

# Conversation Partner Guide



## **Jones Library ESL Center Conversation Partner Guide**

### **General Information**

- [What is a Conversation Partner?](#)
- [Where are the students from?](#)
- [The Logistics: when, where, and for how long?](#)
- [Do I need to keep records of what I do in the tutoring sessions?](#)
- [How will I know if I've succeeded?](#)
- [Accepting \(small\) tokens of thanks](#)
- [Other volunteer opportunities at the ESL Center](#)
- [What if I have questions/problems?](#)

### **Teaching Suggestions**

- [Be a clear communicator](#)
- [Give your student a little "space"](#)
- [What do we talk about?](#)
- [Answering questions](#)
- [Role play ideas](#)
- [Sharing hobbies/interests](#)
- [Field trips](#)
- [Functions of language](#)
- [Idioms/slang](#)
- [Listen and discuss a passage](#)
- [Rehearsing a presentation](#)
- [Pronunciation](#)
- [Clarifying meaning](#)
- [Understanding your student's errors](#)
- [Requests for other kinds of help](#)

## General Information

### What is a Conversation Partner?

At Jones Library, we have students at all levels of English proficiency from a variety of educational backgrounds. Some of them have studied English in their home countries, and can read it fairly well. But they are not accustomed to speaking English in ordinary life. We assign conversation partners to this sub-group of students. These students already know a good deal *about* English, but they find that they only understand a portion of what people say to them in day-to-day life, and are unable to express themselves as clearly as they would like. They sometimes feel reluctant to make conversation with native English speakers for fear of making mistakes or misunderstanding what people are telling them.

Conversation partners offer their students a non-threatening way to:

- Practice with a native English speaker, (and hopefully discover that they can make themselves understood most of the time!) We hope that they'll develop enough confidence to use their English in ordinary settings, and become more assertive about interacting with American neighbors, classmates, or co-workers.
- Ask questions about language they hear but don't fully understand. This often involves idiomatic expressions, slang, and reductions (How'd'y'like that?) They may also be confused by references to popular culture or events (e.g. news, politics, sports) that they are unfamiliar with.
- Get suggestions about better ways to express themselves, including pronunciation, word choice, or phrasing a sentence. Often our students have learned a formal "textbook" English that is grammatically correct, but doesn't sound natural in real-life settings here in the US. In many cases, the best way to phrase something depends on who you are speaking with (for example you might address your supervisor differently than you would a young classmate). Students need to find ways of saying things that are suited to the particular situations/settings they find themselves in from day to day.
- Learn about American culture (why we say and do things that don't always seem to make sense to them). You may be your student's first American friend, and the only person he/she feels comfortable enough with to ask questions about American behaviors, values, customs, etc. (Keep in mind that the student has a great deal to teach you about his/her native culture—take advantage of this opportunity to learn about the world and get a new perspective!)
- Figure out how to navigate the various institutions and bureaucracies students come across in everyday life here (i.e. finding out where to where to get what they need, accessing information, resolving problems, figuring out how things work in the US).

Think of yourself as a guide to the language and culture of the US. You do not need to work through a textbook, or to prepare exercises or homework (unless your student asks for help with a particular skill). You need only make conversation and answer

questions that come up. In the process you will be modeling correct, naturally spoken English, and giving the student a chance to experience an authentic language exchange.

### **Where are the students from?**

The majority of students who request conversation partners are from East Asia—Korea, Japan, and China. We also get a few requests from students from India, Brazil, Iran, Russia, and a variety of African, Latin American, and European countries. Most are international students or spouses of international students (or international research scholars/faculty) who are going to be in the US for several years. A few are permanent residents who will stay in the US.

### **The Logistics: when, where, and for how long?**

In general, tutors meet with a student for 60-90 minutes, twice a week, at whatever schedule is convenient for both. To avoid confusion you should agree on a consistent weekly schedule and write it down. People often decide to meet in one of the three dedicated tutoring rooms at the library; however, you and your student may choose to meet in any public place that is convenient for both of you. For example, Newman Center at UMass, local coffee shops, and the college libraries are popular meeting places. Be sure that your arrangements (where and when you will meet for your next session) are very clear to both of you, and that you have each other's phone and email address in case something comes up.

### **Do I need to keep records of what I do in the tutoring sessions?**

There is no need to keep a formal record of your activities, but we ask you to stay in touch with the coordinator. Every few months she likes to get give a brief summary of what you've been doing and how things are going.

