CONVERSATION PARTNERS
English Language Center (ELC)
Towson University
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The Conversation Partners Program was developed to provide international students with an opportunity to practice English while learning about American culture with a “non-teacher” contact on campus. At the same time, the American speaking partner is exposed to a foreign culture and a new way of looking at the world. It is hoped that partners will meet for at least ONE hour each week during the semester. Occasionally ELC instructors will assign a topic to be discussed at a session; however, partners may ask each other about almost any subject of interest, and, of course, partners who become friends may continue to communicate with each other through e-mail or regular mail long after the semester ends. This is not an unusual occurrence.

HOW CAN YOU TALK TO SOMEONE WHOSE ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILLS ARE LIMITED?

All English Language Center students have studied varying amounts of English, but they have focused primarily on grammar and reading rather than on conversation. Many may be shy to speak because they fear making mistakes. Perhaps in their own cultures accuracy is of utmost importance, whereas in most English language classes in America, we stress “getting the ideas out,” that is to say, fluency first. Accuracy should then follow.

♦ Patience is definitely a virtue when dealing with non-native English speakers. Speaking louder when communication fails will not help. In fact, it may only fluster your partner. If your partner has difficulty understanding you, try speaking slower and using different vocabulary; i.e., say the same thing in a different way. Repeating the same sentence over and over may not be the solution.

♦ Avoid slang whenever possible and use grammar that you learned in school. If you use idioms or slang expressions (“chill out,” “I aced the exam,” “I usually hang out at the Union,” etc.) try to explain them. Foreign students want to learn “street” English, but you may need to help them with it.

♦ Don’t correct your partner’s English - grammar, pronunciation, etc. - while he/she is speaking unless the problem is causing a communication breakdown. Your partner will probably appreciate some casual tutoring but not if it means constant interruptions. Your partner needs an opportunity to practice speaking and develop fluency, even if mistakes are made. This approach will help create the comfort zone necessary to boost your partner’s confidence when using English.

♦ Smile a lot, don’t roll your eyes or make impatient or disgusted noises! Imagine yourself after two years of high school French trying to buy some food in a small town in southern France where no one speaks English. Or better yet, imagine how life might have been for your ancestors if they immigrated from a non-English speaking country. Remember, there was little help offered to newcomers in those days. The myth of the starry-eyed immigrant coming to America, learning English with out much assistance and becoming a rags-to-riches success story is predominantly just that – a myth. Learning a language takes time and effort and training. It often takes two generations for immigrants to master a new language and culture. What is needed is a sense of humor, gestures, smiles, determination, and patience on both sides.

♦ Don’t be embarrassed by pauses that might seem awkward to you but natural to your partner. Americans talk a lot; we feel that every silent moment must be filled with sound even if it is a meaningless “um,” “er,” or “uh.” Asians in particular often reflect on what they will say before speaking. This means that there might be long silences. Don’t always assume that your partner didn’t understand what you said or asked. Wait for a moment before jumping in with a revised
question. Not only do Asians tend to speak less hurriedly than we do, but any foreign speaker will need extra time to formulate his/her thoughts in English.

- Americans tend to be very direct. If we don’t understand something or we don’t like something we often blurt it out. **Students in some cultures prefer to make their partners feel comfortable and will never say anything to insult or unsettle them.** If your partner is smiling and nodding at everything you say, don’t assume that your message is getting through. The reality might be quite the contrary. Politeness is a critical factor in some cultures, even among young adults. Your partner may agree with you or pretend to understand even when he/she doesn’t. Your partner is not trying to deceive you; in fact, he/she is really trying to protect you from unpleasantness. If you are being met by happy but blank looks, ask, “Am I speaking too quickly?” or “Do you understand? Are you sure?” Try to confirm their understanding by asking a question, but without embarrassing them. Your goal isn’t to “catch them in a lie” but to communicate in a comfortable environment for you both.

- As the native English speaker, **YOU are usually in control of the conversation.** This puts a burden on you to help maintain the flow. If you yourself are not an expert conversationalist, come prepared with questions you might want to ask. Learn a little bit about your partner’s country so that you can ask sensitive, intelligent questions. Much of Asia is highly developed with pockets of poverty — just like in the United States. Not every American has a phone, electricity, a car, or even housing, but that does not make us a primitive or underdeveloped society. The same holds true for other countries. The more basic information you have about your partner’s country, the less chance there will be of asking embarrassing or insulting questions. Ask open-ended questions that begin with **why, how, what,** etc., rather than those requiring a simple **yes/no** answer.

