



**Conversation Class Handbook**  
**Revised 8/07**

**Disclaimer:**

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## Purpose

The Literacy Council's conversation classes are intended to improve students' ability to speak and understand English more confidently and rapidly.

Learning to use English in conversation does not come from just learning words or phrases but rather from learning sentence patterns. The aim in a conversation group is to help familiarize the non-English speaker with sentence patterns appropriate for most daily communication. Participation in free-flowing conversation opens doors and broadens outlooks.

## Target Population

The program is directed at students who have reasonable competence in spoken English and the desire to learn and grow. Low level learners are also welcome, but those who find it difficult soon leave of their own accord.

Most students will have jobs or other outside obligations that affect their attendance. They may drop in or out to accommodate these obligations. While this is expected, it is wise to discuss with participants the advantages of continuing serious, consistent, and reasonably on-time attendance after the initial 2 to 3 weeks. Building skills and confidence in speaking English comes with practice, dedication, and hard work. This is especially true for those who have little or no opportunity to use the language outside of their participation in the group.

## Administrative Procedures

### Attendance

Given the target population, it is reasonable to expect attendance to be sporadic. Having the students use a sign-in sheet at the beginning of each class can make taking attendance easier. You can ask students to record their name and phone number in case of emergency cancellation. You can also include areas for the student to indicate if he/she is interested in receiving information about structured classes. See Appendix A for a sample sign-in sheet.

### Evaluation

Although our conversation class model does not currently include a formal evaluation, it is something that other programs may wish to consider. Simple student surveys given at the end of the session or several times throughout the calendar year are forms that would work well in an informal setting.

## **Class Characteristics**

### **Size**

The average class size is about 6, although it has varied from as many as 15 to as few as 1 or 2. The class usually starts at 8 or 10 and then dwindles. When more than 6 students attend, pair and group activities can maximize the time that each student spends speaking. Classes of more than 12 might benefit from a second teacher, depending on the location.

### **Frequency and Duration**

Typical classes are about 90 minutes long and occur 1-2 times a week, depending on volunteer availability. There are 3 models currently operating under the Literacy Council conversation class program:

1. Classes are held in parallel with structured classes for 10 weeks per session, breaking in August, December, and April.
2. Classes are offered during the intersession between the Literacy Council's structured classes for about 5 weeks a session.
3. Classes are held continually throughout the year, breaking only for holidays.

The advantage of holding classes concurrently with structured classes is to allow students in class to have a forum in which to practice. Classes during the intersession help keep students interested in the program. Continuous classes can make recruitment and retention easier because students are not confused by start and end dates.

### **Content**

The class should focus on conversation, but activities can involve reading. The idea is to keep the students talking as much as possible, without dedicating large chunks of time to reading and writing, as you would in more traditional classes. Occasionally students attend who can't read at all, and this class should be a place where they don't feel awkward about it.

### **Multilevel Classes**

Given its target population, it is inevitable that the class will have students at many different levels. Some teachers feel that the strongest students should be paired with the weakest. This is a good method as it avoids putting anyone "on the spot." When students come regularly but hardly ever speak, give them opportunities to speak, but don't insist on it. If some students seem confused, stop the class to make sure everyone understands a word or phrase. Involve the more advanced students by having them help define the word. Of course, encourage all students to ask for clarification when they don't understand. Use your judgment to decide whether students who speak the same language should be paired together or not. Avoid relying on other students to translate, as students will learn faster if they have to practice the English skills they already have to get answers.

## Class Activities

### Ideas to build conversations and discussions

Emphasize the flow of a “natural English conversation” rather than a classroom dynamic. Encourage students to ask questions of other students instead of waiting for the teacher to ask them. Allow digressions from the planned topic, as long as all students seem engaged in the discussion.

