Left, Michelle Pimentel, 19, a native of Hasif, Brazil, had been in the United States four days before attending her first conversation session at Volunteer Instructors Teaching Adults. Pimentel, studying English at UL Lafayette until January, hopes to graduate with a degree in business and become a banker in her home country. Right, Betty Haynes with Volunteer Instructors Teaching Adults leads a recent conversation group that includes Carmen Ferrer, 59, Venezuela, right, and Michelle Pimentel, 19, Hasif, Brazil, foreground.
Immigrants learn to speak English as a second language

Michelle Pimentel arrived in Lafayette a few weeks ago from her native Hesif, Brazil, to study advanced English at UL Lafayette. Within days, Pimentel, 19, had more than a dozen friends from Russia, Venezuela, China and Egypt. Most are students in the Volunteers Instructors Teaching Adults English as a Second Language Program who meet from 10:30 a.m. to noon each Thursday to practice and fine tune their English speaking skills.

“The first problem most have is that they don’t know how to get into a conversation or they panic about the answer when asked a question in English,” said instructor Betty Haynes. “It’s an involved process for many. They translate the question into their native language, formulate an answer, translate that into English and then reply. Like anything, the more you do it, the easier it becomes.”

The classes, which are offered at no cost, give those learning to speak English as a second language invaluable experience in proper pronunciation, subject-verb agreement, conversation etiquette and other stumbling blocks common to those just learning the language. Participants are required to make a three-minute presentation that could be focused on a specific topic or center around personal experiences. All must be polite, courteous, use the name of the person being addressed and not interrupt the person who has the floor.

“The easiest thing is to stay in the house and not talk, which most people do who just move to this country,” Haynes said. “You need to get out and use the language to learn it. Putting it into practice could be as easy as asking a store clerk to help you find ketchup.”

A business student at a Brazilian university, Pimentel one day hopes to work in a bank at home, where English is a necessity to get a better job and have some job security, she said.

“Is very important I learning and speaking English,” Pimentel said.

Fatimata Simpore, 34, moved to Opelousas this summer with her two children and husband, who teaches French at Opelousas Junior High. Simpore, from a village near Ghana on the African Ivory Coast, began taking VITA English classes soon after she arrived to help her function better in the community.

“The French here is not the same as it is back home,” said Simpore, who speaks a French dialect closer to the native language from France than the one spoken by most Cajuns. “The one here is like the French of Canada.”

However, some participants who struggle to learn English and adapt to the local culture fear their children, being reared in the United States, will lose touch with their native language and culture.

“My two children don’t speak Chinese. I’m afraid they will forget their heritage,” said Cathy Lin, 28, who grew up in a village just north of Hong Kong. “I don’t have time to teach them. I don’t want them to lose a sense of who they are.”