

Conversation Prompts (all)

PURPOSE

To engage in conversation on specific topics.

METHOD

There may be times in tutoring sessions when it will be appropriate to engage in casual conversation with a student. This might be a regular activity to build the student's fluency. It could be an appropriate approach with a student who needs extra work on speaking skills. You might also want to use casual conversation to extend practice on a subject you are studying. For example, if you are studying jobs, you might want to plan a structured conversation about a student's work goals.

1. Decide in advance what you will discuss. See page 67 for conversation prompts related to English learning, culture, music, and more. Focus on one topic at a time.
2. If students are at a lower proficiency level, supply them with copies of some leading questions. Although this makes the practice less authentic, it helps to pre-teach words they may not know. It also gives them time to think about the questions.
3. Use the leading questions to generate a conversation. Ask follow-up questions, and encourage the student to ask you follow-up questions. Five minutes or so of conversation might be enough for a beginning student. With an advanced student, the conversation may last for 10 or 15 minutes. Do not aim to correct speaking errors on the spot; instead, take note of errors you'd like to discuss after the activity.
4. Take some time after the conversation to go over new vocabulary words that came up or to identify patterns of errors you noticed (in pronunciation, word choice, or grammatical structures). Point out that asking follow-up questions is a great way to keep a conversation going, a valuable skill in many different social situations.

SUGGESTIONS

- These questions work with small groups or classes as well as with individual students.
- The questions also serve as great writing prompts.

SUGGESTED CONVERSATION TOPICS

General

What would you expect/like to be doing one year from now? Five years from now?

What were you doing one year ago? Five years ago? (These are good for practicing past and future tenses.)

Bring in an advice column. Read the problem. Ask participants what they think the writer should do. Then hand out the advice columnist's answer. Ask the students what they think of that advice.

What makes you happy/unhappy? (Discuss vocabulary for emotions: What makes you jealous, excited, discouraged, amused, relieved, disappointed, etc.?)

What person do you admire most? Why?

Tell the group about something that made a really big difference in your life.

U.S. Culture

Talk about U.S./American customs and usages.

Discuss accepted forms of introduction and address (formal and informal).

Preceding a federal/national holiday, a brief discussion of the significance of the date is often useful. This may include a short American history lesson and a discussion of customs.

Compare and contrast the United States/America with the home country.

Talk about housing, food, schools, government, etc.

Discuss how (or if) the United States/America is different from what may have been expected.

Vocabulary

When do you speak English? At home? During school? While shopping?

Do you keep a notebook to write down new words or ideas you have learned?

For vocabulary growth and enrichment, provide a list of ten new words for memorization and use, including proper pronunciation.

Discuss idioms and their meanings.

Use tongue twisters to practice pronunciation.

Practice numbers (e.g., 16 vs. 60, numbers in the thousands and millions).

Entertainment

Discuss current events, TV shows, movies, etc.

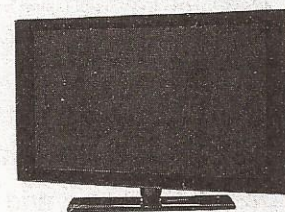
What do you like to do in your free time? Do you have a hobby?

What are you reading now? In what language?

What movies do you like? In what language?

What kind of music do you like? Why? Bring a CD to share with the group.

Tell something about the music you have brought.



Jobs and Job Hunting

Do you have special skills or training? What things do you think you can do better than most other people? Would you like to teach about these things?

Are you working or looking for work? Do you have a résumé?

Did you work in your home country? What did you do?

What questions will you be asked in an interview?

What is your dream job?

Analyze job ads.



Health

Talk about how to maintain good health. What is your "health literacy" in English?

Pretend to call 911 to respond to emergencies. Note: Local fire stations can send a trained EMS professional to talk to your class about emergencies.

How can you stay healthy? (Discuss healthy diet, exercise, stress reduction, etc.)

When should you go to the doctor (cold vs. flu, medical conditions, injuries, annual exams, etc.)?

Travel

What places would you like to visit in the United States? In the world? Why?

Discuss giving directions. Analyze a map.

Talk about transportation. How did you get to the United States (car, bus, plane, train, etc.)?

Do you prefer to fly or to drive? Why?

Are you planning a vacation? Where are you going?

Money

Do you have a bank account? Do you prefer to use cash, credit card, debit card, or checks? Why?

What would you do if you won the lottery? Is it better to save the money or spend the money? (This is a good way to practice or introduce the conditional tense.)

Discuss money and how much different things cost. Practice giving a price and making change.

Do you like to go shopping? Why? Where? Is shopping different in your home country?

Family

Tell the group about your family. Are you married? Do you have children?

Do you have pets? Did you have a pet in your home country?

Do you have a big family or a small family?

Are you the oldest, middle, youngest, or only child?

What family members are in the United States/your home country?

Housing

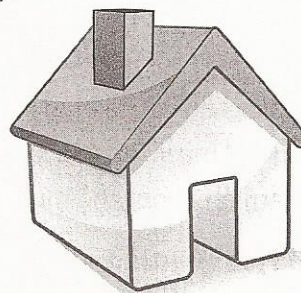
Do you live in a house or an apartment?

Discuss rooms in the house and furniture vocabulary.

Draw a floor plan, and give a tour of your house.

Where would you like to live?

Analyze housing ads.



Food

What is your favorite food?

What food do you see here that you never saw in your country?

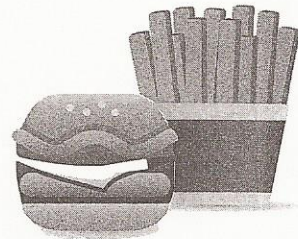
What food do you eat in your country that you can't find here?

What food do you make for special occasions in your country?

What food do you like to cook?

Do you cook often? What will you eat tonight?

Do you think food in the United States is better or worse than food in your country? (Often, students answer that food is faster to make but less healthy and tasty.)



Adapted from the *Literacy Council of Northern Virginia's Conversation Class Handbook*. Published by the Literacy Council of Northern Virginia. Revised August 2007. Used with permission. For a copy of the handbook, email Erin Finn at EFinn@LCNV.org.

Native Country

What is one of the best things about your native country?

What is a problem in your country?

Who is a famous person in your country? Why is he or she famous?

What is a national holiday in your country?

What is the weather like in your country?

What interesting places do tourists visit in your country?

Music

What kind of music do you like?

What are your favorite music groups or performers? Why do you like them?

When do you like to listen to music?

When do you listen to traditional songs from your country?

Can you play any musical instruments? When and how did you learn?



Have You Ever...? Explain.

Have you ever been in the newspaper?

Have you ever done something dangerous?

Have you ever helped a stranger?

Have you ever been on TV?

Have you ever quit a bad habit?

Suggested by Christine Polk.