### General Activities:

1. **New Words/Phrases-** Ask participants to talk about words or phrases they have heard or read, but may not understand. Define and explain new words and usages (what’s “proper”). Explain slang words and pronunciations (e.g., “dunno,” “gotcha”) and idioms such as “fifty-fifty,” “set sail,” and “cry wolf.”
2. **“Ear training”** – Have students listen to some prose to help them learn the rhythms and flow of spoken English.
3. **Short Reading-** Provide copies of a brief article to be studied at home for discussion at the next meeting.
4. **Dictation-** Read short paragraphs as dictation. Have students write down what they hear. Distribute a copy of the text so that the group members can compare what they have heard and written to the original text. *\*Note: This activity is more appropriate for students who have an interest in improving their reading and writing skills as well.*

### Pair/Group Activities:

1. **Role playing** (5 minutes): Write a short dialogue on the board and ask students to practice the dialogue in pairs.
2. **Discovery** (5 to 10 minutes): Give students one or two open-ended questions to ask their partner. When all students have answered, discuss their responses as a group. The teacher can ask each student what he or she answered or what his or her partner answered. This works well with a question such as “How is \_\_\_\_\_ different in your country?”
3. **Realia** (10 to 15 minutes): Provide the class with real-world materials (e.g., maps, menus, catalogues, housing or job ads, coupons, telephone book pages) and ask the students to analyze them. Ask them to compare several different materials, to find information using the materials, or to define the vocabulary used on the materials. Materials can be as elementary or advanced as the students’ skills. Keep in mind that those students who appear to be beginners may be surprisingly adept at real-life tasks they have already had to navigate, such as apartment hunting. After students have discussed their materials, ask them to explain what they found or decided to the group.



4. **Photos** (5 to 10 minutes): Provide photographs of people from magazines and ask students to answer questions about them (e.g., who are they? how do they feel? what are they doing?)
  
5. **Debate** (20 to 25 minutes): For this activity it is best to have a class of at least 6 students. Divide class into two groups. Provide a question with two opposing answers. Assign each group one answer and ask them to brainstorm reasons that support that answer. After each group has thought of several reasons, have one student from each group come to the front of the class and present one reason. Rotate students from each group. Note: Less advanced students may not understand that you have assigned them an answer. They may instead think of reasons to support their own answer. To simplify a debate, allow each student to defend his or her own answer to the class instead of dividing the class into groups.

## Typical Group Session Models

### Model A:

#### Attendance

Attendance is taken.

#### Welcome

Any new students are welcomed and introduced to the class. This includes a welcome and introduction by each person to the new attendee (practicing social skills in English).

#### Sharing

If the class follows the weekend, people are asked to share what they did during that time. Discussion often follows, especially if some aspects of the weekend activities need further explanation, i.e., new words, places, etc. Having local area maps can be useful and often opens up new prospects for those who wish to explore our local areas. (A world map is also useful to show where students are from throughout the semester.)

#### New words/phrases

A brief period is allotted to discussing and explaining English words or phrases that group members may have heard or read. This may include discussion of idiomatic usages and often involves presentation of a bit of grammar.

#### Prepared discussion

Students can discuss a topic assigned at the previous meeting. The topic may be in response to a request from a group member for more information, or can be generated by some topic of current interest in the news.

#### Short Reading:

Students listen as the teacher reads a short story, and then discuss the subject. This may involve something such as a folk tale. If this is the case, a discussion of a parallel story from the group members' home countries is often very interesting.

#### Dictation:

Once a week a few short paragraphs may be read as dictation. The group members write down what they hear. The reading is given fairly slowly, sentence by sentence. Then the entire dictation is repeated at conversational speed. Following this, a copy of the text is distributed so that the group members can compare what they have heard and written to the original text. Any new and possibly unfamiliar words/phrases are identified and added to the text for clarification.

*Note: This activity is most appropriate for classes in which students are also interested in improving their reading and writing skills.*

#### Wrap up

Topics for future discussion are assigned with handouts provided for study before the next meeting.



## **Model B**

### **Attendance**

Take attendance and pass out weather notices or class schedules, if necessary.

### **Sharing**

Ask the students to tell a story about something that happened since the previous class. (10 minutes)

### **Introduction**

Presenting the day's topic and reviewing relevant vocabulary. (10 minutes)

### **Activities**

- Pair activity (role playing) to practice vocabulary. (5 minutes)
- Pair activity (discovery) to see what students think about the topic. (10 minutes)
- Group discussion of issues and ideas that surfaced in pair discussions. (10 minutes)
- Pair activity (realia) to analyze materials related to the topic. (15 minutes)
- Group discussion of realia used in activity. (10 minutes)
- Debate. (20 minutes)

## Suggested Conversation Topics

### General

- What would you expect/like to be doing one year from now? Five years?
- What were you doing 1 year ago? Five years ago? (These are good for practicing past and future tenses.)
- Bring in an advice column. What should s/he do? Discuss options, and then hand out advice columnist's answer. Is this good advice?
- What makes you happy/unhappy? (Discuss vocabulary for emotions: What makes you jealous, excited, discouraged, amused, relieved, disappointed, etc.?)
- What person do you admire most? Why?
- Tell the group about something that made a really big difference in your life.

