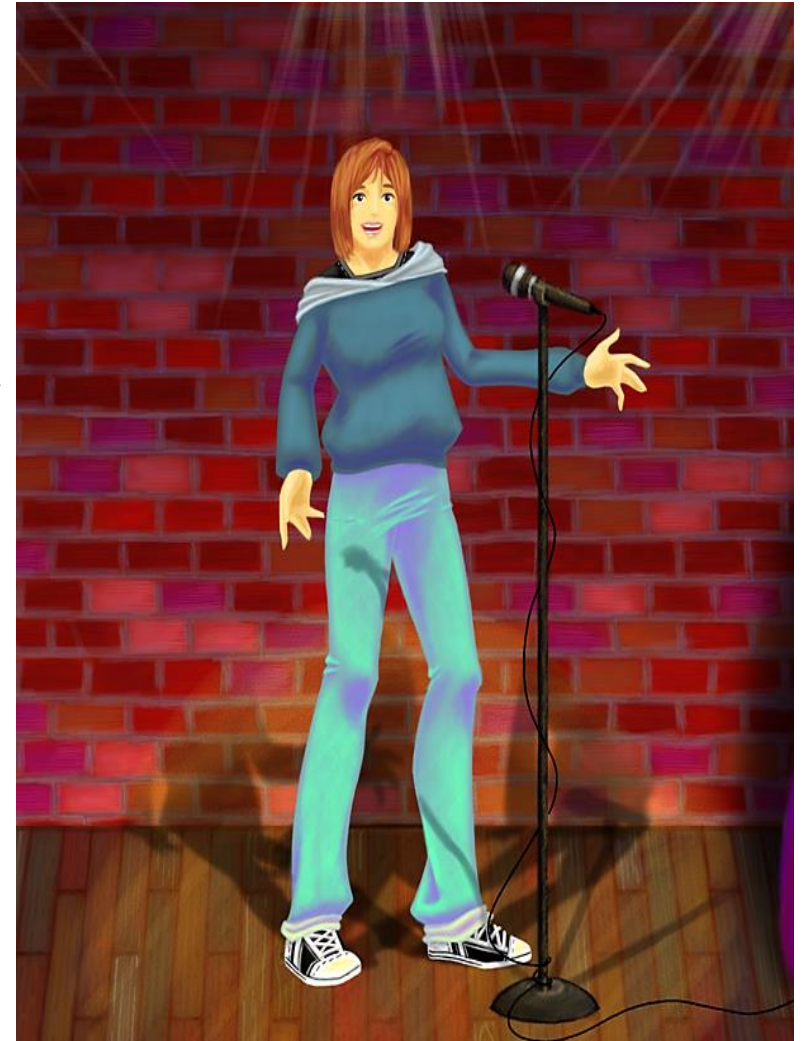
Personality transcends language.

People bring their personalities with them.

Especially true for advanced speakers

Example:

Class clown



# Conversation Management

## The “Convo Hog”

One person monopolizes the conversation or talks too long.

### Risks:

Others can't join the discussion.

People become annoyed, bored.

They don't come back.

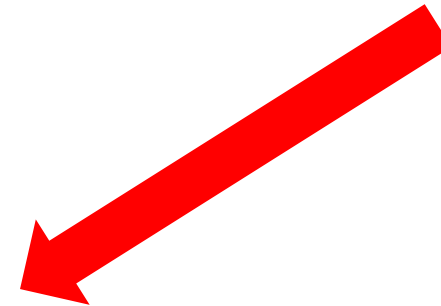


# Conversation Management

## The “Convo Hog”: Solution

Host unmutes and jumps in as soon as the speaker takes a breath.

Welcome comments, questions from others.





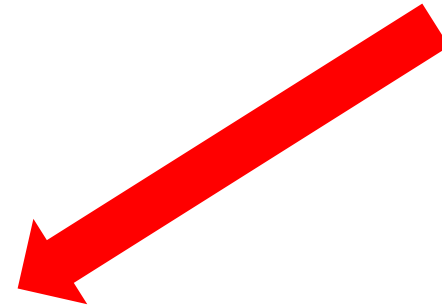
# Conversation Management Out in Left Field

1. Conversation goes too far off topic.
2. It flies off the rails.



# Conversation Management Out in Left Field: Solution

1. Use the new topic for a future meeting.
2. Redirect the speaker as soon as possible.



# Conversation Management

Titration the host (or this is a question for Claudia)

1. Vocabulary
2. American culture
3. Need for information

End result

I am talking too much!





# Conversation Management

Titration the host (or the is a question for Claudia):

Solution

1. Bounce questions back to group
2. Student centered topics
3. Post links to relevant information in chat.
4. I have talked enough.

Get them talking!



