

ESL Conversation Circles Toolkit

Introduction

Conversation circles can be challenging. On the one hand, they can be interesting, fun and a wonderful learning experience. However, they can also easily turn into an unnatural, forced and boring conversation. Because there is no pre-set curriculum or a checklist of grammar structures in a conversation circle, some believe that it doesn't require a lot of preparation. This isn't true. Even the most experienced facilitators need to prepare a little. The main idea is to care about your group and to be prepared. This toolkit is developed for English Conversation Circles (ECC) volunteer facilitators and offers ideas, resources, helpful tips, session plans and sample activities to make conversation circles a success.

Working with Adult Newcomers

The purpose of ECCs is to support newcomers as they practice and enrich their English language skills in a welcoming and comfortable environment. ECCs are important tools for newcomers to gain more confidence in general communication and to make informed decisions in job search and settlement in their new country. Hence, you will become very important in their lives. You will be faced with the stark reality of newcomers' lives and the challenges they have to face day by day. Don't forget that settlement is a very stressful and long process and because of cultural differences what seems perfectly natural to you may not be to the participants, and vice versa. This can lead to misunderstanding and it is important that you know how to address miscommunication in a sensitive and appropriate manner. Because you will be working with adults, some key principles of adult learning will help you shape your attitude, practice and behavior in working with the participants.

Here are some key principles¹:

- Respecting the experience of adult learners is one of the cornerstones of adult education.
- Learning is an exchange between adults who trust and respect one another as equals.
- Learning must be relevant to the learner's life.
- Adults learn best when they are actively involved in choosing and organizing what they will learn.
- Adult learners respond to positive reinforcement and a physically and emotionally comfortable environment.
- Learning begins with attention to the learner's strengths and successes rather than deficiencies and failures.

Session Planning and Preparation

First off, you need to decide what the participants should learn or practice in each session, in other words, you need to set a focus. Your focus can be one of the five skills development areas: *confidence building*, *improvement of pronunciation and emphasis*, *vocabulary builders*, *life skills* and *gaining cross-cultural competency*. Each area also includes several topics. After choosing a skill area you can start with deciding on what kinds of supporting activities will be appropriate for learning on the selected topic as well as for levels of the participants. When preparing for a speaking activity, you should:

¹ See Shawn Conway, *The E.S.L. Tutor's Handbook* (Toronto: Frontier College Press, 1996).

- Discuss the purpose of the activity and introduce any new vocabulary
- Introduce and review relevant grammar points
- Discuss any peculiar cultural points relevant to the activity or what the activity is simulating.

The following skills development tables have been adopted from Queen’s University, International Student Centre’s web site resources.²

1. Confidence Building

Topic	Sample Activities
Small Talk how to start conversation with strangers	Ask the participants if talking to strangers is common in their culture (when is it okay/what would you talk about?).
	Simulate situations in which the participants would engage in small talk.
	With the group, come up with a list of topics that would be considered “small talk.”
	Discuss how small talk is different from other forms of conversation.
Speaking in Public how to express opinions in class setting how to explain an idea/a topic how to find help if needed	Choose a mildly controversial topic (but not something that would offend anyone) and have a mock discussion about it- e.g. violence on television.
	Ask the participants to explain something to each other that is important to them or about which they have expertise (it can be a skill, tradition, a cuisine, anything).
	Post a picture or series of pictures (from magazines, newspapers etc.) Divide participants into groups and send them to a designated wall to discuss the meaning behind the picture. After designating a certain amount of time, have participant groups report back to the group about the pictures.
	Discuss with the group the different ways they can find help if they are lost or having trouble with their landlord.
Presentations/Seminars how to give a seminar presentation how to explain something in different ways so that other people can understand	Ask participants to write scripts that would teach you a skill, have them read it out loud (word for word) as if they are presenting/teaching you.
	Divide participants into groups and ask each group to choose a topic which you must guess, but they can only describe it to you (e.g. topic: Things you do in the morning; Hints; “You get up.....”, “shave” etc.).
	Choose a short story suitable for your group’s language level. However, delete/cut the ending of the story. Participants discuss how they think the story ends then present to the group.
Thinking and Speaking Spontaneously how to engage in a conversation in which justification is needed and arguments/ explanations must be convincing and quick	“Government Priority Activity”- give the participants - or group of participants- cards with different roles of the government on them (e.g. health care, defence, education, welfare, etc.) and ask them to prioritize the roles as if they were the government. Then ask them to explain their reasons for the order of priorities.
	Split the group into teams. Each participant must talk about a certain topic for one minute. If they can do this without hesitation, they win a point for their team. If they hesitate, another team can challenge and continue for the rest of the minute. If the challenging team finishes the minute, they get a point. The team with the most points wins.