### **How will I know if I've succeeded?**

There is no formal measure of success for conversation partners. Generally speaking, after a few months, your student should feel more confident about speaking English in day-to-day life. His/her speech should flow more freely, contain fewer grammatical and pronunciation errors, and demonstrate a wider range of vocabulary. Comprehension of rapidly spoken, authentic English should be less of a problem than it used to be (for example, the student may tell you that she used to understand about 50% of what people were saying, and now she understands about 80%). Hopefully he/she will also be more knowledgeable about American culture and "how things work," locally and in the US as a whole.

### **Accepting (small) tokens of thanks**

Some students feel awkward about being on the receiving end of a "charity." They may offer a gesture of thanks, such as a souvenir from their country, some food they have cooked for you (or an invitation for a meal), or some other small token. Accept these little gifts graciously, as long as they do not involve cash or appear to be of significant value.

**Other volunteer opportunities at the ESL Center**

If you find your conversation partner experience rewarding, and you want to move on to a new challenge, we encourage you to attend our formal tutor training workshop in September or February. This training will prepare you to work with a broader range of students—especially those who need basic skills instruction: beginning level English, functional literacy, and/or citizenship preparation. Alternately, you may want to consider leading your own conversation circle (weekly group discussion sessions). If so, feel free to visit any conversation circle as an observer/assistant, and discuss your thoughts with the ESL coordinator.

**What if I have questions/problems?**

Please contact the ESL Coordinator by phone (413 259-3093), by email ([esl@joneslibrary.org](mailto:esl@joneslibrary.org)), or in person (M 1-5, T-F 9:30-1:30), anytime you need ideas, or have questions/concerns about your conversation partner experience.

## Teaching Suggestions

### **Be a clear communicator**

Students often ask for a conversation partner who “speaks clearly.” What does that mean? For starters, it means slowing down your speech and pronouncing the individual words more distinctly (instead of slurring them together as we sometimes do). It doesn’t mean shouting, or baby-talk. It helps to be conscious about your use of vocabulary, idioms, slang, and complex sentence structures—try to gauge your speech according to what your student is already likely to be familiar with, and check frequently to make sure that your meaning was understood. Rather than ask “do you understand?” which students tend to respond to with a “yes” every time, ask questions that require the student to rephrase information in his/her response. Or simply ask your student to mirror back to you what he/she understood (“Can you say that back to me?”) Be conscious also about references to things like pop culture, religious terms, etc. that your student may not be familiar with. And be aware that irony, sarcasm and humor in general does not easily translate across cultures, even when the student understands the literal meaning of your words.

### **Give your student a little “space”**

It’s hard to process what someone is saying to you, think of how to respond, and construct a sentence correctly--all at the same time (especially in a new language). Resist the urge to fill in the silence with additional conversation. Wait a few more seconds than you normally do, to give your student time to think. This may feel a little uncomfortable at first, but if you avoid rushing in with words of your own, your student will eventually think of what to say and how to say it. Developing confidence in speaking is crucial for your student, and giving him/her this little bit of “space” is the best way to help that along.

Try to make sure that the conversation is evenly balanced. If you are doing all of the talking, how will your student get enough practice to become confident about speaking? If your student is a reluctant speaker, encourage elaboration. Ask questions, get examples and details. Make it clear that you will wait as long as necessary for him/her to come up with a response. If the student is overly conscious of errors, try to shift his/her focus to expressing ideas (regardless of whether the sentences are constructed perfectly).

### **What do we talk about?**

Before you come in for a session, you should have at least a rough idea of what you want to talk about—a topic and some discussion questions to get the ball rolling. The pair of you may go off on a tangent and end up discussing a completely different topic, but at least you’ll have something to get started with.

Where do you get ideas? You can spark a discussion using a magazine or newspaper article, a Youtube video, a book of photographs, or just a few questions about a particular topic. Try to select a topic your student is interested in and would feel

comfortable talking about (for example, violence, sexuality, or personal religious/political beliefs may or may not be topics that your student is comfortable discussing with you). Remember—it's OK to have different opinions on a topic—you're here to practice conversation, not try to change how anyone thinks. (Note: Your student may want to take a turn at determining topics for discussion, too.)

