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Episode #130

Things you shouldn't say when
having a conversation in English

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Hi, everybody! I am Georgiana, your English teacher and founder of SpeakEnglishPodcast.com. My mission is to help you speak English fluently.

Today, in this episode

Let's look at some bad strategies and attitudes that don't quite work in conversation. I mean, like having awkward conversations.

Next, you'll practice your fluency with a mini-story lesson—the best way to learn to speak English without translating mentally.

Okay, let's start with an important question:

Do you think that you are too old to learn English?

I have always thought that it is never too late to learn a language, and I have always had students of all ages using my method successfully.

But a few days ago, I received an email from a student in Greece, saying something like this:

*Dear Georgiana, hello,
I'm delighted to see your programs.
I think you give your soul to every lesson.
My mother tongue is Greek, and I am proud because our language has a positive contribution to the English vocabulary.
I'm also proud that I try to improve my English even though I'm 94 years old.
Georgiana, I encourage you to continue with your English lessons.
I admire you!*

Erotokritos

Thank you, dear Erotokritos, for your kind words. You are an inspiration for all of us.

So, you see, I think I've made my point. **It's never too late to learn English.**

All right, have you ever been with someone and not know what to talk about? It's happened to me sometimes. Every once in a while, we run into situations where it's difficult to continue the conversation.

One example is what happens in an elevator. Imagine that you meet a neighbor you hardly know, and a typical dialogue ends up going like this:

- Good morning.
- Good morning.
- Going down?
- Yes.

- ...
- It's cold today, isn't it?
- Yes, yes. It's going to be like this all week, they say...
- ...

As you can see, this conversation is not very intellectual. It's more about avoiding silence, which can be uncomfortable. This doesn't just happen in elevators but in all kinds of social interactions. I read recently that a silence of four seconds or more triggers anxiety.

It doesn't get any better when you have to speak in a language you are learning. You have even fewer resources to express yourself.

Today we are going to see which topics or strategies do not work well in conversations, especially with strangers. The goal, I think, is to have a somewhat interesting conversation. Come on, let's move on to the first one:

Talking about the weather

Talking about the weather is not a bad thing, but if we only talk about it or any other obvious things, we are not going to make a good impression.

Now I can think of a couple of situations where talking about the weather is an awful strategy.

— **A first date:**

Talking for 45 minutes about whether it's raining or hot or cold or windy isn't going to make you more attractive.

— **Job interview:**

Let's see...you don't know what to say...better not start commenting that it's a cold and foggy morning.

However, there are also exceptions. If you have a date with someone who works in meteorology or your job interview is to work as a meteorologist... well, yes, of course, you have to talk about the weather, right?

Let's see the next one:

You don't listen.

Yeah, I know it seems obvious, but... many people don't know how to listen, and it shows. When you really listen, you can find many ways to continue the conversation engagingly.

Sometimes people just pretend to be listening. They repeat the last part of what you say in the form of a question.

For example:

- When I was on vacation in Rome, it rained all week.
- The whole week?
- Yes, and we had to buy umbrellas.
- Umbrellas?
- Yes, and Bill Gates gave us all his money.
- All his money?
- Yeah... and you don't listen.
- I don't listen?

Well, you see what I mean, right?

Let's continue.

How to say it.

It is not only important what to say, but how to say it.

The most common mistakes are:

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— **Talking too fast.** Sometimes people need a slower pace to understand the message better. Not everyone is familiar with what you are saying.

— **Speak too softly.** Shy people sometimes speak too softly and are hard to understand.

— **Speak without articulating well.** Some people do not pronounce well, and it is difficult to follow what they say. It's better to speak clearly.

— **Speak without pausing.** It is better to pause from time to time and observe how the other person reacts.

Talk about something negative.

Another mistake that some people make is to talk about a negative topic to strangers. I really don't recommend that.

Talk about something boring.

I don't think it's a good idea to talk for half an hour about what color you want to paint the bedroom wall. You have to know how to choose your topics. Basically, for you, it can be relevant, but not for the other person.

Messing up

There are many ways to mess things up, but a common one is to assume something is true when it is not.

Let's look at some examples of messed-up conversations:

The first one:

— Congratulations!

— Why?

— Well, you're pregnant. How many months?

— No, I'm not pregnant.

Oops! The poor woman may have been a few pounds overweight. So, don't assume anything!

The second one:

— Ah, how beautiful your wife is and how young!
— No, she's not my wife. She's my daughter. And she's a minor.

Again... oops! It's better not to assume this kind of thing. In fact, the other way around is also wrong.

— Ah, it's good you're coming with your mother.
— She's not my mother. She's my wife.

We also have to be careful with criticism.

Especially when you do not know the type of relationship between the person you are talking to and the one you are criticizing.

For example, if you're **at a wedding**:

— Food is very scarce. Not much money has been spent.

— What a pity! I'll tell my brother, who paid for everything.

Okay, we'll leave it here for now.

Let's continue with a mini-story.

Mini-Story

(practice your speaking)

What's a mini-story?

A mini-story is very simple. I give you information using phrases, and then I ask you questions.

After each question, there will be some seconds of silence: it's your turn to answer the question!

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Just try to give an easy and short answer. Not a complex one.

After your answer, I'll give you the correct answer.

And just like that, I'll tell a story with questions and answers.

Are you ready?

▶ **Fred went into a store to buy a blender to prepare some delicious smoothies.**

Fred went into a boat?

No, no. Fred didn't get on a boat. He went into a store.

What did Fred want to buy?

He wanted to buy a blender.

Where did Fred go in?

Into a store. He went into a store.

Why did he want to buy a blender?

To prepare some delicious smoothies. Fred wanted to buy a blender to make some delicious smoothies.

▶ **Fred saw someone and assumed he was a shop assistant.**

A shop assistant saw Fred and assumed he was a customer?

No. That didn't happen. The shop assistant didn't see anything. Fred saw someone and thought he was a shop assistant.

What did Fred assume about the person he saw?

That he was a shop assistant, Fred assumed he was a shop assistant.

▶ **Fred asked the alleged shop assistant for advice on which model to buy.**

Did Fred ask his girlfriend to marry him?

No, no. He didn't do that. We don't know if Fred had a girlfriend. He asked the alleged shop assistant for advice.

Who did Fred ask for advice?

The alleged shop assistant. He asked for advice on which blender model to buy.

What advice did he ask?

Which model to buy. Fred asked for advice on which blender model to buy.

▶ **The alleged shop assistant replied that he didn't know much about appliances.**

Did the shop assistant reply that he was an expert?

No, he didn't reply that. He answered that he didn't know much about appliances.

Did he know much about appliances?

He didn't know much. Therefore, he knew little.

Where did this happen?

At the store. This happened at the appliance store.

▶ **Fred got mad because he thought the store had lousy service.**

Fred got mad?

Yeah, he got mad. You could also say he got angry.

He got angry because he thought the store had excellent service?

No, the other way around. He got angry because he thought the service was terrible—bad service.

▶ **Finally, Fred realized that the alleged shop assistant was also a customer. So, he was very embarrassed.**

What did Fred realize? That the blender was expensive?

No, not that. He realized that the alleged shop assistant was also a customer. So, he felt embarrassed.

What did Fred feel? Pride?

No, no. He didn't feel proud. He felt embarrassed.

Why did he feel embarrassed?

Because he realized that the alleged shop assistant was also a customer, he assumed he was an employee. That's why Fred was embarrassed.

Perfect! It's the end of this mini-story. And as you can see, through questions and answers, you can practice

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and improve your speech just like in a **real conversation**.

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