Conversation Classes for Low Literacy Students

Gareth Wingfield

Agenda

- Introductions
- Challenges of a Conversation Class
- Complications of Low Literacy
- Strengths and Strategies
- A Living Example

Me

My name is Gareth Wingfield, and I've been a professional adult educator since 2006, focusing on math, HSE and ESL.

I started doing conversation classes as a once-per-week "after class" program from 2022 to 2024.
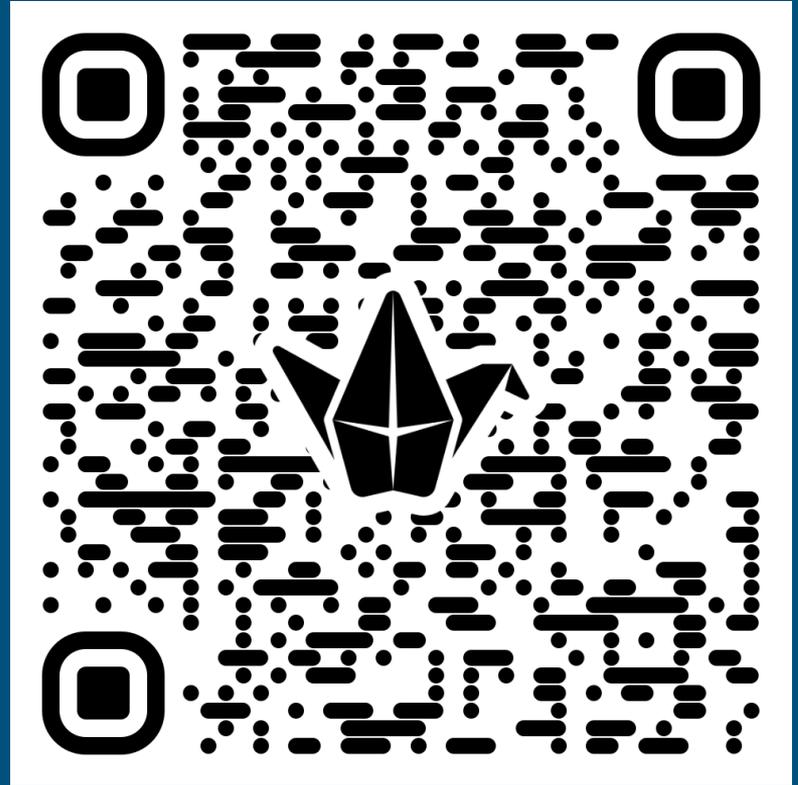
Tell us about you?

What's your name?

Where are you from?

What got you into adult education?

What led you to this presentation?

bit.ly/TexLitConvo
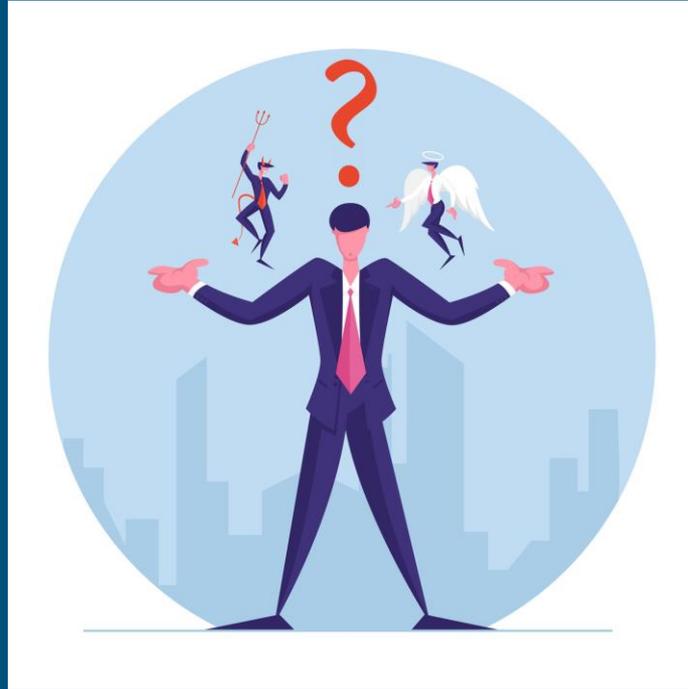
Conversation Classes

Are conversation classes are regular part of your classroom routine? Are they a separate class?

Complications of Low Literacy

If students are low literacy, how does that impact them in conversation classes?