Here are some common topics:

- Favorite/least favorite foods, movies, TV shows, books, celebrities, music, sports, hobbies, places to visit, people, technology, etc.
- A time when you...(changed your mind, broke the rules, had a big scare or major surprise, won a prize, lost a bet, made a big mistake, got lost, etc.)
- A time when you were... (proud, angry, happy, discouraged, embarrassed, scared, sad, etc.)
- Places you've traveled to, or would like to visit
- Things you're good at/not good at
- Things you like best/least about your home town/country/school/job
- Childhood memories, family histories
- Differences between the US and your native country (e.g. weather, government, health care, work, customs, dress, foods, money, laws, transportation, etc.)
- Holidays and special events
- Cultural differences and personal views in regard to topics like: education, dating/marriage, age, crime, poverty, adoption, pets, alcohol, gender roles, art, charity, etc.
- Current events, natural disasters, new scientific discoveries, sports
- Particular movies or TV shows you've both seen recently, or books you've read

Here are some web sites that offer ideas for conversation topics:

- ESL Gold [http://www.eslgold.com/speaking/topics\\_conversation.html](http://www.eslgold.com/speaking/topics_conversation.html); or [http://www.eslgold.com/speaking/speaking\\_situations.html](http://www.eslgold.com/speaking/speaking_situations.html)
- Tiger ESL <http://tigertesl.blogspot.com/>
- The Internet TESOL Journal <http://iteslj.org/questions/>
- ESL Discussions <http://www.esldiscussions.com/>
- HopeLink Talk Time <http://www.eastsideliteracy.org/tutorsupport/ESL/TalkTime.htm>

There are many good books for this in the “tutor resources” section near the ESL Office. Some examples:

- [Getting together : an ESL conversation book](#)
- [Conversation inspirations for ESL](#)
- [Compelling conversations : questions and quotations on timeless topics](#)
- [It's time to talk! : 101 pages of questions for communication and fluency](#)
- [Discussion starters : speaking fluency activities for advanced ESL/EFL students](#)

- [First discussion starters : speaking fluency activities for lower-level ESL/EFL students](#)
- [More discussion starters : activities for building speaking fluency](#)
- [Let's Talk About That! The complete manual for stimulating conversation](#)
- [Knowing me knowing you : classroom activities to stimulate conversation](#)
- [Grab Bag of Telephone Activities: A collection of telephone-related Activities for ESL](#)
- [The grab bag of socializing : a collection of socializing activities for the ESL classroom](#)
- [Something to talk about : a reproducible conversation resource for teachers and tutors](#)

Here are some sample pages (from books we have at Jones Library) that you can download and try out as starting points with your student:

▪ **Compelling Conversations: Questions and Quotations on Timeless Topics**

by Eric H. Roth and Toni Aberson [http://www.altaesl.com/pdf/compellingconversat\\_PEEK.pdf](http://www.altaesl.com/pdf/compellingconversat_PEEK.pdf)

▪ **Essential Functions for Conversation**

by Lawrence J. Zwier and Amy Hughes

[http://www.altaesl.com/pdf/EssentialFunctionsforConv\\_PK.pdf](http://www.altaesl.com/pdf/EssentialFunctionsforConv_PK.pdf)

▪ **American Manners and Customs: A Guide for Newcomers to the U.S.**

by Elizabeth Claire <http://www.altaesl.com/pdf/americanmannerspeek2.pdf>

▪ **Get With It! 101-Plus Pop Culture Idioms and Expressions**

by Harry Collis [http://www.altaesl.com/pdf/getwithit\\_PEEK.pdf](http://www.altaesl.com/pdf/getwithit_PEEK.pdf)

**Answering questions**

Encourage your student to bring in a list of questions to ask you at each session, and make time to answer them. For example:

- things he/she heard but didn't understand
- things he/she wants to say but isn't sure how to phrase
- examples of text he/she doesn't understand (letters, signs, messages, headlines, instructions, etc.)
- "Why do American people (do something that seems puzzling to the student)?"
- "How do I (get something done/find something out)" —how do things work here?

**Role play ideas**

If you ask, your student can probably name a variety of situations in daily life that present communication challenges. Re-enacting these situations with the student is an excellent way to boost conversation skills. Make sure you both agree on the parameters of the situation (who is playing which role, what the circumstances are)

and then improvise a conversation. As you go along, you will find many instances in which you could suggest a better word choice, sentence structure, or pronunciation to facilitate communication. Keep notes on these suggestions, and when the role play is finished go over them with the student to make sure he/she understands what you mean. Encourage the student to incorporate these suggestions in successive re-plays of the conversation.

