



Developing a Conversation Partner Program

by [Kendra Johnson](#) and [Amy Tate](#)

English language students want and need real-life conversation practice. Providing these opportunities is a constant challenge for oral communication instructors, but we were able to do just that for students in our advanced pronunciation and oral communication classes through a partnership at our community college. Working with two professors who teach a first-year experience course in the Honors College, we developed a conversation partner program that paired each English to speakers of other language (ESOL) student with an honors student. They met virtually three times during the semester for a 45-minute conversation related to culture. The ESOL students reported a number of benefits:

- learning new vocabulary,
- growing in their confidence,
- identifying gaps in their speaking and listening abilities, and
- deepening their understanding of another culture.

With willing participants, a program like this can get off the ground quickly. Just a month after our first discussion with the honors professors, the students had been paired and were scheduling their first conversations.

Alternative: Collaborating with another sector of our school community was rewarding for our students and for us as professors. However, the most important outcome (student practice) could be accomplished through a partnership with community volunteers or even another ESOL class.

Students and Preparation

In preparation for their conversations, the honors students had lessons on cultural competency and styles of intercultural communication. The honors professors wanted to ensure that their students had the skills necessary to engage their partners in respectful conversations about culture. The honors students also developed a set of about eight culture-centered questions for each conversation that moved from surface culture to deep culture.

Meanwhile, the ESOL students completed a brief survey asking for their first language and a brief description of their cultural background, including country of origin and anything else they wanted to share. Their partners received this information before their first meeting.

The honors professors sent us an Excel spreadsheet with their students' names, email addresses, and phone numbers, and we randomly typed the name and contact information of one ESOL student next to each of those names. We had one more honors student than ESOL students, but we easily identified an ESOL student willing to have two partners.

After receiving their partner's information, students were responsible for contacting each other and scheduling their first virtual meeting. Every 3 to 4 weeks, they had another conversation, with a total of three during the 16-week semester.

Alternative: If students don't match up exactly one-to-one, consider small group conversations with three or four students, where there is at least one student from each participating class.

Conversation Questions

Before each meeting, the ESOL students were provided with the set of questions that the honors students had developed for the upcoming conversation. Students were informed that the questions were a guide, and they did not have to discuss all of them. We wanted the discussions to develop as organically as possible. As we mentioned earlier, the conversation questions gradually transition from surface culture to deep culture:

Example of questions from Conversation #1:

- How would you describe the food of your culture? What is the most popular food?
- What holidays do you celebrate? What do they represent?

Example of questions from Conversation #2:

- How important is being on time to you?
- In what ways are emotions shown, or not shown, in your culture?

Example of questions from Conversation #3:

- What are the typical roles expected of different family members?
- How does your culture view the current social justice movements, like Black Lives Matter?

See the [Appendix](#) for more questions.

Alternative: The ESOL students can develop their own questions for the conversations. The three conversations could be varying themes on the same topic or three different topics related to the course material.

Assignments

After each conversation, the ESOL students submitted an assignment related to their experience. They submitted a reflection that included a brief summary of their conversation and an analysis of their learning. For example, they wrote about new words they learned, any difficulty they had speaking or understanding, and strategies they used to communicate their ideas.

Some assignments were written, while others were submitted as audio or video recordings. In the pronunciation class, these recordings were posted to a discussion board so classmates could hear about each other's experiences. The honors students also submitted a graded assignment in their class.

Tips

We counted this program a success after receiving overwhelmingly positive feedback from both the ESOL and honors students. The structure is easily customizable for many teaching contexts. Here are some suggestions based on our experience:

- Give students an opportunity to speak with the same partner multiple times. Some students were very nervous before their first meeting but were more relaxed after they spoke with their partner. Changing partners regularly might cause unnecessary anxiety.
- Attach a graded assessment to the task. We had 100 percent participation, which we attribute, at least in part, to the fact that it included a graded assignment for both the ESOL and Honors students. This also adds incentive for students to reply to their partners in a timely manner.
- Instead of random pairings, consider deliberately matching students so they have a partner from a different cultural background.
- If meeting in person, require students to meet on campus or in a space where they both feel comfortable.
- Provide at least a few guiding questions to help students get started. However, they should not have to study or prepare any answers ahead of time so their discussion can unfold as naturally as possible.

Alternate Discussion Topics

Our conversation program focused on culture, but there are many topics that can generate enjoyable discussion for students. It is important that the chosen topic facilitate a conversation where everyone involved can share as well as learn. The goal is to avoid a teacher-student dynamic where one partner is teaching the other and, instead, to foster a peer relationship where all participants have expertise to share. If the students are from different countries, they can exchange information about their nations, such as

- pop culture,
- government structure,
- transportation,
- education,

- history, and
- tourist attractions.

If students are from the same country or similar cultures, conversations can center on topics such as

- wellness and health,
- movies/TV series,
- music,
- free-time activities,
- major/career choice,
- family relationships and expectations, and
- strategies for reaching their future goals.

Conclusion

After several semesters of these cultural conversations, our students continue to report the experience as one of their favorite class assignments. With a little preparation, this program can be incorporated into any course that is hoping to provide more real-life conversation practice.

***Kendra Johnson** teaches ESOL at Lone Star College – Montgomery, in a suburb of Houston, Texas. She earned her MATESOL from the University of Central Florida and has taught English language learners in Florida, Maryland, South Korea, and Colombia. She uses conversation and storytelling programs to help students build confidence in their oral communication skills.*

***Amy Tate** teaches ESOL at Lone Star College – Montgomery, in a suburb of Houston, Texas. She received her MATESOL from the New School. She is interested in oral skills development, including pronunciation, and she is often looking for creative ways to give students more practice and feedback with their speaking and listening skills.*