Mental Preparations
for Improving English on Your Own

1. Never forget that improving your English is one of your main goals while you are studying/working in the United States.

2. Resolve to practice English every day (or nearly every day). Make a commitment to yourself: “I will practice English with an American (or another foreign student/scholars who speaks English well) at least ten minutes every day.” (It is easier to start with a modest objective. You can plan for longer practice sessions later.) Then make a plan to fit English into your daily schedule. For example, “On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, I will practice English for at least ten minutes during the noon hour.” And so on. Decide when your daily schedule has room for some English practice. Start immediately! The longer you wait to get started, the harder it will be to start.

3. Overcome your anxieties. The idea of speaking English with Americans you do not know may make you nervous. Here are some suggestions for overcoming your anxiety:
   - Remind yourself again what you can gain from improving your English.
   - Remind yourself what you will lose if you do not improve your English.
   - Ask yourself, “What is the worst thing that can happen if I try to talk with an American and get a negative response?” What is the worst thing that could happen? Maybe the person will say “no.” Maybe the person will walk away from you. The person might even say something unpleasant to you, or behave rudely. Could you survive that? Of course you could.
   - To get an idea what to expect in your interactions with Americans, review the “Culture Matters” section of this web site.
LOCATE PEOPLE TO TALK TO

Here are some suggestions for finding someone to talk to:

1. Find people who share your interests.
   - If there is a student organization for people in your field of study/research, join it and volunteer to do some of the organization’s work.
   - If you play sports, go to a recreation center or playing field.
   - Join a club based on your interest. (The University’s Student Activities Office has a list of recognized student organizations. The local public library will probably have a list of organizations in your community.)

2. Volunteer to help at the local public library or some other local organization.

3. Talk to people who spend time in the same places you do, people such as classmates, colleagues, library staff, neighbors, and departmental secretaries (volunteer to help the secretary with some small task, and talk while you are doing it).

4. Force yourself to attend social functions where there will be many people who do not speak your mother tongue.

5. Find people at leisure (that is, people who are not obviously busy). For example, you could approach people who are:
   - sitting in a lounge in a dormitory, classroom building, or the student union
   - sitting on a bench at a mall or in the park
   - watching TV in a public place, and waiting for a commercial to end
   - eating in the cafeteria
   - taking a study break at the library
   - waiting for a performance or a class to begin
   - sitting beside you in class
   - sitting beside you on a bus or train

Of course, you need to be prudent about approaching strangers. You need to feel generally comfortable in the situation. People you approach should be ones who appear to be open and receptive.
PREPARE SOME CONVERSATION TOPICS

You may feel reluctant to approach Americans because you do not know what to talk about. But there are hundreds of things you could discuss! Get some topics ready in advance. Memorize them, or have them written down so you can refer to them. Here are a few possibilities:

1. Reasons you (both) came to the University of Minnesota
2. Your plans for after you graduate/finish your program
3. Your families—where they are, what your parents’ positions are, any siblings you have
4. Description of the place you lived when you were children
5. Experiences you remember from your early childhoods
6. What you can remember about your primary-school years
7. How you celebrated birthdays when you were children
8. How various American holidays are celebrated
9. How you spend your weekends
10. What you like to read about
11. Words or slang expressions you have heard but did not understand (write them down when you hear them, and have them ready to discuss)
12. Something in the day’s newspaper
13. Plans for the coming summer
14. Popular television programs or personalities
15. Places to eat in your community
APPROACH PEOPLE YOU CAN TALK TO

Be committed to practicing English. Have a topic in mind. Look for someone who seems available to talk. Don’t hesitate! Walk up to the person and:

1. Smile! (For Americans, a smile is a sign of friendliness and good intentions.)
2. Introduce yourself. Say, “Hello. My name is ________.
3. Say something about yourself: “I’m from ... I’m a student majoring in ________. I came here in ____________.”
4. Bring up a topic. For example, “I have some words here that I don’t know the meaning of. Can you tell me what they mean?” Or, “I wonder if I could ask you about [whatever topic you choose from your list].”
5. After the conversation, say “Thank you, I enjoyed talking with you,” or “I hope to see you again sometime.”

Persist! If your first few attempts to start a conversation do not work out, do not be discouraged. Keep trying. And after you have some successful conversations, keep it up!