The Tutor Resources section has some collections of “canned” role play situations you can use to get ideas from:

- [Cathy's Cards](#) (*A blue plastic case with a set of role play activity cards*)
- [Situations and Guided Conversations for Language Learning](#) (*This is a set of blue plastic envelopes in a small cardboard box on the bottom shelf. Each envelope has a different theme, such as “Greetings and Meetings,” “Spending Money,” and “Fun with Friends.”*)

### **Sharing hobbies/interests**

Do you enjoy a particular craft or sport? If your student is interested, give a demonstration. Or invite your student to demonstrate something to you. Do you both like to cook? Exchange recipes and explain how to make something. If you have a collection of some kind, offer a “show and tell” session.

### **Field trips**

There is no rule that says you have to hold your sessions in the library. Students can learn a lot about their new environment by visiting new places. For example:

- Go to ordinary public places that you would visit in the course of daily life, and demonstrate (or encourage your student to engage in) some type of practical communication—mailing a package at the post office, visiting a relative in a nursing home, shopping at a farmer’s market, asking about a job opportunity, signing up a child for a recreational activity, etc.
- See if your student would like to visit sites of cultural interest such as a museum, park, or gallery. Talk about what you see there, and ask your student to compare it to similar sites in his/her home country.
- Look for free or low-cost community events, such as a crafts fair, flower show, a home show, a performance or lecture, an open house, a cultural festival, etc. See if your student would be interested in attending with you (or just describe the event if the student is looking for something to do with his/her family later on).
- Some conversation partners have had success in suggesting ways for students to interact socially with community members by introducing them to events such as contra dances, UMass Outing Club events, or volunteer opportunities in the community.

## **Functions of language**

Advanced-level students may have the vocabulary and knowledge of language structures to get most of their ideas across, but they often want to know how to convey shades of meaning or social complexities. You can discuss these challenges as they come in conversation, or use a textbook. We have several textbooks that offer practice with functions of language (communication tasks like: inviting, apologizing, expressing sympathy, disagreeing politely, hedging, interrupting, etc.):

- [Communicator I & II](#)
- [Essential Functions of Conversation](#)
- [Power English: Obtaining Information, Goods and Services and Resolving Problems and Emergencies](#)
- [Communication Strategies](#)
- [Speaking of Values](#)
- [Fitting In](#)

## **Idioms/slang**

Idioms and slang will come up in the course of ordinary conversation. It's always a good idea to check and see if your student is familiar with a particular word/idiom when it comes up. This is one of the areas of conversation that higher level students have the most trouble with. If your student wants to do a more systematic study of idioms, we have many textbooks that explain idioms and offer practice in using them. You can find these in the Advanced ESL section, third shelf down. There are also some idiom dictionaries on the dictionary shelves to the right. There are plenty of websites for learning idioms as well. For example: [The Idiom Connection](#), [E-Z-slang](#), and [ESL Gold](#).

## **Listen and discuss a passage**

Select a short journal article, textbook passage, folktale/story, or newspaper article, and read it aloud to the student, while he/she takes notes (it may help to read it twice—first to get the “gist” and a second time to capture more of the details). Ask comprehension questions, and/or have the student summarize the article for you. With a computer or tablet, you can also play a short YouTube video, TV show, movie or lecture segment, and process it the same way. You may find it easier to have the student read an article or view a video ahead of time, and come in prepared to do an oral summary. Choose stimulus material related to topics that your student is interested in, and remember that students can also select/suggest articles/videos that they would like to discuss. If the passage is long, you may need to break it into segments and discuss one segment at a time. For ideas on how to provide feedback and respond to errors in a student's oral summary, see the “[Snapshots](#)” Activity on the library's webpage.

## **Rehearsing a presentation**

Some students have to make presentations at work, or for classes they are taking. If so, they may want to rehearse them with you ahead of time, and work out the kinks. Take notes on how the student can improve pronunciation of particular words, come up with better ways to phrase things, or improve on the organization of the

presentation. Share these notes with the student, and encourage him/her to incorporate the suggestions in a subsequent rehearsal.

NOTE: When students do oral presentations or summarize a passage, one option is to have them record themselves ahead of time, then go over the recording with you during the session to get your ideas on how it might be improved.