### U.S. Culture

- U.S./American customs and usages
- Accepted forms of introduction and address (formal and informal)
- Preceding a federal/national holiday, a brief discussion of the significance of the date is often useful. This may include a short American history lesson and a discussion of customs.
- Compare and contrast U.S./America with the home country
- Housing, food, schools, government, etc.
- How (or If) U.S./America is different from what may have been expected

### Vocabulary

- When do you speak English? Home? School? Shopping?
- Do you keep a notebook to write down new words or ideas you have learned?
- Vocabulary growth and enrichment – provide a list of 10 new words for memorization and use, including proper pronunciation
- Idioms and their meaning(s)
- Use tongue twisters to practice pronunciation.
- Practice numbers (e.g., sixteen vs. sixty, numbers in the thousands and millions).

### Entertainment

- Current events, TV, movies, etc.
- What do you like to do in your free time? Do you have a hobby?
- What are you reading now? What language?
- What movies do you like? What language?
- What kind of music do you like? Why? Bring a CD to share with the group.
- Tell something about the music you have brought.

## **Jobs and job hunting**

- Do you have special skills or training? What things do you think you can do better than most other people? Would you like to teach about these things?
- Are you working or looking for work? Do you have a resume?
- Did you work in your home country? What did you do?
- What questions will you be asked in an interview?
- What is your dream job?
- Analyze job ads.

## **Health**

- Maintaining good health. What is your “health literacy” in English?
- Calling 911 to respond to emergencies
- *Note:* Local fire stations can send a trained EMS professional to talk to your class about emergencies. Contact the Literacy Council for more information.
- How can you stay healthy? (healthy diet, exercise, reduce stress, etc.)
- When should you go to the doctor? (cold vs. flu, medical conditions, injuries, annual exams, etc.)

## **Travel**

- What place(s) would you like to visit in the U.S.? The world? Why?
- Directions- discuss giving directions. Analyze a map.
- Transportation – how did you get to the United States? (car, bus, plane, train, etc.)
- Do you prefer to fly or to drive? Why?
- Are you planning a vacation? Where are you going?

## **Money**

- Do you have a bank account? Do you prefer to use cash, credit card, debit card, or checks? Why?
- What would you do if you won the lottery? Is it better to save the money or spend the money? (This is a good way to practice or introduce the conditional tense.)
- Discuss money and how much different things cost. Practice giving a price and making change.
- Do you like to go shopping? Why? Where? Is shopping different in your home country?

## **Family**

- Tell the group about your family. Are you married? Do you have children?
- Do you have pets? Did you have a pet in your home country?
- Do you have a big family or a small family?
- Are you the oldest, middle, youngest, or only child?
- What family members are in the U.S./your home country?



## **Housing**

- Do you live in a house or an apartment?
- Discuss rooms in the house and furniture vocab.
- Draw and floor plan and give a tour of your house.
- Where would you like to live?
- Analyze housing ads.

## **Food**

- What is your favorite food?
- What food do you see here that you never saw in your country?
- What food do you eat in your country that you can't find here?
- What food do you make for special occasions in your country?
- What food do you like to cook?
- Do you cook often? What will you eat tonight?
- Do you think food in the U.S. is better or worse than food in your country? (Often, students answers that food is faster to make, but less healthy and tasty)

## Resources

The Literacy Council teachers and program staff have compiled a list of some of our favorite teaching resources, as well as some further reading that may interest you. Many of the books listed below are available in the LCNV resource library.

### Suggested Websites:

#### Reading Companion

[www.readingcompanion.org](http://www.readingcompanion.org)

A web-based literacy tool that allows registered users to access a library of e-books. The program then “reads” with the student by modeling the phrases in the book and asking the student to repeat them. It then uses voice recognition to evaluate the student’s performance. Contact the Literacy Council of Northern Virginia for details on how to register.

#### Traducelo Ahora

[www.traduceloahora.org](http://www.traduceloahora.org)

This IBM grant allows registered users to translate web pages back and forth from English to Spanish. It also enables users to have their emails automatically translated into English or Spanish. Contact the Literacy Council of Northern Virginia for details on how to register.

