

Topic: Small Talk

Let's get started... Have you had a little conversation with anyone new today? If so, what did you talk about? Did you talk about the weather, your plans for the weekend, your plans for next weekend, your plans for the summer, or another topic?

Background:

In the United States, little social conversations, about non-serious, non-controversial topics, are called "small talk." Every culture and country has traditions and expectations about what topics are appropriate for small talk. For example, in the United States, in many parts of the country, it is safest to not talk about politics, religion, your age, sex, or your salary, except with very close friends or family members. In other countries, it is common to start a conversation about politics when you meet someone for the first time. In some countries, it is a sign of respect to ask someone about their salary or how much something cost. In the United States, these questions are considered taboo (inappropriate), except among family or very close friends. What about in your home country and culture?



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

- What kinds of things do people talk about in your home country?
- Do people in your country "strike up conversations" with strangers on the bus, in lines at the movie theater, the grocery store, at the park, or when at the playground with their children? If yes, what do people talk about in these situations?

Share your partner's answers with the group.

Discussion Questions:

What are some safe topics for conversation in your home country and culture?

What are some taboo topics for conversation in your home country and culture?

Do the “rules” change in different situations - for example, depending upon whether you are at work, on the bus, or at home?

Do the “rules” change depending on whether you are talking with close friends, strangers, family, neighbors, new acquaintances, or work colleagues?

Are the “rules” different in conversations between employee and supervisor, or between men and men, women and women, or men and women?

In the United States, a good conversation involves a mutual sharing of ideas, sometimes called “give-and-take.” Is this the same, or different, in your culture?

In the United States, it is considered a sign of respect and interest in the other person to make direct eye contact. In some cultures, direct eye contact is not respectful. In your culture, what are the expectations, or “rules,” about eye contact when you have a conversation?

In the United States, to continue a conversation, it is polite to give “feedback” to your conversation partner – small phrases that show you are listening and interested in what the other person is saying. For example, you can say, “Oh, really?” “That’s interesting. I didn’t know that.” What kinds of “feedback” do people in your culture give to a conversation partner to keep the conversation going and to show interest?

In your home country and culture, what are some elements of a good conversation? How much should each person talk, and how much should each person listen? What makes a satisfying conversation?

Do you find it difficult to start a conversation with some people? Why or why not?

In your home country and culture, how close or far apart do people stand or sit when they are having a conversation? What have you noticed in the United States that is different from your country on the issue of “personal space” during conversations?

New words and Idioms:

social; conversation; topic; “safe topics;” “taboo topics;” non-serious; non-controversial; salary; appropriate; traditions; expectations; “strike up a conversation;” acceptable; acquaintances; work colleagues; situations; eye contact; feedback; give-and-take; mutual; elements; satisfying; sensitive; “personal space;” similarities; differences; observed.