



# Strategies for Conversations



So while it is important to continue studying vocabulary and grammar, **there are also strategies you can use to improve your communication right now**, making the most of the language you have already acquired.

## Learning and using communication strategies can help you to:

- **Perform better on oral proficiency evaluations** by effectively demonstrating what you know.
- **Interact with native speakers**, making casual conversation more enjoyable and logistical situations easier to navigate.
- **Make better conversation at any level of language learning**, whether you are a beginner or an advanced speaker of the language.

## Acknowledgement

The suggestions in this section are based in part on experience helping students prepare for Oral Proficiency Interviews and in part on [Boris Shekhtman's book \*How to Improve Your Foreign Language Immediately: Foreign Language Communication Tools\*](#). The book is a quick read and relatively inexpensive, so you might want to read it yourself.

**We especially recommend this book for any student who will be taking an Oral Proficiency Interview or other oral language examination for U.S. government sponsored scholarships, fellowships, or jobs.**

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# Say as Much as You Can

**The more you say in the language, the more you are showing what you know.** Obviously this is helpful in a situation where your language ability is being evaluated. It can also make casual conversations more comfortable and enjoyable:

- In a conversation with a native speaker, if you give very short answers to questions, **that puts more of a burden on the native speaker** to come up with additional questions and keep the conversation going.
- **This feels unnatural, more like an interview than a conversation**, and it can be an uncomfortable situation for both of you.
- **It could also cause the native speaker to give up on the interaction**, and then you would lose out on the opportunity to practice speaking.

When someone asks you a question, **don't give a one-word answer if you possibly can say more.** And don't stop at one sentence either:

- **Expand on the topic of the original question, or move onto related topics.** If someone asks you about your favorite food, you might say that you love lasagna.
- From there, maybe you say that your grandparents came from Italy, or talk about your mother's amazing cooking, or your favorite Italian restaurant, or tell a story about a time when you tried to cook lasagna but you forgot to boil the noodles, or discuss your opinions about the slow food movement.

Obviously how you can expand on a topic will depend on your level in the language, **but even a string of very simple sentences is better than a single word:**

- Maybe you say, "I like lasagna. My mother makes good lasagna. She is a good cook. My father does not cook. He is a doctor. He works in a big hospital..."
- In this string of short, simple sentences, **you have given the person with whom you are conversing five different pieces of information** that could spark follow-up comments and/or questions.

When you are talking, you may hear yourself making mistakes, searching for words, or stumbling over your sentences. **That's okay. Just keep talking even if you make mistakes or are uncertain.** Usually the person you are speaking with is eager to let you express yourself and will ask questions for clarifications or offer a little help along the way.

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# Learn Phrases for Clarification

As early as possible in your language learning, **learn and practice phrases in the target language that you can use to clarify when you don't understand something.** For example:

- I don't understand.
- Please repeat.
- Say that again.
- More slowly please.
- I don't know/remember how to say ...
- What does ... mean?
- Do you mean ...? (restating what someone said to you to make sure you understood correctly)
- I'm trying to say ...
- Tell me.
- Show me.
- Help me.

You may be able to find these types of phrases in your textbook. If not, look them up or ask your conversation partner. You can bring your list of high frequency phrases in the target language to your conversation session(s) and refer to it for a couple of weeks at the beginning of the semester. After that, aim to memorize your high frequency phrases. You can use flashcards or other techniques to help you [memorize](#) them.

You should **use these phrases in the target language instead of asking in English:**

- **This will be valuable practice for real-life situations** where you need to clarify what a native speaker said.
- In a social situation, **this can help keep a conversation going** instead of having one or both speakers give up on the interaction.
- When handling a practical situation such as asking for directions, **it can make the difference between getting where you need to go or becoming even more lost.**

Also **learn some questions that will help you to pick up new words and phrases** in the language. For example:

- How do you say ...?
- What is this called in [language]?
- What's the word for ... in [language]?

## Listen for Main Points

In order to have a successful conversation, **you need to understand what someone is saying to you.**

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- Whether you are a beginner or have been learning the language for years, **you probably do not know as much vocabulary as a native speaker of the language**, so chances are you

will not understand every word that you hear.

- Instead of getting caught up on the words that you don't know, **focus on what you do understand**.
- **Even if you do not know every word, often you can figure out the gist of what someone is saying, or at least the main topic.**
- Focus on the words that you already know and words that you can guess the meaning of (words that are similar to English words or to words you know in the language, as well as names of people and places). Don't worry about words that are completely unfamiliar.

In casual conversation, usually it is enough to understand the main point of what someone is saying.

**In a situation where you need to listen for detailed information** (like phone numbers, addresses, or directions):

- Ask clarifying questions.
- Have the person repeat the information to you again, and/or repeat back what you think you heard to make sure you understood correctly. Also see: [Learn Phrases for Clarification](#).

One way to practice listening for the main points is through **extensive listening** activities (See: [Extensive Listening](#)).

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## Use Simple Language

You won't be able to speak as elegantly in your new language as you can in your native language. But often you can get your basic point across using simple language that you have already learned.

**It's better to say something in a simple way and be understood than to try to make a more complicated sentence and not be understood**, or to freeze up altogether because you just don't know enough of the language to form a more complicated statement. **You can simplify both the words you use and the grammar/sentence structure.** For example:

- Maybe you don't know the word for "calculus" but you can say that you have "math" class on Tuesdays and Thursdays.
- Or perhaps you don't know the word for "gigantic" but you can say "big" or "very big."
- Instead of "On my drive to school every morning, I pass by the chocolate factory, where I have always dreamed of working as a taste tester," maybe you can say, "Every day I drive to school. I pass by the chocolate factory. I want to work there someday. I want to test the chocolates."

