

Conversation Partner Program Handbook

A Guide for Domestic Student Volunteers



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<http://www.wm.edu/as/graduate/graduatecenter/conversation/index.php>

Conversation Partner Program

The Conversation Partner Program at William & Mary is an opportunity for native and nonnative English speakers to meet informally and discuss topics of mutual interest. The purpose of the program is twofold. For the nonnative English speakers, the Conversation Partner Program is an opportunity to meet Americans, learn more about American culture, and practice their everyday, spoken English. For native English speakers, the Conversation Partner Program provides an opportunity to meet people from different countries and to learn more about different cultures.

The Conversation Partner Program is currently working in conjunction with COLL 501, the English Conversation & Pronunciation course offered through the Graduate Center. This course is open to all graduate students at William & Mary.

The international graduate students at W&M come from a variety of countries and speak many different languages, including Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Hindi, Russian, and Spanish. Their courses of study vary as well, and may include Applied Science, Business, Chemistry, Computer Science, Law, Physics, or any number of other specialties.

The Conversation Partner Program is completely voluntary. Many students have found the experience of meeting new people and sharing their culture to be very rewarding. Below are some comments from past participants in the Conversation Partner Program:

- “I really enjoyed meeting with my partner and talking. Our conversations were awesome! I learned a great deal about Japan and, curiously enough, the United States.”
- “As a nonnative speaker,” [what I enjoyed most was] “cultural recognition from a native speaker.”
- “I enjoyed learning about another culture. It was also interesting to try to explain American terms and practices I take for granted.”
- “I enjoyed learning about Chinese culture and asking questions that I’ve always wanted answered.”

Getting Started

Getting started is as simple as filling out an application, being sure to include all possible times that you are available to meet. Being too restrictive about your time makes it more difficult to pair you with someone. Of course, you know your own limitations, so only record times that you truly are available.

Once you submit your application to the ESOL Program Manager, she begins the process of pairing you with an international student with similar interests and availability. Sometimes the latter takes precedence because of everyone's busy schedules, but rest assured you should have *something* in common, even if that is not apparent on first glance. Once the ESOL PM identifies a potential partner for you, she will send you that person's application for your review. You then confirm that you would like to work with that person, and she sends your application to the international student to alert him/her to expect to hear from you. **Please confirm your partner with the ESOL PM at your earliest convenience;** this will allow for re-matching if necessary.

You are expected to initiate the first meeting, either by phone or e-mail. Again, please do not allow too much time to pass without contacting your partner. Remember that he or she is likely excited to meet you and begin conversing with you!

Once a pairing has been made, the ESOL PM will assume that you are meeting regularly with your partner. If issues arise—such as a conflict in your schedule that impedes your ability to meet with your partner regularly—you must notify her as soon as possible so that other arrangements can be made.

Tips for Working with Your Partner

Be a Moderator & Facilitator

Conversation Partners act as moderators and facilitators. While you should come prepared with a few topics to discuss, be open to suggestions from your Conversation Partner. Avoid being the only one who asks questions. This should be a give-and-take process between native and nonnative speakers.

If you are working with more than one student at a time, be aware of group dynamics. Encourage participation from quieter people, and try not to let any one person dominate the conversation.

Pause Time

English is an "impatient" language. American speakers are frequently uncomfortable with pauses that last more than a few seconds. However, there is a great deal of variation in acceptable pause time from one language to another.

Be patient. Give your conversation partner time to respond. You can also help your conversation partner practice asking for clarification if in fact they don't understand what they are hearing.

Respect Each Other

The Conversation Partner Program is not an opportunity for you to promote personal, political, or religious agendas. Rather, it is an opportunity for you to help someone master English, and at the same time, learn more about another culture.

While differences of opinion are bound to occur, it is the responsibility of all parties to be mutually respectful of each other's opinions and ideas.

Helpful Hints

While in many ways our international students are just like everyone else, there are difficulties unique to working with nonnative speakers. Here are a few helpful hints:

1. Repeat and rephrase

If students don't look like they understand you, repeat what you just said. If they still seem confused, try to find a way to rephrase what you just said using different words and/or simpler grammar. Talking slower may help. Talking louder does not.

2. Focus on key words

Even the most advanced nonnative speaker doesn't understand 100% of what is being said. Instead, what students hear are key words. Knowing that, you can emphasize the most important information, slowing down for the main ideas.

3. Write important information down

If something is important, consider writing down the information. Many times students nod "yes, yes, yes" when really they don't understand.

4. Don't overcorrect

Resist the urge to correct everything that the students say incorrectly. Consider the idea of comprehension versus perfection. Can you understand what the student is trying to say? Let them speak, and when they are finished, you may gently remind them of a few of their mistakes, but try not to interrupt them while they are putting their thoughts together.

5. Explain abbreviations

Abbreviations can be confusing to nonnative speakers. This doesn't mean that you shouldn't use them; just understand that a nonnative speaker might not understand what they mean.

6. Limit slang and be ready to explain

Likewise, slang expressions can be very confusing to nonnative speakers, although they love to learn them. The international students will pick up slang expressions from you that you are not even conscious of using. When you think about it, there is a vast amount of slang being used. Don't overwhelm the students with everything you've ever heard. Try to stay focused on what they are most likely to hear.

7. Have a translator handy if possible

Though certainly not a requirement, it is helpful if one or both of you have access to an electronic translator—even Google's language tools feature, which you can access using any Internet browser.