

Conversational Skills for ESL — with ideas collected & written by Craig Rusbult

INTRODUCTION

We want to help you learn how to improve your **Conversational English** — your skill in **LISTENING** (so you can understand other people) **and SPEAKING** (so you can be understood by other people). We have two ways to help you, usually with **discussions** (plus short periods focused on "instruction") and occasionally with a **class** (including handouts like this one) that is more structured.

You have good skills in your own language, so how can you transfer that skill to English, and improve your skill in English? You are probably more skilled in two modes of language (reading & writing) than in two other modes (listening & speaking):

	Passive (?)	active	
on paper	READING	WRITING	visual (you see it with your eyes); often scholarly *
through air	LISTENING	SPEAKING	auditory (you hear it with your ears); oral conversation;
	goal is to understand	goal is to be understood	* scholarly reading/writing can be in journals or internet forums; reading/writing is also used for informal email "conversations"

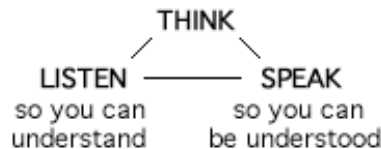
When you speak (or write) you need

1. **GOOD IDEAS** and

2. **GOOD LANGUAGE SKILL** - pronunciation, grammar & word order, pacing, appropriate (for audience & message), etc.

re: #1, develop a clear goal (what do you want to say?) with ideas (to say information, ask questions, persuade for argument or a sale) expressed in way listener/reader can understand (what do they know, what is their perspective? can you appeal to their interests?) and check for feedback from listeners (do they look interested? confused?) so you can adjust what you are saying, and how you say it.

Conversation is a challenging activity, because during it you must do several things at the same time: listen (and mentally process the information so you can understand), think about what you'll want to say when you respond, and speak (so you can be understood),



LISTENING SKILLS

listening is important, so listen to speaker with your full attention; minimize **external** distractions (or ignore them), and try to minimize **internal** distractions (when you're multi-tasking with your attention being split between listening and your own thinking).

listening + planning to speak (combination) -- In 2-person conversation, first focus on listening, then focus on talking. In group (3 or more) the split (listening + talk-planning) is difficult even for Americans, but is especially challenging in your 2nd language.

listen actively: goal is to understand (listen with open mind), interpret/evaluate, decide if you want to respond, and (if yes) how. Your first goal is to get the Main Ideas, then it will be easier for you to understand details and how they fit into the whole story.

listen for total meaning (including feelings) by being aware of body language, voice tone, etc.

minimize translation: The challenge described above (to simultaneously listen/think/speak) is easier if you "think in English" instead of translating back-and-forth into your first language.

ask questions to clarify: ok if 2 people, often in group; open-ended question (if answer is not just yes or no) lets you learn more.

write down ideas for later: if it's appropriate and useful, so you can remember ideas and think about them, or ask questions.

personal connections: While listening, occasionally nod your head (or smile,...) so you can be "active" with interactive communication while you're listening. Occasionally (if appropriate) you can summarize (paraphrase by saying it more briefly and a little differently) to remain connected, and to clarify and be sure you understand what is being said. You can combine a summary (about what you did understand) and a question (about what you didn't understand) -- for example, "You work where?" or "Where is it that you work?" -- instead of a non-informative "What?" or "Can you please repeat?" that doesn't tell the speaker what you do and don't understand.

PRACTICE LISTENING

- Discussions (with feedback) in ESL Cafe, plus International Club and (look for opportunities!) in your everyday life.

- Listen to Audio or Video/Audio, slow-paced or at faster "conversational" speed. Here are some tips for practicing with DVDs:

- use subtitles in English (not Chinese) to connect what you know about English reading with what you're trying to learn about listening (and speaking) and this will help you learn how to "think in English" during your conversations.

- also use the "stop" and "replay" buttons. (these features - subtitles, stop, replay - are advantages of DVD, versus TV or radio)

- types: entertainment (fiction), documentary, educational,...; maybe use movie guides (to get "basic ideas" as with Cliffs Notes)

- where: Madison Public Library, UW Libraries (College or Memorial?), Blockbuster & Netflix, ...

For more educational resources, see the homepage of ESL Cafe, <https://mywebspace.wisc.edu/crusbult/web/108/index.htm#homework>

SPEAKING SKILLS

PRONUNCIATION — Some useful ideas are in a class-handout, <https://mywebspace.wisc.edu/crusbult/web/108/week1b.pdf>.

Proper pronunciation is more difficult during *conversation* — when words are spoken in combination with other words in the middle of a sentence — compared with when you say the same words as individual words in a practice drill. It's also more difficult with *improvised speaking* (when it's from "inside their head" due to your own thinking) instead of *reading* (with visual guidance).

