

Conversation Starters

As much as possible, avoid asking questions that require a “yes” or “no” answer. Instead, utilize the “who, what, when, where, and how” of good conversation. Avoid, however, sounding like a talk show host or an interrogator. Having more than one student with you can enhance the conversation and experience, especially if the students are from different countries.

Geography

Where is your city? Ask for a description of his or her home, city, climate, etc. What are some of the most interesting places you have visited? What would you like to see while you are in America?

Languages

What languages do you speak? How long have you been studying English? How would I greet you if I were in your country? Explain American slang and jokes.

Education

What are some differences between your educational system and ours? What degrees (subjects for study) are most popular or valuable in your country? What degree are you pursuing here? How long do you expect to study here?

Food

How do you like American food? What is your favorite food? How is it prepared? Would you like to use my kitchen to cook sometime? Where do you usually eat, in your apartment or out? What is a typical breakfast, lunch and dinner in your country? Does the family eat together most of the time?

Shelter

Describe the appearance of a typical home in your country. Which is usually the largest room in the residence? Do you have extended families living together or nearby?

Transportation

How do you get to school or work? Do people travel much from town to town? Is it customary for a family to go somewhere for a vacation? How much does it cost to use a taxi?

Socializing and Dating

How do young men and women in your culture get to know each other? Do you and your friends go out in groups or as couples? At what age do most couples marry? If you are planning to serve a meal at 7:30 p.m., at what time do you ask your guests to arrive? If a friend invites you to a party which begins at 8:00 p.m., at what time will you plan to arrive?

Family

May I see some pictures of your family? Where did you grow up—in the city or in the country? Who does most of the cooking and housework? Tell me about your parents’ daily lives. In your culture, how does the husband help in caring for the children? At what age do children start school? How many hours per day? How are children disciplined for disobedience? What is the average number of children in a family?

Driving

What are the differences between driving here and at home? Do most people drive in your country? What kind of cars is most common?

Spiritual

Please tell me something about your religion that is important to you. What are your worship centers like? What do you know about the Christian faith? What is your concept or belief about God? What is your perception of religion in this country?

The Art of Listening

Being a successful cross-cultural communicator with an international student often involves a strong investment in developing good listening skills. While the main objective is to encourage internationals to open up and speak, just shooting questions back and forth can become dull. Mutual satisfaction depends on practicing good communication skills, which entail some of the following characteristics:

- ◆ Select topics that are of mutual interest and require more than short answers. Make sure your surroundings are quiet enough to hear one another.
- ◆ All cultures differ in the spatial distance between two people engaged in conversation. Be alert to non-verbal cues that indicate the other person is feeling uncomfortable, and resist the urge to speak louder if your friend finds it difficult to understand what you are saying.
- ◆ Proper feedback maintains conversation. Use clarification questions that promote dialogue. Don't ask, "Do you understand?" Instead, ask questions like, "Do you mean to say...?" Use open questions instead of yes-and-no ones.
- ◆ Ask follow up questions that indicate your interest in his or her feelings, such as "How did you feel after that happened?" or "How would you respond to this if you were in your culture?"
- ◆ Help bring the conversation into focus by using summarizing statements, such as, "These seem to be the key concerns you have expressed..." or "Your primary point seems to be..." Often, such statements stimulate additional dialogue.
- ◆ Silence makes Americans uncomfortable in conversations. Resist the urge to blurt out something to fill the void. Silent periods may seem awkward to you, but they may indicate showing respect, providing some mental rest, or a transition between topics.
- ◆ Select questions that will get some mileage out of the conversation, as well as indicate greater depth of interest you have in knowing him or her better. Avoid questions that are too specific about family, or overly trite questions, such as, "Where is your country?" or "When are you going back?"
- ◆ Don't judge the quality of the relationship by how well you communicate on the same wavelength. It may take some time to adjust to one another's communication habits. Be patient, and ask God to help draw you closer as friends.
- ◆ Remember that cross-cultural communication is a skill to develop. Keep a humble and learning spirit.