Low Literacy might mean…

- Limited decoding skills
- Limited sight word vocabulary
- Slow reading
- Poor comprehension
- Limited writing skills
- Difficulty with academic language
- Challenge with many everyday tasks

Reasons

What is their literacy background?

- No prior experience with written language
- Literacy in non-Roman script language(s)
- Literacy with Roman alphabet in a different language

English Proficiency?

- Students can be proficient in English without being literate.

Cognitive Differences?

- Students with low literacy skills may also have learning disabilities.

What *IS* low literacy?

The [Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies](#) (PIAAC) ranks 5 levels of proficiency. 1 in 5 adults in Texas is at or below Level 1

Proficiency level and score range	Task descriptions
Below Level 1 0–175 points	The tasks at this level require the respondent to read brief texts on familiar topics to locate a single piece of specific information. There is seldom any competing information in the text, and the requested information is identical in form to information in the question or directive. The respondent may be required to locate information in short continuous texts; however, in this case, the information can be located as if the text were noncontinuous in format. Only basic vocabulary knowledge is required, and the reader is not required to understand the structure of sentences or paragraphs or make use of other text features. Tasks below Level 1 do not make use of any features specific to digital texts.

Percentage of State Populations at or Below Level 1 Literacy

12%　　　29%
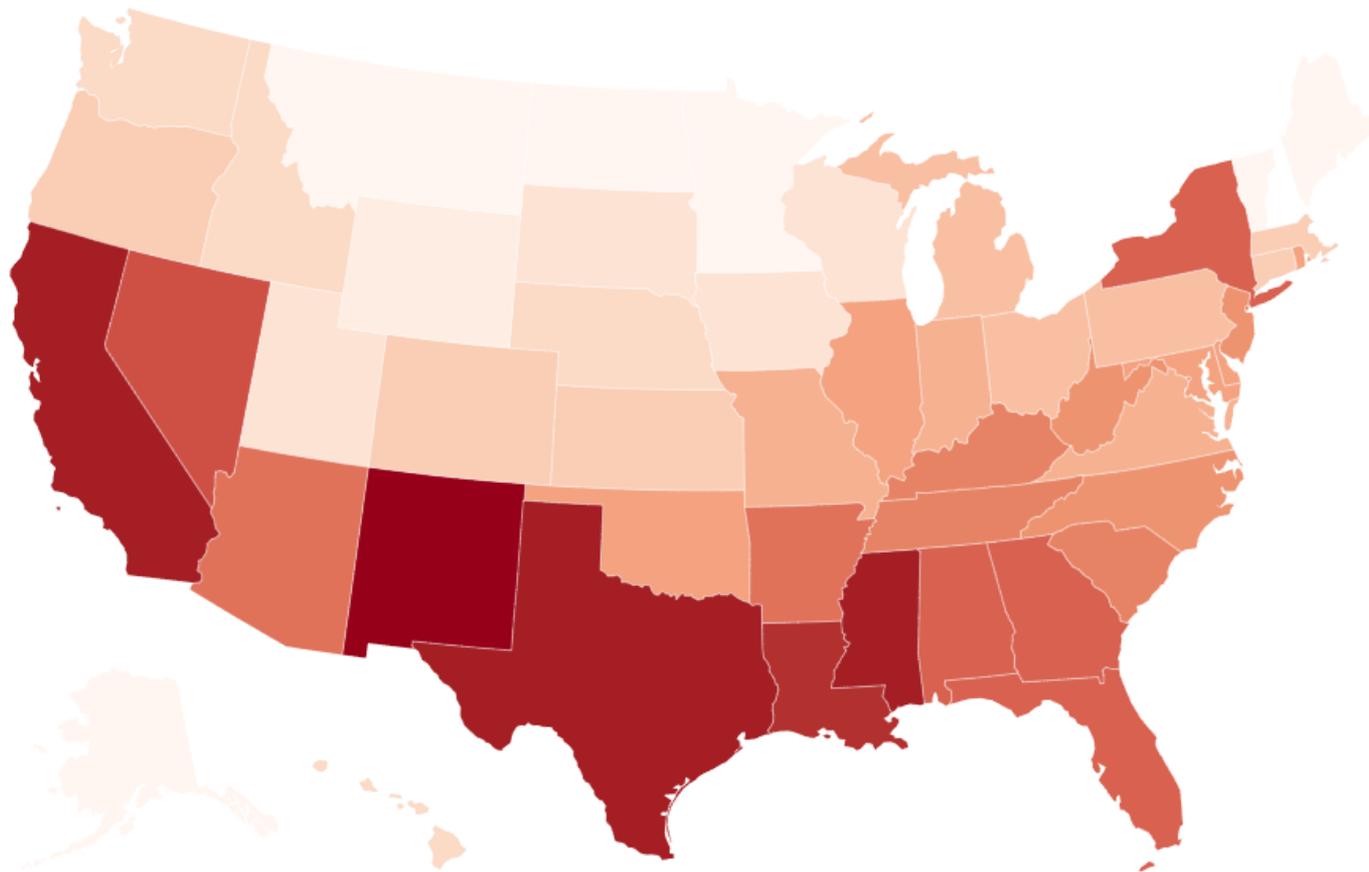
Impacts of Literacy on Speech

