

WORKPLACE TALK IN ACTION

AN ESOL RESOURCE

Nicky Riddiford and Jonathan Newton

TE WHARE WĀNANGA O TE ŪPOKO O TE IKA A MĀUI
VICTORIA
UNIVERSITY OF WELLINGTON

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– AN ESOL RESOURCE

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School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies
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Audio files

For a downloadable zip file containing recordings of the lead dialogues in each chapter go to www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/resources/z54gtqs09tr.aspx

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Who this book is for

This book is designed for adults of all ages from non-English speaking backgrounds who work or plan to work in workplaces in which English is the medium of communication.

It is designed for use in business/workplace focused ESOL classes or communication training courses in English speaking countries, especially, but not exclusive to, Australia and New Zealand. The book could also be used in one-to-one tutoring contexts.

It assumes an intermediate to advanced proficiency in English.

Why this book was written

Firstly, we saw the need for a business English text book that provided learners with access to examples that show how people really interact at work in English. Many subtle features of communication can be unwittingly left out of artificially constructed conversations, and misleading input from textbook conversations has sometimes been blamed as the source of communication misunderstanding. The examples in this book, by contrast, draw on recordings of interactions as they naturally occurred. We have adapted these to protect the identities of the participants and organisations who volunteered to give us access to their everyday workplace talk, but they retain the crucial features of real interaction.

Use of the data has allowed us to identify important communication issues. For example, a common misconception among English language learners is that New Zealanders are very direct in the way they interact. However, instruction in politeness or pragmatics, especially when the focus is on looking carefully at authentic language, can help raise awareness of the subtle features that are employed to soften the impact of face-threatening acts. Learners discover that, just as native speakers do in their L1, New Zealanders use a range of linguistic strategies to suit the social context. Depending on the situation, sometimes people are polite by being respectful of others and indirect, and sometimes people are polite by being friendly and direct and making someone feel like part of the group. Status difference, level of familiarity and difficulty of task all influence the way interactions are carried out. In the white collar workplace, learners often observe that the

more difficult or awkward the task, the more indirect New Zealanders become in their language strategies.

Secondly, we saw a need to focus on the kinds of interactions and speech functions that are difficult to manage interculturally such as requesting, refusing, disagreeing, complaining, and apologising. The different ways face-threatening speech functions are handled across cultures makes the risk of communicative misunderstanding and offence considerable when they are not handled appropriately. Furthermore, without explicit focus on the features of these speech functions, it is unlikely that learners will discover this information simply by living in an English speaking environment because native speakers tend not to comment on what they perceive to be deliberate rudeness rather than language errors.

Thirdly, we saw a need for an approach to business English which incorporates a critical component so as to empower business English learners to undertake their own analyses of what is going on in workplace interactions and to develop awareness of the communicative choices available to them and the consequences of choices on the effectiveness of their workplace communication. This textbook provides learners with the analytic tools for interpreting workplace conversations in English in relation to contextual features (e.g. participants, setting, nature of the interaction).

How this book is organised

Each of the seven main chapters in the book addresses a speech function or set of related speech functions that are often high risk and face-threatening. Each chapter has four parts:

1. *Analysis of a workplace interaction*: A series of activities focusing on an authentic workplace scenario and interaction (available as a transcript and recording) including discussion, role-play, listening, analysis of language and communication strategies, and cross-cultural comparisons.
2. *Additional interactions for analysis*
3. *E-mail transcripts for analysis*
4. *Useful expressions*: Suggestions for effectively managing the speech function(s) in the chapter, including lists of alternative expressions and useful phrases and activities for practising these ideas and phrases.

The book concludes with an appendix including supplementary materials (for example, role-play prompts).

Recordings of the leading dialogue in each unit are available as mp3 files in a zip folder. These recordings have been reconstructed to protect the participants' identity. Nevertheless, they reflect the pragmatic details of the interactions in as much detail as possible. To download the recordings follow the instructions on the attached access code card.