#### ESL Images/ESL Library

<http://www.esl-library.com/>

This site contains images for teaching vocabulary and some fully-prepared lesson plans. This site requires membership, but you may use LCNV’s member account—contact the Literacy Council for more information.

#### Boggle’s World

<http://bogglesworldesl.com/>

This site contains a myriad of activities, lesson planning ideas, worksheets, and flashcards for teaching ESL. It also has links to other helpful sites and teaching discussion boards.

#### Dave’s ESL Café

<http://www.eslcafe.com>

The “idea cookbook” on this site has hundreds of classroom ideas submitted by ESL/EFL teachers of all levels throughout the world. It’s a great source of inspiration for new activities, role-plays, and debates.

#### English for Everybody

<http://www.english-online.org.uk>

This site provides pronunciation activities, reading practice, resources, and games at many different levels. (Note: British English)



### **The Internet TESL Journal**

<http://iteslj.org/>

This monthly web journal offers articles, research papers, lesson plans, classroom handouts, teaching ideas and links to other useful sites.

### **Virginia Adult Literacy Resource Center Literacy Support Center**

[http://www.aelweb.vcu.edu/literacy\\_support\\_center/links/lesson.shtml](http://www.aelweb.vcu.edu/literacy_support_center/links/lesson.shtml)

This resource center contains a list of websites with resources for lesson plans and some fully-prepared lesson plans.

### **REEP ESL Curriculum for Adults**

[http://www.arlington.k12.va.us/instruct/ctae/adult\\_ed/REEP/reepcurriculum/index.html](http://www.arlington.k12.va.us/instruct/ctae/adult_ed/REEP/reepcurriculum/index.html)

This site contains a number of helpful resources related to instructional planning, curriculum content, learner assessment, and technology integration from the Arlington Education and Employment Program (REEP) curriculum, which is life-skills based, like the LCNV curriculum.

### **Randall's Cyber ESL Listening Lab**

<http://www.esl-lab.com/>

Here you will find over 100 online listening activities grouped by level and topic. The listening files require RealPlayer.

### **ESLflow**

<http://eslflow.com/>

This site provides a multitude of lesson planning ideas and activities on many different topics.

## **Suggested Books:**

### **Grammar: Form and Function**

*Broukal, Milada*

*McGraw-Hill, 2004*

**ISBN-10:** 007008226X

According to McGraw-Hill, "The series features interesting photos to help students accurately recall grammar points, meaningful contexts, and a clear, easy-to-understand format that integrates practice of the rules of essential English grammar (form) with information about when to apply them and what they mean (function)."

### **How to Teach Vocabulary**

*Thornbury, Scott*

*Essex, England: Pearson Education Ltd., 2002*

**ISBN-10:** 0582429668

According to Amazon.com, "This book looks in detail at the theory of words and at how students learn new vocabulary. It offers practical advice on how to help students build vocabulary in new and effective ways and how to test students' word knowledge. Major developments, such as language corpora and lexical approaches, are clearly explained and related to your needs as a teacher."



### **Language Teaching Games and Contests**

*Lee, W.R.*

*Oxford University Press, 1979*

**ISBN-10:** 0194327167

According to Amazon.com this book is, “a large compendium of games for all ages and levels, separated by theme. Each chapter begins with a short introduction, and each game is then explained clearly and practically. The book is especially suitable for use with large classes.”

### **Oxford Basics: Intercultural Activities**

*Gill, Simon, and Michaela Cankova*

*Oxford University Press, 2002*

**ISBN-10:** 0194421783

According to Amazon.com this book contains “thirty simple activities designed to inform and give practice in discussing cultural topics with classes up to intermediate level. The activities are quick and easy to prepare and require few, or no, additional resources. An introduction provides guidance for teachers unfamiliar with the communicative approach.”

### **Skills for Success: Working and Studying in English**

*Donna Price-Machado*

*Cambridge University Press 1998*

**ISBN** 0-521-65742-3 *Student's Book*

**ISBN** 0-521-65714-8 *Teacher's Edition*

This book integrates English language instruction with teaching the competencies needed for succeeding on the job. It focuses on both academic and workplace behaviors, helping students with topics such as building self confidence, handling criticism, managing a successful job interview and making small talk with colleagues.