Being low literacy does not automatically mean that you're a poor speaker, but there is a connection:

- "Learners with low literacy often have limited exposure to [...] grammatical structures, which affects their ability to formulate sentences orally (*Literacy and Second Language Oracy*, Tarone, Bigelow & Hansen 2009)

- Low-literate learners often lack phonemic awareness, which affects pronunciation and listening comprehension. (*Metalinguistic Awareness of Adult Illiterates,* Kurvers, van Hout & Vallen, 2006)

Impacts of Literacy on Speech

- Low literate students rely heavily on memorized phrases, show high levels of hesitation and avoid initiating speech (NCLE & Minnesota Literacy Council)

- Low first language literacy can hinder second language oral development – learners have more difficulty retaining and manipulating new vocabulary, struggle with phonemic awareness, which affects both pronunciation and listening comprehension (*The Impact of Alphabetic Print Literacy on Oral Second Language Acquisition*, Tarone, Bigelow & Hansen (2007))

Impacts of Literacy on Speech

- Limited exposure to print means fewer cognitive supports - literate learners can "see" grammar and patterns in text, which reinforces their speech, while low literate learners rely entirely on oral output; without reinforcement, their retention and fluency develops more slowly.

- Students with low literacy can still make substantial gains in speaking skills especially when instruction emphasizes
  - Repetition
  - Use of visuals and gestures
  - Total Physical Response
  - Meaningful Conversation Practice

What to do?
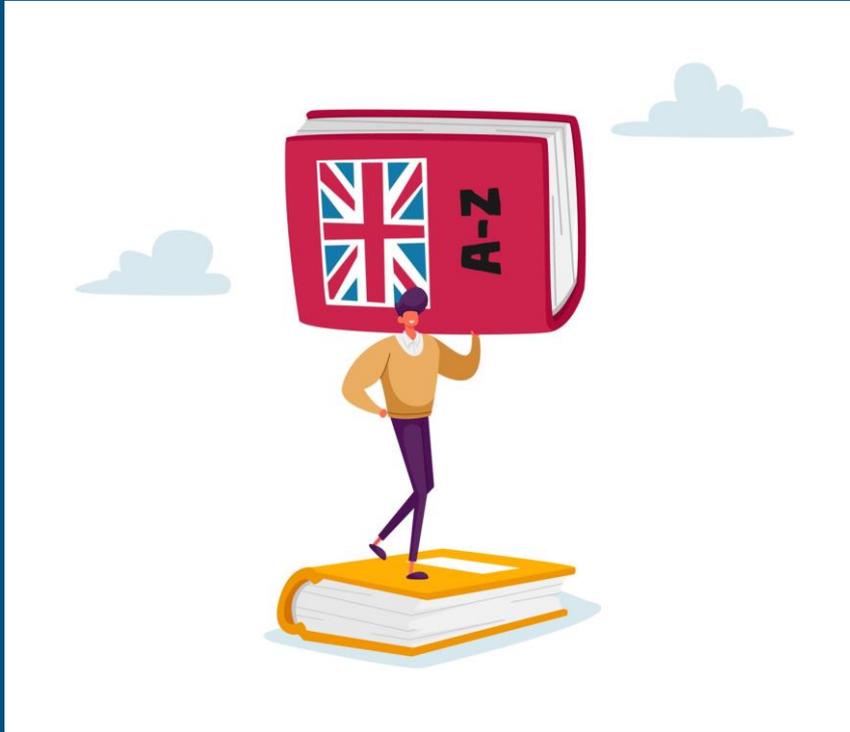
In your conversation class, reading will not be the point, but it is going to help.

