



Yolo County Library

English Conversation Group

Volunteer Facilitator Training

Thank you for your interest in volunteering for the Yolo County Library!

English conversation groups are a fun way to give back to the community while meeting new and interesting people.

To volunteer, please follow these 5 steps:

- 1) Contact the [Yolo County Library branch](#) where you would like to volunteer or [complete the volunteer application](#) and return it to your local branch. (Please keep in mind that not all branches have an English conversation program.)
- 2) Once your application is received, you will be invited to [come to the library to meet with the staff member](#) who oversees the English conversation program.)
- 3) The staff member will ask you to [review this brief online training](#). Please be sure to copy the training certificate and provide it to the staff member.
- 4) [Attend an English Conversation Group meeting](#). This will be an opportunity to see a group in action and meet a current English conversation volunteer. Be sure to ask questions!
- 5) Work with the library staff member to [set a time for your group](#). You are ready to begin.
[Good luck and have fun!](#)



English Conversation

Conversation Sessions for Volunteer Facilitators

And Limited English Speaking

One of the largest barriers for adults learning English is the opportunity to practice oral skills in an **environment where they feel safe and secure**. New language learners often develop reading and writing skills in advance of oral skills. The most hesitant adult new language learner is waiting until his/her mastery of spoken English is complete before developing the confidence to use the spoken language in public or even with family members or friends. However, just as a baby learns language, so does an adult need to begin with one word answers, progressing to phrases and later to sentences. Initially, just making sure the message comes across is the mission. Only at an advanced stage of language acquisition is grammar of importance. **Communicating meaning becomes much more valuable than the form of the conversation.**

English Conversation was created to offer this safe environment for new language learners to practice whatever English they have. It is a **group based conversational opportunity** where volunteer facilitators and learners (waiting for a tutor) are connected to practice oral skills. Learners are free to take risks with sympathetic listeners in a comfortable, non-threatening setting. It is the perfect place to ask questions and share experiences. It is often the only place participants can express spontaneous speech. Friendships are formed and cultures shared as both facilitators and limited English speakers struggle to get their meanings across.

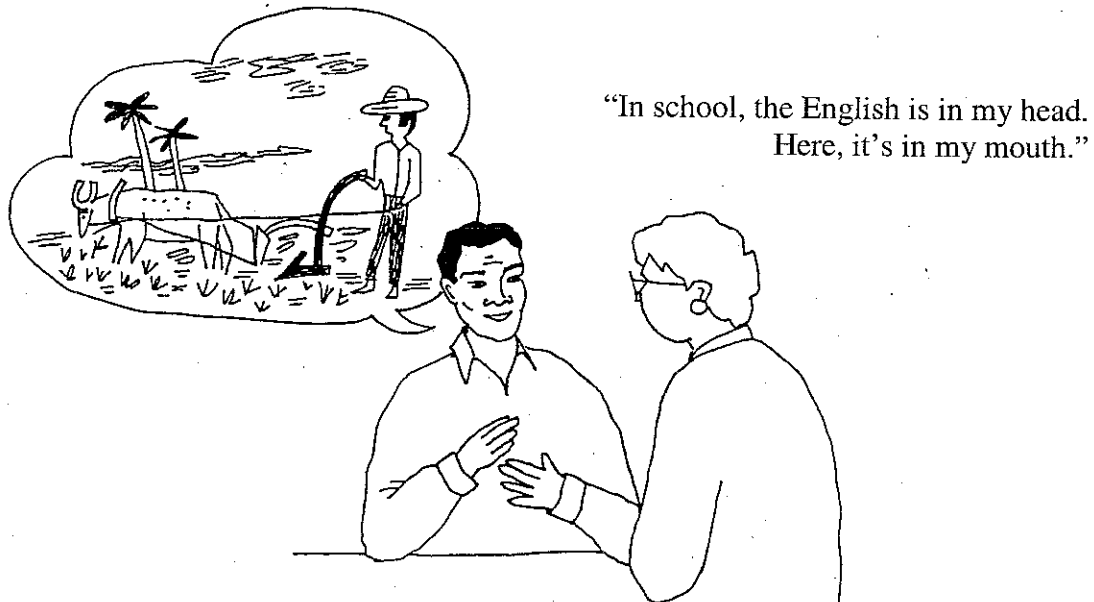
While each language learner may be limited in how effectively he/she can express ideas, the objective of English Conversation is to generate as much conversation as the language learner can manage using the English he/she already has acquired. The focus on comprehension may often look quite intense and spectacular. Communication is achieved by demonstration, use of pictures, gestures, drawings, mime, smiles, and great intuitive leaps!



The volunteer role is that of a **facilitator**—not a tutor. Facilitators do not tutor, but foster and encourage conversation. **The primary goal is to increase confidence, rather than increase skill.**

Facilitators do not teach lessons on structured speech so that participants will speak better English. Instead, they provide opportunities to share cultural and personal information relevant to the group of limited English speakers so they communicate using more English. **Language learning theory suggests that the opportunity to practice oral English in a non-threatening situation is essential to language acquisition.** New language learners must have some time to just talk to others—without fear of making mistakes. Without this time, their English will remain in their heads, not in their mouths.

Making mistakes is an important part of language learning!



Facilitators use any means possible to set up situations in which limited English speakers will want to use the English they have. **Communicating meaning becomes much more valuable than the form of the conversation.**

Ideal qualities for an English Conversation facilitator....

