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Introduction:

English language learners come from many different cultures, economic levels and language groups. Their needs will vary depending on their level of English language proficiency and their goals for learning English. Whether they are learning English to help navigate the city or to gain employment in a specific field, English language learners are interested in improving their English language skills to help them integrate into their new communities. The purpose of this Handbook is to provide a general overview of the program and a guide to help you plan for your meetings with your Mentee. There are two HIAS ESL programs: Conversation Partners, who are matched with mentees with an intermediate and advanced level of English and Tutors, who are matched with mentees with a beginner level of English. In addition to the general guidelines for Conversation Partners, a Tutor may have very specific goals that are related to the needs of the tutee.

I. Building a Relationship with your Mentee:

Building trust and understanding between you and your mentee takes time, but will help to create a productive learning environment. Remember, as a mentor, you play an important role in introducing your partner to their new home city and country.

Active listening and patience is the key in encouraging and facilitating English language conversation between you and your mentee. For example, you can ask your mentee about their culture or traditions. Ask them about what they find strange about U.S. culture in comparison to their home country. You can ask what is frustrating or confusing for them here in New York. Remember, it is important to leave any opinions, judgments or biases aside. This will allow you and your mentee to build trust and for your mentee to feel safe.

It is very important to be conscious of trauma that your mentee may have suffered. It's impossible to anticipate all the circumstances that could trigger past trauma in your mentee, however you can minimize the risk by avoiding behaviors or questions that could remind them of loss, physical displacement, or past interrogation.

For example:

- Would you, as a mentor, bring up the political climate of your mentee's home country? The answer is: No. Many refugees and asylum seekers come from nations with severe amounts of political violence and unrest.
- Would you, as a mentor, ask your partner what circumstances brought them to the United States? The answer again is: No. We can assume that our mentees have experienced or are experiencing at least some degree of loss, displacement, or physical

trauma. Revisiting these traumatic memories with your mentee may create feelings of depression or fear, and make it difficult to establish a relationship of trust with you.

As an ESL tutor or conversation partner, you are not expected to be a cultural expert, however we want to understand our clients and to communicate effectively and sensitively with them. Make sure to avoid generalizations about their home country, culture, or status. Remember that within each culture, people are influenced by an urban or rural background, education, ethnicity, social group, and of course, personality.



Please keep in mind that at times, you may notice that your mentee is distracted from the lesson you intended to present. Please do not take this personally. Distraction could be caused by a variety of factors: legal issues, family related concerns, economic pressures, bureaucratic paperwork. Our clients, of course, are aware of what is happening in their home country. They may experience homesickness, or loneliness. If symptoms appear severe and you are having trouble working together, be sure to speak to your HIAS Volunteer Coordinator.

II. Assessing English Language Skills:

You will want to begin by assessing your mentee's level of English. This should include speaking, reading, writing, and pronunciation.

Beginners may be coming from countries where they did not learn to read or write. This group of learners will need to start with very basic reading and speaking skills, including the English alphabet.

More advanced beginners are likely to require more time working on pronunciation and vocabulary and more advanced learners may find it helpful to spend more time on reading, writing, and grammar. The goals of your mentee will depend on their individual circumstance and goals for learning English. For example, for most mentees, oral communication skills will be more important in their daily lives than complex grammar or reading skills.

If your mentee is enrolled in a formal ESL class, ask them if there are lessons which need further clarification. This can be very helpful as a place to start and expand your work together.

For more advanced mentees, you may ask them what they find difficult and easy about English and what their goals are for improving their reading and writing. Their responses will help you tailor future work and identify ways to help them navigate their local environment.

Here are some basic ways you can/should gauge the ability of the learner:

Assessing listening and comprehension:

How does the individual respond to simple questions?

- Where are you from?
- Where do you live now?
- Tell me about your family.
- What do you usually do on the weekends?
- Why do you want to learn English?

Assess Reading Skills:

- How familiar are they with the English Alphabet?
- What materials do they currently read in English, if any?
- You can use [News in Levels](#) and assess their reading skills. [There is also an app for this resource]

Assess Writing Skills:

- Can they write their name?
- Can they write a grocery list?
- Can they write a short letter or email?