# Conversation Management

## Questionable Advice and Information

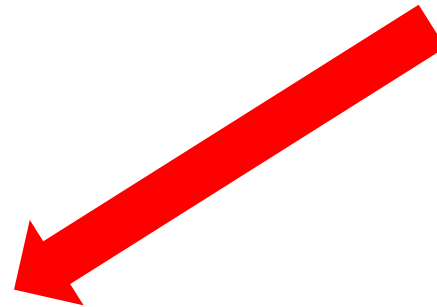
1. Medical, legal, financial, etc.
2. Making statements that are incorrect



# Conversation Management

## Questionable Advice and Information: Solution

Encourage students to do their own research and make informed decisions.







*You are cordially invited*

*to attend*

*The South Holiday Library*

*English Conversation Group*

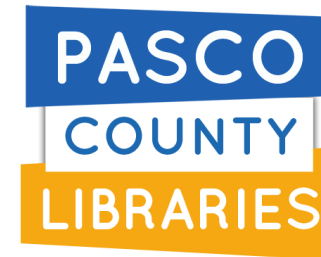
*Live on Zoom.*

*RSVP: [claudiar@pascolibraries.org](mailto:claudiar@pascolibraries.org)*

# Let's have a conversation.



South Holiday Library  
4649 Mile Stretch Drive  
Holiday, FL 34690  
(727) 834-3331



Claudia Ratay  
Email: [claudiar@pascolibraries.org](mailto:claudiar@pascolibraries.org)

# Appendix 1: Oxford Languages



mindfulness definition



All

Books

Images

Videos

News

More

Tools

## Dictionary

Definitions from [Oxford Languages](#) · [Learn more](#)

Search for a word



## mind·ful·ness

/ˈmɪn(d)f(ə)lnəs/

*noun*

1. the quality or state of being conscious or aware of something.  
"their mindfulness of the wider cinematic tradition"
2. a mental state achieved by focusing one's awareness on the present moment, while calmly acknowledging and accepting one's feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations, used as a therapeutic technique.



# Appendix 2: Conversation Group Resource

<http://iteslj.org/questions/>

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## Conversation Questions for the ESL/EFL Classroom

A Project of The Internet TESL Journal

If this is your first time here, then read the [Teacher's Guide to Using These Pages](#)  
If you can think of a good question for any list, please [send it to us](#).

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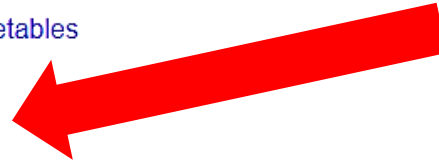
[Home](#) | [Articles](#) | [Lessons](#) | [Techniques](#) | [Questions](#) | [Games](#) | [Jokes](#) | [Things for Teachers](#) | [Links](#) | [Activities for ESL Students](#)

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- Accidents at Home
- Adoption
- Advertising
- Advice
- Age: Youth & Old Age
- Airplanes
- Amusement Parks
- Anger
- Animals & Pets
- Annoying Things
- Arguing
- Art
- The Art of Conversation
- Bags and Purses
- Baseball
- Basketball
- Beach
- Beauty & Physical Attractiveness
- Behavior
- Birthdays
- Body Language
- Books & Reading

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- [Food & Eating](#)
- Free Time & Hobbies
- Friends
- Fruits & Vegetables
- Future
- Gambling
- Garage sale
- Gardening
- Gay Community
- Gender Roles
- Generation Gap
- Gestures
- Getting to Know Each Other
- Gifts
- Goals
- Going to a Party
- Gossip & Rumors
- Habits
- Happiness
- Have You Ever ...
- Health
- Healthy Lifestyle
- Hobbies



- Plagiarism
- Plans
- Police
- Politics
- Pope John II
- Possessions
- Poverty
- Prejudices
- Privacy
- Procrastination
- Race
- Religion
- House Renovation
- Restaurants & Eating Out
- Nursing Homes & Retirement Communities
- Retirement
- Russia & the World
- Safety Inside & Outside of Home
- School
- Science & Technology
- Secrets
- Self-employment
- Service Industry

# Appendix 2: Conversation Group Resource

<http://iteslj.org/questions/>

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## Conversation Questions Garage sale

A Part of Conversation Questions for the ESL Classroom.

- What is a garage sale?
- Do you have garage sales in your country?
- Have ever stopped at a garage sale in this country?
- Do you know how to haggle or negotiate a lower price?
- What are some things that you need, that you might find at a garage sale?
- When you stop at a garage sale do you always buy something.
- What are some reasons that people have garage sales?
- What season are there the most garage sales?
- Do you enjoy shopping at garage sales?
- What have you bought at a garage sale?

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If you can think of another good question for this list, please [add it](#).

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