

## English Conversation Project

This guidance document introduces the English Conversation Project to all those who are either students or staff members of Imperial College and are interested in volunteering in this project. Please read this document **before** you take the short online questionnaire which we would like you to fill in before you are fully registered.

The conversation project has been running since 2007 and is a result of co-operation between Imperial's Outreach office and the CfAE which stands for Centre for Academic English. CfAE is part of the School of Professional Development. If you want to find out more about it, please visit:  
CfAE: <http://www3.imperial.ac.uk/academic-english>

The main purpose of the Conversation project is to pair people who are new to Imperial and come from different language backgrounds with those who speak English as their first language. Also, as stated already, in order to volunteer in this project you need to be either student or staff member of Imperial College.

In other words, if you study or work at Imperial College and want to volunteer in this project, then please read further and you will get an overview of the project.

After reading to the end you will be ready to complete a short online questionnaire. This is to ensure that you are aware of your role, your responsibilities and what the project entails. The online test consists of 20 questions and takes about 10 minutes to complete.

## So, what can you expect from the English Conversation Project?

You would be paired with a learner, or "client", as we call them. You will then meet your client on one-to-one basis, once a week over five weeks and **JUST** converse, as the name of the Conversation project states.

Please note that you are NOT expected to act as an English teacher and you are not required to provide any other support than just **CHAT** with your client. This offers your client an opportunity to gain confidence in spoken English and will greatly help them to adapt to the UK, London and of course to Imperial College.

The clients can be undergraduates, masters or PhD students as well as visiting academics, selected by the CfAE. As already explained CfAE stands for Centre for Academic English and is part of the School of Professional Development.

## OK, so what do we mean by conversation?

This should be pretty straightforward to define, so maybe it is better to outline a couple of things we **DO NOT** mean with conversation:

- firstly, we **do not** mean English lessons and
- secondly, we **do not** mean befriending.

What we ask you to do is to simply chat about any topic your client (or you) wants to explore further. Our, and your, goal is simply to achieve a **flowing conversation**.

## 1 - Time and Frequency

The most common question most volunteers want to know is how much time they need to commit to this project.

You are asked to attend **five** sessions with your client. In other words, five is the number of sessions you should complete with any one client and therefore this is your minimum volunteering commitment. Each session should last one hour and no more than one and a half hours.

**All your five meetings should be achieved within five weeks.** This means that ideally you should meet your client once per week. This gives your client the chance to make progress.

So, who will be organising these sessions?

You will need to fix the first appointment and during your first meeting you both together should schedule the next four follow-up sessions. Try to fix all your sessions during your first meeting with your client as this will make your and your client's life much easier.

Your responsibility is to ensure all five sessions are organised within that time frame and email [liz.chiu@imperial.ac.uk](mailto:liz.chiu@imperial.ac.uk) if there are any problems.

After five weeks we will pair you with a new client and you will receive an email from us at that point. This means that we will "automatically" pair you with a new client at this point, **unless** we hear otherwise.

**If** you do **not** wish to carry on you must let us know before five weeks have gone from the first meeting with your client. Some volunteers have asked from us why we limit the conversation project to five sessions per client. This is for various reasons:

Firstly, the purpose of the project is to offer the client opportunities to meet new people and practice their spoken English with these different people.

Secondly, we know that if you were to meet your client over a longer period of time, the purpose of the sessions might get blurred and, as this project is not a befriending scheme, we want to keep it structured by limiting the time spent on each client.

Finally, there are more clients than volunteers and it is only fair that all those who want to receive support in their spoken English are given opportunities to do that.

## 2 – Your first session

We will pair you with a client and you will receive an email from us with contact details of your client. Your client is copied into this email but it is **your** responsibility to contact your client and organise the first meeting.

So, where should you meet your client? A really good place is the reception area of the Centre for Academic English reception area on Level 3, Sheffield Building. This reception area is open during normal working hours and you don't need to book the space.

Your first session should follow a specific structure and an info pack about this will be attached in the initial matching email... but more about this in the next section of this guide.

### 3 – Conversation Topics

So, you are meeting your client, but what should you talk about?

As already explained earlier, your first, initial session should follow a standard format. We will email you an info sheet when you are paired with the client. This info sheet will have a list of ready-made questions which we hope you have time to go through together with your client.

Towards the end of your first session you should make a decision about what topic you will discuss when you meet next time. Again, you will find some suggested topics listed in the info sheet.

Your client should pick up the topic which they are interested in and then prepare for the session in advance, possibly by bringing in some material, such as newspaper cuttings or leaflets, websites or simply by listing some questions.

Please remember that we encourage you to ask specific questions to keep the conversation going. Your role is to encourage the client to speak as much as possible so that they gain confidence in spoken English.

We do not want anybody to feel forced to cover this ‘ready-made’ list of topics from the info sheet, actually we are happy for you and your client to “wander off” in any direction. Yet, do return to the list of topics should the conversation come to a stall and you run out of things to say. Please note that we do not encourage you to discuss any highly sensitive issues, such as political or religious views or other similar topics.

It might not always be easy to ‘keep the discussion going’ but you should rely on your initiative and self-confidence to take the lead whenever necessary.

A small hint on making your sessions easier to run - try to agree all your topics in advance so that your client then has more time to prepare for each session.

But, please remember that all sessions should be fun and ‘just’ an opportunity to speak in English, so that neither you nor your client should feel that you have lots of home work to do in order to prepare for your sessions. It might be that you just have a cup of coffee and discuss any topics, most **important** is that you both **speak!**

Also, a quick note on British Culture. Some of your clients may very well be curious to find out more about the British Culture. We understand many of you volunteers may not be British. **Do not worry!** If you are not British, you can still help complete outsiders explore this nation’s culture, and you can introduce your own.