Other Questions to Consider in Assessing Language Skills

- Can the person converse easily but not read or write in English?
- Can the person read or write but not speak well?

Something to remember: We all learn in different ways. Many people learn English well through repetitive verbal communication or from visual clues. They may appear relatively fluent with regard to general questions, but when a topic changes they may have trouble understanding the question



because there is not a set response. Some people may not speak well because of shyness or lack of confidence. Patience and trust will help you gauge the best approach to learning for your mentee. As learners become more confident they can take on increased challenges.

III. Setting Tutoring Objectives and Expectations with Your Mentee:

You will want to begin by understanding your mentee's specific goals and needs.

The first meeting is about getting to know one another. At that time, make sure to have a conversation about your mentee's expectations and what they hope to get out of your time together. Finding out at the start of your relationship how the learner will use English will help in formulating vocabulary, points of interest, and what they consider crucial to their English learning objectives.

Is your partner looking to enter a specific field of employment and do they need help learning vocabulary useful to that work? Are they looking to be able to communicate better with their child's teacher? Learning how to telephone the landlord and deal with a leaky ceiling is often more helpful than reading through fictional English literature. Try to note their everyday needs and frustrations and face those first. This will help them make progress in their daily lives as they are learning English.

Here are questions that can help you determine your objectives:

1. How long have you studied English? Where did you study?
2. What is most important for you to improve: reading, writing, speaking, listening?
3. How often do you use English? For what purposes do you currently use English? (Ex. Shopping for clothes/food, transportation, speaking with teachers, at work). How confident are you in these activities?
4. Why do you want to learn English? (Ex. To get a new job, to help children with homework, to feel part of the community)
5. What do you want to be able to do, in six months? (ex. Talk to my child's teacher, be able to go food shopping, apply to college, etc.)
6. Do you have any upcoming events or activities you need help preparing for? (Ex. Job Interviews, College Admission Tests, etc...)
7. How much time can you commit to learning English each week?
8. Do you have a television or radio that you can use regularly for listening? Do you have a cell phone or computer that you can use for English language programs? There are many free and helpful programs available on computers and phones.

IV. Lesson Planning Best Practices:

Whether or not you choose to use a formal lesson plan will depend on your mentee's language skills, goals, and the number of mentees with whom you are working. It's always good to prepare for each meeting with materials/information that you can share with your partner. You also want to think about "building" on each meeting from your previous meetings, as you repeat concepts from earlier lessons. Learning by repetition is very important in English language learning. It is difficult to learn a concept in one meeting alone without continuing review.

Formal lesson plans can be useful as a guide. As you progress in your meetings, you may be less informal and as you spend time together, you will learn what is the best way to teach and encourage learning.

For Tutors, a formal plan may be divided into the following sections:

- A. **Warm-up:** An warm-up is intended to help your mentee shift into the mindset of using English. Begin with a simple exercise with which the mentee feels comfortable and familiar. The warm up can include reviewing lessons from the previous meeting, can be about your mentee's day or week, or just fun and random. A good way to start is to ask about what transpired since you last met.
- B. **Presentation:** The lesson introduces a new concept, term, verb tense or vocabulary. The amount of time you spend on this section will depend on your mentee's objectives and grasp of the material.
- C. **Practice:** You can create an activity or game to help your mentee review and practice the new materials that they have learned. For example, simply making sentences using the new vocabulary is very effective. This practice can be oral or written, depending on the needs of the mentee. Practice makes perfect and repetition is key.
- D. **Conclusion:** Make sure to ask if your mentee has any questions or if they found anything particularly challenging during the session. If you are giving practice/homework, the end of the session would be an opportunity to explain the work and what will be expected of your mentee.