## Dealing with Words You Don't Know

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When you run into a word you don't know, **you can also try to work around it by giving a description or example:**

- If you don't know the word for "submarine" you could explain that it's like a boat that goes under the water, or for "hypocrite" you could give an example of a person who says they care about the environment but always throws trash on the ground.
- **Gestures** can often be helpful as well.

## Think in the Language, Don't Translate

You should **try as much as possible to think in the language you are learning**. Try to avoid thinking in English (or another language) first and then translating your thoughts into the language you are learning:

- If you think in your native language, **you will probably think in terms that are too complicated for you to express in the language you are learning**, requiring vocabulary and grammar that you haven't learned yet.
- Also, because grammar and sentence structure differ between languages, **you may end up forming sentences that sound awkward or even unintelligible because you are trying to use English grammar** instead of the grammar of the language you are learning. (For example, you cannot translate a sentence such as "I really like ice cream" word-for-word into Spanish, because the Spanish version is more like "The ice cream pleases me a lot" ("Me gusta mucho el helado").)

By thinking in the language you are learning and sticking to simple vocabulary and grammar, you can use what you know to communicate more effectively.

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## Practice Asking Questions

When you practice speaking, both on your own and in your conversations sessions, **make sure you practice asking questions**:

- If your conversation partner always asks all the questions and you just answer them, then **you won't get enough practice with asking questions**.
- **Often the sentence structure for a question is different** than the sentence structure for a basic statement, and you need to be comfortable with both forms.

**In a social conversation, usually there is a back-and-forth**, with both speakers taking turns asking and answering questions:

- **If one person is doing all the asking, the conversation can become more like an interview**, and both speakers might feel uncomfortable.
  - **Questions can also be useful for steering the conversation** toward topics that are more interesting to you or subjects that you can talk about more easily. (If you want to talk about music, you could ask the other person what kind of music they like.) Also see the
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article: [Develop Comfortable Discussion Topics](#).

- **Questions are also essential for practical situations where you need to get certain information.** For example, if you are booking a hotel room you might want to ask about the price, how many beds are in the room, whether any meals are included, etc.
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## Develop Comfortable Discussion Topics

It is helpful to have certain topics that you are very comfortable discussing in the language you are learning:

- **Talking about a familiar subject that you have practiced many times takes less effort,** so it can feel like a bit of a break in the midst of a more challenging conversation.
- Boris Shekhtman refers to these prepared topics **as “islands” where a non-native speaker can rest while “swimming” in an unfamiliar language environment,** and he **recommends memorizing short monologues until they can be recited automatically.**

If you don't want to memorize a paragraph word-for-word, **practicing a topic over and over will still make it much easier to discuss that subject in the future.**

- You can practice in your conversation sessions and any other time you have the opportunity to talk with native speakers (or with other learners).
- But since those opportunities may not come very often, **you should also practice on your own.**
- **Have conversations with yourself out loud, playing both parts.** The more often you practice speaking about the same topic, the easier it will become.
- **You can even use flashcards to help with your conversation practice.** [In her To Be Fluent blog](#), Stephanie describes making flashcards that have a question on the front (Do you have any siblings?) and prompts on the back (name, work, residence, description, etc.), all written in the language she is learning.

### Choosing Topics to Practice

When choosing topics to focus on, pick subjects that are important or interesting to you and that will be helpful in conversations with native speakers:

- **Practice some personal topics** such as talking about your family, your daily routine, your studies and/or work, your favorite book or movie, a hobby that you enjoy, etc.
  - **You can also work on non-personal topics, especially ones that relate to places where the language is spoken.** For example, if you are studying Turkish, you might practice talking about Turkish music or literature, discussing the different political systems in the U.S. and Turkey, or comparing the geography and climates of the two countries.
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- (But again, **you should choose the topics based on what *you* like to talk about**, as well as your level in the language. As a beginner you may want to stick to personal topics.)

## Steering a Conversation

When a conversation becomes challenging or fades into uncomfortable silence, **you can steer the conversation to one of your comfortable, practiced topics.**

- **One way of doing this is to ask a question that relates to the topic.** (For example, if you want to talk about your favorite book, you could ask the person you are talking with whether they like reading, or about *their* favorite book.)
- You can also try to **make a bridge from the current topic of conversation to the subject you want to discuss by stepping from topic to topic** (Shekhtman calls this “linking”). If the conversation is about taxes but you’d rather talk about your family, you could say something like this: “My friend helps people do their taxes. She and I went to high school together in Vermont. My parents still live in Vermont. My mother is a doctor, and my father is a teacher...”

## Shift the Conversation Away from Difficult Topics

**Sometimes in conversation a topic will come up that you just aren’t able to talk about in the language you are learning.** Even if you are trying to use simple language, you might just not have the right vocabulary to discuss a certain subject. In these cases, **it can be helpful to shift the conversation to a topic that you can talk about more easily** (perhaps one of your comfortable, practiced topics or “islands”):

- **You can take either a direct or indirect approach to shifting the topic.** The most direct way is to simply state that it is difficult for you to talk about that topic and to suggest changing the subject.
- **Alternatively, you can try to introduce a new subject in a subtler way.** For example, if a native speaker has asked you a question that you cannot answer in detail, you could give a short, simple answer and then ask a question on a different (perhaps related) topic.

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## Develop Comfortable Discussion Topics - Video

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### Five College Center for World Languages

79 South Pleasant St, Suite 100  
Amherst College, AC Box 2264  
Amherst, MA 01002  
USA

[FCCWL website](#)

p: 413-542-5264

e: [fclang@fivecolleges.edu](mailto:fclang@fivecolleges.edu)

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