As part of having meaningful conversations, you need to connect the words the students are using to ideas that impact their lives.

Make use of the internet to look up examples and context as much as possible to help expand understanding.

Vocabulary

Direct Instruction of Word Meaning

Quadrant Charts

Sentence completions

Vocabulary Word/Meaning (Dictionary)	Context
Manuscript: a handwritten or typewritten document or paper, especially a copy of an author's work	Since Robert began to read the tattered manuscript, you can tell that a manuscript is words on paper.
Structure	**Sound**
Manu + Script The root manu means "hand " Script is a root means "to write "	Man´ yōō skript´ Manuscript sound like the word manual, which is a reference book that provides instruction .

Good Vocabulary Instruction

When words come up that the student needs help with, use good vocabulary instruction:

- Introduce the word
- Model
- Show it in print
- Provide examples
- Engaging students to give examples
- Provide practical application

What to Avoid

Avoid giving students a list and sending them to a dictionary.

Vocabulary should be taught in context!

Total Physical Response

Connect students with their language through Total Physical Response:

- Teach action words and commands with physical engagement

- Nouns and adjectives with clear physical attributes like "big" or "small."

- Sequence and storytelling using acting (stretch and yawn for "wake up.")
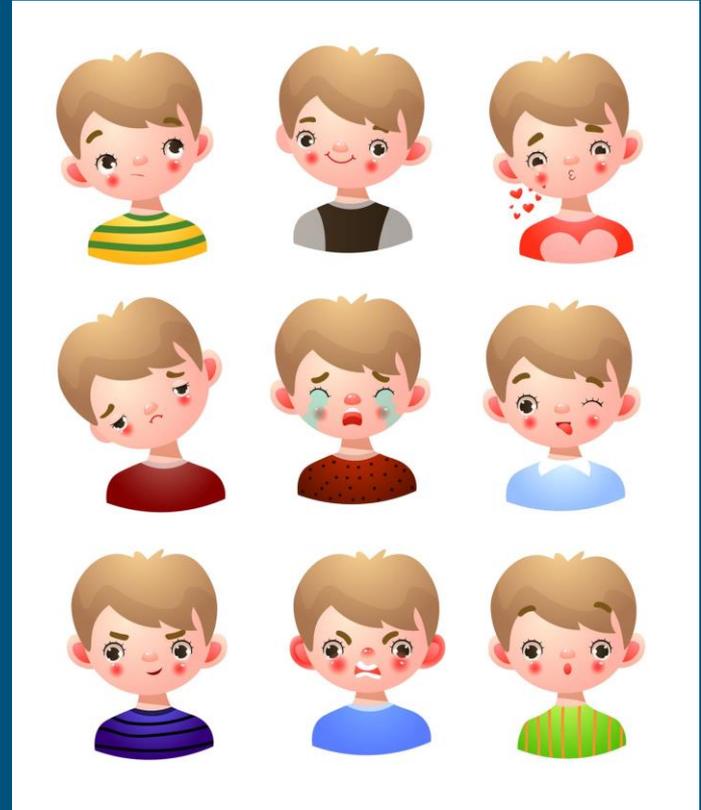
Meaningful Conversation

So how do we have meaningful conversations?
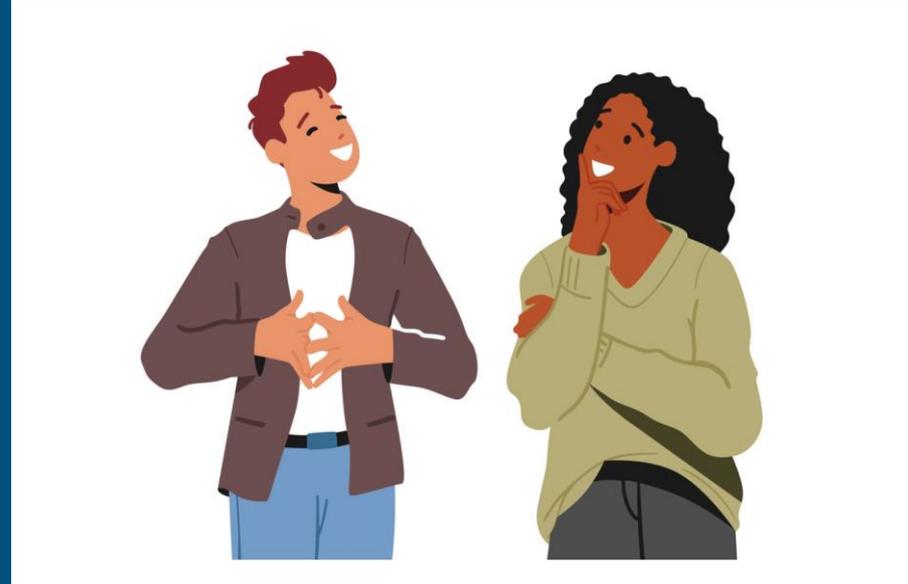
Talking

