



Five College Center for World Languages

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Section 1: Conversation Sessions

Section 1: What is a Good Conversation Session?

1A: Conversation Partners

1A: What is a Conversation Session? What is a Conversation Partner?

Conversation Sessions

Conversation sessions provide a chance for learners to practice using the language. The session is conducted entirely in the language students are learning with an opportunity to ask questions in English at the very end of every session. Conversation sessions focus on using the language in the types of situations one might encounter in everyday life. Students commonly engage in role-plays, question and answer activities, description, narration, and problem-solving exercises. In beginning level courses, typical topics are greetings, introductions, getting acquainted conversations, telephone calls, asking for directions, shopping and bargaining, and talking about schedules and events in the past, present or future. More advanced students will practice more complex speech activities that involve expressing opinions, giving reasons in arguments, and discussing current events and cultural issues.

What Makes a Good Conversation Session?

Here are some characteristics of a good conversation session:

- students are actively speaking throughout the session;
 - activities encourage students to create language rather than read from a book or piece of paper;
 - every student gets an equal chance to participate;
 - the interactions are almost completely in the target language; English is used sparingly;
 - every student in the session arrives well-prepared;
 - the conversation partner arrives well-prepared;
 - questions, problems, and corrections are dealt with in a constructive manner.
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What is a Conversation Partner?

In this program, the term "conversation partner" is used to refer to the person who leads the conversation session. That person might be undergraduate conversation partner who has been formally educated in the language, a visiting foreign language teaching assistant, a graduate student tutor, or a language lecturer. The role of the conversation partner is to facilitate activities that make active use of the language. In a successful conversation session, the students will be the ones doing most of the talking for at least 90% of the time. The conversation partner may engage students in dialogue or may have students work in pairs with one another. The conversation partner will use the language being learned throughout the session. At the end of the session, the conversation partner will give students a chance to ask questions in English.

Conversation partners do not present a lesson; instead they participate in conversation with the students studying the target language. Their role is in the guidance of the session in order to ensure that the students are having ample time to speak and practice speaking the target language with them. A conversation partner is meant to help students actively make use of linguistic functions that they would encounter when using the language in its authentic and native context. For example, a conversation partner would not teach students about using the verb "to be" but would rather engage students in conversation by asking questions that utilize the verb such as "How are you?" "What time is it?" etc.

1B: Target Language

1B: Using the Target Language

Pronunciation

Even though students may only know a few words, such as "hello" "how are you?" "goodbye" and "my name is," you can still keep the entire session in the target language. The key is to speak slowly, enunciate your words, and make sure your pronunciation is very clear. Before your first session you need to practice your pronunciation in order to make sure that you are pronouncing every letter and syllable when speaking.

Speaking in Simple Sentences

Even if students can't understand everything you say they will pick out certain words they have heard before in order to understand the context. In the beginning, you will need to speak in simple sentences and use a lot of hand gestures and body language, sometimes even drawing on the blackboard, in order to make sure you are being understood. Again, this takes practice.

Before your first session you should write down a list of simple sentences and phrases you will use during your conversation session. Practice your pronunciation of these sentences and think about what kind of body language you can use to articulate your meaning. For example, when saying the word "hello" one can wave one's hand to signify the action's meaning. If the language learners have studied the phrase "my name is," then during the session, when you say your name, you can point to yourself, say your name, and then say the entire phrase together.

Use emphatic gestures in order to help the students make connections between the words you are saying and their meaning. Expect to say phrases slowly about three to four times before the connection between what you are saying and what it means is made. Prepare a list of simple and useful words and phrases that can be referred to when someone wants to ask a question or if something was not understood. You may want to make sure that each person is able to say phrases such as: "Can you please repeat?" "I don't know" "I didn't understand." You can also review these quickly during the first session.

Also remember to only use the vocabulary currently being studied based on the study materials. It is okay on the first day of the session to practice the phrase "my name is" or "how are you?" but other than those basic greetings and partings, it is extremely important that the conversation partner adheres to the vocabulary that the conversation participants are learning. You can always review the vocabulary everyone is learning by referring to the study materials or syllabus.

How Fast Do I Speak?

Speak slowly in the beginning. You can eventually quicken your speech, but not by much. You want those in the conversation session to gradually become adjusted to the normal speaking velocity in the target language, but this transition must not be rushed. You will need to gauge when you can start introducing a quicker speaking velocity based on how easily you are being understood. It is best, however, to keep it slow until they are more advanced.

Body Language and Gestures

In elementary conversation sessions body language and gestures are crucial in communicating what you are saying in the target language. When practicing greetings such as "hello," use the appropriate gesture that corresponds to the word so the connection is made to the word "hello." For example in English one would wave his/her hand. Point to objects and give their name in the target language, ask students to repeat by pointing to them. Students may not understand the first or second time, however if you are patient and keep repeating and using the appropriate gestures, students will eventually understand what you are asking or saying. Remember that repetition is very important in the first few sessions since those in the session are still getting used to hearing the language and understanding it.

1C: Examples & Assignment

1C: Video Examples and Section 1 Written Assignment

Preparation for Discussion

Watch the video examples below and think about these questions, write down your notes, be prepared to talk about them in group discussion. If you are doing this training individually, you will need to prepare written answers to each question.

1. Why do you think each of these videos was chosen as a good example of a conversation session activity? What attributes of a good conversation session are exhibited in each video?
2. Based on what you have read, observed in the videos, or gleaned from your own language learning experience, list five key ingredients for a good conversation session.

Video Examples

Watch the video examples. Even though you may not understand the language involved, you can still observe the way the conversation partner and students interact.

Offering Cake

Discussing Music

Barbecue

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