**FINDING THINGS TO TALK ABOUT**

International students may be timid at first to use English with you. They may be afraid of making mistakes and appearing foolish. Don’t correct all their errors even if they ask you to — especially while they are speaking. If they say something you do not understand, say what you think it is in clear English.

“**You went to Washington on the train with your cousin last weekend?”**

If you misunderstood, you can say, “**Sorry, I didn’t understand that. Could you repeat it?”** Remember to smile as much as possible to encourage your partner. If you have ever studied a foreign language, you know how difficult it is to come up with the appropriate vocabulary on the spot. Try to keep your conversation moving by asking questions or filling in details. If your partner asks, “**Have you ever been to New York City?”** don’t just say, “**Yes, several times.”** Tell your partner what you saw and did or what you liked. Say, “**Yes, I have been there several times. I don’t really like it though, because…. What kinds of things have you heard about New York City?”**

If you ask your partner a question, give her/him a chance to think before talking AND make your partner feel that you are interested in her/him.

**Suggested topics for conversation:**

- **your partner’s impression of the USA** before and/or after arriving (if your partner says something negative, don’t be insulted or become defensive — see below)
- **How did partner form his/her ideas of US before arriving here** (movies, word of mouth, music, TV, etc.)
- **something your partner likes/dislikes about the USA** (don’t be insulted — you can share some of your own feelings about things you like or dislike)
- **families and family life** —
  - do both parents typically work, is child care shared, do men/women get = pay?
  - are jobs gender-determined? (In China, there is a one child policy — families may only have one child by law)
How are older people cared for – by families (sons, daughters), retirement communities, nursing homes, etc.

- **Social networking** – what is used and popular – Facebook, Hi5 (more common internationally), My Space
- **Hobbies and interests** - favorites – sports, music, movies, celebrities
- **Taboos** – what are things that people shouldn't discuss or do (eg., in Middle East, putting feet on a desk is rude, etc.)
- **Pets** – what pets are typical in partner’s country; are any taboo?
- **Education in partner’s country** - do boys and girls study together? Is there much discussion in the classroom, do students have to research and write papers, can students disagree with teachers?
- **Something your partner likes/dislikes about American education**
- **Dating in partner’s country** – do people use Internet (e-harmony, Match.com, etc), how do people meet, where do they go on dates, how old when they can start dating, do parents have to approve marriage partner, are there any arranged marriages/dowries in their countries (don’t judge this – just listen!)

Here is a questionnaire our ELC students made when they had to interview American students – maybe you could use some of these questions:

- What age do you think is appropriate for young people to start dating? How old were you?
- Is it OK to ask someone you have just met out on a date?
- Where do couples of different ages go on dates: to a movie? A restaurant? A nightclub? A concert?
- Who usually asks the other person out? Can a girl/woman invite a boy/man?
- Do people arrange “blind dates” in your country? Have you ever been on one? (you may need to explain: a blind date is one that has been arranged by friends or relatives and the couple meet for the first time at the date.)
- When a couple goes out, who usually pays? Does this vary with age?
- Do you think it is OK for a person to date more than one person during the same period of time?
- Do you think it is a good thing to date many different people before you get married?
- What do you think about cyber-dating – meeting someone on the web? Have you done it? Do you know of anyone who has done this? Do you think this can be successful? Why? Why not?
- Tell about an enjoyable date you went on, or describe your imaginary “perfect” date.

- **Traditions and holidays** – how do people celebrate holidays – religious and national, Communist countries might not celebrate Christmas or Easter
- **Geography and business in partner’s country** – mountains, seacoast, plains, etc – types of agriculture, main income – farming, tourism, manufacturing, etc.
- **Gestures and body language** – compare hand symbols (peace, victory, slow down, stop, etc.), how close do people stand when talking – in the US we tend to stand farther from people than those in the Middle East or Africa, etc. What about eye contact – can young people look adults directly in the eyes?
- **Relationships between young and old, men and women** – formality, forms of address, bowing, etc.
- **Travel experiences** – places visited, future travel plans – what did they see, like, do? Where do they want to go? Why? Where have you been?
- **Some experiences (funny, scary, etc) your partner has had in the U.S. or home** - experiences living away from home; adjusting to a new culture and language
- **Food, clothing, architecture, etc. in partner’s country** – Size of house, types of rooms, kinds of things in bedroom – TV, computer, etc? Typical food in partner’s country, do families sit together for meals, use chopsticks, fingers, forks? Is burping rude? Do men and women eat together?
• **Transportation** – public and private – differences between the two countries, Baltimore has terrible public transportation – how does your partner get around?

