

## Conversation Partner Program

Throughout this document, the focus is on the international teaching assistant, but conversation partners assigned to Graduate Assistants from the School of Business are also invited to read and glean from this information.

The conversation Partner Program is one which is specifically designed to help International Teaching Assistants (ITAs) meet the goals of the Conversation Partner Program. (See Goals below.) The Conversation Partner (CP) in this program is usually a **native English speaking** student (ie, one whose family or the household where s/he grew up speaks English as a native and his/her education was gained in an English language medium) who accepts the Guidelines listed below, namely, to meet an international teaching assistant (ITA) twice weekly for an hour each time to practice speaking English to improve the ITAs' level of fluency in English. In return, the ITA who accepts a conversation partner will meet at an assigned place and work hard to improve his/her fluency. (The conversation partner is the domestic student who meets the foreign ITA to practice the ITA's English.) Because the Conversation Partner is compensated, the CP should handle this assignment professionally and inform the Director of ESL about any changes in schedule **or** failure to meet immediately as either of these situations becomes evident.

This handbook is specifically designed for the Conversation Partners to explain the responsibilities and duties associated with meeting an international Teaching Assistant. ITAs involved in the Conversation Partner Program are encouraged to read this Handbook as well. In the interest of this Program, it is hoped that the Conversation Partner will read and consider what is being asked by way of duties and responsibilities.

Both the conversation partner and the ITA should bring topics to the meeting to discuss. The ITA should not expect the conversation partner to entertain him/her nor should the Conversation Partner have to do all of the work of keeping a conversation flowing easily. These sessions should not be an interview with the conversation partner asking all the questions and the ITA providing the answers. These sessions should be a mutual exchange where both the CP and the ITA discover and get to know each other. Both should explore the mindset of the other and, in the process, work on the ITA's ESL skills, correcting and encouraging as any two people would engage each other.

In order to keep these meetings between the conversation partners and their ITAs as open as possible and in the interest of safety, these conversations should be conducted in a public space, preferably on WPI campus. Additionally, Conversation Partners need to manage their time wisely to maintain their good grades and standing in the WPI community. This experience is more valuable when the CP is well rested and not under a lot of stress.

Before meeting the assigned ITA the Conversation Partner should decide what kind of conversation partner to be. Some conversation partners prefer the 100% professional stance where they interact with their ITA in a formal way, usually planning the highlights of their hour together and providing a very structured meeting when the goals are in focus and executing a kind of “lesson” is the most important way of interacting. Other conversation partners prefer something somewhat less formal, more **informal**, intending to get to know the ITA in a more casual and relaxed manner. Whatever kind of Conversation Partner you choose to be, remember that the goal of the program is to help the language acquisition process of the ITAs so that their classroom presentations and verbal interactions with the assigned students are clear and more focused.

## **Benefits of the Conversation Partner Program**

The Conversation partner Program provides an excellent atmosphere of mutual sharing and cross-cultural communication. Conversation Partners gain valuable information about other cultures and people, build new relationships and acquire a sense of achievement. Conversation Partners may receive a letter of reference upon request at anytime during your participation **after** the first 7-week commitment.

## **Requirements to Become Conversation Partner**

- Be a native speaker of English.
- Commit to meeting an ITA twice weekly for 1 hour meetings each time.
- Speak English clearly as it is used at the university level.
- Understand and commit to the Conversation Partner Program to help ITAs practice English.

## **The Goals of the WPI Conversation Partner Program**

Improve ITAs ability to converse comfortably in English.

Improve ITA's grammatical correctness when speaking English.

Improve ITA's pronunciation of English words.

Improve ITA's knowledge of English colloquialisms and idiomatic English.

Provide opportunities for social interaction between US, native English speakers and non-native ESL speakers.

Provide ITAs and conversation partners with opportunities to socialize, using English as the medium of communication.

Provide ITAs with an understanding of US social and academic culture.

Increase the awareness that international students are on campus. (See ***WPI's Commitment to Pluralism.***)

Provide opportunities to know other cultures as represented by ITAs.

Improve the spirit of welcoming and exchange on WPI campus.

Provide opportunities to share culture values and insights

Expand understanding of people, the world and cross-cultural communication.

Provide opportunities to offer friendships across cultures.