Informal Lesson/Conversation Partner Guidelines:

- A. **Warm-up:** Begin with a few warm-up questions to get your mentee focused. It can be helpful to ask what your partner did over the past weekend and how they are feeling.
- B. **Focus for the session:** Even if you aren't teaching a specific lesson, it is really helpful to come prepared with written resources and topics of conversation. For example, if a mentee wants to practice interview skills have some practice interview questions ready before you arrive. Good topics for conversation can be information that impacts daily lives. For example, you can bring flyers from grocery stores, or advertisements from magazines. There are all kinds of brochures and information about activities and places to visit in New York City. For example, NYC posts information about free and low cost activities. The list is posted seasonally. Many materials can be found on line depending on the needs of your partner.
- C. **Conclusion:** It's always helpful to allow time at the end for your mentee to ask questions or give feedback. You can build on what you learn.
- D. **Practice:** Reinforcing new concepts and tracking accomplishment
If you think it's appropriate, any "assignments" given for "at home" work should reinforce what you learned. For those mentees who do not have much extra time, a task that will fit in their daily lives might be appropriate.

Some Suggestions for Mentee Practice outside of Meeting times:

- During the week, write down any words that you see or hear that you don't understand
- Listen to the news or weather and write or tell a summary.
- Learn directions to a particular location. See if you can write them down.
- Write or tell the summary of an article, show or movie that you read or saw during the week.
- Make a shopping list, write a recipe for your favorite dish or prepare the recipe and talk about why you like it.
- Write a letter using vocabulary from a particular lesson. Practice using words in new sentences.
- Provide the mentee which worksheets where they have to identify and correct the English language mistakes. You can find these worksheets online on sites like BusyTeacher.com. You can also create some worksheets yourself so that you can be specific to the issues you and your mentee are addressing.
- For the Tutor or Conversation Partner, it can be really helpful to keep a notebook to record what you have covered each week. You can also write about what you have learned each week from your conversations and lessons.

V. Gauging your Mentee's Progress:

Below are general standards for levels of English learning. An understanding of these levels can be helpful in focusing conversations and lessons as well as in looking for suitable materials to use in your meetings.

Introduction:



- A student at this level doesn't appear to answer most questions.
- Answers usually consist of single words or simple phrases.
- Your goal is to move them into Level 1.
- If your student does not know the English alphabet, you will be starting at the most basic level of teaching adult literacy.

Level 1: Beginner

At Level 1, a student will look like this:

- Student/Partner appears to understand questions, but sometimes answers with difficulty.
 - Using nouns and verbs in present tense.
 - Can read simple words and sentences
 - Can write their name and basic sentences
- Gradually learn to read simple past tenses.
 - (Gradually) Be able to read a short paragraph.
 - Be able to write sentences with some errors.
 - Be able to respond to open-ended questions.
 - Responding to literal questions with "what," "where," "when," "who," and "how many."

Level 2: Intermediate

These students will have a solid grasp of the basics of the English language, including past and present tenses. They will know enough vocabulary to communicate but still have trouble expressing themselves fully. They understand basic grammar but make grammar mistakes often.

- Be able to respond to hypothetical questions.
- Use a range of words including to comment, state opinions, clarify, express agreement or disagreement.
- Be comfortable with present, past, future tenses.
- Be able to use negatives, noun phrases.
- Be able to read a newspaper article and understand most of it
- Be able to write several paragraphs, letters and fill out forms without assistance.
- Can use a dictionary comfortably.

Level 3: Advanced

Advanced students are conversant and have solid listening comprehension. They can communicate effectively but still make mistakes with grammar. They have a strong vocabulary but may be lacking subject specific vocabulary (ex. Business vocabulary, science related words, etc.) Advanced students will usually have specific goals related to their occupations, skills and family situation.

- Understand a greater range of words including: adjectives, adverbs, words related to academic topics.
- Select from a greater range of words including: utility words, descriptive words, subject-specific words, academic words, words with multiple meanings to: discuss topics, state opinions, inquire, persuade.
- Can read a book in English; write a paper of several pages.
- Has a strong command of vocabulary and grammar.

VI. Best Practices for Tutors and Partners

These are some helpful rules for working with your partners and tutees.

Correcting your Mentee

While your mentee is speaking, always allow them to complete their thought before correcting them. It can be helpful to note areas that you need correction on paper to avoid interrupting your mentee. And, think of positive ways to offer suggestions as part of your response.

Modeling Speech

When you ‘model’ speech, for example, telling something about yourself, the students will get an idea not only of what you are explaining, but also they will hear some speech examples that they can follow. Learn about their passions and interests and use them as talking points to integrate the grammar points and vocabulary you want to emphasize.

