

Lesson Plan: Small talk - cultural differences

In their day-to-day working lives, and as business people are increasingly working more globally, being culturally aware and sensitive to cultural differences are essential skills to have. This latest life skills lesson plan from *In Company 3.0* looks at how small talk is often used in business settings before getting down to business, and examines the cultural differences that exist internationally. Have your students do a cultural sensitivity activity to gauge their own cultural awareness, and then do a listening exercise around the different ways that meetings can begin in different cultures.

Level: Intermediate / CEFR B1+

Time: approx 60-90 minutes (or longer depending on how the activities are used)

How to use this lesson plan:

The lesson can be used for the whole class, who can work in pairs or groups of three. Download and print out the [Student's Book pages](#) so each student has a copy, and download the related [audio files](#).

Learning objectives

Small talk can be a minefield when engaging in international business, because both cultural and personal factors come into play as well as any language difficulties. This unit addresses the issues of what is normal or acceptable in different cultural contexts, and looks at some techniques for making successful small talk before getting down to business.

A game-like exercise gives students a chance to talk about their own experiences – a useful skill as small talk often revolves around personal experiences.

They are then taught some adjectives to use to describe their experiences. Finally, they try out their skills in a conference dinner roleplay.

The grammar focus is on the Past Simple and the Present Perfect, and the lexical focus is on common adjectival collocations, and exaggeration and understatement.

In this first section, students begin by doing a quiz about cultural differences when it comes to small talk.

Warm-up

Focus attention on the quotation from John D Rockefeller, and ask them for their opinions on whether – and if so, how far – friendship and business can be mixed. How many of their closest friends are business colleagues and does this link affect either the friendship or the business in any way? Ask them if they think it is important to build friendships in business.

1 Do this as a whole-class discussion and encourage students to relate their own personal experiences of business small talk.

2 Ask students to work with a partner choosing to be either Speaker A or Speaker B. Photocopy and give out the 'Cultural sensitivity test' role cards to the students and ask them to discuss the dilemmas on their respective cards. When they have discussed each of the dilemmas in turn and made their decisions, give them a copy of the 'Comments on cultural sensitivity test' analysis section and ask them to read the analysis there.

Note that it is dangerous to make any sweeping generalizations about cultures, so be prepared for students to disagree with the analysis of the test or the diagram from *When Cultures Collide* in the next section. Encourage open discussion, but be careful not to encourage comments on particular nationalities that may cause offence.

1:1 notes

Ask your student if he / she agrees with the quotation. Discuss what qualities a good conversationalist has.

Getting down to business

This section further discusses the implications of cultural context on business small talk with a diagram. This shows how much small talk different nationalities are likely to engage in before they get down to business. Students then listen to extracts from meetings and match each to one of the countries in the diagram. They then listen again for specific information to answer questions and do some grammar work on some of the things that are said.

1 Students will be guessing or giving a personal opinion when they fill the diagram in for the first time. Allow them to discuss their answers with a partner or in small groups if they wish. Then discuss answers in a class feedback session but don't confirm any answers at this stage.

ANSWERS

a Germany **b** Finland **c** USA **d** UK
e France **f** Japan **g** Spain and Italy

2 (Tracks 2.01–2.07) The recordings should give students the answers that Richard D Lewis believes to be correct. Note that the names of the countries are not always given in the extracts. The students must work them out from clues.

ANSWERS

Extract a: Japan (clues: Sakamoto, Mizoguchi Bank, Usami-san, green tea)

Extract b: Germany (clues: Berlin, Wolfgang)

Extract c: Italy (clues: Juventus, Lazio, Italian football, Luigi)

Extract d: UK (clue: cricket)

Extract e: Finland (clue: Finland)

Extract f: USA (clue: New York)

Extract g: France (clue: president of France)

Track 2.01 Extract a audio script

A: Er, how do you do. I'm Tom Pearson, Export Manager, Falcon Petroleum.

B: How do you do, Mr Pearson. I am Sakamoto, Assistant Director of International Investments, Mizoguchi Bank. Please sit here opposite the door.
You'll be next to Usami-san.

A: Oh, okay. I sit here, right?

B: That's right. Have you tried green tea before, Mr Pearson?

