

English as a Second Language Programs

Memorial University

Conversation Partner Handbook



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Conversation Partner Program

Spencer Hall, room SP-3016

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1 Welcome to the Conversation Partner Program

HOW TO GET STARTED

After you have completed and sent in your Conversation Partner Volunteer Form, we will send your partner's contact information by email. The form is available at http://www.mun.ca/esl/support/conversation_partner_program.php

YOUR FIRST MEETING

Arrange a meeting with your partner once you receive the contact information. After your meeting, send an email to eslvolun@mun.ca to confirm that you have met.

During your first meeting, discuss the following points:

- When and where you will meet.
- Your partner's expectations of the meetings.
- Specific goals your partner would like to reach by the end of the semester with you (e.g. fluency, learning about local culture, pronunciation, vocabulary development).

DURING THE SEMESTER

- Meet with your partner on a weekly basis for a minimum of one hour per week.
- Keep track of the hours you spend with your partner by writing them in the time log located in section 7 of this handbook.
- If you wish, create your Co-curricular Record. See section 6 for more information.
- Contact us as soon as possible at eslvolun@mun.ca if:
 - ✓ You are unable to contact your partner
 - ✓ You lose your partner's contact information
 - ✓ Your partner starts missing meetings
 - ✓ You have any questions or concerns.

END OF THE SEMESTER

- The Conversation Partner Program finishes at the end of exams each semester. However, we strongly advise that you complete all of your meetings with your partner before exams begin.
- If you have met with your partner for a minimum of 10 hours during the semester, the ESL Program can validate your involvement on your Co-curricular Record. Drop off your completed time log at SP-3016 in Spencer Hall or email it to eslvolun@mun.ca.
- If you receive a program evaluation, please complete it.

2 Frequently Asked Questions

What does a conversation partner do?

A conversation partner meets once or twice a week for about one hour, one-to-one with an international student whose first language is not English, at a mutually convenient time and place in order to talk, listen and learn.

How will my partner benefit from our conversations?

By meeting with your partner, you can help him/her adjust to a new culture, gain confidence in having conversations in English, feel at home in a new country, and find answers to questions about Canadian culture as well as living and studying in St. John's. A conversation partner is often one of the only native-speaker contacts that international students make; thus these meetings can be truly invaluable.

Do our meetings always have to be at the same time and place?

It is a good idea to meet at the same time and place since it will become part of a routine. However, sometimes meeting may not be possible, so it is important that you always have each other's contact information. Meetings can take place in various settings (classrooms, coffee shops, student lounges and so on). Keep in mind that the "noise factor" may prevent your partner from understanding what you are saying.

Am I expected to correct mistake and pronunciation?

Only try and offer corrections if they interfere with understanding and clarity. Too many corrections of word choice, sentence structure and pronunciation may "blow up" the conversation. Asking for clarification will encourage your partner to rephrase, repeat what was said more clearly, or ask you for help in discovering what caused the communication breakdown. Doing this helps the student to understand which word choices, pronunciations and sentence structures work and which do not.

What if my partner insists that I correct everything?

It is not your role to correct every mistake. Make sure that your partner understands that you will provide feedback on areas that interfere with clear communication but that endless interruptions would not be useful and may in fact hinder learning. Discuss your partner's expectations and try to come to an agreement about when corrections will take place – otherwise frustration or disappointment may ensue.

What do I do if my partner is shy and quiet?

Many language learners are afraid to make mistakes or are embarrassed by their pronunciation. This will take time and patience to overcome. Try and encourage your partner and importantly, do not be afraid of silence! Sometimes it will take a while for your partner to understand a question and then to formulate an answer. Give them this time to think. After some time (10 seconds or so), feel free to offer help or your own views, but take care not to dominate the discussion.

What if my partner doesn't show up?

There may be many reasons behind this: forgetfulness, shyness, embarrassment, personal business etc. If your partner misses a meeting, contact them to find out why. If you are not able to contact them, send an email to eslvolun@mun.ca as soon as possible so that the reasons can quickly be clarified and any potential problems solved.

What do I do if I have requested and am matched with two partners?

If you have two partners, you are required to meet with them separately. In this way, each partner has individual time to spend with you to work on issues that they are having difficulty with. This means that you will spend 10 hours with each partner, totalling 20 hours at the end of the semester.