² <http://quic.queensu.ca/incoming/elsactivities.asp>

2. Improvement of Pronunciation and Emphasis

Topic	Sample Activities
Pauses & Meanings speed and rhythm how different pauses help create meanings	Read an article in the group and ask the participants to identify the pauses.
	Give the participants a series of sentences (without punctuations), ask them to read them aloud and explain what the sentences mean, then explore the different ways in which the sentence can be punctuated.
Similar Sounding Words & Consonants and Vowels how are similar words sounded in different uses	Give a list of “th” and “t” words: tin, thin, tank, thank, taught, thought. Demonstrate correct pronunciation by saying the list out loud for the participants. Practice in sentences containing both sounds. For example: The thin child thanked his grandmother for the tin toys.
	From the alphabet, randomly sound out a consonant/ a vowel. Ask the group to guess which letter you are saying.
Reading & Flow how to read aloud clearly so others can understand how to identify the intonations in a paragraph	Bring in a short article. Ask the participants to read the article out loud (you may choose to write down words that they have trouble with) and discuss and correct as needed.

3. Vocabulary Builders

Topic	Sample Activities
General Vocabulary building a larger vocabulary learning synonyms to avoid repetition and enhance language	“The Dictionary Game”. One participant chooses a word from the dictionary and reads the word aloud to the rest of the group. He or she then writes the definition from the dictionary on a slip of paper while everyone else writes down what they think the definition may be. Then mix up all the definitions and have each player draw a slip and read out the definition. Players then try to guess the correct definition after hearing all the slips.
	Come up with as many synonyms for adjectives as you can. Then ask the participants to consult a thesaurus to confirm that your list is correct and to expand your list.
Idioms/Slang/Phrasal Verbs how to incorporate idioms into daily conversations using phrasal verbs correctly	Write down idioms on slips of paper and ask the participants to draw one out. Ask them to illustrate or describe what the idiom says (i.e. as plain as day, to get along together). Then use it in a sentence and ask them to guess the meaning of the idiom.
	Choose a common word (e.g. think) and together brainstorm phrasal verbs that are connected with your word (i.e. think about, think through, think up), and compare their meanings.
	Look at different uses of the word “get.” Look at uses of word “up.”
Adjectives/Descriptions Practicing descriptive abilities	Make up a list of descriptive terms used in varying situations. Then ask the participants to describe and critique a recent experience (film, dinner, holiday etc.) using as much descriptive language as possible.
	Bring a picture or pictures from a magazine or a newspaper and ask the participants to describe what is happening and to discuss the people and places in the picture.

4. Life Skills

When planning life skills topics, you should consider newcomers' key survival themes such as health, transportation, housing, family, food and clothing, banking, jobs, house-hunting, telephone, education and citizenship and government issues. These themes relate to various situations such as taking phone messages, arranging appointments, dealing with emergencies, looking for a job, applying for a job, using transportation, dealing with merchants and looking after housing needs. The examples are endless. Hence, the following table includes only few selected samples.