A: Er, yes, I have. I had it last time I was here. I like it very much.

Track 2.02 Extract b audio script

A: Good morning, everyone. I'd like to introduce you all to Dr Alan Winter, who's come over from the Atlanta office to spend a few days at our research centre. Welcome to Berlin, Dr Winter.

B: Thank you very much, Wolfgang. It was kind of you to invite me.

A: Okay, let's get down to business, shall we?

Track 2.03 Extract c audio script

A: ... And then Juventus scored the winner. It was an incredible goal! Did you see the Lazio game last night, Miss Sterling?

B: Yes, I did. Wasn't it a great match? One of the best I've ever seen. But then, there's nothing like Italian football.

A: So, you like football, then?

B: Oh, yeah. I love it. In fact, my father was a professional footballer.

A: Really?

B: Yes. He wasn't a superstar or anything, but he, er, played for Leeds.

A: Leeds United?

B: Yes, that's right.

A: They were a great team in the 70s, weren't they?

B: Yeah, that's when he played for them.

A: Amazing. Wait till I tell Luigi. Our new partner's father played for Leeds United, ha!

B: Where is Luigi, by the way?

A: Oh, he'll be here soon. He's never the first to arrive, not Luigi ...

Track 2.04 Extract d audio script

A: Rain stopped play again yesterday, I see.

B: Sorry?

A: The cricket. They cancelled the match.

B: Oh, they didn't! Well, we certainly haven't seen much cricket this summer.

A: No. Chocolate biscuit?

B: Oh, have we got chocolate ones? Business must be good.

C: Right, everyone. Er, I suppose we'd better get started ...

Track 2.05 Extract e audio script

A: Right, shall we start? First of all, this is Catherine Anderson from London. I think this is your first time in Finland, isn't it, Catherine? Or have you been here before?

B: Actually, I came here on holiday once, but that was a long time ago.

A: Well, we hope you enjoy your stay with us. Now there's fresh coffee if you'd like some before we begin ...

Track 2.06 Extract f audio script

A: Okay, you guys. Thanks for coming. Now, to business ... Oh, did you all get coffee?

B: Hey, wait up. I've got a great one here.

C: Oh no, it's one of Marty's jokes.

B: See, there's this guy George goes for a job, right? And it's a really cool job. Right here in New York. Big money. So, anyway, he takes a test, like an aptitude test, you know, him and this woman. There's two of them. And they have to take a test to get the job.

C: Yeah, yeah, so ...?

B: So they both get exactly the same score on the test, George and the woman – 99%.

C: Uh huh.

B: So George goes into the interviewer's office. And the interviewer says, 'Well, you both got one question wrong on the test, but I'm sorry, we're giving the job to the other candidate.' So George says, 'Hey, that's not fair! How come she gets the job?' And the interviewer says, 'Well, on question 27, the question you both got wrong, she wrote "I don't know" and you wrote "Neither do I".'

C: That's a terrible joke, Marty.

B: No, you see, he copied her test, right?

A: Marty, we've heard the joke before. It's ancient. Okay, everybody, time to work.

B: I thought it was funny.

Track 2.07 Extract g audio script

A: As you know, Albert, I'm the last person to talk about other people's private lives. If the president of France himself wants to have an affair, I don't care. I mean, this is not the United States.

B: Yes, quite.

A: What I do worry about is what's going on between our vice-president and our head of finance.

B: They're having an affair?

A: Haven't you heard? I thought everybody knew.

B: No! No one ever tells me anything.

A: I mean, it's not the affair I care about. It's how it affects our meetings. Haven't you noticed?

B: Noticed what?

A: How they always agree on everything.

B: Well, now you mention it ...

3 (Tracks 2.01-2.07)

Go through the questions with the class so that students know what information they are listening for. Encourage students to answer the questions from memory before playing the recordings again.

ANSWERS

a Opposite the door, next to Usami-san

b A few days

c Professional footballer

d Chocolate biscuits

e She was on holiday.

f 99%

g The vice-president and the head of finance agree on everything.

4 With multinational groups, encourage students to explain why they have put their nationality in a particular place on the diagram in 1. With single nationality groups, find out how much agreement there is on the position on the diagram their nationality should occupy.

