



## Talking the talk

**Oksana Matsnieva** reports on strategies for fostering in-person, people-focused communication

From January to April 2025, I was among 50 fortunate Ukrainian EFL teachers to take part in a ten-week online course “Positive Influence at Work” run by renowned business English expert Mark Powell. Organized by TESOL Ukraine and Sumy State University in eastern Ukraine, the course was designed to equip EFL / ESP professionals with the tools and strategies they need to have a meaningful impact in their classrooms.

My numerous takeaways from the course included the insight that small talk is one of the key elements of networking, not only in business.

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### The eight Es

Mark argued that small talk is part of conversations that are people-focused rather than topic-focused. What’s more, the purpose of people-focused conversation is not to *communicate* but to *connect*. And the No. 1 way to connect is not just to *listen* but also to *listen emphatically*, an activity that can be facilitated, in turn, by eight small-talk skills or what Mark called the “eight Es”:

1. Echo (“Paris, uh huh.” “With your family? Right.”)
2. Encourage (“Really?” “Oh, yeah?” “Oh, I see.”)
3. Enthuse (“Wow!” “No!” “That’s so amazing!”)
4. Explain (“You mean...” “Oh, so you...”)
5. Enquire (“So, did you...” “Isn’t that supposed to be...”)
6. Elaborate (“I hear that’s very...” “I believe they...”)
7. Empathize (“Oh, I know what you mean. How awful!”)
8. Endorse (“Yeah, that’s true.” “Mm, I know.” “Oh, absolutely.” “Certainly is.”).

### Activity: The conversation agility game

But Mark didn’t just tell us about emphatic listening, he also shared a classroom activity for practicing it.

★ **Level:** A2+

🕒 **Time:** 15 minutes+

🎯 **Aim:** Improve language students’ conversational skills

📄 **Materials:** A list of 12 individual conversational topics such as: *work, weather, (world) news, the course they’re doing, (business) travel, free time, economy, holidays, movies, family, accommodation, plans for the weekend*

✍️ **Prep:** Explain the eight Es and provide students with the above list of conversational topics as well as a few gambits for opening conversations such as: *Have you*

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*seen the news? Do you do a lot of traveling with your job? Is it hot enough for you? Apparently...*

### Procedure:

1. Students choose four of the 12 conversational topics you’ve provided but don’t reveal their choices to one another.
2. Working in pairs, they take turns starting conversations on the topics they’ve chosen.
3. If the topic chosen by speaker No. 1 is the same as one of speaker No. 2’s chosen topics, No. 1 scores a point, and No. 2 must respond at length and keep the conversation going for as long as possible.
4. If the topic chosen is not one of speaker No. 2’s topics, No. 2 answers only briefly and starts a new conversation on one of his or her chosen topics.
5. The first student to score three points is the winner.

**Variant:** For conversation starters, also provide students with sets of preference cards with questions like this: *Are you a dog-person or a cat-person? Are you a coffee person or a tea person? Are you a restaurant person or a take-away person? Are you a still-water person or a sparkling-water person? Are you a Zoom person or a Google Meet person? Are you a YouTube person or a TikTok person? Are you a success person or a happiness person? Are you a half-empty-glass person or a half-full-glass person?*

Thank you, Mark, for reminding us of the importance of people-focused communication and for sharing your ideas for developing language students’ emphatic listening and small-talk skills.




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