Topic	Sample Activities
<p>Jobs</p> <p>where to find job openings and how to apply</p> <p>typical components of a resume</p> <p>how to prepare for an interview</p> <p>where to get help</p>	<p>Find a mock resume and discuss the different components of a typical Canadian resume with the group. How is it different from the resumes the participants are used to writing? What components are excluded and included?</p> <p>Introduce job searching tools to class such as Career Directory, list of online sources and a few job ads. Brainstorm where to find job ads and other alternative job searching techniques. Discuss job ads together (what are the skills required?).</p> <p>Discuss the purpose of a cover letter. Come up with questions that an employer may ask in an interview. Simulate the interview and discuss.</p>
<p>Health</p> <p>how to seek medical attention</p> <p>what vocabulary to use when seeing a doctor</p> <p>who to go see if there are special needs</p>	<p>Ask the participants to describe the medical system in their home countries (i.e. how does one make an appointment to see the doctor? How much would it cost? Where would one get medication?). How is this system different from the Canadian system?</p> <p>Create a list of ailments (i.e. coughing, sneezing, sinus congestion, headache, dislocated ankle, etc.) and define these symptoms. This will equip the participants with a vocabulary that would be useful when seeing a doctor.</p> <p>Prepare a list of specialists' titles and ask the participants to guess at what they do. Discuss the answers. (A list of common specialists may include chiropodist, paediatrician, gynaecologist, obstetrician, neurologist, urologist, orthodontist, anaesthesiologist, internist, orthopaedist, plastic surgeon, etc.)</p>
<p>Telephone</p> <p>Different telephone etiquettes</p> <p>How to leave voice messages on the telephone</p> <p>Using the phone book</p>	<p>Simulate situations in which a participant has dialed the wrong phone number (you are the person who answered the phone call). Discuss how he or she might handle the situation and how the person who received the call (you) might react. Then simulate situations in which you are the caller.</p> <p>Prepare scenarios in which the participants might have to leave you a message on the phone (she is ill and cannot meet). Rehearse what the message may sound like and the essential information they should leave.</p> <p>Simulate a telephone conversation that may take place if someone is trying to order food over the telephone. You will be the one taking the order. You may want to distribute pamphlets of restaurants or pizza places, etc., before you begin. Ask the participants to decide on what they would order and don't forget to ask them for all the necessary information such as address, phone number, details of order.</p>

5. Gaining Cross-Cultural Competency

Topic	Sample Activities																						
<p>Sharing Cultural Backgrounds, Beliefs and Preferences</p> <p>looking at similarities/differences between home country and Canada</p> <p>facilitate understanding of different cultural practices, attitudes and concerns through conversation</p> <p>looking at rights and responsibilities</p> <p>folklores, fables, superstitions</p>	<p>What do the participants think is better or worse in Canada compared to their home countries (you might want to give some pointers such as weather, food, travel, education, etc.)</p> <p>Consider the list of traits below. Ask the participants to consider the five most important when they are choosing (1) a friend, (2) a friend of the opposite sex, and (3) your future partner or husband/wife? Discuss the expectations and differences in opinions:</p> <table border="0" data-bbox="678 499 1339 695"> <tr> <td>Intelligent</td> <td>Compassionate</td> </tr> <tr> <td>A good conversationalist</td> <td>Trustworthy</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Respects other people</td> <td>Works hard</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Has my parents' approval</td> <td>Likes to do the things I do</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Well educated</td> <td>Has a good job/income</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Polite</td> <td>Physically attractive</td> </tr> </table> <p>Ask the participants what kind of rights they have as citizens of their home countries. Is there a charter of rights and freedoms? What is the most important right that a citizen possesses?</p> <p>Ask the participants to tell the class about the different fables/fairy tales they read in their childhood. There are many variations on the classic fairy tales (Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, Little Red Riding Hood, etc.) Talk about the differences and tell them about the versions popular in Canada.</p> <p>Tell the participants about the different superstitions that Canadians typically believe in (i.e. broken mirror, throwing salt over your shoulder, the number 13, etc.) Discuss the superstitions that the participants believe in.</p>	Intelligent	Compassionate	A good conversationalist	Trustworthy	Respects other people	Works hard	Has my parents' approval	Likes to do the things I do	Well educated	Has a good job/income	Polite	Physically attractive										
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<p>Holidays</p> <p>What different holidays are celebrated in Canada?</p> <p>How do people celebrate holidays in Canada?</p> <p>What happens during certain holidays (i.e. what businesses/services are closed?)</p>	<p>Give blank calendars to the participants and ask them to circle all the dates (in the year) where they would celebrate a holiday in one colour, have them circle all the Canadian holidays they know of in another colour; compare the holidays circled: how many dates are overlapped? What are the different celebrations that take place? What is the significance behind them?</p> <p>Write down, on slips of paper, the different ways people typically celebrate each holiday in Canada. Have the participants draw them out and match it to the holidays they observe. Here is a list of holidays:</p> <table border="0" data-bbox="678 1451 1276 1801"> <tr> <td>New Year's Eve</td> <td>Civic Holiday</td> </tr> <tr> <td>New Year's Day</td> <td>Labour Day</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Valentine's Day</td> <td>Rosh Hashanah</td> </tr> <tr> <td>St. Patrick's Day</td> <td>Yom Kippur</td> </tr> <tr> <td>April Fool's Day</td> <td>Colombus Day</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Easter</td> <td>Thanksgiving Day</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Ramadan</td> <td>Christmas Day</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Victoria day</td> <td>Remembrance Day</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Boxing Day</td> <td>Canada Day</td> </tr> <tr> <td>St. Jean Baptiste Day</td> <td>Mother's Day</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Father's Day</td> <td>Others</td> </tr> </table>	New Year's Eve	Civic Holiday	New Year's Day	Labour Day	Valentine's Day	Rosh Hashanah	St. Patrick's Day	Yom Kippur	April Fool's Day	Colombus Day	Easter	Thanksgiving Day	Ramadan	Christmas Day	Victoria day	Remembrance Day	Boxing Day	Canada Day	St. Jean Baptiste Day	Mother's Day	Father's Day	Others
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The Dos and Don'ts of Conversation³

