

What to Say After Hello | Small Talk in English, Episode 2

English learning resource · EN

Full episode script · English

281 lines

Study task: Listen again and notice the expressions you studied.

Quick game.

Do not think, just answer.

Alright.

Where are you from?

Manchester.

How long have you lived here?

Six years.

Do you like it?

Yes.

What do you do?

This.

Is that interesting?

Sometimes.

Do you have brothers and sisters?

One.

Do you drive?

Can I stop?

Why?

Because I feel like I am at passport control.

You feel like what?

Like somebody is deciding whether to let me into the country.

And that, my friend, is exactly what you do to people.

I do not do that.

You did it to my cousin at Christmas for nineteen minutes.



Welcome to Your English Toolbox, the podcast that trains your English while you live your real life.

I am Martin.

And I am Julia.

This is the second conversation in our series about small talk in English.

Last time, the first ten seconds.

How to start.

And today, the thing that happens one second later.

You said your sentence.

They answered.

And your mind goes completely blank.

So let us start with the mistake, because almost everybody makes it.

The interrogation.

You ask a question.

They answer.

There is a tiny silence.

And the silence frightens you.

So you fire another question.

And another.

And another.

And it feels like you are doing really well, because the conversation has not died.

But you are not having a conversation.

You are filling in a form.

And there are two problems with that.

Tell me the first.

The other person gets tired.

Answering is work.

If I ask you fourteen questions, you have done fourteen jobs and I have done nothing.

And the second problem is bigger.

The second problem is much bigger.

You have told them nothing about yourself.



Nothing.

So even if it goes well, they walk away knowing you are polite.

And that is all.

You cannot become friends with somebody who gave you nothing.

There is a phrase for this in English.

To grill somebody.

To grill somebody.

Like meat, on a fire.

It means to ask somebody question after question until they feel uncomfortable.

Stop grilling me.

And nobody has ever made a friend by grilling them.

Right, so here is the idea that changes everything.

This is the heart of the episode.

Free information.

Every answer a person gives you contains free gifts.

Little pieces of information you did not ask for.

And those pieces are doors.

Give me an example.

Somebody says, I have just come back from Lisbon.

How many conversations are inside that sentence?

Three, at least.

Lisbon itself.

The trip.

And why they went.

Work?

Family?

Holiday?

And notice, you did not ask for any of that.

They gave it to you.

Another one.



Somebody says, I am just finishing a late shift.

So they work shifts.

They are tired right now.

And they have a job you know nothing about.

Three doors again.

One more.

My son starts school next week.

They have a child.

The child is about four or five.

And next week is going to be emotional.

And now, here is the painful truth about why people miss all of this.

Go on.

Because while the other person is talking, you are not listening.

You are preparing your next question.

You are in your head, searching for something to say, and the other person is handing you three topics and you do not hear a single one.

So the instruction is almost too simple.

Stop preparing.

Just listen to the answer.

The answer contains the next thing to say.

Now let me give them the mechanical version.

Three steps.

Say them.

Answer.

Add.

Return.

Somebody asks you, do you live near here?

The machine says, yes.

And the conversation dies.

The person says, yes, about ten minutes away.

I moved last year, so I am still finding my way around.



How long have you been here?

Three steps.

Answer, that is the yes.

Add, that is the moving last year.

Return, that is the question back.

And the magic is in the middle part.

The middle part is free information that nobody asked for.

That is you giving something away.

And in English, to give something away also means to reveal something about yourself.

Which is the whole point.

Because now the other person can say, oh, where did you move from?

And you did not have to think of a clever question.

You just gave them one.

Right.

My favourite tool in this entire series.

Oh, this one is good.

Backchannelling.

Almost nobody teaches this, and it is the fastest way to sound natural in English.

Backchannelling is what the listener does.

The little noises and words you make while the other person is speaking.

Mm.

Right.

Oh really?

Did you?

You're joking.

That is amazing.

And here is why it matters so much.

In natural English conversation, listeners often give small signals while the other person is speaking.

Not every second.

But often enough to show they are still with you.



If you stay completely silent while I am talking, I do not think, what a polite listener.

You think, he is bored.