What are the key ideas

Our daily communication is imbued with culture. As the linguist Claire Kramsch (1993) expresses it, 'every time we speak we perform a cultural act'[1]. Thus, when we communicate interculturally, we experience not only different languages but different ways of using language to get things done and to get on with other people.

In the context of a multiculturally diverse workplace, or where a recent migrant has entered a new workplace, intercultural communication skills become critical. Very often, they determine the success of high-stakes encounters, such as job interviews and sensitive contract negotiations. Intercultural communication skills are no less important in daily workplace interactions in which people are constantly using language to manage 'face' – to preserve their public self and that of others. To explain this point, let's look at an apparently unremarkable example from a conversation recorded in a New Zealand white-collar workplace.

Example 1

Kate is a manager in a government department. Brenda is her personal assistant. Kate would like Brenda to work late today.

Kate: 'I know this is a bit last minute Brenda, but do you think you could possibly stay later tonight? It's just that I need to get the meeting agenda ready for tomorrow.'

Although this request may look unremarkable, Kate is skilfully and seemingly effortlessly managing potentially risky – or face-threatening – communication in which she has to ask Brenda to do something above and beyond what would normally be expected of her.

Kate handles these risks by making language choices that minimise imposition and enhance solidarity in culturally determined ways. To understand these choices, we need to think of the simplest and barest way

1 Kramsch, C. (1993). *Context and culture in language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

that Kate might have stated her message: 'I need you to work late tonight'. A message stated in this way would threaten the collaborative and ostensibly egalitarian nature of the manager-staff relationship established by Kate and Brenda. Instead, Kate uses a number of strategies to soften the impact of her request. First, she begins by acknowledging and implicitly apologising for the potential imposition with: 'I know this is a bit last-minute Brenda'. Next she presents the request indirectly as a question: 'Do you think you could possibly stay later tonight?' in which the real question – 'Could (you) possibly stay later?' – is embedded in a less direct question: 'Do you think...?' Finally, Kate follows up the question with an explanation: 'It's just that I need to get the meeting agenda ready for tomorrow', which has the effect of emphasising Brenda's right to make an informed response.

Note that the language choices Kate is making here are **cultural acts**. That is, they reflect (and construct—but that's another story) not only the specific nature of Kate's relationship with Brenda, but also more general cultural values concerning, for example, status and power in the workplace. These values pose a challenge in multiculturally diverse settings or for recent migrants joining the workforce. In such contexts, different cultural assumptions about the right of employers or managers to make demands on staff are likely to result in more and less direct and forceful ways of making requests, giving instructions and so on. Such differences increase the risk of miscommunication and offence with downstream effects on workplace relations and productivity.

Kate's request in Example 1 is part of one of more than 1500 interactions involving around 500 participants recorded from more than 20 work sites in a project conducted by the Victoria University of Wellington called the Language in the Workplace Project (LWP) www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/lwp. Since 1996, the LWP has been developing a large corpus of transcribed recordings of workplace talk from a range of workplaces, and this material has been used extensively for research purposes. Topics investigated include meeting talk; negotiation and conflict resolution; mentoring; management style; and social features of workplace talk such as humour, small talk and storytelling.

Until recently, this huge resource has been relatively under-used for workplace language training. We saw an opportunity to address this gap when, in 2005, Victoria University of Wellington was contracted to provide language-focused training courses for skilled migrants who had been unable to find work in their chosen professions in New Zealand. Professions represented by participants in the programme include law, stock broking, finance and economics, business analysis, academia, design, medicine, engineering, accountancy, and IT. The course emphasises the skills necessary for obtaining employment, for example job interview skills, and provides work experience. But we also wanted to provide training in workplace communication skills so that, once in employment, participants were better equipped to adapt to the workplace cultures in which they were likely to find themselves.