Dos

- Always keep broad goals in mind. It is easy for you or the participants to become preoccupied with smaller details of English and to lose sight of the main goals of the sessions. When you get sidetracked or when you lose your focus, think of the big picture.
- Use your imagination and experiment. There is no single curriculum that will suit all the participants. So you will have to learn through trial and error no matter how many books you consult.
- Provide suggestions and resources that will assist the participants to improve their English language skills.
- If concerned about shy or overpowering participants in a group, assign each participant certain key points to discuss. Alternatively, you could establish a turn taking system.
- Provide continual encouragement and constructive feedback that will encourage the participants to use English in everyday life.
- Include participants as much as possible when planning future conversation activities.
- Be patient with yourself and the participants.
- Trust yourself and your common sense.
- Be positive, attentive and easy going.

Don'ts

- Do not introduce a conversation activity that requires a higher level of vocabulary that most of the participants are not comfortable with.
- Do not interrupt participants mid-conversation. Even though you may hear mistakes, let them speak freely. Just make note of mistakes to discuss later. You could alter the errors in such a way that do not identify particular participants.
- Do not assume that you have to be a grammarian or linguist.
- Avoid sensitive subjects about participants' culture, religion, race and political views. Although some of the participants may seem open, you cannot guarantee that you won't possibly offend other participants or make them feel uncomfortable.

Discussing Cultural Diversity

Cultural difference is an extremely complex and sometimes highly personal and emotive subject. When facilitators bring this issue into their sessions, they can easily create as many problems as they solve. You may find the following "core values" and "guidelines" sections useful when dealing with cultural diversity.

a. Core Values

- A positive, constructive and optimistic approach to differences.
- Commitment to relationship, mutual respect and integrity.
- Tolerance, openness and flexibility.
- Belief in the uniqueness of individuals, their strengths and capability to achieve their goals.
- Attention to principles of cross-cultural communication.

³ This section was compiled from different web site resources. See The E.S.L. Tutor's Handbook at literacy.sa.utoronto.ca/resources/esltutorhandbook.html, www.yourdictionary.com and esl.about.com

b. Guidelines

- Link the question of cultural differences to the main themes of your sessions: small talk, presentations, vocabulary building, life skills, etc.
- Emphasize how differences can complement and benefit each other and don't single out particular groups.
- Focus on positives, such as the benefits of cultural differences rather than negatives such as racism and prejudice.
- Accommodate points of view of others and explain your own in an appropriate manner.
- Beware of your body language and non-verbal cues.
- Given the informal nature of ECCs, expect the participants to ask you questions about Canada. Try to answer all questions the best you can.
- Set personal boundaries with the participants and respect those boundaries.