3 Tips for Effective Cross-cultural Communication

- Be explicit. Don't assume that the other person has the same background information that you do.
- Be an active listener. Be sensitive to various meanings of silence, attitudes, resistance, or non-comprehension of ideas.
- Don't be afraid of silence. Sometimes the student needs time to process what you have said and to formulate an answer.
- Avoid slang, cultural expressions, and work-related jargon unless they are part of the conversation or you provide the necessary explanation.
- Speak at a moderate speed. Speaking too slowly could be insulting.
- Speaking louder does not increase a person's comprehension.
- Give your partner sufficient time and patient attention to express themselves.
- Listen well. Pay attention to verbal and non-verbal language and the meaning behind the message.
- Ask for clarification if something confuses you.
- Re-wording is the best way to ensure that you have understood what your partner meant to say. Repeat back what you have heard and/or get your partner to repeat back what they have understood.
- Give feedback. This affirms that you have understood properly and gives your partner a chance to correct or confirm what you have heard.
- Be aware of how your own assumptions may affect what you perceive to be hearing.
- Try to think of what cultural factors may be influencing your partner's views/behaviour.
- Don't jump to conclusions. Suspend your judgements and reactions.
- Let go of your own viewpoint and try to see things from your partner's perspective.
- Express a true desire to understand your partner's culture in its depth and complexity.

4 Conversation Topic Ideas

The best way to succeed as a Conversation Partner is to be interested in learning from your partner. Have a few general topic ideas in mind for each session. That way, if one topic fizzles out, you have a back-up. Here are some ideas to get you started. Socially acceptable topics or questions may differ from culture to culture, so make sure your partner is comfortable discussing the topics you choose before starting in on them.

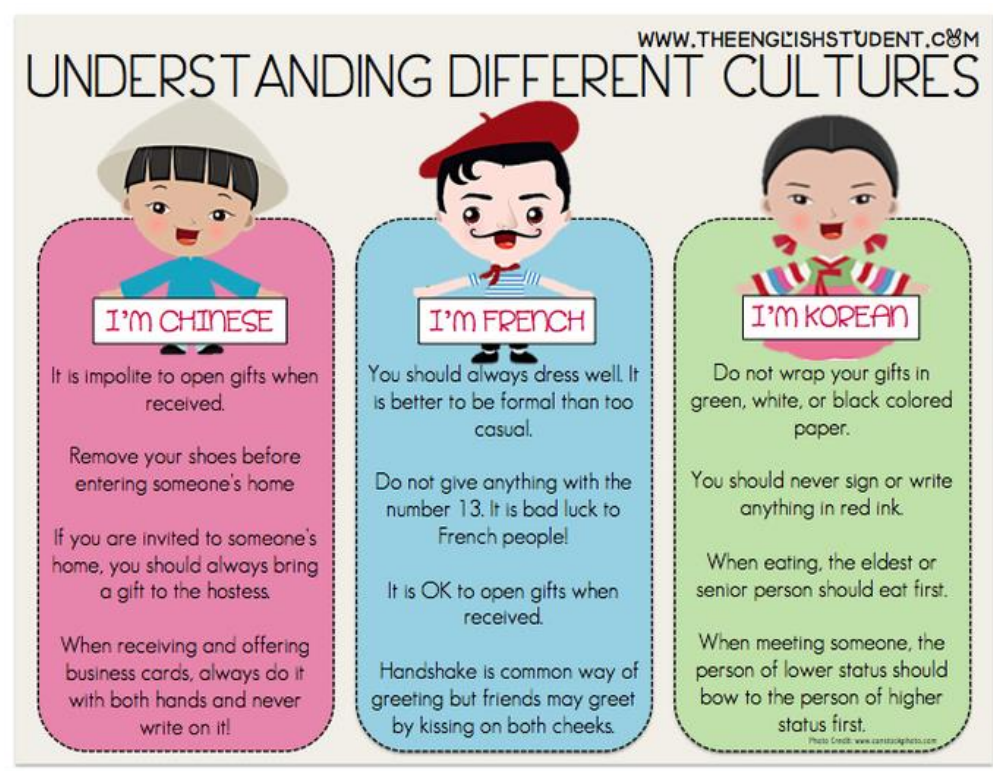
- Talk about your home, the members of your family, your upbringing, etc.
- Compare and contrast birthday traditions, coming-of-age celebrations, marriage and wedding customs, funeral rites, etc.
- Inquire about special food, clothing, rituals, beliefs, superstitions and so on associated with each occasion.
- Discuss and/or demonstrate Canadian vs. your partner's cultural behaviours for greeting, visiting, tipping, dating, etc.
- Ask whether your partner is experiencing culture shock and how he/she is adapting to life in Canada.
- Answer questions that your partner may have about Canadian values and behaviours.
- Tell each other which places (countries, cities, tourism spots) you have toured and visited.
- Compare and contrast common holidays (New Year, Valentine's Day, etc.).
- Discuss other special days, such as national days, holidays and religious celebrations.
- Discuss what food is served during a traditional/typical breakfast, lunch and dinner.
- Discuss what special foods are prepared on holidays, birthdays, weddings.
- Talk about rituals, etiquette/manners, eating utensils, etc. associated with food.
- Discuss language and translation challenges, alphabets and writing (script or characters), pronunciation, vocabulary-building, etc.
- Talk about how various emotions are expressed and which of them are culturally and socially acceptable/permitted.

