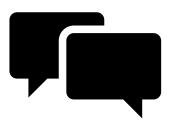
# Conversation Partner Program Handbook for

Volunteers and Participants



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## **Purpose**

The English Conversation Partner Program brings together fluent English speakers and English language learners to provide one-on-one conversation practice, supporting the development of fluency, vocabulary, as well as knowledge about different cultures. Volunteers benefit by learning about other cultures, developing communication skills, and gaining volunteer experience. Participants benefit by practicing English conversation skills, and learning about university life and different cultures, while connecting with a fluent English speaker from a different background.

## Guidelines

Partners meet once or twice a week, for the duration of the one term, for a total minimum of 10 hours. Meetings are arranged at a mutually convenient time in person or remotely using a video calling platform (such as Skype or Zoom). The Conversation Partner Program officially ends with the last week of classes. Although most volunteers and participants are matched at the beginning of the semester, we accept volunteers and participants throughout the semester and continually match students as promptly as possible.

## **Conversation Partner Definitions**

## Program Participants

A **participant** is a student (undergraduate or graduate) whose first language may not be English and who wants to practice their English-speaking skills and develop fluency.

Participants improve their English speaking and listening skills with regular, supported practice. They are matched with volunteers from different backgrounds. Participants can share their culture, learn about a new culture, and exchange stories and advice about living and studying in St. John's.

#### Program Volunteers

A **volunteer** is a Canadian or international student who speaks English fluently. The ideal volunteer is friendly, open to meeting new people, and respectful of different cultures and communication styles. Volunteers should be able to work independently and be great time managers. They meet once or twice a week for about one hour, one-on-one with a program participant to learn about a new culture and provide one-on-one conversation practice.

Volunteers will learn about other cultures, develop their communication skills and cultural humility and gain volunteer experience. Volunteers may also receive a reference letter or certificate if they have met with their partner for 10 or more hours during the semester.

## **Email Address**

The Conversation Partner Program email address is cpprogram@mun.ca.

#### Website

The Conversation Partner Program website can be found at https://www.mun.ca/writingcentre/english-language-learner-support/external-resources/

You can also use the search bar at the top right corner of the MUN website and type in "Conversation Partner Program".

## Time Commitment

Partners will meet for a minimum of 10 hours over the semester. However, they can certainly meet more often.

## Time Logs

Volunteers are expected to keep a record of the times spent with their partners and the topics covered. Time must be recorded on the time log.

The time log is provided at the beginning of the program to volunteers to keep track of their hours. However, both partners are expected to sign the time log at the end of the program to confirm the amount of time spent in meetings.

Volunteers are asked to return their signed time logs to <a href="mailto:cpprogram@mun.ca">cpprogram@mun.ca</a> once they have finished their hours. A reminder message will be sent out before the last week of classes. Volunteers who spend at least 10 hours in conversation practice with their partner may receive a letter of reference which provides a brief description of the program and confirms their participation.

You may print a copy of this log or download one from Brightspace.

# **Conversation Partner Program** Time Log DATE TIME SPENT TOGETHER COMMENTS Total Number of hours: Volunteer Name Participant Name Volunteer Signature Participant Signature Date Date

## **Getting Started**

- 1. Participants and volunteers will receive an e-mail with each other's name and contact information.
- 2. Partners will arrange to meet. After the first meeting, the volunteer will send an email to cpprogram@mun.ca to confirm that they have met.
- 3. During the first meeting, partners should discuss the following points:
  - a. When and how they will meet.
  - b. Each partner's expectations of the meetings.

c. Specific goals the participant would like to reach by the end of the semester with the volunteer (e.g. fluency, learning about a different culture, pronunciation, vocabulary development).

## **During the Semester**

#### **Reminders**

- 1. Meet with your partner for a minimum of ten hours.
- 2. Ensure the hours are recorded in the Time Log.
- 3. Contact us as soon as possible at cpprogram@mun.ca if:
  - a. You are unable to contact your partner;
  - b. You lose your partner's contact information;
  - c. Your partner starts missing meetings; or
  - d. You have any questions or concerns.

