

International Student Conversation Partners

What is a Conversation Partner?

A conversation partnership occurs when an American student and an international student meet together regularly to help each other in a variety of ways. Each conversation partnership is unique and reflects the personalities, needs and goals of both partners. However for most, the first goal is the improvement of the international student's English. As an English-speaking host, the American is responsible for initiating the partnership and for helping with English.

Why Be a Conversation Partner?

Because we are whole people with physical, emotional, social and spiritual, as well as intellectual concerns, conversation partnerships can naturally develop into friendships where many non-academic needs can also be met for both people. Conversation partnerships are an excellent way to lovingly serve internationals as God's Good News calls us to do. Internationals feel a deep need to learn English well. Their academic success depends on their ability to read, write and understand English. After getting a good education, the second major desire of most internationals is to make one close American friend, though few are successful. Many internationals criticize Americans because they only offer a superficial friendship. Conversation partners can offer deep and lasting friendships.

Of course, international students aren't the only ones who benefit. The inherent benefits to Americans are many. One gets to see the world (current events, politics, distribution of wealth, war, family, relationships, values and beliefs, etc.) through the eyes of a different culture. This can affect one's ministry priorities, use of resources, career goals, choice of friends and even day-to-day lifestyle as one becomes more exposed to the variety in God's creation and begins to act on God's intentions for it. Further, conversation partnerships are a wonderful way to experience the joy of being a servant for Christ's sake.

A Christian conversation partner must consider the spiritual implications of the relationship. Christians learn to walk closer with their Lord and Savior and can help others to trust Him as well. As Christians help their partner with language and genuinely care for them as friends and whole people, they will also seek and discover opportunities to help people who are ready to enter the kingdom of God. Further, growth results as each person struggles to incorporate different views into personal existing cultural guides and to determine where and how cultures and true Christianity relate. This is essential to Christian maturity.

What Are the Requirements of Conversation Partners?

The first requirement is a willingness to give yourself and your time. Friendship to most people from cultures outside North America is much deeper than most American "friendships." Conversation partners are expected to meet at least once-a-week for an hour to help meet the goal of language learning. But American partners should be aware that one hour a week does not constitute a friendship. Three hours a week (talking, studying, eating or sharing leisure time) is a more realistic minimum for friends who really want to "be there" for each other.

A second requirement is the Christian's willingness to pray and care for a partner's felt needs and for the Holy Spirit's work in his or her life. Finally, the Christian conversation partner should be willing to take the initiative in 1) deepening the friendship, 2) seeking opportunities to sensitively discuss spiritual things and the Good News, 3) entering into the international's network of friends perhaps with another conversation partner, 4) starting a Bible study with these new friends and 5) inviting them to culturally sensitive outreach events.

How to Get Started

Many schools already have a conversation partner program. If so, participate in it while getting more training in the cultural and spiritual dimensions. If no program exists, start one. Getting the support of people in your campus' international and language offices will really help.

Conversation partners can get further help from the "English as a Second Language" textbook section of most libraries. Literacy Volunteers of America has a two-week evening training seminar in tutoring. Helpful books include: "Tutoring ESL Students" by Marian Arkin, Longman Press, 1982; 19 W. 44th St., New York, NY 10036 and "Teaching English as a Second Language" by Paulston and Bruder, Winthrop Publishers, 1976; 17 Dunster St., Cambridge, MA 02138.

Be Sensitive

Realize that these men and women were top students in their native language. Be sensitive to their feelings of inadequacy, embarrassment, etc. Watch for nonverbal clues of frustration and be ready to encourage and reassure.

Be Patient

Don't be afraid to repeat things often. Have realistic expectations of what your friends can do. (Remember when you took a foreign language?)

Be Enthusiastic

Give them genuine and frequent encouragement. However, don't tell them everything is great if it isn't—be selective in your praise. Don't be afraid to correct mistakes. Most students want and expect this.

Be Creative

Use your imagination. Your sense of humor can be one of your greatest assets. Think of ways to make tasks into games.

Be Informed

Find out about your friend's background and culture. Use resources which will help you become a better tutor.

Be Adaptable

Be willing to put aside some cultural expectations of the "way things should be." Be willing to change your agenda, pace, etc. to meet your friend's particular week-to-week needs.

Be Loving

Pray for your friend's salvation and progress. Look for ways to serve outside of your weekly meetings.