- Patience
- The facility for listening and drawing out

- A talent for resisting the urge to fill any silence with their own voice
- The desire to reach for communication
- Willingness to work toward mutual comprehension
- A tolerant ear that can decipher an assortment of sounds and make English words appear
- A reluctance to have conversations end with polite smiles and no comprehension

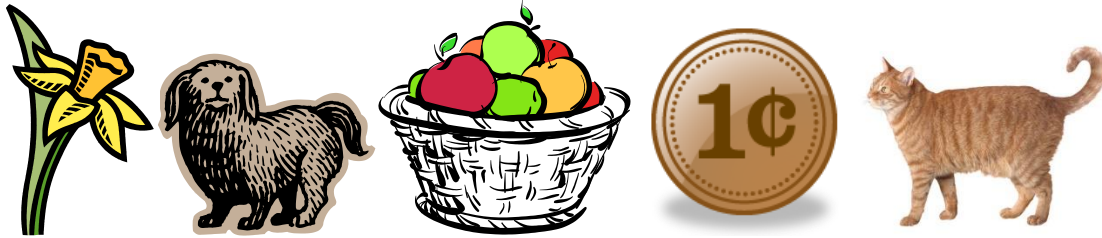
Effective facilitators are also comfortable knowing that communication-driven language practice, however imperfect, is invaluable to language acquisition.

This is not teaching in a traditional sense. Often people with teaching experience or expectations have a difficult time facilitating. Because they want to instruct, they end up talking most of the time, assuming a role of authority and correcting participants' pronunciation. While in moderation, this may be useful for tutoring, it is not desired in English Conversation.



Visuals and Realia

There is a good reason for the expression, “A picture is worth a thousand words.” An essential element of every English Conversation program is a collection of materials and objects. Communication flows more easily for participants and facilitators when visuals are used. Pictures, photographs, drawings, and objects are essential English Practice elements. Realia is an ESL term for “the real thing” and nothing stimulates language better than seeing and holding the actual object while discussing it.



Training

Some skills can be taught, such as using realia to increase communication, while other characteristics cannot be taught. Volunteers need to come to the program with patience and cultural sensitivity. Effective facilitators are able to use a variety of methods to encourage their groups to speak English and create sessions with all the recommended elements.

Communication Skills

Varying the activities according to group size and communication function gives participants practice with many different aspects of communication. All of the following essential skills promote conversation and can be incorporated:

- **Asking and answering questions** – Fluent speakers do both, so it’s important to provide opportunities for participants to ask questions of each other as well as answer questions directed toward them. Guessing is a vital skill as well.
- **Discussing a topic of mutual interest** – Activities that promote discussion give participants practice in asking and answering questions, turn-taking, pausing, breaking into conversation, and listening skills.
- **Presenting Information** – When participants are asked to speak from their experience and culture, they get better at stringing related sentences together to present a detailed description.



Conversation Activities

The goal of English Conversation is to give the participants many opportunities to practice their new English. People want to talk – and will talk more – when session activities fully involve them. So, **when planning a session, include several different kinds of activities to add interest to the topic.** Staying with only one activity can get old and if it's not going well can make participants uncomfortable and uneasy about their English ability.

You will want to **vary the activities around a certain topic so that participants have a chance to ask questions, explain, discuss, and problem-solve.** In doing all of these, you will also want to **promote the exchange of cultural and personal experience.** For variety, change the group size and different activities. Design some activities for small groups, some for pairs, and some for large groups.

Keep in mind that it is usually easier for people to talk one-on-one rather than in front of a large group. For this reason, **beginning an activity with one-on-one conversation is often a good start.** You can start with participants sharing information about a picture or object with a partner, then have them move around and share with several people (still one-on-one), and then have them present it in front of a small group. Organized this way, the activities build on comfort level and still provide a lot of practice with the same topic.

Making mistakes is an important part of language learning!



Conversation Support: Library Conversation Coordinators

Arthur F. Turner (West Sacramento) Branch

Rachel Wolf rachel.wolf@yolocounty.org or 916-375-6465

Esparto Regional Library

Malinda Baker malinda.baker@yolocounty.org or 530-787-3426

Stephens Davis Library

Puiyuk Sin puiyuk.sin@yolocounty.org or 530-757-6777

Winters Community Library

Toni Mendieta toni.mendieta@yolocounty.org or 530-795-4955

Conversation groups are supported in part by the Yolo Reads adult literacy program. The Yolo Reads Program Assistant can be contacted at 530-666-8019 or at libraryvolunteer@yolocounty.org.



Communication

Communication is important to ensure the program functions smoothly and is an enjoyable experience for volunteers and participants.

Please be sure to:

- Contact your Library Conversation Coordinator if any problems arise.
- Call your Library Conversation Coordinator at least 24 hours in advance if you will miss a session. If there is usually more than one facilitator during the time in which you facilitate conversation, please notify that person.
- **Complete information sheet after each session.** The information sheets will be kept in a binder at the reference desk. Please be sure to complete a sheet after each session to document your volunteer hours and the number of participants.

Resources & Thanks

The Talk Time Handbook: Conversation Session for Volunteer Facilitators and Limited English Speaking Participants is written by Marilyn Bentson and Elisabeth Mitchell and published by Tacoma Community House (1995).

Special thanks to the staff at the Solano County Library Adult Literacy Program for generously sharing advice and conversation training materials.

Revised 06/13

Congratulations!

You have completed the online English Conversation Facilitator training.

Please print this page, fill in your name in the blank and complete the bottom of the form, and return to your Library Conversation Coordinator.

Certificate of Completion

**has completed the online training for English Conversation
Facilitator**

Volunteer Name: _____

Date: _____

Phone Number: _____

E-Mail Address: _____

Please provide any feedback or suggestions about the online training. Your input is appreciated!