To address this goal, we have developed these materials which, because of our access to the LWP corpus, are centred around examples of real workplace language. The focus on these materials is on face-threatening speech acts since these present particular challenges in intercultural communication. Let us be quick to say that this 'threat' is not the behaviour of some red-faced bully. Instead, it is the more subtle threat created when whatever one says has the potential to undermine either one's own self-image (i.e. 'face') or that of another. Some of the more obvious face-threatening acts include requests, instructions, refusals, complaints, opinions, disagreements and apologies. Cultures develop ritualised scripts for carrying out these acts – scripts that reflect cultural assumptions about how face is to be managed, about politeness, appropriateness, formality and a host of other social variables. Managing face requires competence at using strategic and linguistic resources to express indirectness, to hedge an issue, or to boost or soften the force of a speech act; these are all strategies that cause difficulty in intercultural communication and are difficult to learn in a new cultural context. In the following examples we see people in the workplace skilfully using these strategies.

In the second example (Example 2 following), Heather chooses a noticeably indirect way to make her request, using the phrase: 'I wondered if you wouldn't mind ...'

Example 2

Heather is a manager in a government department, and Anna is her new, temporary executive assistant.

Heather: Okay, um, now we're about to start with the, um ... development session this afternoon. We've got an outside speaker ...

Anna: Okay.

Heather: ... which means that you'll be ... out here by yourself and I wondered *if you wouldn't mind* spending some of that time contacting ... while no one else is around ... contacting the people for interviews.

Migrants who have participated in our courses often find bi-clausal requests such as 'I wondered if you wouldn't mind' amusing for their indirectness and for the number of words required to say 'Could you ... ?' And yet such request strategies are commonly used in English and are important linguistic tools for managing face in communication.

In our experience, one of the mistakes migrants often make in their requests is to overuse the word 'please', as in "*Please spend some of that time contacting people*". The mistaken assumption here is that 'please' automatically makes the request polite and appropriate. In fact, 'please' can be interpreted as strengthening the force of the instruction rather than softening it and as increasing the social distance between the speakers, depending on context and the way the word is used.

In example 3, the "*I was wondering ...*" strategy comes up again as does the very common strategy of beginning a request with a question such as 'Can I just have a quick word?' Both serve to facilitate the difficult task of asking the boss for a day off.

Example 3

Tom enters Greg's office to request a day's leave. Greg is Tom's boss.

Tom: Can I just have a quick word?

Greg: Yeah sure, have a seat.

Tom: (sitting down) Great weather, eh?

Greg: Mm ...

Tom: Yeah, been a good week. Did you get away skiing at the weekend?

Greg: Yeah, we did. Now, how can I help you?

Tom: I was just wondering if I could take Friday off and make it a long weekend?

Greg: Mm … I don't see any problem with that … you will have finished that report by then, won't you?

We see in these examples direct and indirect ways of expressing meaning and boosting or softening the strength of an utterance. The dominant cultural values in a community shape the choices people make from this complex range of language resources. But this influence of culture is often invisible to native speakers for whom accepted ways of communicating appear normal and uncontested. This makes learning to communicate in another culture particularly challenging.

Concluding comments

Learning ways of interacting that are appropriate and normal in a workplace is an important aspect of fitting-in and becoming an integrated member of that workplace, and is an often under-estimated aspect of workplace success. Even those born and brought up in an English-speaking speech community may find the process of learning how to do things appropriately with words at work very challenging. It is this challenge that we address in this book. For people from cultures with different norms from those of their co-workers the challenge is of course much greater. Knowing how to make a joke, how to disagree without causing offence, and how to refuse effectively are examples of the many areas that can present pitfalls.

With these challenging goals in mind, we hope that the materials in this book will assist people from non-English speaking backgrounds to become more informed, sensitive, flexible, and strategically equipped communicators in English in the workplace. In the materials, we encourage critical awareness of the assumptions and values that lie beneath utterances and behaviour, and aim to develop in users of the book the ability to assess situations and recognise multiple interpretations. Most importantly for intercultural communication training purposes, such materials can help alert people from different cultural backgrounds to likely areas of cultural difference, therefore enabling them to better negotiate the distance between their own and the target culture. The process of integrating this knowledge into actual use is often a very long one.

