



LangMedia

Five College Center for World Languages

Published on LangMedia (<https://langmedia.fivecolleges.edu>)

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Conversation Sessions



Goals of a Conversation Session

A conversation session is your weekly opportunity to practice your target language. During a conversation session, **you will spend time speaking with a conversation partner** who has been trained to facilitate spoken language practice. Speaking practice is designed to help you use the language in conversations and role-plays to mimic real-life situations. You will become most comfortable in the language by speaking it as consistently as possible.

What a Conversation session is NOT

Conversations are a time to speak. Your conversation partner will be able to answer some questions in order to enhance your understanding of the language and improve your speaking ability. However:

- Conversation sessions are **not a time to drill grammar, take lots of notes, or study from your book**. Conversation partners are not there to “teach” you the language. You should come to every conversation session having already studied on your own and prepared as best you can by using your book and other resources available to you.
- Conversation Partners are trained to leave **5 minutes at the end of each session for questions** in English. If you have an urgent question that will prevent you from participating at your fullest, you may ask at the beginning and quickly move into conversation time.

What can you expect from a conversation session?

Every conversation session will look a little different depending on the language and the number of students present, but all sessions include the same components:

- **Greeting each other and saying goodbye** using culturally appropriate gestures and phrases.
- Conversation sessions involve multiple **role-play scenarios**. These can be used to practice a variety of topics: a group of vocabulary words, a grammatical concept, or a cultural situation you might encounter. Role-plays help you become comfortable using grammar and vocabulary you might need when navigating life in your target language.
- You and your conversation partner might **ask each other questions about your classes, activities, schedules, or opinions**. At the intermediate and advanced levels, you and your conversation partner might start to discuss more abstract topics.
- During the semester, you will **read or watch, then discuss, videos about important traditions, holidays, or events from the culture you are studying**. Discussing these with your conversation partner will enrich your understanding of your target language country.

Your First Conversation Session

Going to your very first conversation session can be daunting because you haven’t learned much of the language yet. Because you have studied only the first lesson or chapter of your book, you will not be able to speak in the language for the entire session. This is expected. Below are strategies that you can use to make the most of what you DO know how to do in the language.

Recite the alphabet

- Your book will open with an explanation of your language’s alphabet and sounds. For more information about learning sounds see the articles under [Writing Systems and Sounds](#).
 - Your language might have an alphabet song. Search for “[Language] Alphabet” on YouTube. If you can find a song, listen multiple times – and try to sing along!
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Use the dialogues in your book

- Does your book start with meeting or greeting other people? Most books will start with basic language about how to introduce yourself. Recite the dialogue as many times as you can, to the point where you have it fully or nearly memorized. In your session, you will be able to concentrate more on pronunciation and less on remembering what to say. Remember to listen to the corresponding audio tracks from your book.

Modify Sentences to Say More

- Modify the basic sentences you have learned so far.
- For example, if your book's dialogue includes the question, "How are your mother and father?" you could modify the question to "How are your friends?" If the dialogue says "I am American", you could replace "American" with another nationality. Explore which new words are available to you and work them into your practice.

Learn Short, Useful Phrases

- One way to use less English in your conversation session is to take short phrases you might say in English and use phrases in your target language instead. Learn shorter phrases such as "I don't understand. Please repeat?" and use them as often as possible. Also see: [Useful Expressions for Conversation Sessions](#).

Note for Heritage Speakers

([Tips for Heritage Learners](#)) If you grew up speaking this language or passively hearing it at home, you might be familiar with most of these introductory words and phrases already. This means that the first conversation session might seem like it will go very easily for you. However, you can still find ways to study effectively and fill in the gaps in your knowledge:

- **Go through the entire assigned section carefully** to see if there is anything new to you.
- **Listen to all audio files** for the chapter.
- **Study the alphabet or script carefully** and read the phrases/dialogues in the books while you listen to them.

Also remember that in your learning the language, you might have internalized certain grammatical mistakes and are repeating them without realizing it. While listening to your audio and reading the book, note if anything is different than how you or your family speak, and ask your conversation partner about it.

Your First Conversation Session - Video

Making the Most of Your Sessions -

Elementary

Prepare to spend your conversation session speaking. You will need to engage with your conversation partner and act out scenarios in the language. Do the following tasks to prepare yourself:

- You will feel much more confident in your conversation session if **you have already practiced the dialogues and vocabulary words in your book out loud** a few times. Practicing dialogues by yourself will help you concentrate more on pronunciation and less on what to say next. You will also be more comfortable modifying dialogues with new vocabulary if you have already practiced the original.
- Come having used all the resources that your textbook and syllabus/study guide have given you for that week. **Read the assigned section of your book thoroughly** to be sure you didn't miss any details.
- Was there a conversation preparation guide in your syllabus? Listening material from your book? Go over these thoroughly. **Those resources will empower you to speak more confidently** when you go to your conversation session.

Come with Questions

Each week, you will find something in your book or your study guide that you have a question about:

- Make sure that you **keep track of these questions** as they come to you – have a list ready when you come to your session.
- **When asking questions, don't forget to use phrases in the target language.** At the beginner level, you will find yourself wanting to switch into English a lot. Resist the urge and always try to use the target language first, even if you know you will have to use English to ask a particular question.

Push Yourself

During the first weeks of your language course, it seems like there is little to say at each conversation session. **Filling the whole time with conversation in the target language might be repetitive at first** because you are repeating the basics you have learned over and over again at each session. Remember that solidifying these basics is the best practice to set yourself up for comfortable speaking in the future.

