

Language for ...

informal conversations

Age: Adult

Level: Intermediate

Time: 45–60 minutes

Language focus: types of informal conversations and key phrases within them

Skills: speaking, listening

Materials: audio and worksheets, internet access

Aims: to provide students with language to describe and participate in short informal conversations



What are red words?

Ninety per cent of the time, speakers of English use just 7,500 words in speech and writing. These words appear in the Macmillan Dictionary in red and are graded with stars. One-star words are frequent, two-star words are more frequent, and three-star words are the most frequent. 'Language for' lessons are based on red words and encourage students to improve their English through communicative tasks using collocation and commonly used phrases.

- 1 Ask students to look up the word *conversation* in the Macmillan Dictionary (www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/conversation), read the whole entry carefully, and find three key verbs that this noun often occurs with. NB. steps 1 and 2 in the lesson could easily be given to students to carry out individually before class, as an alternative to doing them at the start of the lesson.



Teaching Tip: Students could be invited to note their findings in a word cloud platform (e.g. <https://answergarden.ch/>), which could be displayed as the class begins – do they all agree on the three verbs *conversation* regularly occurs with? (= *have*, *make* and *get into*)

- 2 Ask students to follow the thesaurus link within the same entry: (www.macmillandictionary.com/thesaurus-category/british/informal-conversation-about-other-people-or-

unimportant-things) and look at the words for describing different kinds of informal conversation – are there equivalents in their own languages? How might they translate them?

- 3 Hand out copies of the worksheet to each student.
- 4 Exercise 1 consolidates the three phrases students should have found when preparing for the lesson. Start by reading the sentences and asking students how they think the bold phrases differ in meaning (see the Key. Return to the Macmillan Dictionary entry for *conversation* if necessary, though if students have looked at it in advance, they should have an idea). Then explain that, following on from what they've also read in the thesaurus, the lesson is going to look at different types of informal conversation in English.
- 5 Tell students that they're now going to listen to four speakers describing different types of informal conversation. Ask them to read the questions in exercise 2a and circle the answers they think are correct. Then play the audio. Do they now want to change any of their answers? Check the answers as a class. You might like to point up some fixed phrases the speakers use: *behind someone's back* = *without someone knowing*; *someone's business* = *something that involves a particular person and no one else*; *make fun of* = *make jokes about*.
- 6 Play the audio again, and ask students to complete exercise 2b. As a class activity, invite four pairs of students to role-play each of the short conversations as shown.
- 7 Ask students to look at the phrases in exercise 3a and then work in pairs to complete the exercise. Encourage them to first complete any answers they immediately know so that they can be eliminated. Check the answers as a class. Take a

Language for ...

informal conversations

moment to explore students' own experiences – have they heard these short phrases in informal conversations? Have they used them themselves? Can they think of any others? Elicit ideas and if necessary add a few other common examples (e.g. *Of course; Cool; That's great/terrible; How awful/exciting; I see/know what you mean; What a shame; Oh dear*). Some other suggestions are also given in exercise 4.

- 8 Before starting exercise 3b, explain to students that it's important to know which of these conversational phrases is appropriate in a particular situation. For instance, if someone said to you, 'My grandfather's very ill,' and you replied, 'Oh well' or, 'Never mind' then you'd be considered impolite. Ask students to complete the exercise in pairs and then check the answers as a class.

 **Teaching Tip:** As an extension activity, ask students to look again at the incorrect options in each case and think of simple conversational statements for which they could be (part of) a response, e.g. for Q.1: A: I've got a new job. B: Cool, where? — A: I think I've lost my keys. B: Oh no! When did you last see them?

- 9 Exercise 3c is a vocabulary exercise which returns to the Macmillan Dictionary thesaurus panel from step 2 of the lesson, putting some of the words there into context. Tell students to first re-read the panel, paying careful attention to the definitions and also remembering what they learnt about some of the words in earlier exercises. Ask them to complete the exercise and check answers as a class. (NB. though *conversation* can plausibly fill more than one gap, it's the only correct option for question 7; i.e. it might be helpful to point out that, unlike *conversation*, *chat* cannot be used with *get into*, or *make*).
- 10 Divide students into pairs for exercise 4. Tell them to spend a few minutes noting down ideas and to then take it in turns to informally tell their partner a

piece of news, or to respond to their partner's news. Remind students to look at the conversations and phrases in earlier exercises to help them, as well as the useful phrases box.

- 11 As a brief wind-up activity, play a charades-type game in which two students are secretly given the words gossip, banter or small talk. These students then act out a short conversation (e.g. no more than six turns), and the rest of the class have to guess which of the three conversation types the students are attempting to illustrate.