Our emphasis on the goal of critical awareness means that we are categorically not aiming at the goal of notional 'native-speaker' competence which is often neither appropriate or achievable. Being interculturally competent means communicating with a sensitivity to the culturally shaped parameters of your language behaviour on others and understanding these same cultural dimensions in the behaviour of others. Finally, successful communication in multicultural workplaces is not just a question of people from other cultural backgrounds fitting in. It is a two-way process in which members of majority cultures also need to develop intercultural competence, to display empathy and support for colleagues who are not fully conversant with local communication norms.





UNIT ONE

SMALL TALK

Introduction

Being able to take part in social talk is a very effective way of maintaining relationships and fitting in at work. It is perhaps one of the most visible aspects of communication and is one that is often commented on by employers of non-native speakers of English.

Part A: Looking at a workplace interaction

The context – The beginning of the day

Diana, a manager of a government department, enters the office of her administrative assistant, Sally, at the beginning of the day to collect mail. They have worked together for two years.

1. Thinking about context

Working with a partner, use the context information above and complete the table:

Diana and Sally	High	Medium	Low
Status difference		✓	
Level of familiarity			

2. Role-play

The first part of the conversation between Diana and Sally is provided below. Work with a partner to role-play the conversation. When you have role-played, write down your conversation.

The conversation:

Diana: Good morning Sally, lovely day.

3. Comparison and analysis

a. Comparing the conversation

Compare your conversation with the original conversation between Diana and Sally (see p.12). What differences do you notice?

b. Analysing the conversation

a. What is the topic of the small talk?

b. Is the topic suitable?

c. How much detail is given?

d. How long does the small talk last?

e. What is the purpose of the small talk?

f. Where does the small talk come in the conversation?

g. What can we tell about the relationship of the speakers?

h. Who starts and finishes the small talk?

i. What short responses are used?

j. Locate the point where the small talk becomes work talk. What phrases are used to signal this transition?

Listen to the way the small talk is carried out. Listen in particular to:

- The volume of the voices (loud or soft).
- The intonation pattern of the conversation. Which words are stressed?
- The use of pauses.
- The use of any sighs or inhaling and exhaling (noticeable breathing in and out).

c. Focus on turn-taking

Read the conversation again and focus on the steps taken in the dialogue.

- How does the dialogue begin? Brainstorm some other useful openers.
- How many turns does each person have in the conversation? What does this illustrate?

d. Cross-cultural comparison

Compare this communication style with the style used in your country. Are there any differences or similarities?

The original conversation between Diana and Sally

1. **Diana:** Good morning Sally, lovely day.
2. **Sally:** Yes, don't know what we're doing here. We should be out
3. in the sun.
4. **Diana:** Mm, pity about the work really.
5. **Sally:** How are your kids?
6. **Diana:** Much better thank goodness. Any mail?

Part B: More workplace conversations for analysis

Following are a further nine conversations involving people doing small talk at work. Analyse each conversation using the questions in activities 1 and 3 on the previous pages. For each conversation, fill in the table below. After looking at these examples what generalizations can you make about small talk?

		Status difference	Level of familiarity	Topic of Small Talk
Conversation	1	medium	high	the weather
	2			
	3			
	4			
	5			
	6			
	7			
	8			
	9			
	10			

Conversation 2: Before the meeting

Context: People are gathering for a meeting and chatting as they wait for others. Monica is the chairperson. Louise is to do a presentation.