## The Goals of the WPI Individual Conversation Partners

- To provide opportunities for service to the WPI community.
- To improve the listening skills and increase comfort level while dealing with international students.
- To provide chances for social interaction and understanding of students coming from especially other societies.
- To increase leadership skills.
- To help students develop skills in social diplomacy.
- To enable Conversation Partners/ITAs to develop increased awareness of other languages, history and sociology.

## The Successful Conversation Partner

The primary resource of successful conversation partners is their knowledge of norms, values and procedures of our institution. Conversation partners would do well to read **WPI's *Commitment to Pluralism*** before starting your work. This acknowledgement is essential but there are also personal and professional characteristics which contribute to the effectiveness of a Conversation Partner. These include the following considerations:

Values the ITA as a person.

Develops mutual trust and respect.

Maintains confidentiality.

Listens actively both to what is being said and how it is being said.

Asks open-ended and gender neutral, supportive questions and provides constructive feedback.

Helps ITA solve his/her own problem, rather than only giving directions.

Focuses on the ITA's development and resists the urge to speak constantly.

Corrects errors as they occur.

Remembers the specific skills the ITA is trying to improve as well as CPs assessment of ITA.

Refers to the Audio and Video references when conversation comes to a standstill.

Motivates ITA to contribute more to conversation than CP does.

Contacts the Director of ESL for suggestions and better understanding of grammar points.

Continues to improve understanding of English grammar.

Speaks English (only) during the CP/ITA meetings.

## **The Goals of the ITAs in the CP Program**

To increase fluency to facilitate dispensing of information in labs and classrooms.

To increase skills at small talk necessary to adjust the listener's ear and comprehension of ITAs spoken ESL before starting a more serious oral delivery.

To improve pronunciation, intonation and enunciation of spoken ESL.

To control grammar, vocabulary and transitional expressions while conversing.

To improve comprehensibility of spoken ESL.

To improve understanding of US academic and social culture

## **Guidelines for Conversation Partners**

Commit to one 7-week term (renewable at the end of each term).

Contact ITA within 1 week of designation as CP

Set a specific time meet at the International House for the **first** meeting.

Confirm first meeting with ITA via e-mail; copy message to the Director of ESL.

Select a public space on WPI campus for future meetings

If for some reason, you cannot keep an appointment, contact ITA to explain the reason for your failure to show up and re-establish a new appointment; copy message to Director of ESL.

If you need additional ideas/topics for conversation partnering, contact Director of ESL Program

At the end of your appointment or at the end of the academic year (whichever comes first), fill out the conversation/ITA response form and submit to the Director of ESL immediately.

Add an hour to your timesheet whenever you meet the Director of ESL  
See International Student Advisor in the International House, 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor,  
to complete your timesheet at least once every **other** week (ie, one every two weeks).

Conversation Partners should fill out the general Weekly Report Form (see below) after each meeting that includes when/where, topics discussed, and also a section for possible challenges/obstacles that you can input your advice on, as well as how the partner plans on potentially overcoming it.

## How to Access the Weekly Report Forms

- You will need your WPI username and passwords to log in.
- If you are accessing the website from off-campus or from your personal computer, please enter user name as follows: [username@wpi.edu](mailto:username@wpi.edu) .
- Please use only Internet Explorer and not other browsers including Firefox. Otherwise, some errors may arise.
- Once you understand the template, it will take roughly 3 minutes to fill the form. The existing conversation sessions started from January 31st, so we have labeled it as Week 1 of the semester and so on. Most of the form only requires picking options from a drop-down menu to save your time.
- **Here is the link:**  
This directly takes you to the form:  
[https://home.sharepoint.wpi.edu/offices/ih/esl/Lists/list\\_cp\\_feedback/AllItems.aspx](https://home.sharepoint.wpi.edu/offices/ih/esl/Lists/list_cp_feedback/AllItems.aspx)  
Click "New" on the webpage from this link to fill a blank form.

You are expected to fill this form for each meeting (ie, twice a week) for each one-hour session.

