

FAQ: Meeting with ESL Students

1. What if they can't understand me? Foreign learners of English want to have in-depth adult conversations with native speakers, but some may stay quiet from embarrassment about their English, and from a feeling that they don't know enough about U.S. cultural topics to speak appropriately. Your partners will appreciate your being patient and persistent in figuring out what they want to express.

Use clarification strategies:

Say it a different way

Give an example

Draw a picture

Write it down

(ESL learners often have better English reading and writing skills than speaking or listening comprehension skills. If they say something you don't understand, ask them to write it down for you. If you say something they don't understand, write it down for them. Always bring a pen/pencil and paper when you meet with your partner.)

Be aware of the expressions you use.

Some expressions might be difficult for a non-native speaker to understand, i.e. slang and phrasal verbs that can't be translated word-by-word such as *come in handy*, *catch on*. The ESL students may have learned a word like *tolerate* but never heard of *put up with*. Write down the expression and ask your ESL partners if they know it. They will be glad to learn new everyday English words.

Speak clearly and at a moderate or slower than usual pace.

If you know you are a fast talker or a mumblor, *slow down your speech*. Ask: "Am I speaking too fast?" If your partner's (polite) answer is, "A little," it means you should slow down *a lot*. But be careful not to slow down *too* much, lest your partner feel as though you are talking down to him/her.

Make sure knowledge of topics is shared.

Some of the topics you talk about to international students require cultural background they don't have yet: certain TV shows, special types of food dishes that Americans may all know/eat, U.S. sports team names, names, locations of cities and states, events and activities (e.g. homecoming, cheerleading, fraternities and sororities). Keep asking, "Do you know about this?" "Have you heard of this?" and offer explanations. This will help them build cultural knowledge that will allow them to participate more fully in this country.

2. What if I can't pronounce my ESL partner's name? Your partner may have just as much trouble with your name as you do with theirs. Teach your partners how to say and spell your name and ask your partner to help you say and spell theirs. Write it down. Practice saying the name several times. Don't be embarrassed to ask your partner to repeat as many times as it takes.

3. *How should I behave to be culturally sensitive?* Since movies and other media may have been ESL students' only exposure to the U.S., they may have some strange or perhaps negative preconceptions about U.S. culture. You may be the only U.S. student that your partner has had an extended conversation with. The way you present yourself may shape their attitudes toward U.S. culture and the way people from the U.S. treat foreigners.

Show your interest in your partner by sitting forward and giving your full attention to the conversation.

Participate and share the time.

Ask questions as well as giving your point of view. If you tend to be a quiet person, push yourself to give your ideas and opinions. If you tend to be a talker, share the talking time so that both of you get a chance to speak. In either case, take responsibility to invite your ESL partner into the conversation—especially if he/she is quiet and holding back—by frequently asking, "*What do you think?*" "*How about you?*" "*What's _____ like in your country?*"

Ask if it's okay.

If you're not sure if a question is culturally appropriate, begin it by saying, "I hope it's okay if I ask you ..." A sincere desire to know is usually appreciated, regardless of the topic.

Don't carry on private conversations with other friends, answer your cell phone, lean back in your chair with your legs stretched out, look at your watch, or gaze off in the distance while you are meeting with your partner. Your ESL partner will notice these behaviors and think you are bored and don't really care to learn about other cultures.

4. *If my conversation partner wants to help me learn his/her language, how do we do this?* Begin by telling your partner (in English) your language proficiency level ("I just began studying Arabic," "My Japanese is okay, but I make many mistakes," "I am almost fluent in Korean.") Then, when you're ready to practice your second language, ask if it is okay that you begin speaking your partner's native language. Now it is your turn to ask your partner to clarify, draw pictures, and slow down!

Continue your conversation. Your meetings should not take the form of a tutoring session. Feel free to bring travel books, picture books, or other items that will help the two of you better discuss your countries and cultures.

MAKE SURE that one language does not dominate your meeting time; the idea is to help both of you practice your second language while learning about each other's culture.

5. *To whom do I go if there is a problem?* If you simply cannot attend a prescheduled meeting, contact your conversation partner directly. If there is a larger issue, such as incompatibility or inappropriate behavior, see Jenna Hammerich or Maureen Burke in the ESL Office (1112 UCC).

If my partner has a problem with

homesickness/loneliness, personal relationships, stress, or cultural adjustment	I should...	empathize, suggest the international student support group at the counseling center
suicide	I MUST...	contact ESL Programs Office immediately
immigration issues, insurance, or daycare	I should...	suggest that she contact ESL Programs Office
discrimination	I should...	suggest that she contact ESL Programs Office
attendance, grades	I should...	suggest that she contact ESL Programs Office or her teacher(s)
finances	I should...	suggest that she visit OISS
housing, roommate	I should...	suggest that she contact ESL Programs Office
learning problems	I should...	suggest that she contact ESL Programs Office