Think of what else you can do to engage during the session:

- **Look over your vocabulary lists** from the sessions you have done. How many of these words have you used in a session? What could you do to insert them into your conversation? For example, if you have been practicing introductions, try introducing some new words into the scenario. Instead of "Hello. My name is Yannick. How are you?" try: "Hello Yannick. Are you a farmer? Do you have a book? Do you like tomatoes?"
 - **Try to keep adding whatever you can**, even if all you do is string many short sentences together. For more specific tips, see the article: [Say as Much as You Can](#).
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Be Patient with Yourself

Learning another language is hard! You will find yourself making mistakes over and over again, and it might feel like you are always struggling to understand. Remember that **struggling with the language is normal and it doesn't mean you aren't doing well** – the small steps of progress you make each week will eventually accumulate into meaningful and tangible interactions in the target language.

Making the Most of Your Sessions - Intermediate

At the intermediate level, you are already comfortable with the basics of conversation: hellos and goodbyes, exchanging pleasantries, and giving information about yourself and what you are doing. **Intermediate-level conversation sessions should help you build on these skills** by filling in gaps in your vocabulary and helping you master more grammatical structures. You will begin to create longer sentences and express feelings about or describe concrete topics.

When you come to your session...

Come Well Prepared

- When you go over the dialogues and examples of new grammar and vocabulary, you will find some familiar terms, as well as new ones. **Keep careful track of all new words you are learning in a notebook or on a computer.** Make flashcards for all of them as well (Also see: [Why Use Flashcards?](#) and related articles).
- **It's likely that your assignments will include longer dialogues, or longer readings, which you will need to dissect and analyze.** Use highlighters and sticky notes (or other tools you find useful) to draw your eye to new words, phrases, or grammatical concepts. You and your conversation partner might act out a dialogue or share your thoughts on a reading, so it's important to have studied them ahead of time.
- **The listening component of your study is still very important.** When you listen to audio sources, try to emulate what you hear. Your pronunciation will benefit if you keep practicing throughout the week in addition to your conversation sessions. Don't be afraid to speak to the wall, the mirror, or a friend in order to sound out the new dialogues and listening exercises that you have each week.

Come with Questions

Keep track of your questions about all new material. **At the intermediate level, you are expected to always ask questions in your target language**, and switch to English only when absolutely necessary. At the beginner level, you practiced asking, "What does _ mean?" Now, look up how to ask for more specific questions or explanations, i.e., "Is this a noun?" or "Please explain this to me."

Push Yourself

You are already comfortable with simple conversation, and this is a perfect time to build on that foundation. Ask yourself **what else you can say to create more conversation**:

- In your sessions, think of an extra detail, an opinion, or an experience you can add to what you're saying. For example, if you are role playing buying clothes you might say, "I want this shirt." What else could you add? "I want a very soft shirt. Cotton shirts are my favorite. I'll go to school every day in this shirt," etc.

What you can add will depend on the vocabulary and grammar concepts you have learned in your course so far. **What is important is that you can start bringing a new thought or idea into each encounter.** Forcing yourself to think hard to use what you already know improves your ability to think on your feet and say what you mean. For more tips on having successful conversations, see the articles under: [Strategies for Conversations](#).

Making the Most of Your Sessions - Advanced

At the advanced level, you can string phrases together to create longer sentences. You are beginning to offer opinions more confidently and analyze reading and listening material. Your proficiency will improve as you engage with difficult material and think critically in the target language. Your conversation sessions will help you become comfortable narrating multiple tenses, role-playing complicated scenarios, and speaking about topics of personal and public interest.

When you come to your session...

Come Well Prepared

In an advanced course, **your study sources are longer and more complicated.** Use the resources in your syllabus, and any outside sources you find, to challenge yourself in reading and speaking:

- When you read a dialogue or a chunk of text, **read it multiple times and look up all new words.** After reading, take time to voice your thoughts on the material out loud to yourself for about a minute afterwards.

For **listening practice**, continue using resources from your syllabus, and think about any other resource that might be available to you for more practice:

- Is there radio you can listen to online from another country?
- How about TV shows or Youtube channels?
- The more exposure you can get to both formal and colloquial speaking patterns, the better.

There should be a **speaking component of every study session** you have. It will be hard to gain more advanced speaking skills if you speak only once per week at your conversation sessions:

- In particular, it's important to **practice creating with the language** (i.e., speaking your own thoughts and ideas instead of reading a dialogue in your book aloud). If you practice consistently during the week, you will engage more readily with your conversation partner and the topics in your session.

Come with Questions

You can now **ask your conversation partner longer questions in the target language.** When

appropriate ask your conversation partner their thoughts and opinions on the topics you are covering.

- If you have a longer reading or listening selection, online activity, or something similar, **write down some questions about it and go over them with your conversation partner.** Make it a lively back-and-forth. Asking and answering questions is a great way to make yourself think on your feet and hone your conversational ability.

Push Yourself

At the advanced level, you can say a lot and understand a lot. Now is the time to ask yourself questions about the gaps in your proficiency and where you want to go from here.

- In the session, what vocabulary would make the conversation easier? What else would be helpful to know about a particular topic? When you are talking to your conversation partner and can't find the best way to express what you want, **ask them about it immediately.**

The best way to continue advancing in proficiency is to **speak as much as you can in your session.** Challenge yourself to use the new structures and vocabulary words you've learned as much as possible, and keep exposing yourself to the language at every opportunity.

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