Speed and Enunciation

Generally, try to repeat the word slowly and clearly several times in the discussion with the student so that partners can hear clearly. The next time you say the word, speak it at normal language speed so they become accustomed to hearing it as they normally would in their daily life. You can also ask the student to give you an example using the word, or how they think others would use it. If there are particular vowels or consonants that are difficult for your student, you can make lists of words with the same sounds. These can become helpful practice sheets.

Managing expectations

If you and your mentee have decided that there is time for “practice” outside of your meeting time, don’t be too concerned if they are not able to complete the assignment. Don’t mistake it for not caring. Ask what barriers they have or if there are ways for you to help. Also, be sure to emphasize that learning a language is a process and improvement Takes time.

HIAS Mentor Dos and Don'ts

DO:

- Prepare for your meeting. Think about what you want to emphasize in terms of the needs of your mentee.
- Bring a notebook for yourself and your mentee. Take notes on pronunciation and grammar challenges of your mentee and keep track of successes.
- Focus conversation/lesson plan on personal interests and language needs of your mentee.
- Maintain a positive attitude. Encourage your mentee and congratulate them on their triumphs.
- Use your natural speech pattern and volume when conversing with your mentee.
- Use body language to emphasize and strengthen meaning of ideas and words.
- Let your mentee make mistakes and take risks in learning to speak English. Always allow your mentee to self-correct.
- Be empathetic and patient. Moments of silence are an important part of the conversation and learning process.
- Review lessons from the previous session, if appropriate.
- Ask your mentee for regular feedback to ensure your mentee is getting what he or she needs.
- Respect the life experiences and knowledge of your mentee.
- Remain positive and relax -- It will come naturally.
- Encourage your mentee to talk!

DON'T:

- Do not over correct or interrupt your student's flow of speech. Take notes and provide some positive corrections where appropriate. You can always use your notes for the next meeting.
- Do not lecture. The best way to incorporate information for your mentee is to practice and model the pronunciation or usage of material. You might give an example of how you would say something, or ask them to rephrase it in another manner to encourage use of different vocabulary.
- Try not to get frustrated. Patience is a virtue here.
- Do not expect your mentee to remember everything you told them in the last session. This may be the only chance they have to practice English and repetition through their work with you is the best approach.
- Don't be afraid to say you don't know. English phrases, spelling, etc. do not always have exact rules. You can always research to prepare for the next meeting.

Conclusion:

There is no “magic rule” to being a Conversation Partner or Tutor. We have outlined some basic approaches and practices for you that we think are most helpful. Participating in this program is a wonderful opportunity for both parties as you learn about each other and each other’s culture and life. Remember to be flexible with your partners. They want to learn English and they are eager to learn their way around the city and their new environments. They are participating in this program because they want to learn and that is a great asset for you, as a teacher and coach.

This booklet is a guide for you. Learning is a creative process. Through your relationship and meetings, you will learn to focus on issues that are important for your mentee, whether that means learning how to navigate the subway, engaging with a child’s teacher or putting together a successful resume. The key is starting where your partner is right now, and working to build language skills from that point.



Our Favorite ESL Resources

News in Level: <https://www.newsinlevels.com/> <https://en.islcollective.com/>

Busy Teacher has all kinds of resources for ESL teachers-- including grammar worksheets, puzzles and listening practice. <http://busyteacher.org>

Practice Activities: <http://www.nytimes.com/ref/college/faculty/esol-lessons-around.html>

Easy English News: <https://www.elizabethclaire.com/>

StoryCorps is great for listening and wonderful stories. There are weekly broadcasts and new stories every week. Many of the stories have animations as well. <http://storycorps.org>

TED Talks has a special section for ESL learners. <http://tedxesl.com>

PBS has good learning and conversation materials including short films on current topics. <http://pbs.org>

The New York Times has ESL teaching materials based on the most recent news events. There are great photos and ideas for conversation and for reading practice. <http://nytimes.com/section/learning>

Using English: Teacher Resources has free vocabulary and grammar worksheets that are good for review and teaching. <http://usingenglish.com>

American Manners and Customs: A Guide to Newcomers: <https://www.elizabethclaire.com/products/american-manners-and-customs>