I think you are bored, or you have not understood me, or you want to leave.

And for somebody still building their fluency, this is the best deal available.

The best deal in the language.

Sometimes it costs only one syllable.

And it buys you presence.

You are in the conversation, and you have not had to build a sentence.

Now, I have a confession.

Go on.

I have three different versions of mm.

Everybody has three versions of mm.

Translate them.

The short one.

Mm.

That means, I am here, keep going.

Correct.

The long one.

Mmmm.

That means, that is interesting, or, I am thinking.

And the one that goes up at the end.

Mm?

That one means, say that again, I did not understand.

Which, in England, is the politest possible way to say, what?

Now, the silence.

Because somebody is listening to us right now who thinks silence is their fault.

And it usually is not.

Here is something worth knowing.

In many British conversations, even a few seconds of silence can feel longer than learners expect.

Just a few seconds.



And in some cultures, that same pause is completely normal.

Comfortable, even.

So you arrive from a place where a pause is a pause.

And suddenly everybody is uncomfortable, and you decide it is because your English is bad.

When actually it is a cultural difference.

It is a cultural difference.

Your English is fine.

The clock is different.

And if you need a safety net, when your mind really is empty.

There is an old one, and it works.

Four possible directions.

Family, occupation, recreation, dreams.

Family, work, free time, and plans.

If you are stuck, one of those four can give you a direction.

But use your judgement.

Exactly.

It is a safety net, not a checklist.

Family and work can feel personal, so choose the door the other person has already opened.

And I want to add a warning about the second one.

Please do.

In the United States, what do you do is a common early question.

In some British settings, especially with someone you have just met, it can feel a little more direct.

It can sound like you are measuring somebody.

So instead?

Are you working at the moment?

Or even better.

What keeps you busy?

Which is a beautiful question, because the answer can be a job, or a child, or a garden, or a very demanding cat.

So.

Juan.



Juan, in the campus café, two weeks after the bus stop.

With somebody?

With Priya, from his course.

She sat down at his table because there were no free tables.

A gift.

An enormous gift.

And Juan did what we all do when we are nervous.

He grilled her.

Fourteen questions.

Fourteen.

He counted them afterwards, walking home, dying of embarrassment.

How did he find out?

On question fourteen, Priya put her cup down and said, can I ask you something now?

Oh, that is painful.

It is painful.

And it was the best thing that happened to him all month.

Because?

Because he had been telling himself for three weeks that his problem was his English.

And his problem was not his English.

His problem was that he was giving nothing.

What did he do?

The following week, same café, she asked him if he was enjoying the course.

And instead of yes, he said, yes, but the reading is hard.

I read everything twice.

Sometimes three times.

And then?

And then Priya said, oh god, me too.

Right.

Three tools.

Listen, and repeat in the pause.



Tool one, answer and add.

Yes, about ten minutes away.

I moved last year, actually.

Tool two, the backchannel that opens a door.

Oh really?

How did that go?

Tool three, picking up the free information.

You said you had just moved.

How are you finding it?

All three again.

Yes, about ten minutes away.

I moved last year, actually.

Oh really?

How did that go?

You said you had just moved.

How are you finding it?

Notice the word actually in the first one.

It is doing something small and clever.

It makes the extra information sound casual, like you have just remembered it.

And how are you finding it is a very natural way to ask somebody about a new experience.

Not, do you like it.

How are you finding it.

And our sentence of the day.

Ready?

Don't ask another question.

Give something back.

Don't ask another question.

Give something back.

One more time, with us.

Don't ask another question.



Give something back.

So here is your task this week.

One conversation.

One sentence that nobody asked you for.

Somebody asks you something, you answer, and then you add one small true thing about yourself.

That is all.

One extra sentence.

And watch what happens, because that sentence is where the other person walks in.

Next time, the problem that comes after this one.

You know a lot of people.

And you do not have a single friend.

How a conversation stops being polite and starts being real.

Everything from today, the transcript, the vocabulary, and the three tools, is waiting for you at yourenglishtoolbox.com.

With translations, flashcards and downloadable PDFs, completely free.

Thank you for spending this time with us.

And stop grilling people.

See you in the next one.

