

Topic: Small Talk

Let's get started... Did you have a conversation with anyone new this week? If so, what did you talk about? How long was your conversation?

Background:

In the United States, little social conversations with people that you don't know well are called "small talk." There are some rules or guidelines about small talk. It is not safe (it is taboo) to talk about politics, religion, your age, sex, or your salary. What topics are taboo in your native country with new acquaintances?

Look at the pictures below. Make a guess about some of the relationships. How well do these people know each other? Pretend that you are one of the people. What would you say in conversation to the other person or other people?



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

- What kinds of things do people **love** to talk about in your home country? What do **you** love to talk about? Do you have trouble finding people to talk about the things that you are interested in? Please explain.

Share your partner's answers with the group.

Think about rules on what you can talk about in your native culture. Are the rules different in different situations? - for example:

. . .at work

.at home

.at a public place (park, theater, grocery store, on the bus)

. at school

In your native culture, are there rules for conversations

. . . between employee and supervisor?

. between men and men?

. between women and women?

. between men and women?

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

Are there rules about disagreeing or agreeing in conversation in your native 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:

. . . . “Oh, really?”

. “That’s interesting”

. “Hmmm”

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?

Small Talk Questions

Students – Here are some possible questions that are usually **safe**. Discuss when you might use them – with a stranger, coworker, family or other person. Discuss how to change the questions so they work for you.

Question	Ask a stranger?	Ask a coworker?	Ask your brother-in-law?
How do you like the weather today?			
Did you grow up around here?			
Do you like Seattle (Bellevue, etc.)?			
Do you have family in this area? (Tell me about them.)			
Do you like to . . .(read, walk, play soccer, eat dimsum, garden . .etc.)?			



If you ask a yes/no question to start a conversation, follow-up with questions like:

- ...Why?
-Why not?
-Can you give me an example?
- Can you tell me more about that?
- Can you give me some details?

Practice questions on your fellow students. See which ones led to conversation.

You can use a statement with an added question to start conversations. Examples are:

- Weather - "it's so windy (stormy, sunny, nice, awful, rainy, cold) today, isn't it?"
- News - "I read about that earthquake in Haiti (China, Chile), it's awful, isn't it?"
- News - "I heard about the person who (got sick, got shot, helped, donated), did you? What do you think about it?"

Students - make your own examples of statements with questions. Try them on each other.