A Problem-Solving Approach to Improving Pronunciation — details are in handout, and here is a summary-outline:

You have a **problem** when the way something is NOW does not match your GOAL for the way it should be. You solve a problem by converting the NOW-situation into your GOAL-situation.

1. **Define the GOAL:** carefully listen to Americans, so you can get a clear idea of what "the sound of proper pronunciation" is.
2. **Observe the NOW:** Say the word and listen to the sound, to get a clear idea of what you are saying NOW.
3. **Explore Possibilities** for a New Now: Do experiments — by adjusting all factors (shape of your mouth, relationships between your mouth & tongue & teeth, and timings of changes in these relationships,...) — and observe how every change affects the sound. Try to determine what combination of factors will produce the best sound, the sound that most closely matches your GOAL-sound.
4. **Internalize and Master:** When you discover how to pronounce the word properly, practice the word (and words with similar sounds) until you can consistently say it correctly, both by itself (in a practice drill) and together with other words (in the context of a sentence) by doing the "speak and observe" of Step 3 when you say the word during a sentence.

This method is **scientific** because you're using Reality Checks, <http://www.asa3.org/ASA/education/think/scientific-method.htm>. It is Scientific Method, and is Design Method (<http://www.asa3.org/ASA/education/think/intro.htm>) with "proper sound" as goal.

PACING — **Speak more slowly.** (details are in handout, outline-summary is below)

Why? 1) give LISTENER more time to hear & mentally process your WORDS (more difficult to understand due to your accent) and IDEAS, and for you to provide logical "cues" about your ideas" by using brief pausing-stops to emphasize important words and to clarify the logical structure of your ideas; this also lets a listener "catch up with you" and think about what you are saying.
2) give YOU more time to plan your own IDEAS and word-order, and to self-monitor your own PRONUNCIATION, and so you can take more time to enunciate (to say slowly, clearly, distinctly) for vowels, word-ending consonants, and multiple-syllable words.

How? Just *decide* to slow down, and *do it*. Don't try to "match the speed" of native speakers, because it isn't a race. And if you slow down your speaking, maybe others will slow down when they speak, and this will make it easier for you to listen and understand. balance — Speak slowly, but not extremely slow; as with most things, balance is useful, so don't be "extreme" in your pacing.

FLUENT SPEAKING (this does not equal "speed")

Practice. Be an adventurous explorer with your new language. Don't be cautious and silent. You have interesting/useful ideas, so share them (in English) with others. Try improvising during a sentence, begin and then plan as you go instead of planning it all first.

How to "**think in English**" instead of "thinking in Chinese and then translating into English"? (did you "learn ideas" in English?)

LOUDNESS — **Speak more loudly.** (details are in handout, outline-summary is below)

If you speak with enough loudness, **it helps listeners understand your words and ideas** even if you speak with some accent.

balance — Speak loud enough, but not too loud. Compare your voice volume with others, try to match so your volume is similar and it blends in, so you're not too loud or too soft. In a quiet situation or during a speech (a lecture at UW, sermon in church,...), lean toward listener (so your mouth is closer to their ear) and "whisper" instead of talking. For public speaking, use a microphone.

Skills for EXPRESSING IDEAS

VOCABULARY

memorize words (in word-list, or use electronic dictionary, MS Word, Mac-widget, book,...) to improve two types of knowledge:

dictionary: but one word often has many meanings, so you must determine the intended meaning based on the word's context.

thesaurus: many words can have one meaning; but meanings are only similar, not exact, so you must choose the best word.

word-principles: in a "family" of words you'll see variations on a basic word-theme, to make related words; also, know basic word plus its tenses (past, present, future, etc) and singular/plural. (these are same for listening/speaking and for reading/writing)

idioms: get web-list of commonly used phrases (principles? some idioms are logical, but you also need experience + memory)

profession-related words: students & scholars, be certain you pronounce these correctly, and know the precise meanings.

STRESS ON SYLLABLES — This is very important in English, so you should know which syllable to stress with loudness.

Usually you must **memorize** "where the accent is." (But there are some principles; for example, in a word with "...tion" the previous syllable gets the stress-emphasis, as with information, production, inspection.)

PITCH — for Statements and Questions. Pitch is not very important in English, compared with syllable-stress.

Usually you end a statement-sentence with a slight downward pitch, to show confidence, not hesitation or lack of confidence. But you should end with slight upward pitch if you are asking a question, or (less frequently) if you are not confident about a statement so you want to show this humility. (yes, honest humility can be valuable in communication, but don't overdo this; as usual, use balance)

PROPER WORD ORDER

Usually several word orders are OK so you have options; you can choose any one of several acceptable orders. You don't have to memorize THE correct order (i.e., the only one that is proper) because often more than one is acceptable and is commonly used.