To think about how to have meaningful conversations, let's first think about who does most of the talking in your classroom?

Airtime

Airtime is literally time spent talking. How long are you "on the air?" How long are your students given to do the same? What can be done to even that ratio out?

Turn Taking

"Turn taking" is the transfer of "airtime" to other people in the conversation.

- Signals like "what about you?" or "Now you go."
- Pair Practice with role cards or structured dialogues
- A "talking stick," ball or other object to indicate turn to talk
- "Find someone who–"
- Choral Repetition
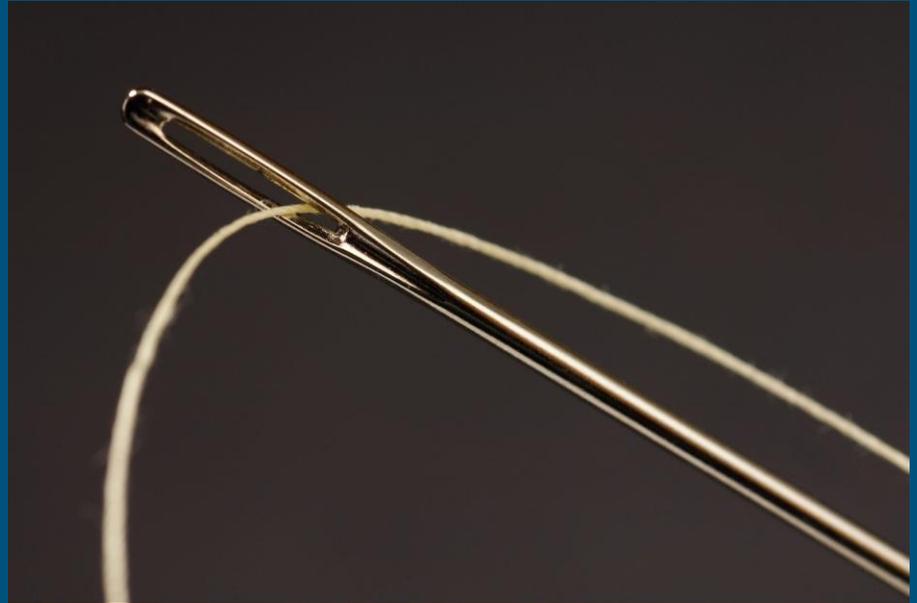- Interrupters: "Excuse me," or "Can I say something?"
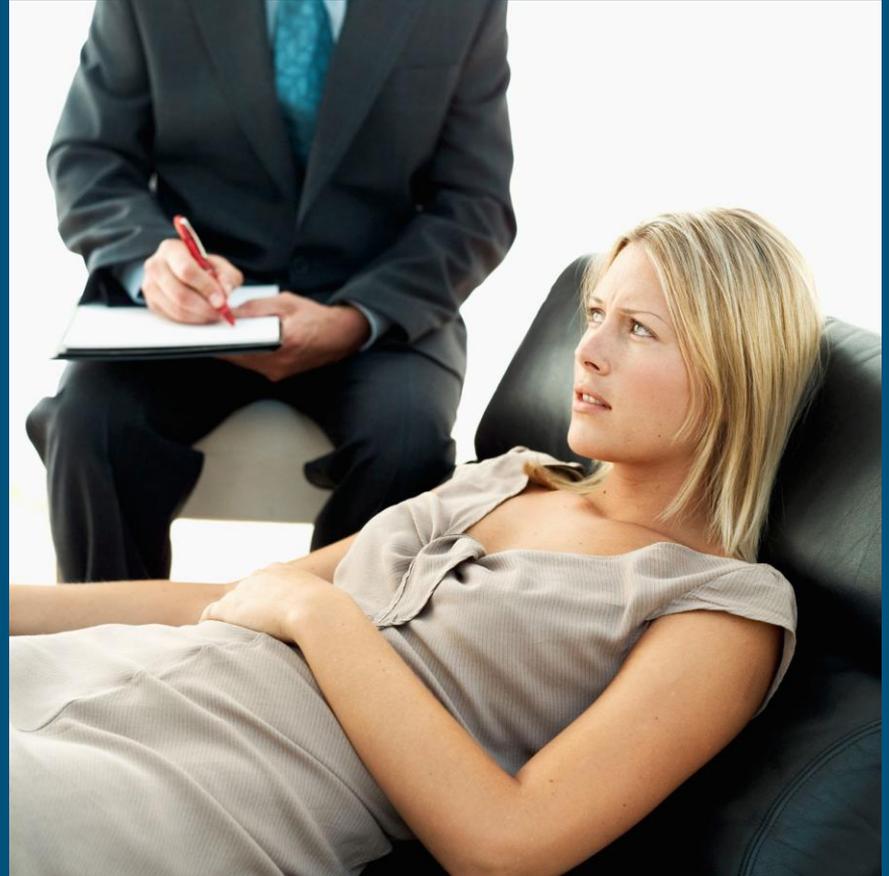
Back-channeling