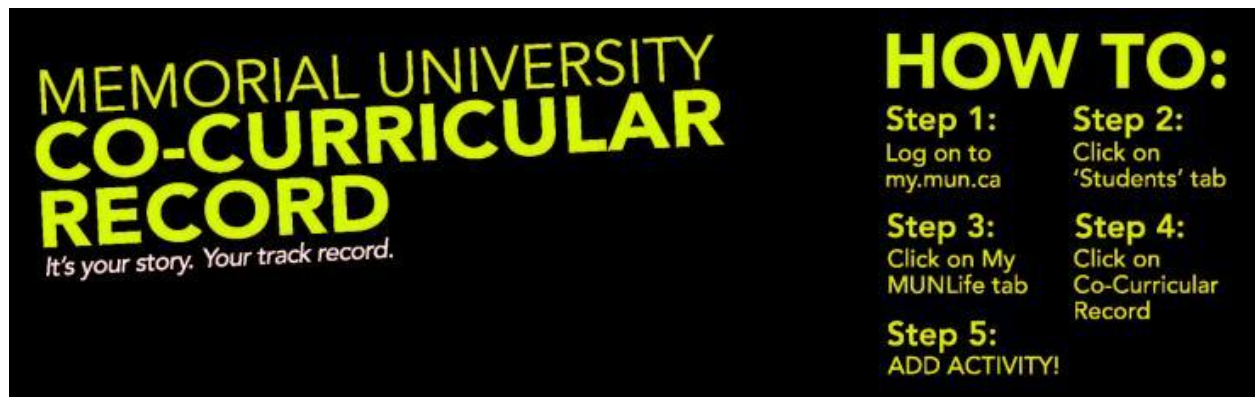
- Compare non-verbal communication (movements of the hands and body, symbolism of clothing accessories and so on).
- Talk about primary and secondary schooling, the ages when children begin their education, the length of the school day and year, teaching methods and important lessons, and preparations for university.
- Discuss university life, the lecture system, typical course assignments, workload in your degree program or your favourite course.
- Discuss what people enjoy doing in their spare time when not studying or working.



5 Communication Styles and Behaviours

- In North America, we are used to a relatively direct styles of communication, getting to a point quickly while remaining sensitive to others' feelings. Students are often told that North Americans are direct, which can lead to an overly direct style that can be interpreted as rude. Conversely, students may avoid communicating concerns at all costs, which can lead to misunderstandings or resentment.
- Try not to draw conclusions about the student's personality. Instead, ask questions that may help to resolved misunderstandings.
- Some students may avoid eye contact while speaking in order to show respect.
- Students may use command forms when making requests, such as, "Give me..." and "Do this...". While these phrases sound rude to us, students may initially be unfamiliar with which phrases and words are considered polite. You may want to point out to students that speaking in this manner may be considered rude. Then you can offer alternative phrases.





Memorial University has developed a Co-curricular Record which is an official document from the university outlining a student's out-of-class learning. All involvement is verified. All conversation partner volunteers who meet with their partners for a minimum of 10 hours in a semester can have their involvement verified by the Conversation Partner Program after they submit their time logs.

To create your own Co-curricular Record or for more information, go to
<https://www.mun.ca/student/studentexperience/ccr/>

7 Conversation Partner Program Time Log

All volunteers must print off this log at the beginning of the semester and have their partners initial it at the end of each meeting. Completed time logs can be dropped off at SP-3016 (Spencer Hall), emailed to eslvolun@mun.ca or faxed to 864-8282. Volunteers wishing to add this volunteer position to their CCR must meet with their student for a minimum of 10 hours during the semester and submit the signed time log.

Date and Year	Length of meeting	Topics Discussed/Comments	International Student Initials
Total # of hours:			

Volunteer Given Name (please print clearly):	Student Given Name (please print clearly):
Volunteer Family Name (please print clearly):	Student Family Name (please print clearly):
Volunteer Signature:	Student Signature:
Volunteer Email Address (please print clearly):	Student Email Address (please print clearly):