Potential Conversation Topics

- Canadian culture/climate/landmarks/traditions/heritage
- Career choices/job searching/employment
- Childhood memories/experiences/education
- Computers/technology/space
- Cultural norms/social conventions
- Current events/news
- Daily problems
- Dreams
- Family/traditions/homesickness
- Globalization
- Government
- Have you ever.....?
- Health/medicine
- History
- Hobbies/interests
- Holidays
- House-hunting
- If you were.....
- Industry/agriculture
- Literature/comics/magazines
- Local history/attractions
- Manners/etiquettes
- Movies/music/TV shows/pop culture
- Natural disasters
- Nature/environment/animals
- Nightlife
- Seasonal topics/activities associated with different times in the year
- Shopping/dining/sales
- Sports/recreation

- Stories/jokes/fables
- Superstitions/home remedies
- The arts (paintings, sculptures, museums, galleries etc.)
- Travel/transportation
- Vacations
- Volunteering/charity
- Who is the greatest....?
- Would you ever.....?

Sample Session Plan and Useful On-line Resources for ESL Conversation Learners and Facilitators

Small Talk- Session Plan⁴

Aim: Improving 'small talk' skills

Activity: Discussion of appropriate small talk subjects followed by a game to be played in small groups

Level: Intermediate to Advanced

Outline:

- Write "Small Talk" on the board (if there is one). Ask the participants to brainstorm as a class to define small talk.
- Discuss the importance of small talk skills with the participants.
- Divide participants into groups of 3-5.
- Give participants the small talk work sheet. Ask them to complete the first section: **Small Talk- Appropriate?**
- Once participants have discussed the various situations, solicit responses on the various subjects from the group as a whole. Feel free to let participants debate the issue.
- Have participants get back into their groups and play the small talk game. Circulate around the room helping the participants when they run into difficulties.
- Take notes on subjects that participants find difficult and brainstorm on appropriate comments for those subjects after the game has finished.

Small Talk- Appropriate?

Which topics are appropriate for small talk discussions? For those topics which are appropriate, think of one interesting comment to make when the teacher calls on you. For those topics which are not appropriate, be able to explain why they are not appropriate for small talk.

- The latest films
- The One True Path to Eternal Life
- The local basketball team
- Cars
- A product you would like sell to everyone
- The Death Penalty
- Your home town
- How much you make
- Your last holiday
- Your favorite movie-star
- The correct political party
- The weather
- Gardening
- Your health problems
- Your family

⁴ By Kenneth Beare, About. Com Guide

Name/URL Address	Useful Activities
Online English Lessons Index http://www.canada-esl.com	printable lesson plans/activities common mistakes in English, English slang and idioms, conversational English, etc.
English Daily http://www.englishdaily626.com/	common mistakes in English, conversation, idioms, proverbs, English Comprehension, exercises, etc.
English Learning Fun http://www.elfs.com	visit guest section “humour me”- English jokes “mouth manglers”- tongue twisters with similar consonant sounds “say what”- listening activities “movie talk”- many interactive activities involving movie stars
English-Zone.Com http://www.english-zone.com/	links to various categories “conversation & pronunciation”-different activities “idioms”- quizzes “dictionaries”- different types of words/phrases arranged in alphabetical order
Sounds of English http://www.soundsofenglish.org/index.html	many interactive activities diagrams to illustrate the position of tongue & teeth when producing different sounds handouts available for print
1-language.com http://1-language.com/eslactivityzone	many ideas on group activities most activities suitable for large classes but may be adapted for smaller groups and pairs
Tefl.net ESL Lesson Plans http://www.tefl.net	activities for all ESL levels and for different skills ESL games and classroom activities
ESL Wonderland http://www.eslworldland.com	online activities for different skills ESL lesson plans, quizzes and group activities
Dave’s ESL Café http://www.eslcafe.com	“hint of the day”- very useful information comprehensive list of phrasal verbs, their usages and definitions “idea cookbook”- great resource for teachers extensive list of idioms “quotes”- always fun & something to talk about- good for discussion and conversation
ESL Party Land http://www.eslpartyland.com	sample lesson plans conversation questions quizzes and games
ESL Games, Quizzes and Activities http://www.teflgames.com/games.html	different games quizzes for different topics
The Internet TESL Journal http://iteslj.org	conversation topics, questions and lesson plans games and activities tips for teachers
ESL about.com http://esl.about.com	conversation topics, questions and lesson plans