### 4 – English Level

Everyone who comes to study or work at Imperial has learnt English as a foreign language for many years but as science students, not language specialists. It is often the case that they can read and write to a high level while speaking and listening stand out as a problem for them.

Poor speaking skills can be evident in a lack of the niceties of polite expression, which is also connected with cultural awareness. Please take a light hearted approach to the occasional inappropriate phrase! You will be doing the client a favour if you can tell him/her that we wouldn’t normally say such a thing, or that we might prefer to express this in another way, or even that this is a not a usual discussion among people who have only just met.

## 5 – Location

We have already suggested the Centre for Academic English Reception area as the initial venue. You are welcome to use this space throughout your volunteering.

Generally, you can meet anywhere on the campus but not outside of the campus area. You might wonder why. There are two reasons: firstly liability and secondly practicality.

Any activity run on the campus grounds of Imperial College meets our health & safety requirements. It also makes it convenient for both you and the client despite your busy schedules.

This means that you can meet anywhere you want, as long as it is on College ground. College's common rooms, cafes, Union Bar and similar are good places to meet but be aware that the background noise of busy areas might seriously compromise your conversation.

If there is a lot of background noise, your client is more likely to lose some parts of the conversation – turning your discussion into a boring stream of *pardon, sorry* or embarrassed and meaningless nods.

Please note that any additional sessions taking place outside of the immediate campus area, and/or in addition to the agreed five sessions, are not considered as part of the program.

These boundaries are there to provide you and your client a structure and purpose for all five sessions. This is also to make sure that you both feel comfortable despite being strangers.

## 6 – Organisational Tasks

Once you've received the matching email and fixed the first meeting, your role then really is just to ensure that you organise together with your client the times and dates of the remaining four sessions, to be held within the next four weeks.

It is important that you copy us into the correspondence that sets the first meeting so that we can record a start date for all your sessions. Please use this email address: [liz.chiu@imperial.ac.uk](mailto:liz.chiu@imperial.ac.uk) - thank you!

After this initial email, we do not need to receive emails confirming your weekly sessions. In other words, only contact us if you have any questions or any issues arise. Although the length of your volunteering is not fixed, the minimum requirement is to run one full cycle of 5 sessions.

**Unless you tell us differently, you will be still considered an active volunteer and we will re-pair you with another client after five weeks have passed from your initial session.**

Should you want to withdraw from the project or just temporarily be put on hold, please let us know as soon as possible.

## 7 – Useful tips

In this section we want to pass on some useful tips we have given to previous volunteers.

## **Telephone**

At times you might prefer to call your client rather than use email. But, be aware that, despite the phone conversation being something our clients really ought to learn to handle, it is much harder for them to manage this in comparison to any face to face **or** written conversation.

This is partly because you will not sense what degree of understanding has been reached at the other end of the line because you miss the facial expressions... and you will be lost too. For this same reason, you may find the client very reluctant to use phone calls in the first place. We therefore recommend that you use email as this is easier for most clients, especially in the beginning.

## **Boundaries**

The emotional involvement may sometimes grow strong as some of the clients find a great deal of relief in this project.

Similarly, you as volunteer may get trapped in a 'Samaritan' mood you may find it hard to disentangle from. That may make it hard to put an end to your fifth session.

We do appreciate any effort you put into understanding behaviours triggered by cultural shock and we ask you for a certain degree of confidentiality in case the client is very open to you. However, as usual, if you are told something very disturbing, please let us know as the College has responsibility for everyone's safety and well-being.

If your client is asking for any help, whether emotional or practical, for example on their bursaries, accommodation or home sickness, please hand them the "A-Z Guide" from Imperial College. This little pocket guide is available from the Student Hub (level 3, Sherfield Building) and we will leave you a copy at the reception of the Centre for Academic English.

We actually recommend that you have a copy of this with you during your sessions with the client as this might prove to be handy if your client is not aware how to find certain services within the College.

However, remember that you are not their guide or personal assistant and they must find out independently more about all services. Your role is not to sort out client's problems and issues but to simply offer conversation in English. If you feel the client may need additional help or your client expresses specific needs, please get in touch with us. Do not take it into your own hands as that is not your task.

In your own interest, we suggest that you keep an appropriate distance. Meeting on campus during the work day, sticking to the session schedule and not revealing your personal contact details are three simple ways to go about that. Outside of the project parameters you may choose to do whatever you like, of course....

## **8 – Evaluation**

We may ask you to take part in feedback surveys and we really appreciate your participation. Any other feedback is also very welcome.

## **9 – Key points**

You receive the matching email with contact details of your new client. Your client will be copied into this email and we also attach the info sheet with this email.

At this point you should email your client to fix the first meeting. Remember to copy us into your correspondence ([lizchiu@imperial.ac.uk](mailto:lizchiu@imperial.ac.uk)). The date of this email defines your start date for your volunteering and will be used to record this information in our database.

We recommend that you have your first meeting in the Centre for Academic English reception area. Otherwise, you can meet anywhere, as long as it is on campus grounds.

Fix dates and topics for all your sessions during your first meeting with your client. You can always change these later but at least you have established the structure for your sessions.

Remember your role. You are neither a Samaritan nor an English teacher.

You will be re-matched once the fifth week has gone from the date of your initial email to your client.

## **10 – Next Steps**

One last thing we need you to do is to answer some questions about this guide to make sure that all is clear and you are ready to start your volunteering. If you have not already received the link to our short online questionnaire, please email us.

We really appreciate your time and hope you that you join the scheme. The Conversation Project is, and stays, a proven, enjoyable way to give something back to the College you belong.  
Thank you.

Centre for Academic English  
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