When speaking an additional language, many people may be nervous about making mistakes or embarrassing themselves. This will take time and patience to overcome. Try and encourage each other and most importantly, do not be afraid of silence!

If your partner misses a meeting, please send an email to <a href="mailto:cpprogram@mun.ca">cpprogram@mun.ca</a> as soon as possible so that the reasons can quickly be clarified, and any potential problems solved.

## End of the Semester

The Conversation Partner Program finishes at the end of classes each semester.

If partners have met with your partner for a minimum of 10 hours during the semester, the Writing Centre can validate the involvement on a reference letter for the Student Volunteer Bureau's Volunteer Incentive Program.

In addition to the time log, you will be asked to complete a program survey.

## Frequently Asked Questions

## Do our meetings always have to be at the same time each week?

It is a good idea to have a regular time to meet since it is easier keep up with your meetings if they are part of a routine. However, sometimes this may not be possible, and it is therefore important that you always have each other's contact information.

### How will the volunteer help?

The main goal for the meetings is to talk as much as possible. This is a great opportunity for practicing conversational English skills and developing fluency. Therefore, a volunteer will not correct every small mistake that a participant may make, but only provide correction if they cannot understand what is being said.

Volunteers may try and offer corrections if mistakes interfere with understanding and clarity. Too many corrections of word choices, sentence structure, and pronunciation may distract from the main conversation.

Volunteers may provide insight into a different culture and develop participants' own cultural understanding and intercultural communication skills. Volunteers can also give participants further information about life in Newfoundland and Labrador and can provide advice on navigating life in St. John's.

#### How will the participant benefit?

By meeting with a volunteer, a participant can gain confidence in having conversations in English. Sometimes a volunteer may offer corrections to a participant, encouraging them to rephrase, repeat what was said more clearly, or ask for help in discovering what causes misunderstandings. Having to "negotiate meaning" in this way helps the participant to see which word choices, pronunciations, and sentence structures work and which do not.

Given that many participants are international students, they may also benefit from learning more about St. John's and Canadian culture from volunteers who may have lived in St. John's or Canada for much longer than participants. Sometimes, volunteers in this program are one of the only fluent English-speaking contacts that participants make, so these meetings can be truly valuable.

#### What are some things we can discuss for conversation practice?

Arriving to each meeting with some topics already in mind is a great idea to keep in mind. A list of suggested topics for 10 sessions can be found on our D2L/Brightspace course shell under Resources > English Conversation Partner Program - Suggested Questions. Take care to avoid

arguments about values. You can express your opinions but remain respectful of others' beliefs and traditions.

## Here are some ideas to get started:

- Talk about each others' homes, family members, upbringings, etc.
- Compare and contrast birthday traditions, coming of age celebrations, marriage and wedding customs, funeral rites, national days/holidays, religious celebrations, common holiday observations (New Year, Valentine's Day, etc.), etc.
- Inquire about special food, clothing, rituals, beliefs, superstitions, etc. associated with each occasion.
- Talk about cultural behaviours for greetings, visiting people, tipping, dating, etc.
- Discuss the possibility of culture shock and what it's like adapting to life in a new country.
- Tell each other which places (countries, cities, tourism spots) you have visited.
- Talk about food: what food is served during a traditional/typical breakfast, lunch, dinner or for snacks. Discuss what special foods are prepared on holidays, birthdays, weddings. Discuss 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, etc.).
- Talk about experiences in education: 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, your favourite courses, etc.

- Discuss what people enjoy doing as pastime when not working or studying.
- Introduce each other to favourite hobbies.
- Explain the basics of popular national sports.

You can also engage in activities that may provide additional conversation practice!

- Consider playing board games, going grocery shopping, ordering food, playing sports or even watching a movie.
- Review news articles about current events. This can provide many ideas and new conversation topics. Some students like to hear sentences read out loud and then imitate the sounds. This technique is called "shadowing" and can help improve pronunciation.
- If you meet over a video-call platform, and if the platform allows for the meeting to be recorded, the participant may ask to record parts of your conversation for listening practice later.

## **Suggestion Box**

If you wish to leave any suggestions or comments during the semester, please feel free to use our suggestion box in Brightspace. You can decide whether you want to leave your name or to have your comments anonymous.