Answer key:

- 1 *make conversation* = to talk to someone you don't know well in order to be polite (and not because you really want to talk to them)
have a conversation = to talk with one or more people, usually privately and informally
get into conversation = to start talking to someone you haven't met before
- 2a 1 friendly; anytime
2 other people
3 friends; the same
4 don't know; serious
- 2b 1 c 2 d 3 a 4 b
- 3a 1 a 4 b 7 d
2 e 5 c
3 g 6 f
- 3b 1 Oh well. 4 That's great. 7 Sure.
2 Oh no! 5 Take care.
3 Really? 6 Never mind.
- 3c 1 banter 4 gossip 7 conversation
2 chatter 5 chat
3 small talk 6 repartee
- 4, 5 students' own answers

Language for ...

informal conversations

1. What does having a chat mean? When do people tend to have a chat?

Person A: Er, a chat is a friendly conversation between two or more people. And normally people tend to have a chat at any point during the day, maybe in the morning, at school, or at work, or perhaps in the evening, on the telephone, online or face-to-face.

Person B: Having a chat means having a discussion about a certain topic, usually, ah, not too long. People tend to have a chat when there's just something that they need to talk about.

Person C: Well, having a chat means something smaller than a conversation for me, and a chat does not necessarily need to have an outcome. You can just have a chat for fun. That's probably the main difference between chat and conversations.

Person D: For me, having a chat is when you talk with someone in a nice friendly way. Er, it's pretty informal so you wouldn't use it for a formal discussion. So I'd maybe have a chat with my friends, um, before work or at lunch time.

2. What is gossip? What kind of things do people gossip about?

Person A: Er, gossip is when two or more people talk about ... often about someone else and when they're not in the room. And they usually talk about ... perhaps their private lives, possibly what they look like, what they're wearing that day.

Person B: Gossip isn't very nice. Gossip is, ah, when you talk about someone behind their back or when they're not there, ah, usually about things that aren't really your business.

Person C: Well, gossip is a conversation or a chat you have about people that you know, and I think it's important that everybody knows what they're talking about. The moment you don't know the people you're

gossiping about, you're losing interest. Gossiping is mainly about people and what they did. Usually, it's not very nice things they did or not very glamorous things that they did.

Person D: Talking about other people's business. Erm, news about other p ... gossip is news about other people, um, especially if it's about their personal relationships or private lives.

3. Can you explain what banter means? What type of people have banter with each other, and about what?

Person A: Banter is a conversation between two friends, and often it's when they're making jokes or laughing at each other. The type of banter that people have is ... it could be to do with anything ... so maybe a shared interest like a football team. Or it might be something related to their work, or their school, or anything that makes them both laugh.

Person B: Banter is, um, it's sort of funny chat that you might have, um, joking and making, sort of, silly ... silly comments that don't really mean anything.

Person C: It's the type of talk you have with people who do things together or are interested in the same things and it can be about sports or about work. And it's usually the type of talk that you have where not everybody says nice things all the time, but if they say things which aren't nice, they're meant in a humorous kind of way or to just, you know, be sociable with one another.

Person D: Er, friends have banter with each other. Um, I think banter is making fun of people but again in a nice way. I don't think you'd have banter with someone that you didn't know or like very much.

4. How would you describe small talk? What are some common small talk topics?

Person A: Small talk is like a chat, but I think it's more in a business context. So often before giving

Language for ...

informal conversations

a presentation or before having a meeting you will maybe have a very informal discussion about the weather, about your day, about the weekend, about y ... perhaps even your family or friends. Er, and it normally lasts for about ... from anywhere between 20 seconds to two minutes.

Person B: Small talk is what you talk about when you don't know someone. So, um, if you're introduced to someone you might ask them where they're from, um, or you might ask them about their family, ah, or travelling, movies, that kind of thing. So it sort of breaks the ice to get into a discussion, and then maybe you can talk about some deeper things.

Person C: Small talk is pleasantries. It's the kind of conversation that you have before you get to the really important conversation. And as such, I think it follows that small talk topics must be not offensive, not really serious, so you're gonna be talking about weather or, er, very simple things about holidays, or very simple topics about your family, but nothing that would ever offend anybody before you're meant to have this really important conversation later.

Person D: Small talk is very basic personal information. So, How's work going?, How's the family?, er, British classic: Hasn't the weather been lovely recently? Um, you'd never cover any difficult topics in small talk, it's all very light and superficial.

Language for ...

informal conversations

1 Warmer

Read the sentences and look at the phrases in bold – how are their meanings different?

- ‘It’s very warm today, isn’t it?’ she said, desperately trying to **make conversation**.
- I **had a long conversation** with my cousin in America last night.
- He met one of the organizers on the train, and they **got into conversation**.



2 Listening

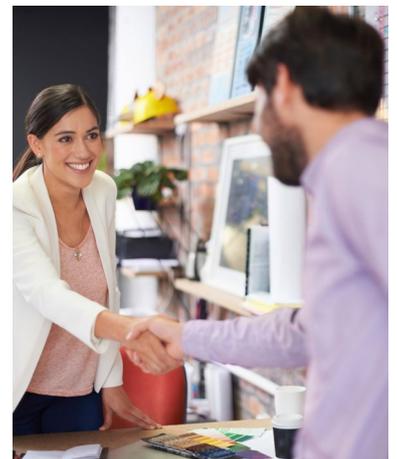
a You’re going to listen to four people talking about different types of informal conversation. First, choose the correct options to complete the sentences below. Then listen to the speakers to check your answers.