### **Pronunciation**

Your student will probably never sound like a native English speaker, but it's important for him/her to speak clearly enough to be understood. If you hear pronunciation patterns that interfere with intelligibility, let the student complete his/her thought, then go back and address the pronunciation problem. Model the correct pronunciation, and try to coach the student to get closer to the target sound(s). It may be helpful to record the word or phrase on a voice recorder (the library has a few that can be checked out) or smart phone so that the student can review and practice between sessions. Common errors include:

- **Substitutions:** the target sound does not exist in the student's native language, so he/she is substituting a sound that seems similar. In this case, it's important to make sure the student can hear the target sound, so try quizzing the sounds using "minimal pairs" such as bit/bet. (For an extensive list of minimal pairs, (as well as common pronunciation problems for specific languages) visit [Ted Power's website](#) or find the book [Pronunciation Pairs](#) on the Advanced Speaking shelf. (You can download a sample unit [here](#).) In addition to modeling the target sound, exaggerate it somewhat, and, if possible, explain what you are doing with your tongue, teeth, lips, or throat in order to make the sound. Note: in multi-syllable words, it's best to break the word down into separate syllables and coach the problem syllable before attacking the full word.
- **Omissions:** the student is leaving off one or more sounds in a word (for example, saying "star" instead of "start.") Exaggerate the missing sound when you model the word. Write the word and underline the letter that represents the missing sound (startt). Students may also omit syllables from words, (like "constution" instead of "constitution.") In this case, it may also help to tap out the syllables, or count them on your fingers.
- **Inclusions:** the student is inserting a sound that doesn't belong there (for example, saying "care-ee-ful" instead of "careful" or "this is uh good" instead of "this is good." Usually this is a failure to link together two consonants (e.g. the "s" in "this" and the "g" in "good.") Model and coach the correct pronunciation of the word or phrase.
- **Syllable stress:** for example, "PO-lice" instead of "po-LICE"). Model and exaggerate the stressed syllable.

### **Sentence structure/grammar**

Most of our advanced-level students are highly educated and have studied English grammar already. They can often explain grammar rules better than their teachers

can! But they are not always able to apply these rules consistently when they are concentrating on expressing a thought. When you hear patterns of errors, write down some examples of what the student said, and present them later on—after you’ve finished your discussion/conversation. Invite the student to identify the error(s) and rephrase the sentence. If the student is unable to do so, offer a better way to phrase the sentence yourself. If you do run into a grammatical issue that your student has not studied, model the structure with a few examples. You don’t have to be a grammar expert and explain all of the rules yourself. It usually easier to pull out one of the many grammar books on the ESL Intermediate or Advanced shelves, or simply look up the grammar rule (and/or some practice exercises) online.

In many cases, the student will say something that “doesn’t sound right” to you, but does not actually break any grammar rules. We have customary ways of phrasing things and memorizing all of the grammar in the world will not help the student acquire these “lexical chunks.” This is actually a vocabulary issue—knowing the patterns that we generally use in relation to a particular word or idea. But there are just too many of these patterns (or “collocations”) to memorize. It can be helpful to suggest more natural-sounding phrases when your student says something that sounds awkward. For more info and ideas on collocations, see [English Club’s Collocation pages](#) or look for the [Oxford Collocations Dictionary](#) on the ESL Dictionary shelves.

### **Clarifying meaning**

If your student says something that isn’t very clear, try “recasting” it. For example, the student says, “In my country, they pay tax only the selling things, not the paycheck.” You can take a guess, and respond with, “So there are *sales* taxes, but no *payroll* taxes—is that what you’re saying?” Or, “I understand that there are no *sales* taxes, but what was the other part of that?” This strategy puts the emphasis on fostering *communication*, rather than on the errors themselves. If you don’t understand any part of what the student is saying, you can respond with, “I don’t understand what you mean. Can you try saying that another way?” Or “I don’t understand the word you are using. Can you write it down for me?” (This works both ways—there may be times when a student doesn’t understand a word/phrase you are using in speech, but recognizes it when you write it down.)

### **Understanding your student’s errors**

If you know something about your student’s language, it’s easier to understand why he/she is making particular errors. A good resource for looking up the English errors and problems associated with particular languages is Michael Swan’s [Learner English](#), on the ESL tutor resources shelf.

### **Requests for other kinds of help**

Higher-level students are assigned a conversation partner if their primary objective is to improve their speaking and listening skills. However they may have secondary goals, such as improving their email communication, creating a resume, or writing

papers/reports. Strictly speaking, this is not the role of a conversation partner, but you are free to offer assistance with these tasks if you are so inclined. Try to resist getting drawn into anything that goes beyond “wordsmithing” (for example making major revisions on a student’s dissertation). If in doubt, feel free to talk it over with the ESL Coordinator.