Please Note: it is NOT required or necessary to study all of the information in this document in order to volunteer as a speaking partner. The most important thing you can do is meet with your partner and let them speak English to and with you. However, the following guidelines may be of especial interest to those wanting to improve their teaching, tutoring, or foreign language-learning skills.

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Volunteer Role

Most language learning takes place in a formal face-to-face classroom setting. However, in the Pathway English Language Program, we have the challenge of accomplishing the same learning goals in an online setting. Speaking and real-time communication are among the most important skills in learning a new language.

You, as a speaking partner, play a significant role by allowing the Pathway student to practice these skills on a regular basis.

Authentic Language & Interaction

The term “authentic language” means that the speakers are engaged in a natural conversation, listening attentively and responding with interest. In other words, speaking partners should not try to slow down excessively to accommodate the student, nor should they modify their speech to simplify their English (please see the video below). However, speaking partners should still be aware of their speech, avoid speaking too rapidly, using excessive slang, or using unnecessary ambiguity (see van Lier, 1996; personal communication, van Lier, 2011). Using commonly-used phrases and words is helpful for the students. Keep in mind that the more naturally you speak, the more authentic your language will be— which, in turn, will be of greater benefit to the student.

As a speaking partner, you are providing language input as you interact with the student. In order to improve second language skills, a learner needs to receive lots of input that is comprehensible—that is, just a little above the learner’s current skill-level in the language (see Mitchell & Myles, 2004; see also Krashen, 1982, 1985). Speaking at either too simple or too difficult a level does not allow the student to progress in his or her English skills. In addition to this input, the student also needs to produce output. In other words, the student needs to practice speaking and writing in the language he or she is learning. Since the ultimate goal is for the student to communicate effectively in the new language, the student needs plenty of both meaningful input and meaningful output. This means that you should give the student ample opportunity to initiate or lead discussions. As a speaking partner, you should encourage your Pathway student to take the lead in your discussions and provide opportunities for him or her to do so.

Most Pathway English Language students have little exposure to native or fluent English speakers—or at least, not enough to really progress in their language skills. For this reason, you are providing the best opportunity for these students to both listen to and speak English. Remember the following points about your language interaction:
Students will benefit the most when you use a natural, conversational style of speech that is neither slowed down nor simplified.

- Both input (listening) and output (speaking) are essential for language acquisition.
- Students need to take the lead and initiate conversations as much as possible.
- You, as a speaking partner, are providing the students the best opportunity for authentic interaction.

References


CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK

A typical conversation between two native speakers would not include language correction. This is therefore an important difference between truly authentic conversation and a speaking partner’s conversation with a Pathway student. Language learners need to be able to test out the language they are learning. This means that learners should be able to speak freely without having to pause with each word and figure out what word they need next. At the same time, they should feel comfortable asking language-related questions of their speaking partners so that they also gain accuracy—using the right word (and the right grammar) at the right time.

Keep the following things in mind as you decide whether or not to correct something in the student’s speech:

- **Avoid:**
  - Over-correcting. You do not need to correct every mistake the student makes.
  - Correcting errors that are beyond the student’s current language level.
  - Correcting too often. This will disrupt the student's fluency.

- **Rather, do the following:**
  - Correct major errors that make it difficult to understand what the student is trying to say.
  - Correct errors that the student makes over and over.
  - Consider keeping a running list of errors, so that you can decide which ones are persistent enough or significant enough that you should correct them.

- **Offer feedback and corrections at the following times:**
  - During structured segments of the session that are set up for pronunciation or vocabulary practice.
  - When the student asks for clarification or correction.
  - During specific times that you and the student have agreed on for this purpose.
When you meet for the first time with the Pathway student, you should begin a brief discussion on how you will give feedback. For example, you might explain that you will write down their mistakes while you are talking (so as not to interrupt the flow of the conversation) and that you will discuss some of these errors at the end of each meeting.

