

Making Small Talk

The ability to make “small talk” is highly valued. In fact, many English students are more interested in making effective small talk than knowing correct grammar structures – and rightly so! Small talk gets friendships started and “breaks the ice” before important business meetings and other events.

What is small talk?

Small talk is pleasant conversation about common interests.

Why is small talk difficult for some English learners?

First of all, making small talk is not only difficult for English learners, but also for many native speakers of English. However, small talk can be especially difficult for some learners because small talk means talking about almost anything – and that means having a wide vocabulary that can cover most topics. Most English learners have excellent vocabulary in specific areas, but may have difficulties discussing topics they are unfamiliar with because of a lack of appropriate vocabulary.

This lack of vocabulary leads to some students “blocking.” They slow down or stop speaking completely because of a lack of self-confidence.

How to Improve Small Talk Skills

Now that we understand the problem, the next step is to improve the situation. Here are some tips to improve small talk skills. Of course, making effective small talk means lots of practice, but keeping those tips in mind should improve overall conversational skills.

Do some research.

Spend time on the Internet, reading magazines, or watching TV specials about the type of people you are going to meet. For example: If you are taking a class with students from other countries, take some time after the first few days of class to do some research. They will appreciate your interest and conversations will be much more interesting.



Stay away from strong political beliefs.

While you may believe in something very strongly, beginning conversations and making small talk about your own personal convictions may abruptly end the conversation. Keep it light – don't try to convince the other person that you have the "correct" information about a higher being, political system, or any other belief system.

Use the Internet to gain specific vocabulary.

This is related to doing research about other people. If you have a business meeting or are meeting people to share a common interest (a basketball team, a tour group interested in art, etc.), take advantage of the Internet to learn specific vocabulary. Almost all businesses and interest groups have glossaries on the Internet explaining the most important jargon related to their business of activity.

Ask yourself about your culture.

Take time to make a list of common interests that are discussed when making small talk in your own culture. You can do this in your own language, but check to make sure you have the English vocabulary to make small talk about those subjects.

Find common interests.

Once you have a subject that interests both of you, keep to it! You can do this in a number of ways: talking about travel, talking about the school or friend you have in common, talking about the differences between your culture and the new culture (just be careful to make comparisons and not judgments, i.e., "The food in our country is better than the food here in England.").

Small Talk Topics

What is small talk? Which of these topics can be considered small talk? Circle them

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|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| • Movies that are in the theater | • A product you would like to sell | • The best political party |
| • The one true path to eternal life | • Your hometown | • The weather |
| • The local basketball team | • Your favorite movie star | • Gardening |
| • Cars | • How much money you make | • Your health problems |
| | | • Your family |



Do you enjoy making small talk with people? Why or why not?

What kinds of conversations do you enjoy?

30 Seconds of TALK!

Your tutor will set a timer for 30 seconds for each topic. You will talk for 30 seconds on each one! When the timer goes off your tutor will make a comment in response. The he'll set the timer for the next topic. This game helps build your confidence in speaking English.

Topics List

- Your best friend
- The last movie you saw
- Pets/animals
- Learning a language
- Keeping healthy
- Your favorite food
- Finding a job in your country vs. the US
- Your favorite holiday
- Your favorite actress/actor
- Something you've never done but would like to do

