

A moment that changed me: I gave up small talk for a month – and the world came alive

Level 3: Advanced

Article summary: This article describes what happens when the author decides not to engage in 'small talk' for a month.

Time: 60 minutes

Skills: Reading, Speaking, Writing

Language focus: Phrasal verbs

Materials needed: One copy of the worksheet per student

Key:

1. *networking*
2. *mould*
3. *vulnerable*
4. *on edge*
5. *rusty*
6. *deflect*
7. *common ground*
8. *hardwired*
9. *manic*
10. *at ease*
11. *side hustle*
12. *resenting*
13. *broad*
14. *interrogator*
15. *exchange*
16. *quizzical*

1. Warmer

- a. This activity aims to get students thinking about what 'small talk' is, why people use it and what topics they generally talk about. Ask students if they feel comfortable making small talk in social situations and what people typically talk about. You can extend the activity by asking pairs of students to role-play a typical conversation between people who are meeting for the first time, where they engage in small talk. Finally, ask students to speculate whether people from different countries and cultures use small talk in the same way as people in the UK generally do, and whether there are particular generic topics that they use and why.

2. Key words

- a. Ask students to work individually to match the words from the box to the definitions. Remind them to read the sentences that come before or after the words in bold to help them work out the meaning of the words in context. Allow a few minutes for students to check answers in pairs or groups before checking answers with the whole class. Check that students are pronouncing the key words correctly as they give you the answers.

- b. Ask students to work individually or in pairs to complete the sentences using words from the previous activity in the correct form.

Key:

1. *quizzical*
2. *rusty*
3. *deflect*
4. *common ground*
5. *side hustle*
6. *at ease*
7. *networking*
8. *mould*
9. *hardwired*
10. *interrogator*
11. *exchange*
12. *on edge*
13. *resenting*
14. *broad*
15. *at ease*
16. *manic*

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3. Comprehension check

- a. Students can work individually or in pairs to do this activity. Encourage them to highlight the section of the article where they found the answers to the questions, and if possible, to use their own words in the answers.

Key:

1. *It was boring at best and stressful at worst. / She didn't understand the rules (e.g. how long it should last, whether to answer honestly or to try and be funny).*
2. *She compared herself to an actor rehearsing lines for a play.*
3. *Students can mention any three of the following: wellbeing, weather, transport and children's academic achievements.*
4. *When a barista mentioned the weather, she started talking about her favourite season. When a woman mentioned her kids being out of school, she asked what her favourite subject had been.*
5. *She learned about a bartender's side hustle, a graduate's passion for beekeeping and a mental health nurse's novel.*
6. *Most people seemed relieved. The writer explains this by suggesting she wasn't the only one who found small talk awkward.*
7. *She describes small talk as a passport to human interaction.*
8. *Some gave her a strange look before excusing themselves, while others were generally suspicious of her.*

4. Key language

- a. Students work individually to match the phrasal verbs to the correct definition.

Key:

1. *b*
2. *a*
3. *d*
4. *c*
5. *e*

- b. Ask students to work individually or in pairs to complete the sentences with the phrasal verbs from task a. You might like to point out to students that the phrasal verb *play along* is often followed by *with*, e.g. *When Jake started joking about the boss during the meeting, I didn't play along with it – it felt unprofessional.*

Key:

1. *turned out*
2. *seek out*
3. *play along*
4. *came to*
5. *give up*

5. Discussion

- a. Students discuss the questions in pairs or groups. Ask them to justify their opinions, referring to their own experiences whenever possible.

6. In your own words

- a. The aim of this task is to get students to think about a habit, behaviour or social convention that they don't like or find annoying and to devise a social experiment to do things differently for a month in the same way that the writer of the text did with small talk. Monitor as they do this, helping with ideas or suggestions if students need guidance.
- b. Give students time to develop their experiment before they present it to the class. Encourage them to explain their choices and to answer any questions that their classmates may have. Students can vote on the experiment that they think is the most interesting, the most fun or the most practical.