A Guide for Conversational English Sessions

2022, Drafted for AAH by Yoojin Choi, PhD

Conversational English sessions are different from academic tutoring sessions in that there is no apparent content on which to build the lesson plan. However, they do share similarities insofar as the purpose of the experience is to learn something. Your role as the native speaking party of the conversation determines what, how, and how much the student learns.

“English conversation by phone/online” is a global business with numerous participants around the world. The partnerships that work well particularly for an extended period of time have 1. a clearly shared long-term goal between the conversation partners and 2. a concrete plan for each session. “So, whaddya wanna talk about today?” gets real old real fast. This Guide aims to help AAH tutors in both areas.

Rules of Interaction:

0. Speak intentionally and annunciate clearly. Do not make the appearance of “talking down” to your student either with body language or by talking too loudly and slowly. Non-native speakers do need you to annunciate and slow down, but more importantly, they need to know that you respect them as equals.

1. The student must be given ample opportunity to speak. Remember – they’re here to learn to converse in English, not to listen to you talk the whole time. The student must exercise ownership.
   * Ask open-ended questions rather than ones that lead to yes/no or single-word answers. “Tell me about your siblings,” is better than “Do you have brothers and sisters?” “Please explain what you like about that teacher,” is better than “What’s your favorite subject at school?”
   * Listen carefully and ask meaningful follow-up questions.
   * But don’t make it into an interrogation session – sprinkle in your own answer, opinion, and/or sample answers.
   * Be sensitive to potential differences in social expectations. In some cultures, students are expected to defer to their teachers, and they might not feel comfortable expressing their ownership of the conversation. This in itself can be an interesting conversation and a learning experience for both parties. Always ask for the student’s preference first rather than making assumptions.
2. Be sensitive to cultural norms including your student’s age.
   * Do not discuss sensitive or problematic topics such as sex and illegal activities (drugs, weapons, etc).
   * Anticipating personal triggers is difficult and can be even more difficult in cross-cultural conversations. Do not assume your student’s cultural norms; always ask. “Is it okay if we talk about your brother’s illness?” etc.
3. You must provide sufficient structure to each session.
   * “Structure” can take on a variety of forms. For example, you can set a timer so that a certain amount of time is devoted to a topic. Or you can always open with “Share something interesting from the past week” and always end with “Goals for next week.” Or with younger students, you can have an appropriate text ready (maybe an excerpt from a children’s book) for a read-aloud session.
   * Students need homework so they can prepare something to talk about for a sustained conversation. Have a backup plan for the possibility that the student does not come prepared.

Sample 1st Session

1. 30 minutes of introductions, ice-breaking, and building rapport

* Start with a burst of short back-and-forth’s, in spite of Rule #1. Ease into long-answer questions. Try to have a natural conversation, but do take some notes for effective follow-up, if it’s possible to take notes.
  + 1. Hi, my name is Dawn. What’s your name? (answer)
    2. Nice to meet you, (their name). I’m 15 years old. How old are you? (answer)
    3. I am in 11th grade. What grade are you in? (answer)
    4. I live with my mom, dad, and younger brother. How about you?
  + Do you have any questions for me? / Tell me about your family. / What do you like about school?
* Family and school should be easy ice-breaker topics for the first day. However, the student may be hesitant to talk about a specific topic, whether because it’s too personal or because they feel they don’t know how to say their thoughts in English. Ask if they want to move onto another topic. You want to set a tone of mutual respect.
* Question suggestions for the 1st session:
  + Tell me about your family. (with follow-up, like how old is she, etc)
  + Tell me about your school. (with follow-up, like my favorite subject is history, etc)
  + Tell me about your favorite food. (with follow-up, like Chicago is famous for hot dogs, etc)
  + In America, we say hi, hello, or good morning when we see each other. (In Korea, where my family is from, they sometimes greet each other by “Did you sleep well?” or “Have you had your meal?”) How do people greet each other in your culture?[[1]](#footnote-1)
  + Are you interested in learning about other cultures? Why?[[2]](#footnote-2)
  + Do people in your community do a lot of exercising? What activities do you do for exercise?[[3]](#footnote-3)
  + What hobbies do you like to do? What do you like about the hobbies you do?[[4]](#footnote-4)

2. 20 minutes of goal-setting and sharing of expectations

* Clearly state that you’re moving onto a different topic. Thank your student for the first topic of starting to get to know each other.
* Goal Setting:
  + In the first session, discuss the student’s goal. They will of course say they want to improve their English; ask guiding questions to add specifics to that general goal.
  + If the student is older and/or more mature, they will be able to have a better discussion around the topic. For example, they might want to work on pronunciations of certain sounds or they might want to prepare for a speech in English class next semester. Note that those two examples are very far apart on the spectrum of goals.
  + If the student is younger or otherwise really cannot articulate the specifics beyond the general goal, your initial conversations will have to be assigned specific topics until a goal can be discussed and set. For example, you can ask the student to tell you next time everything they can think about a family member (maybe their avó) or about a hobby (maybe futebol/soccer).

3. 10 minutes of re-cap and deciding on homework

* Clearly state that you’re moving onto a different topic. Thank your student for working on goal-setting.
* Briefly share your notes, reiterating that you will take some notes at every session so you can be a better teacher.
* Discuss homework. Ask for your student’s opinion on what to prepare. Ask about the amount of time they will or can spend on preparing for the next session. Have your student write down the homework or set an alarm in their phone, for accountability.

Sources for conversational topics

* For younger students: <https://bilingualkidspot.com/2019/06/24/esl-english-conversation-topics-students/>
* For any age group:
  + <http://iteslj.org/questions/>
    - Note that some topics are inappropriate for our context, such as Gambling and Smoking. Remember Rule #2. Use your best judgment.
  + <https://allesl.com/esl-conversation-topics/>
* There are more sources on the web, easily available through a quick Google search. Modify as they apply to the individual relationship you build with your student. But never go without a topic to talk about or fall back on.

1. Modified or copied from <https://bilingualkidspot.com/2019/06/24/esl-english-conversation-topics-students/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-4)