You know the principles for proper word orders, in your knowledge of English grammar, but... it can be difficult to speak fluently with a proper word order until you develop intuitive skill for it. [What are the main problems: most common and trouble-causing?]

hint: Especially when writing, carefully plan and choose the order (of sections, paragraphs, sentences, words) to make it easy for a reader or listener. Begin with ideas that "set the context" for a reader, then build on this; first part of sentence provides information for second part, etc. Don't force a person to re-read your sentence because to understand the first part of the sentence they need to know information from the second part. With practice, you can also use these writing-principles for speaking.

Usually, when speaking your sentences should be shorter & simpler than when you are writing.

an example of humor when the word-order is wrong: Yoda in Star Wars

Skills for INTERACTIVE CONVERSATION

CONFIDENCE

In conversations and discussions, be confident and friendly, despite your uncertainties and your frustration at not being able to express ideas with the high level of skillful fluency that you have in your own language.

Speaking with some accent is not an "error". (in America, we don't expect perfect language) Usually your main goal should be practical — you want to speak so you can be understood by your listeners.

But skillful speaking, in this practical way, is important. Improved skill makes you more productive, and people are more willing to talk with you if they don't have to "work hard" when they listen & speak during their conversations with you, if they can just enjoy.

FLUENT SPEAKING (described in SPEAKING SKILLS) by planning-and-improvising your ideas, is easier with confidence, and if you develop your skill at "thinking in English" (when listening and speaking) instead of "translating" in both directions.

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION, plus "VERBAL but NOT WITH WORDS"

nonverbal — "body language" with eye contact, tilt of head, face toward listener, general posture (shoulders,...), hand gestures (coordinated with what you're saying) — also see "personal connections" at end of LISTENING SKILLS on first page.

verbal — For emphasis, give cues about the "important words in a sentence" by combining some or all of these cues to show what you want to emphasize: change of timing (brief pause), loudness, or pitch; plus hand gesture,... [Are these similar in most cultures?]

GETTING FEEDBACK (about what you are saying) Watch for nonverbal communications: facial expressions, etc, and...

Invite questions by saying "if I say anything you don't understand, please ask me to clarify" and later, "is there anything you don't understand?" Everyone, including native speakers, should occasionally ask "do you have any questions?" because listeners sometimes understand our WORDS but not our IDEAS, or they may disagree with our ideas, so we encourage them to discuss the ideas with us.

BACK & FORTH in CONVERSATION

overlaps — When is it OK to "cut in" before previous speaker is totally finished? How can you tell others (with nonverbal cues) that you want to say something? The answers are different with 2 people or with a group; and in conversation vs discussion (what is the style & mood?); habit-styles vary, as in East Coast (more "cutting in") vs Midwest (more "waiting" but still with some overlap).

PEN & PAPER — or card, 3x5 inches (7.5x12.5 cm) or 4x6 inches (10x15 cm)

Especially with informal conversations, you (and others) can write on the paper to clarify the **WORDS**, both when you speak and when you listen; if you have 2 pens it will be easier for each of you to write whenever you want.

Writing notes can help you remember & organize **IDEAS** in 1-2-3-... sequence. (use colors to help guide your thinking?)

situations? — Use notes for speech; or any phone call (especially if planned) because the other person won't see your notes; or a planned meeting (with advisor/boss, colleague, or subordinate, for interview,...) as reminder-guide for topics to cover, ideas you want to say, questions you want to ask, and usually a listener seeing your organized notes will be impressed with your efficient planning.

MISCELLANEOUS TIPS

cannot: Instead of "can't" (if ending is unclear it may be heard as "can") you should say "cannot" (easier to say & hear correctly).

numbers: 13-to-19 and 30-to-90 sound similar, so emphasize difference of fourteen (with n) vs forty (and when it's important so you want to be certain, also say "one four" or "four zero"); when you listen, ask for clarification (say "that's one four, right?") if it's important and you're not certain.

phone message: speak slowly and clearly, especially for your name & phone number; this is important information (because listener cannot ask "what did you say?"), and you can speak faster than they can write (and they may have to find a pen to write it), then repeat name & phone number.

strong handshake: but not too strong, and lasting an appropriate length of time ("what is appropriate?" was common theme on Seinfeld Show)

visual support: For a "speech" use visual information because usually it's more cross-cultural, is similar for everyone; show diagrams or photos, make a powerpoint that is logical-and-interesting, or give audience a printed speech-outline (or supplement) so they can also SEE what you're saying.

healthy voice: don't over-use your voice (by talking too much) or abuse it (for example, by screaming too loudly), drink enough water,...

REFERENCES: Sources of ideas in this page are described (only in rough outline now, but later there will be more detail) in our homepage (<https://mywebspace.wisc.edu/crusbult/web/eslcafe>) where you can find more information about ESL Cafe.