

Basics

Communication often flows effortlessly, with both sides participating equally. Sometimes, however, one side doesn't keep up with their side of the conversation. This can happen for various reasons. In these cases, an important skill to have is to encourage the other person to participate more, resulting in a productive interaction.

The academic context

In an academic context, knowledge isn't concentrated solely with the lecturer/teacher or in the books. Your fellow students are invaluable for assisting you in your learning journey with their own experience and views. However, to benefit from interactions with them, you need to communicate with them effectively, allowing the exchange of ideas.

Key features

- Communication isn't a competition of who speaks more (even when you're in a test). An interaction that is beneficial for both sides usually involves fairly equal participation.
- If the person you are talking to isn't participating actively in the conversation, try to identify the reason, perhaps through their body language or facial expressions. Are they not interested? Are they in a hurry? Are they shy?
- Try to bring the other person into the conversation by asking questions about their:
 - Personal experience
Have you been there?
Has that ever happened to you?
 - Opinions
What do you think?
Do you think I did the right thing?
- Ask open-ended questions, not *yes/no* ones. *Wh-* questions (*who, what, where, why*, etc.) encourage the other person to share more.
- When the other person starts speaking, don't interrupt them, but show your interest by nodding and making short comments.
Really?
Is that so?
- Don't just wait for your turn to speak again. Practise 'active listening': react to what the other person said or rephrase it.
So, what you're saying is ...?
- If someone is dominating the conversation and you would like to say something, however, you might want to cut in. You could use one of these phrases:
Excuse me for butting in, but ...
Can I add something here?
Do you mind if I jump in here?
Can I just say something?

Challenges / difficulties

If you are an outgoing person, you might find that you are dominating discussions, especially with people who are shy or quiet. But remember: the more you listen, the more you learn.

If, on the other hand, you feel you're not getting the chance to talk, it might be difficult to interrupt others because you don't want to seem rude. However, if your colleague feels offended by anyone but them trying to talk, it might be better for you to join another discussion!

How can I develop this skill?

Start by noticing when people use the phrases from the Key features in everyday conversations. You can even look out for these phrases in conversations on television, the radio, or a podcast. This will help you learn when it is appropriate to use these phrases, and will help you feel more confident using them yourself.

Learning outcome

Being able to maintain a relevant discussion with your teachers/lecturers and with other students will give you endless learning opportunities. In addition, improving your conversational skills and actively listening to everyone will make you a more sociable and considerate person.

Theory to practice

1 Read the conversations between two people, A and B. What conversational strategies is B using?

- a**
- A** I really like living here because there are lots of things to do, places to go ...
- B** What's it like in your hometown?
- A** It's quite small, so there's not a lot going on.
- B** That can be a bit boring. What did you like about living there?
- A** Well, most of my family lived nearby, so it was never quiet!
- B** And how was your school?
- A** It was OK, I guess. I had been there since I started school, so ...

- b**
- A** I read this article the other day about JOMO: it's the joy of missing out.
- B** Really?
- A** You know, like the opposite of fear of missing out?
- B** Yeah.
- A** So basically, it's about celebrating being away from social media for long periods. Having tech-free time, living in the present, enjoying a good book or a chat.
- B** That sounds interesting!
- A** I think I spend too much time online and really should do something about ...

- c**
- A** I think we should research the theory, but also go out and talk to people on the streets, see what they have to say about the topic.
- B** So what you're saying is we should combine theory with a real-life survey?
- A** Exactly. That way we can make sure we come up with something fresh, not just repeating what's in the books. We could also ...

- d**
- A** ... and that's why it's so important for governments to invest in education. If schools have qualified teachers and suitable equipment, they can prepare children for adult life. Children who will have the skills and ethics to be productive citizens in the future. Another reason I think education –
- B** Can I just say something here? I completely agree with you about the importance of education, but I also think governments need to address issues that are urgent now. Preparing for the future is ...

2 Underline the phrases that B uses to encourage conversation.

Ways to get more practice

There are countless opportunities to practise speaking throughout your day. Make a point of having more interactions with people around you – especially those who you see often but have never actually had a real conversation with. Use the strategies above, but most importantly, you should take a genuine interest in their lives. You'll see there's something interesting to learn from everyone!