Spoken conversation isn't just talking out loud! It's also all the cues you give to the speaker that you are listening to them.

This might be short utterances ("Uh huh"), nods, smiles, leaning forward, eye contact.

Strategy: Threading

Students often struggle with the great American pastime of small-talk.

Using Visuals

What do you see in this picture?

What does it make you think?

Is there someplace it reminds you of?

Roleplay

Set a context; students need a situation where the language is useful, which is best if its relevant to their real life challenges.

This is an excellent time for "problem based learning." Students identify a problem they have to use conversation skills can solve, and the instructor guides them through role play and dialog practice about that problem.

Mistakes happen

Students will make mistakes.

They want you to correct them.

But *how* you correct them can be important.

Tommy

This is Tommy, and he is a volunteer at PAVE East Texas. At PAVE, he's been providing conversation classes for 15 years, alongside his partner Barbara.

As Tommy and Barbara have a long running and well regarded conversation program, I wanted to ask him some questions.

Why?

What are students there for?

"What is your approach?" Part 1

Tommy starts off class by asking students to bring a word or phrase they want to explore or don't understand and they discuss its meaning and its usage.

"What is your approach?" Part 2

Students are regularly asked to make notes about what they encounter in the real world so they can reflect on them together in the conversation class, or to discuss things they have feelings about they can't talk about in a regular class, like "What makes you mad?"

"What is your approach?" Part 3

Tommy firmly believes that to support conversation, you need to support literacy. He goes into definitions, usage, and discusses related words to help support student growth.

Do you prepare for classes? If so, how?

Tommy generally will talk to his students about what is happening in their lives: for example, three of his students were taking a driver's test, so he prepared questions about not just the test but related topics like car insurance.

The goal is for class to be spontaneous and *student-driven*.

Don't prioritize what you prepared: Make class a chance for students to express themselves.

What about mixed classes?
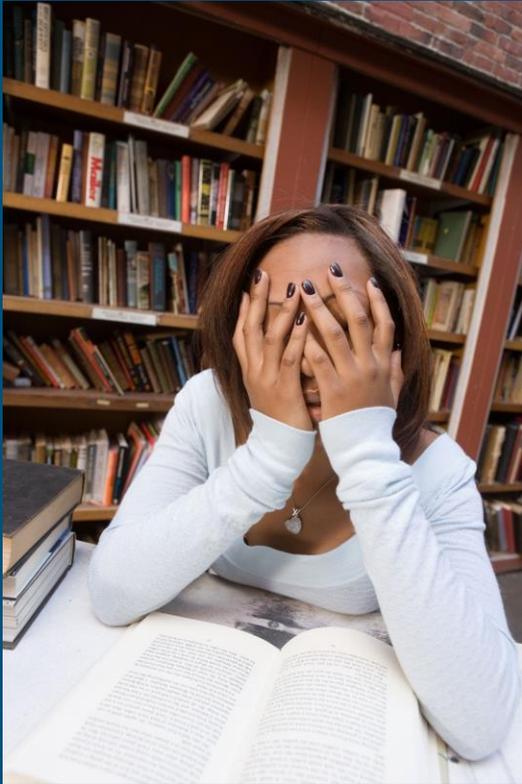
Meet the students where they are, and that goes doubly-so for the lowest level students. Advanced students have more options, and they are usually happy to help the lower students improve, so get them to give their peers assistance through pairing and coaching.