## Sample Questions for ITAs

1. What did you do for fun last summer?
2. What has surprised you when you met American people in the USA?
1. What is your most difficult subject now?
2. Are you a member of any student groups?
3. What annoying habits does your best friend have
4. Who is your favorite teacher of the subjects you are studying now?
5. What are the qualities you want in your professor?
6. How did you decide what college to attend?
7. What characteristic about yourself do you like/dislike the most?
8. What annoys you about living where you live now?
9. What annoys you about driving a car?
10. Is there anybody in the news whom you dislike intensely? Who and why?
11. Do you think a government should be allowed to execute prisoners? Explain.
12. If you/your wife were pregnant and you found out that the baby would have a serious birth defect that would cause it to have a painful and miserable life, what would you do?
13. What are your life goals for the next five years?
14. What are you most passionate about in your life? Why?
15. A close relative of yours is in an accident that leaves him/her in a coma. The doctor says that he/she is completely brain dead and the only thing keeping him/her alive is expensive respiratory equipment. If you had to decide whether to turn the equipment off or keep it running, what would you do?
16. Would you prefer to be a successful businessman/businesswoman or a successful father/mother? Why do you think you would choose one over the other?
17. If you found a briefcase filled with cash, what would you do? Would you try to return it to the owner or keep it for yourself?
18. If you saw three men attacking someone in an isolated place, what would you do?
19. If your ITA/CP had only one day to spend in your city (province, country), where would you take him/her? Why there?
20. What is the most important lesson your parents taught you? Explain.

21. Where do you like to spend time alone?
22. Who is the greatest person of your nationality to live (in history)? Why?
23. Do you have any personal heroes? Who are they? (Name both living and dead.)
24. What film have you seen recently that you liked? Explain why, how, etc.
25. What is a problem in your country that you'd like to see your government/people attack?
26. What charities would you donate to if you had the money and time?
27. Can you sing? What type of songs do you enjoy? Who sings these songs best?
28. Where would like to go on your honeymoon? Why?
29. If you were marooned on an island, what book would you want with you? Why?
30. What makes you optimistic/pessimistic about a recent story in the news? Explain.

## **Suggestions for Meetings**

Below are suggestions for activities to do to make the conversation meetings more interesting and dynamic!

Meet for coffee or other non-alcoholic drink

Eat lunch on campus together

Ask your ITA to teach you to cook something or do some other activity which requires a lot of articulation

Invite ITA to an activity where ITA has to explain the rules

Talk about differences in US educational institutions, culture and communication styles.

Practice teaching skills

Discuss any of the following

- Cultural traditions and customs
- Special holidays
- Traditional food
- Education Systems
- Political structures
- Favorite pastimes: films, outings and other social functions
- Art and/or artists

- Culture shock
- Current events
- Places to visit
- Family and social relations
- Values and assumptions.
- Listen to a short story and then discuss it. The Director of ESL can provide websites for audio programs which might be appropriate for ITAs with major specific suggestions.

## **Pitfalls in the Conversation Partnering**

Do not use this pairing to proselytize, preach religion or strive to convert the ITA to any religious notion.

Do not use ITAs time as chance to practice Conversation Partner's second language.

Conversation partners should engage in this activity of being a conversation because you are interested in getting to know an international ITA(s). Some domestic students might choose to participate in this program because they are seeking ways to fulfill educational, professional, as well as personal goals. This is fine but be aware that there are definite expectations and responsibilities that must be adhered to if your participation is continued. The immediate and permanent goal of the program is to help ITA improve and control of language flow (ie, fluency), pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and idiomatic expressions.

Do not squeeze two hours into one meeting. This is expressly forbidden because the second hour is not nearly as productive as the first. If you choose to go beyond an hour, this is fine but a second meeting is still expected.

Conversation Partners should not fill every silence with words. Conversation partners need to get used to some silence especially early on in their meetings with the ITAs. As a rule, try to have the ITA talk at least twice as much as conversation partners. But be an active listener, asking for clarity, correcting surgically whenever necessary and pressing for more details when the ITA attempts to explain a lot in a few words.

## **What if.....Problems Develop During Meetings**

If the match of Conversation Partner and ITA does not seem to work, that is, you have very different personalities and /or interests, contact the Director of ESL for a change. Understand that it might take some time to re-match CP/ITA with another but every effort will be made to do so.

Contact the Director of ESL if your partnering does not seem to be working and explain the problem.

Inform the Director of ESL if ITA fails to show up.

Don't forget to report your meetings (see weekly Report Form0 and submit your hours to the International Student Advisor in the International House, 2<sup>nd</sup> floor.