

Basics

When you are having a conversation in English, there are various things you can do to maintain it (keep it going) and develop it (make it more interesting and move on to fresh topics).

- Make eye contact when the other person is talking to show that you are listening.
- Allow the other person to speak as much as you. If you do all the talking, the other person will get bored and think you don't want to hear what they have to say.
- Ask questions – but not too many, as this can seem aggressive.
- Ask short questions that invite the other person to take their turn: *How about you?*
- Respond to the other person with fixed words and phrases to show interest: *Really? Wow!*
- Change the topic when there is a pause in the conversation, or when you have nothing more to say on a topic.
- As well as personal information, mention recent world events and topics in the news.

The academic context

You will want to communicate naturally and effectively in conversations with other students and with people generally in the academic world. As in most contexts, a lot of communication in the academic world takes place in informal conversations – especially before or after meetings, seminars, lectures, etc.

Key features

- Turn-taking
- Questions

Where do you study?
How long have you been studying history?

- Follow-up questions

So, where did you stay in Paris?
What was the weather like?

- Short, reciprocal questions

And what about you?
Do you like his work, too?

- Responses to show interest

That's amazing!
What a pity.

- Changes of topic

Challenges / difficulties

Even for proficient speakers of a language, maintaining and developing a conversation can be difficult. If you don't speak the language so well, you might not understand exactly what the other person says, and even when you know what you want to say, you might not be able to say it as you'd like.

How can I develop this skill?

The best way is to practise. Take every opportunity to talk with proficient English speakers and with fellow students. Watch films in English with the subtitles turned on, and use them to practise.

Learning outcome

When you have developed this skill, you will be able to hold longer, more in-depth conversations. You will be able to respond quickly and naturally to what another person says.

Theory to practice

1   **01 Read the transcript and listen to the conversation. In pairs, explain the highlighted examples (1–8).**

Transcript

- Lee** How do you know Sara?¹
- Jim** We met at university.
- Lee** Oh, yeah?² Were you on the same course?³
- Jim** No, actually we met through sport. Anyway, what about you?⁴ How did you meet Sara?
- Lee** I knew her at primary school.
- Jim** Really?⁵
- Lee** Yeah, we were best friends, but then her family moved, and we lost contact.
- Jim** So how did you meet again?⁶
- Lee** We met at a festival in the summer. We got on really well – just like before.
- Jim** That's amazing⁷ after all those years.
- Lee** Yes, it is. Anyway, what do you do, Jim?⁸
- Jim** Oh, I'm a designer. I work for a company in Abu Dhabi.

2  **01 Read the explanations of the highlighted examples in Exercise 1. Then listen again.**

- Notice that the speakers take turns – each person speaks for an equal amount of time.
- The first question (1) is about somebody both speakers know. It's important to start a conversation with a topic that is common to both speakers.
- The speakers ask follow-up questions that logically develop the conversation (3 and 6).
- Jim asks a short reciprocal question (4) to invite Lee to talk about the same topic.
- The speakers use short responses to show interest (2, 5 and 7).
- Lee changes the topic when he thinks they have talked about Sara for long enough (8).

TIP

Some questions that are acceptable in one culture might not be acceptable in another. What would you think if someone asked you these questions? See what other people in your class think.

So, how much do you earn in your job?

Why did you break up with your boyfriend?

Ways to get more practice

- Practise with classmates you don't know well. See how long you can maintain a conversation.
- Think about making English-speaking friends online.