Conversation Starters

"What have you learned in your other classes today?"

"What cultural events are celebrated in your native country this month?"

"What words are you struggling with?"

"What's a new phrase you've heard this week?"

Feedback

Barbara: "Students bring us their joy, and that's what we want to see in our class."

Tommy: "People may think that conversation class is "just talking" but it's more complicated than that; conversation class can be intimidating because they have to talk, and talking is scary. Try not to make students feel embarrassed."

Tech Options
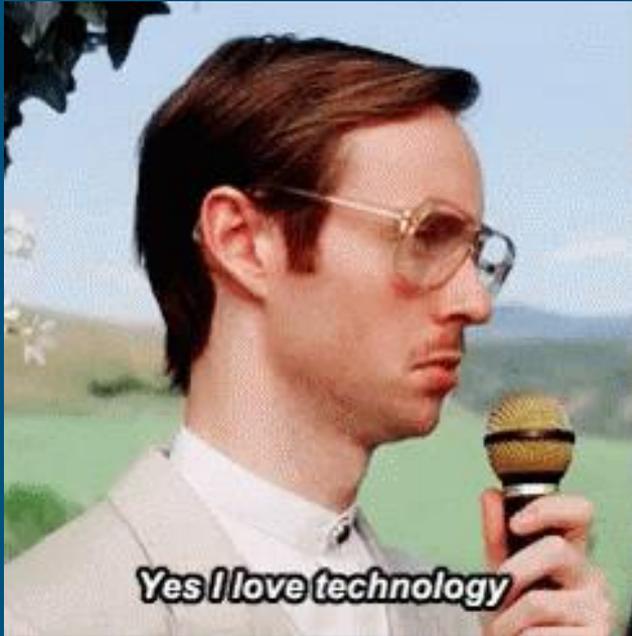
What are ways that technology can help us?

EdPuzzle

EdPuzzle allows you to deliver questions and receive answers in audio format.

OPEN-ENDED QUESTION

00:00   00:07

▶

Click play to hear the question

Type your answer...

🎤 Answer with audio

Rewatch   Submit

EdPuzzle

It also has "projects" where students submit videos to your prompts and you can give them feedback.

Conversation Practice 1

Start date: March 27th, 12:00am   Due date: No due date

Goal

To see students upload video of themselves talking to each other so the instructor can give feedback on remote, asynchronous conversation.

Instructions

You are to record yourself with your partner, having a conversation about your daily routine. Ask each other questions like "Do you eat breakfast?" or "When do you go for work?" When you get your answer, give open follow-up responses like "What do you eat for breakfast" or "Tell me about your job."

Video Source

Students need to record or upload a video of themselves from their computer.

Desmos

[Amplify Classroom](#) (formerly Desmos Classroom) has activity builders which can support audio responses.
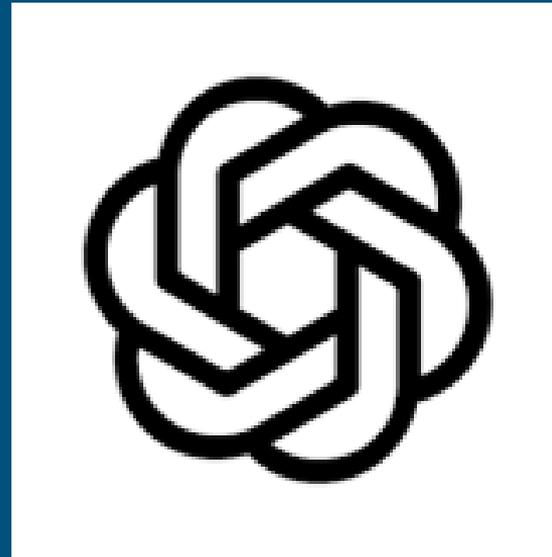
Pi

Pi is an AI that is designed to be talked to and talks back. It can speak in multiple languages, including English, Spanish, French, German, Italian, Portuguese and some English based pidgins and creoles like Nigerian Pidgin.

ChatGPT

ChatGPT can be prompted to give you a scenario and then talk with you in the context of that scenario.

Closing Thoughts

What's one thing you'll try differently in your next conversation class?