• **Baltimore** - suggest great places to go – restaurants, museums (BMA, Walters, Visionary Arts, etc.) Inner Harbor, Fells Point, Fort McHenry

• **Weather and seasons** – How hot does it get, have they ever seen snow, what are favorite seasonal activities? Do they have 4 seasons or just 2? Describe them.

Some topics that should be approached carefully: **sex, religion, politics, women’s rights (abortion), and salaries.** All of these subjects can be discussed but in a non-judgmental way. (If you suspect that your partner is a fundamentalist of any religion, check with your instructor or the ELC office before engaging in controversial topics.) For example, in some societies pre-marital sex is completely taboo and women can be disowned or worse if they bring dishonor to their families. Similarly, in some societies, women think American women are unfortunate because they have to work and drive and be placed in possibly dangerous situations. Some women actually do consider it better to stay at home and be protected and cared for. **Please do not use this program as a vehicle for promoting your own religious or political beliefs.**

**Open mindedness is what is called for here.** Avoid comments like, “You’re kidding!” or “No way!” or “How can you live like that?” It is better to say, “Really? That is very different from here. In America we prefer to.....” Your task as a partner is to learn about a different culture and to clarify yours. You should not assume a mission of changing your partner’s perspective or beliefs.

It is safe to assume that your partner comes from a place where there are paved roads, electricity, cars, and running water. Students with enough money to come to the U.S. to study probably all have computers, cell phones, and e-mail addresses. Don’t insult your partner and embarrass yourself by asking if everyone rides camels in the Middle East or if Senegalese have television. Remember that Puerto Ricans are American citizens, and, in fact, are not “foreign” even though their first language is Spanish. Puerto Ricans are Puerto Ricans, not Brazilians (who speak Portuguese), Cubans, or Venezuelans. Not all “Latinos” eat the same food, like the same singers, or share identical cultures. Know where your partner comes from and don’t confuse Morocco with Algeria or Thailand with Indonesia and say, “wherever.” Learn about your partner’s culture by asking questions, showing respect, and understanding that there is another perspective other than the U.S. one.

Also don’t assume that every international student wants to stay in the United States forever. We may think it is the greatest country in the world, but your partner may be very happy in her/his own country and may, in fact, think there are some serious problems in America that make it an undesirable place to live. Always approach your partner with an open mind and with the attitude that you may learn something interesting.

**HOW DO YOU ARRANGE A MEETING?**

The best way to arrange a meeting is to write down the place and the time. This way there will be no confusion. Some non-native English speaking students have difficulty distinguishing between “Tuesday” and “Thursday.” If your partner suggests a time and place, repeat it for him/her. “Okay, then, that is Tuesday afternoon at 2:00 on the steps in front of Cook Library.” **Exchange phone numbers and call your partner if you must miss your meeting.**

If you call your partner, it is important to **remember that the telephone can be very intimidating for a non-native speaker of English.** The usual cues of facial expressions and other gestures are missing. When arranging your meeting time, try to make the day and hour as clear as possible. Avoid the use of slang and informal pronunciation (gonna, wanna, whaddaya, didja, etc.)
If your partner misses an appointment and hasn’t called, check with him/her first before getting angry! Your partner might have misunderstood and waited for you at the wrong time or place. Should your partner miss several appointments without a good excuse, tell your instructor or call Lynda Mermell in the English Language Center Office (410-704-2552.) In some cultures, time is not as important as in ours. If your partner is consistently late, you can politely explain that in this country, being late is rude and that you will only wait 15 minutes unless your partner calls to let you know s/he will be later.

WHERE AND WHEN DO YOU MEET?

That is for you two to decide. On campus is best, however. Try to make a commitment of once each week for an hour. Avoid meeting in noisy places where sounds might distract your partner. Avoid meeting at places with many entrances. Be specific! “I’ll meet you just inside the first set of doors to the Library, to the left, near the tables. You know, where the soda and candy machines are.” Draw a map if necessary.

Remember, not all people think or behave like Americans, nor do they want to! Just as we may think that America is the greatest country, your partner may think that his/her land is the best - and it is, for him/her! Meeting with your partner may open your eyes to a new world and may help you to see your own country differently. We hope this will be a rewarding experience for both of you.