- 1 A chat is a *face-to-face / friendly / long* conversation. People chat *in the morning / before work / anytime*.
- 2 Gossip is talking about *other people / today’s news / your business*.
- 3 Banter is a humorous conversation between *colleagues / friends / teams*. Banter often happens when two people are interested in *different / funny / the same* things.
- 4 Small talk generally occurs when people *don’t know / see / like* each other. Small talk topics aren’t usually *interesting / serious / informal*.

b Listen again. Then read the conversations 1–4 below and match them with the best description a–d.

- a chat b small talk c gossip d banter

- 1 A Have you heard about Imogen?
B No. I haven’t seen her in ages; what about her?
A Apparently, she’s moving to Australia with her boyfriend.
B Wow! Really? I didn’t even know she had a boyfriend. When?
A After Christmas, I think, or at least that’s what Karl told me ...
- 2 A I really enjoyed the new Avengers film.
B The film, or Scarlett Johansson? Go on, admit it, you really like her, don’t you?
A Well, yes ... but it had great CGI and special effects!
B Now, would you have gone to see it if she hadn’t been in it?
A Haha, no, probably not!
- 3 A Hi Eve, how are you doing?
B I’m fine, thanks. How’s things with you?
A Not bad, thanks. We’ve just come back from a weekend in Edinburgh.
B Ooh, sounds lovely.
A Well, it was OK, but Ben didn’t feel well and so he slept most of the time.



Language for ...

informal conversations

- B Oh no, what a shame! Is he OK now?
 A Yeah, he's fine - nothing serious, it was just a cold.
- 4 A Lovely and warm in the sun today ...
 B Fantastic, isn't it?
 A Let's hope it lasts until the weekend!
 B Absolutely. That would be nice.

3 Language in use

a Match the words and phrases 1-7 with their uses a-g.

- | | |
|---------------|--|
| 1 Sure. | a an informal way of saying 'yes' when someone asks you for something |
| 2 Never mind. | b used for showing that you are very impressed by something |
| 3 Really? | c used when someone has just told you that something bad has happened |
| 4 Wow! | d used for saying goodbye to someone in a friendly way |
| 5 Oh no! | e used for telling someone not to worry or not to be upset about something |
| 6 Oh well ... | f used for accepting a bad situation or disappointment |
| 7 Take care. | g used for showing that you are surprised by or interested in what someone has just told you |

b Choose the best option to complete the responses.

- 1 A It's too late to watch the film now.
 B Oh well. / Oh no! / Cool, we can watch it tomorrow.
- 2 A I can't believe it - someone has stolen my bike!
 B Wow! / Oh no! / Never mind. We should tell the police.
- 3 A Jackie's leaving the company next month; she's got a new job.
 B Sure. / Really? / Oh well. Who told you that?
- 4 A I've just passed my driving test!
 B Take care. / Sure. / That's great. Congratulations!
- 5 A It was really good to see you, Jen.
 B You too. How lovely. / Take care. / Sure.
- 6 A I made a cake for the party, but it got burnt in the oven.
 B Never mind. / How awful. / Really? We can buy one instead.
- 7 A Can you help me carry a box upstairs?
 B Sure. / That's great. / Take care. Which one?

Language for ...

informal conversations

c Complete the sentences with the words in the box.

gossip repartee chatter banter conversation small talk chat

- 1 Ed and Tom are always making fun of each other; they like a bit of friendly _____.
- 2 Please be quiet – it’s impossible to concentrate with all this constant _____.
- 3 Mia didn’t enjoy the party. She didn’t know anyone and she’s never been very good at _____.
- 4 Have you heard the local _____? Jack and Melanie are getting divorced!
- 5 Stefan, I think we need to have a quick _____ about what to do next.
- 6 The play is classic Noël Coward – full of witty _____.
- 7 The journey was long, but eventually I got into _____ with the person sitting next to me.

4 Communicate

Practise having a short conversation. Find a partner and start talking to them about something informal or telling them a piece of news. Then swap roles and practise responding to what your partner says. Use your own ideas or the ideas in the box below.

You’ve just enjoyed a holiday in Ireland.

You and your partner went to school with Joe. You’ve heard that Joe is getting married in July.

You can’t find your wallet.

You’re a fan of FC Barcelona. Your partner likes A.C. Milan. Barcelona has just beaten Milan.

You’re going to cook a special meal for some friends. You’d like to borrow your partner’s recipe book.

More useful phrases

Do/Did you know that ...?	Sounds great / exciting / awful / terrible ...
What a nuisance/shame/pity ...	I know/see (what you mean).
Oh dear.	Of course. / No problem.

5 Discussion

How do chat, banter and gossip in English compare with similar ways of communicating in your language and your country? With your partner, discuss any similarities or differences and report back to the class.

Red Words

conversation (noun) *** chat (noun)* chat (verb) ** of course (adverb) ***
really (adverb) *** sure (adverb) ***