



## LANGUAGE PRACTICE GUIDE

Helping newcomers improve their English is one of the most common activities for Welcome Groups. Learning English is one of the most frequently cited newcomer priorities, as it affects so many other aspects of settlement and integration. Typically, volunteers can help with language learning by regularly practicing conversational English with the newcomers in their match, whether in-person or remotely, over video calls and even messaging platforms.

This guide is to help you better facilitate these language practice sessions.

### SETTING EXPECTATIONS:

1. Language practice can be an incredibly useful way to help the newcomers in your match learn and use English. This, in turn, can make them feel welcome, give them confidence, and instill a sense of autonomy. Many newcomers are also very keen to practice English when they are unable to attend regular ESL/LINC classes, so as to not fall behind or lose what they've already learned.
2. Remember that your role as a Welcome Group volunteer is not to replace professional ESL/LINC language teachers. **Language practice is not the same thing as language instruction**, and there isn't a curriculum for you to follow. This is especially important because beyond helping newcomers learn English, you're also creating social connections for them that exist beyond that of teacher-student, and it's important to not diminish that.
3. Learning a new language can be very difficult, and both volunteers and newcomers should **be realistic about their goals and priorities** in their language practice sessions. After several months of regular language practice, your practice partner may not be fluent, but they may now be able to answer the phone, speak to a stranger, or read their mail with greater confidence.

### GETTING STARTED:

4. It is **important to make your conversations a safe, non-judgemental place** to practice speaking in which newcomers feel comfortable making mistakes and letting you know when they don't understand. To do this take some time to introduce yourself first, share a little about yourself and maybe even your own experience learning a new language. It may also be a good idea to simply ask, "is it OK if I correct something you've just said?"
5. When beginning language practice it is important to **assess the current language abilities** of the household and discuss goals for language practice. For instance, do they want to focus on conversational practice, or would they like help with some ESL exercises they have been working on?



6. You can establish how often you'd like to meet to practice, and perhaps who will be included. Will the whole family participate? Would the parents like separate sessions? Bear in mind, of course, that this can all be flexible and both you and the newcomers in your match should **feel comfortable trying different formats** to find the one that works best.
7. **Ask questions**, such as:
  - a. Where do you need to use English? Do you need English for shopping, finding work, dealing with government agencies, finding housing, going to the doctor?
  - b. Where do you usually speak English now?
  - c. What problems have you faced with speaking English in these places?
  - d. How do you like to practice English? Were there lessons in your ESL classes that were helpful or confusing?

### **CONVERSATIONAL PRACTICE:**

8. Practicing conversational English **can simply mean informal chatting**. You can start by discussing common interests or daily routines. You can incorporate lessons into these conversations by explaining words they aren't familiar with or showing them an alternative way to say something. Some discussion topics can include:
  - a. news articles
  - b. describing specific objects (household objects, photos, food)
  - c. describing feelings ("what do you like to do in your free time?", "what can you not live without?")
  - d. film, TV, music, and other media
  - e. compare and contrast (things, experiences, food, etc.)
  - f. stating and supporting opinions
9. Many newcomers are keen to build speaking skills that relate to their circumstances, or a task that they would like to accomplish. These can be opportunities to **roleplay** through different scenarios, like making an appointment with their doctor, going to a job interview, or simply greeting and making small talk with somebody in their building. Common priority themes you could ask your language practice partner about include:
  - a. transportation
  - b. family
  - c. food
  - d. navigation
  - e. education
  - f. health
10. If the newcomer is interested in working on a particular area of language learning for a potential job or to help them find housing, you can **tailor your conversations** to be about these topics and help them develop language skills for such goals.



## **OVERCOMING DIFFICULTIES:**

11. If they are unable to understand you, **try rephrasing your question/comment and slowing down**. Use simpler language and phrases when possible and avoid using a lot of slang.
12. Use **technology** to help the conversations move along when needed. This could mean simply using Google Translate when a word or phrase is not understood. You could also use photographs to teach words that you are having a hard time describing - encourage the newcomers to do the same.
13. Remember to be mindful of using **idioms** (e.g. “we'll cross that bridge when we come to it”), as even though learners may understand them literally, they may not understand their meaning. As these make up an important part of conversational English, it is worth spending time talking about the idioms you use, and encouraging their use by the learners in your match.
14. Especially in lower-level learners, it's typically more useful to **focus on repetition** rather than expanding vocabulary quickly. Try asking your language practice partners to use an important word, or a word that they're having difficulty remembering, in different contexts or in different places in a sentence.

## **MOVING FORWARD:**

15. It is helpful to **take a few notes** during your conversations to remember which areas need more focus and what areas are particular strengths. These notes can help you share progress with the volunteers and help you to pick up where you left off next time.
16. Start each session with a **recap** of what you talked about last session so you can continue to build on what has been learned.
17. Be sure to **check in throughout your match** to make sure these remote language practice sessions are helpful to the newcomers and see if there is anything they would like to do differently.
18. There's no single way to set up a language practice session, but here is an **example format** that you can try using and modifying as works best for your match:
  - a. Casual conversation/catching up
  - b. Review of what you worked on last session to see what the learner can recall,
  - c. Continuing or introducing something new
  - d. Finishing up with some games or activities





## ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS:

19. Some language learners in your match may be interested in additional language-learning tools that they can use when they're not practicing with your Welcome Group. You can help them understand and get started with some of the supports below.
20. Free **mobile apps** like [Duolingo](#), [Mango Languages](#), and [Memrise](#) can be downloaded and used on most smartphones, and learners can be encouraged to set aside some time each day to use them for language practice. Other apps, like [Reverso](#), help with translation and can play back what is translated so that learners can hear the pronunciation. You can share these different apps in your match, help set them up, and show language learners how they work.
21. For households with a TV, or who stream content on their phones, **watching movies and shows with English subtitles** is a great tool for casual learning. You can even suggest watching the same show or movie, and then use your next practice session to discuss what you watched.
22. Especially in households with children, **games** can be really useful to involve the whole family in language learning activities. Games you can play together range from conversational games like "[Would You Rather](#)", to app-based games like "Heads Up!" and "Tense Buster". There are also plenty of games that language learners can play on their own - we'll share some links below.

## ONLINE RESOURCES:

- [Frontier College](#) - provides fantastic resources for volunteers tutoring English at all ages and levels - we highly recommend reviewing their [ESL Tutor Handbook](#) to understand how to effectively support language learning
- [Engoo.com](#) - free lesson activities, grouped by subject matter and language level
- [ESLDiscussions.com](#) - thousands of English discussion questions you can use to practice
- [TPL.ca](#) - Through their library cards, newcomers can access many language-learning resources through the Toronto Public Library, like "[Tense Buster](#)" and "[Brainfuse](#)"
- [English Language Learner Games](#)

We hope these tips help inform your language practice with newcomers, please let us know if you have any other tips we can include or if you need more support in your match.

