

Where Language Learning Becomes

FRIENDSHIP

Confidence is often the missing piece in language learning — and for students in DWC’s Intensive English Language Institute (IELI), it’s built one conversation at a time. That’s why the college’s English Conversation Partner Program pairs some students with local volunteers for informal, low-pressure weekly conversations that complement classroom instruction. IELI Director Dr. Seo Hyun Park says this structure offers students opportunities they don’t always receive in traditional classroom settings: personalized practice that feels natural and immediately relevant. By meeting consistently over a semester or two, students take risks with language, ask questions freely, and explore vocabulary and cultural nuances — strengthening both classroom learning and confidence in daily life.

Even though many IELI students come from linguistic and cultural backgrounds that may be unfamiliar to community members, Seo Hyun says volunteers approach conversations with openness and generosity. “Watching students realize that their stories, experiences, and cultures are valued — and seeing volunteers discover how much they gain in return — is a deeply rewarding part of this program,” she said.

That spirit of mutual exchange is reflected in volunteers like Art Roche, who began serving as a conversation partner earlier this academic year after learning about the program at an alumni reunion. A former DWC student and longtime supporter of the college, Art lives in nearby Dubuque and has long been involved with immigrant communities in the area.

“I especially enjoy learning about all the things that my conversation partner and I have in common. Sometimes we talk about abstract ideas, like happiness and personal power,” he said. “The vocabulary for that kind of conversation is more complicated, but also more satisfying.”

For students, the impact can be transformative. One student told Seo Hyun that their conversation partner was the first person in the U.S. with whom they felt comfortable speaking freely without fear of making mistakes. Over the semester, that student moved from short, hesitant sentences to full, confident conversations both in and out of class.

“These weekly conversations model the kind of reciprocal learning and bridge building that is at the heart of Divine Word College’s commitment to mission, community, and intercultural understanding,” Seo Hyun said.



Art Roche (left) and Fr. Antoine Malonga Iyemangebe, SVD (right)