

Small Talk & Conversation Skills

Let's get started...

Before you begin discussing today's topic, take a few moments to complete the following activity. Think about what you did last weekend. Share one thing that you did last weekend with your group. Who were you with? What did you do? Did you have a good time? Would you do the same activity again? Why or why not?

New words and Idioms:

Feedback, active listening, polite, conversation, eye contact, inflection, confused, engage, interrupt, paraphrase, intimidate, irritate, interject, criticism, body language, converse, personal, gab, schmooze, comment, "(make) small talk," "shoot the breeze," "chew the fat," "chit-chat," "smooth talker," "full of hot air," "wind bag," etc.

Background:

In *polite conversation* Americans tend to stand about an arm's length apart. A good conversation allows people to speak and to listen. If one person does all of the talking the listeners may become bored. If a person only listens and does not respond, he or she may seem unfriendly or uninterested. To end a conversation, you can say: "Well, it was nice talking with you."

Conversation tips for speaking:

- Face your listener(s) and look at them.
- Make *eye contact* often.
- Watch your listeners' responses. Do they seem to understand what you are saying? Do they look *confused*? Do they look disinterested? Ask questions. Encourage them to respond, and wait for them to finish speaking before you start again.
- Don't speak too loudly. A loud voice is *intimidating* and *irritating*. (If your listener frequently asks "what?" or leans forward to listen, then he or she probably cannot hear you.)
- Avoid direct *criticism* -- unless you are asked to *comment*. Even then it is good to choose a "neutral" word (like "interesting" or "different") instead of a negative one (such as "bad" or "terrible," and to balance a criticism with a compliment or a positive statement (Example: Someone fixes a dinner for you and it is awful except for the rice. Your hostess asks: "Do you like the dinner?" You might respond: "It is interesting. The rice is very tasty.")

Conversation tips for listening:

- Watch the speaker.
- Make eye contact often. (If this is uncomfortable for you, try looking at the speaker's eyebrows.) Americans may feel that if a listener is not watching he is not listening. Do not turn away while the person is talking.
- When the speaker pauses, give *feedback* -- *interject* small responses to what he has been saying. (Examples: Really? Is that so? Is that right? I didn't know that. That's interesting. I see. Oh, my?)
- Be an *active listener*. To make sure that you understand, ask questions, or try to *paraphrase* what the speaker has said. (For example: "Do you mean that _____?")
- Do not *interrupt* (unless the person is speaking too fast or you don't understand.) If you do not understand, do not nod your head or say "yes." Instead, say, "Excuse me. I did not understand that. Could you please say it again more slowly?"
Or ask, "What do you mean when you say _____?"

Topics to avoid in casual conversation:

Religion, politics, sex, money, age, weight. (Anything that might be too *personal*. Americans do not like to share personal information in casual conversation.)

Appropriate Topics for small talk:

Weather, sports, families, television programs, movies, music, books, leisure activities and hobbies, plans for the weekend, work.

Are these topics also appropriate in your culture? Are any of them considered to be inappropriate? What other topics are appropriate in your culture? Compare your answers with your group.



In pairs for 5 minutes, ask and answer these questions:

With a partner, pick a subject from the **appropriate topics** listed above. Take turns asking and answering questions. The first person should ask a question. The second person should respond to the question then ask another question. The first person will answer that question, then ask another, and so on. See if you can continue long enough for each person to ask and answer 5 questions about the topic. If you have time, change partners and pick another topic.

Share your partner's answers with the group.

Discussion Questions:

In your home country:

- How close do people stand when they are talking?
- How does a listener show respect?
- How does a listener show that he or she is listening?
- Do people criticize others openly? Can people be honest in their answers to questions?
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