### **Teaching Adults: An ESL Resource Book**

*ProLiteracy America, developer*

*Syracuse, NY: New Readers Press, 1996*

**ISBN** 1-56420-130-9

This text provides basic information on the process of second language acquisition. Teachers may find it a useful resource in covering idioms, conversation, and the sounds of the English language. It includes related activities.

### **True Stories in the News: A Beginning Reader**

*Heyer, Sandra*

*Addison Wesley Longman Publishing Company, 1996*

**ISBN-10:** 0201846608

Amazon.com says this book “consists of 22 readings based on human-interest stories adapted from newspapers and magazines including new, updated, and improved material. The universal appeal of these stories ensures a pleasurable reading experience and motivates students toward reading fluency. Both the reading selections and exercises will build students' confidence and reading skills.”



## **Suggested Dictionaries:**

### **Cambridge International Dictionary of English**

*Cambridge University Press 1995, reprinted 2001*

**ISBN 0- 521-48421-9** (paperback)

**ISBN 0 521 77575 2** CD-ROM for Windows.

This text is very comprehensive and clear. It can be used internationally because of its thorough treatment of language differences between British, American and Australian English. Also, it contains an excellent section on Parts of speech (grammar), a complete section describing how to find words and meanings, and a collection based on results of the Cambridge Language Survey utilizing a wide variety of spoken and written English, including sources produced by learners of English, offering information based on their needs. Well illustrated.

### **NTC's American Idioms Dictionary, Second Edition, 1994**

*Richard A, Spears, Ph. D.*

*NTC Publishing Group*

**ISBN 0-8442-0826-4** (paperback)

This is an exceptionally comprehensive dictionary, providing many examples of usage for more than 8,500 idiomatic forms in American English. It is an ideal reference for learners who need a thorough and practical guide to American English idioms. It contains a large phrase-finder index as well as an appendix of irreversible binomials and trinomials (phrasals, etc.). Note: NTC Publishing Group provides many other dictionaries of idioms, including a mini pocket dictionary and a collection of essential American Idioms.

### **Oxford ESL Dictionary**

*Oxford University Press, 2004*

**ISBN 0-19-431674-2** paperback

**ISBN 0-19-431628-9** paperback & CD-ROM pack

**ISBN 0-19-431674-2** Oxford ESL Dictionary Workbook

This is an up-to-date, complete guide to North American English (US and Canada). It contains many illustrations, clear explanations, study pages and appendices.

### **The Oxford Picture Dictionary**

*Oxford University Press, 1998*

**ISBN-10: 01-4700607** paperback

**ISBN-10: 0194350738** Beginning Workbook

**ISBN-10: 0194350746** Intermediate Workbook

**ISBN-10: 0194359778** Workbook Answer Key (Beginning and Intermediate)

**ISBN-10: 0194700607** Teacher's Book

**ISBN-10: 0194351866** Classic Classroom Activities

A complete reference to essential everyday vocabulary, this dictionary illustrates over 3700 words, each defined in context with up-to-date art. Each page or pair of pages depicts one of 140 key topics targeted to meet the needs of adults and young adults.



## **Other Tools:**

### **Class Schedules/Information-**

Another good resource for students is information about other English classes that they can take, including the structured Literacy Council courses, and courses at colleges, universities and even some local churches.

### **Community Events**

Students may be interested in events in the community. It is useful to help make them aware of such events. Consider highlighting the many opportunities in this area, especially those that are free, such as the museums and the zoo in Washington, DC, as well as any concerts or shows you know of. Discussing the many things to do in the local area is a good complement to a lesson about travel, transportation, government, or holidays such as the 4th of July. Consider providing students with metro maps and Smithsonian brochures. Encourage the use of area maps. In many localities maps and other information are free from local visitor centers, which can be located online or by checking the phone directory.

**Public Libraries-** Public libraries offer a broad range of reference materials. Many local libraries have dedicated ESL collections and are willing to offer tours of their facilities to classes.

# Appendix A

## Conversation Class Attendance Sheet

Literacy Council of Northern Virginia

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ 7-8:30PM

Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_

**Name:**

**Phone Number:**

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

4. \_\_\_\_\_

5. \_\_\_\_\_

6. \_\_\_\_\_

7. \_\_\_\_\_

8. \_\_\_\_\_

9. \_\_\_\_\_

10. \_\_\_\_\_

11. \_\_\_\_\_

12. \_\_\_\_\_



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