5 (Tracks 2.01-2.07)

When students have underlined their chosen forms, ask pairs to stand up and read out the conversations. The rest of the class should stand up, too, if they believe the conversations to be correct and remain seated if they believe there is a mistake. Students who believe that they are correct (or when the class is divided) can appeal to you to indicate whether there is a mistake or not. Play the recordings again as a final check at the end.

ANSWERS

a Have you tried; have; had; was

b has come; was

c scored; was; Did you see; did; Wasn't it; have ever seen

d stopped; cancelled; didn't; haven't seen

e have you been; came; was

f copied; 've heard; thought; was

g Haven't you heard; thought; knew

Small talk – Cultural sensitivity test

(copy and give each pair of students a role card for Speaker A or Speaker B)

<p>Speaker A</p> <p>Work with a partner. You have two intercultural dilemmas and your partner has two different ones. Take turns to describe the dilemmas to each other and discuss what you'd do in each situation. Do you agree on what you <i>should</i> do?</p> <p>Is it what you'd both <i>really</i> do?</p> <p>Dilemma 1: You meet a Spanish business contact you haven't seen for ages who wants to stop and chat, but you're running late for an appointment. Do you stay or do you make your excuses and go?</p> <p>Dilemma 2: A British salesman is giving you a demonstration of a new office product. He seems to like telling a lot of jokes. Do you join in the joke-telling or wait until he gets to the point?</p> <p>For comments on your answers, use the notes your teacher gives you.</p>	<p>Speaker B</p> <p>Work with a partner. You have two intercultural dilemmas and your partner has two different ones. Take turns to describe the dilemmas to each other and discuss what you'd do in each situation. Do you agree on what you <i>should</i> do?</p> <p>Is it what you'd both <i>really</i> do?</p> <p>Dilemma 1: Your new American boss organizes a weekend barbeque. You find yourself amongst a lot of people you've never met. Do you join in the fun or leave as early as you can?</p> <p>Dilemma 2: You are having a pre-negotiation coffee at a potential client's headquarters in Berlin. Do you mingle with the opposing team or stick with your own people?</p> <p>For comments on your answers, use the notes your teacher gives you.</p>
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Small talk – Comments on cultural sensitivity test

(copy and give to students so they can check their answers to the activity above)

<p>Dilemma 1: Business people from Latin and Arab countries tend to have a more flexible, 'polychronic' attitude to time than their 'monochronic' North American and North European counterparts, for whom time really is money. Their 'high-context' culture also places greater emphasis on personal relationships than 'low-context' northerners do.</p> <p>The message? Try not to be too busy for Brazilians or Italians and don't mess with Americans' tight schedules.</p>	<p>Dilemma 2: Mixing with colleagues out of work-hours is an integral part of business in America where many companies are run like sports teams with the boss as both captain and coach. Elsewhere, there may be a strong dividing line between work and home.</p> <p>The message? In social situations, simply be yourself. Neither do anything that offends you nor that you think may offend your hosts.</p>
<p>Dilemma 3: A good sense of humour is an admired quality in many cultures – notably British, American and most Latin countries – though the type of humour may vary from wordplay to sharp sarcasm to innuendo and even the surreal. In other cultures, however – particularly Germanic ones – humour is not usually considered appropriate in a business context.</p> <p>The message? You don't have to be a comedian with the British, but always smile at their attempts at humour. With Germans or Swiss, leave the jokes for the bar, after the meeting.</p>	<p>Dilemma 4: The amount of socializing you do prior to and during a negotiation will depend both on your own and the opposing team's negotiating styles, and where the negotiating is being held. In Japan, for example, the negotiation process is long and relationship-building plays an important part. The same is true of the Middle East. In the USA, things move faster, and their negotiating style tends to be both more informal and adversarial. In Germany, there may be little time for small talk.</p> <p>The message? Follow your opponents' lead, but do all you can to create rapport.</p>

Teacher's notes taken from *In Company 3.0 Intermediate (B1+)*, Teacher's Book unit 9 with communicative activity sections from the Student's Book.

For more information and to [download sample units](#) and audio from other levels of *In Company 3.0* visit www.macmillanincompany3.com