Ideas for Your First Conversation Partner Meetings

1. Find out how to pronounce and spell their names. Help them do the same with yours.
2. Ask questions. A sensitive curiosity will supply plenty of fuel for long and fruitful conversations. Some ideas: Why and how did you come to the United States? How long have you been here? Where are you from? What part of the country? What is it like? (Bring a map.) What is your family like? Do you have pictures? (Bring pictures of your own family.) What did you study in your country? What languages do you know? What is your favorite food . . . sport . . . holiday . . . TV show . . . in your country? In the United States? Why? What is your religious background? What is the traditional religion of your country? What has been most enjoyable so far about your experience in the United States? Least enjoyable?

3. Find out what particular things they would like to work on during the conversation time and ways they would like to practice their English.
4. Be informed and willing to talk about current and historical political situations.
5. Be ready to answer questions about your culture without arrogance or defensiveness.

Questions for Getting to Know Yourself and Others

"My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak." James 1:19.

Active listening is essential to understanding and to building relationships. Listen to and care for your new acquaintances, to get past superficial relationships to meaningful ones. Asking significant questions is essential in knowing others well. Intent listening also helps overcome difficulty in understanding another's language.

Encourage your friend to tell about themselves, their family, their country and their beliefs. This is therapeutic for their loneliness and also teaches you much about their personal concerns as well as the culture of their people.

Don't always ask questions, of course. Share about yourself, your family, your culture and your beliefs. Participate in activities with their friends and their national group. Together, attend programs about their country. Perhaps they have pictures of their family or slides of their homeland they can show you. You could also listen to their music or learn a dance from them.

General Questions

- What is the most childlike quality you have retained?
- If you could re-live one day of your life, which day would it be?
- What book has made the greatest impression on you?
- What person has been the most influential (positively) in your life and why?
- Of all the material possessions you have, which one gives you the most pleasure?
- What is the most sentimental possession you have?
- If you could have one day off unexpectedly, how would you spend it?
- What is there about yourself that you joke about most frequently?
- What was the best advice you ever received?

Complete this statement: "One thing I missed during my childhood was _____."

Complete this statement: "One thing I miss from the location where I grew up is _____."

What was your favorite room in your house when you were a child? Why? Share some of the things that happened there—sights, sounds, people who came there.

Family and Background

(These important kinds of questions often reveal why people are the way they are.)

Name (first, middle, last) that you go by.

Where were you born and raised?

Describe each member of your family (personality, interests, looks, etc.) briefly.

What is your father's occupation? Your mother's? Do they enjoy their work?

Did they both work as you grew up? Did your family eat and talk together at least once a day?
How well do your parents relate to your brothers and sisters and to you? To each other?
How do your brothers and sisters relate with each other?
Who do you communicate best with in your family? Why? Worst? Why?
What does your family do together regularly for entertainment? Where do you go together?
Describe your best friend and tell why that person is your best friend.

Personal Thoughts and Feelings

(These questions delve into how people feel about themselves and their goals.)

What is one positive thing you enjoy and like about yourself? (Many people do not have one. One of the hardest issues for students is learning to accept themselves. When you tell them positive things about themselves, do they push it aside, thank you graciously or respond boastfully?)

What do you like to do in your spare time? (Often there is a strong tendency to define who we are according to our jobs or positions. One's spare time reveals real interests and some of one's personality and lifestyle. These help us get to know them and find out points where we can relate the Gospel according to specific needs and personality.)

Why did you choose to come to _____?
What do you hope to gain from your time here at _____?
What kinds of music do you enjoy?
What holidays do you observe and how are they observed?

Cultural Questions

How do people greet one another in your country?
What are your customs when eating? What are your favorite foods? What foods are not eaten in your country and why?
I've heard so much about (a person or current event from that country). Can you tell me more?
Keep the conversation positive. Ask, "What do you like about (a county, culture, practice)?" rather than, "What do you dislike . . .?"
What family games do your people play?
What holidays do you observe and how are they observed?

Belief Questions

What, if any, is your religious background? How committed are you personally to it? Why or why not?
Do you believe there is a God? What is God like? Can one know God? How? Do you know God?
What is the nature of man? If humanity is basically good, why do people often act so wickedly or immorally?
What do you think is the correct basis for determining right from wrong? Why?
Where do evil and suffering come from and how, if at all, can they be overcome? How do you hope to overcome them in the world? In yourself?
What is the biggest problem in the world today? How, if at all, can it be overcome? What part do you hope to play?
What is the meaning of history? Is there life after death? If so, what is it like?
What do you know about Jesus and Christianity? What are your impressions?

Have you known any Christians before?

Have you ever read the Bible?

What do you think a real Christian is, and how does one become one?