If you write down complete sentences, you will be able to remember where a specific error occurred; however, do not try to write down more than five sentences in a session. Likewise, you should only address five mistakes (or fewer) per session. If you try to address every error the student made, the student can easily become overwhelmed and confused. As you work with a student, adjust your correction methods until you find a method that works well for both you and the student; always communicate this method with the student so that he or she will know what to expect.

How the student reacts to your feedback will depend partly on how you present it and partly on the student’s attitude and motivations. However, you can also affect those attitudes and motivations by presenting yourself and your intentions in a positive way (see Deci, 1975, p. 23). The following list will help guide your interactions with the learners:

1. Set a personal example with your own behavior.
2. Create a pleasant, relaxed atmosphere.
3. Develop a good relationship with the learner.
4. Increase the learner’s linguistic self-confidence.
5. Make the discussion interesting.
6. Promote learner autonomy (independence and personal responsibility).
7. Increase the learner’s goal-orientedness.
8. Familiarize learner with the target language culture.

(Adapted from Dörnyei and Csizér, 1998, p. 215)

References


Assessing Your Partner

Make sure to take notes after each session in order to keep a record of areas the student can improve. Note areas of weakness, especially those that you notice most often. Refer back to the notes to see how the student has improved.

Two times during the semester, you will receive an email or notice requesting that you submit an evaluation for your assigned Pathway student based on the student's attendance, preparedness, and noting areas of weakness and improvement. These evaluations will help you remain watchful of how the student is doing, and will help the instructor know which areas to focus on in helping the student further.

Building Appropriate Relationships

The purpose of the Speaking Partner Program is to provide English speaking and listening practice for the Pathway English Language students. **It is not appropriate for you to use this occasion to practice your foreign language skills.** Also remember that you are not the student’s instructor, nor are you trying to meet your eternal companion. In fact, the best way to look at your role is to consider yourself as meeting with a friend to discuss what they are learning about in their course.

The “For the Strength of Youth” pamphlet provides counsel on how to be a good friend, which speaking partners should strive to follow while working with the student. It states: “A true friend will encourage you to be your best self. … Show interest in others and let them know you care about them. Treat everyone with kindness and respect” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2011). The perfect example of this type of friend is the Savior. President Eyring (2010) explained that we also “become His friends as we serve others for Him. … His motives are pure. … The perfect friend,
Jesus Christ, is completely selfless in offering happiness to others” (Eyring, 2010; see also D&C 84:77, Matt 25:40). Let the Savior be your perfect guide to building this relationship with the students.

If any serious problems do occur, or if, for some reason, the relationship is not appropriate, please contact us so we can guide you as to the procedure you should follow.

References


CULTURAL PARADIGMS & BEHAVIORS

It is important to understand that the situation of your speaking partner might be very different to your own; they likely have grown up with a different approach to education, in a different socio-economic environment, and with very different values, standards, and norms regarding time management, what is considered polite, etc. Therefore, it is necessary to be patient with your Pathway student, as they too are being patient with you as they strive to learn.

This cultural exchange is one of the major joys and purposes of the Speaking Partner Program—learning to communicate across cultures is just as valuable, if not more so, than just learning the English language. Thus, it is important to note that culture is not simply sombreros, bowing to superiors, or a July 4th parade; culture runs deep into the minds and lives of every human being and differs according to one’s exposure to varying world experiences.

Things to be aware of:

- **Punctuality**: In some cultures, time is viewed spatially rather than linearly, as it is in the Western world; therefore don’t be surprised if a student is 15 minutes late for an appointment and thinks nothing of it.

- **Confrontation/Politeness**: Some cultures will do anything to avoid confrontation, disagreement, or to say “no” to even a suggested appointment time. Some students might seem to drop off the radar because offense was taken where none was meant; therefore, be very sensitive and try to read the confidence and feelings of your partner.

- **Technological Capacity**: Although Pathway students should have access to hardware that can deal with live video calls, sometimes network connections are slow, cut out, and in occasional cases, power might be down in the region (this may occur, but should not be a weekly excuse for missed meetings). Again, try to patient as you work through such, and keep in touch with speakingpartners@byui.edu to report any issues or to keep in the loop with what might be going on in your Pathway student’s region.