1. **Louise:** I met your, um, friend Marie Cross last night.
2. **Monica:** Oh good … how is she?
3. **Louise:** She's fine, really lovely.
4. **Monica:** What was that at?
5. **Louise:** That was at that, um, international institute thing …
6. **Monica:** Okay … this is everybody isn't it? Except Gavin when
7. he comes …
8. **Louise:** Just tell me Monica when you think you're ready for
9. my bit.
10. **Monica:** Yeah, really I just wanted to sort of … um, sort of, just
11. use this opportunity to get a bit of a review on where
12. we're at with …

Conversation 3: During a routine task

Context: Helen has been delegating jobs to Rebecca, the Communications Liaison Officer for the unit.

1. **Rebecca:** I finally got the – the names transferred from the CVs
2. onto the – onto the labels to send out the thank you
3. letters yesterday.
4. **Helen:** Oh good, let's get that one done.
5. **Rebecca:** Okay.
6. **Helen:** Okay.
7. **Rebecca:** And how's Sam?
8. **Helen:** He's just fine.

Conversation 4: In the corridor

Context: Tom and Graeme pass in the corridor as Tom comes into the building.

1. **Tom:** Nice day out there.
2. **Graeme:** Yeah, great.

Conversation 5: In the lift

Context: Two male colleagues of equal status, Matt and Bob, in the lift.

1. **Matt:** Hi, how's things?
2. **Bob:** Hi, good, good ... haven't seen you for ages. How are you?
3. **Matt:** Fine. Busy though, as always ... must meet my
4. performance objectives, eh. [laughs]
5. **Bob:** [laughs] Yeah, me too. Ah well, see you later.
6. **Matt:** Yeah, bye.

Conversation 6: In the corridor

Context: Joan and Elizabeth pass in the corridor.

1. **Elizabeth:** Hi Joan!
2. **Joan:** Hi, how are you?
3. **Elizabeth:** Oh, busy busy busy!
4. **Joan:** Mm, terrible isn't it.

Conversation 7: On the stairs

Context: Joan and May pass on the stairs.

1. **Joan:** Hello, haven't seen you for a while.
2. **May:** Hi, well, I've been a bit busy.
3. **Joan:** Must have lunch sometime.
4. **May:** Yeah, good idea, give me a ring.

Conversation 8: Beth returns from holiday

Context: Manager, Hana, with her personal assistant Beth, who has just returned after a holiday.

Beth: And the election briefing?

Hana: Yeah, oh … I think we've cancelled that … you might need to check.

Beth: Yeah.

Hana: I'm fairly sure that's been cancelled … The panel on Friday afternoon's been cancelled so everyone will just have to … cope on their own.

Hana: Well it's nice to have you back, welcome back.

Beth: Yes, had a very good holiday.

Hana: And feel well rested?

Beth: No.

Hana: Oh well.

Beth: It's just – just been busy with my Mum. And then she had me take her there and take her there and, you know …

Hana: Oh.

Beth: So no, it was good. I didn't have to worry about meals. I didn't have to worry about bills or kids or, um, work or anything, just me.

Hana: A holiday for you.

Beth: Yeah … it was UNREAL. [laughs]

Hana: Now listen are you going to be wanting to take time off during the school holidays?

Conversation 9: In the corridor

Context: Jock and Pam pass in the corridor.

Jock: Morning Pam.

Pam: Hi Jock, nice day.

Jock: Yeah, great.

Conversation 10: During a meeting

Context: Two young women meet to discuss a joint project.

Ann: So how are things in your, um, ... your holiday, how was your holiday?

Mary: Oh it was really funny, the holiday was like really, really awesome.

Ann: Right.

Mary: And then my first day back I was just like kicking back ... in my desk just – just still really relaxed and I ...

Ann: Trying to get back into it. [laughs]

Mary: Yeah and a girl from my – a woman from my section came up and said "oh do you want to do this horrible speech that I have to give in front of students for work day?" They had career work day thing and the students have to come in to the building. And I said ...

Ann: Yeah.

Mary: ... "yeah, yeah sure, I'll do it." And she goes "really? I thought I'd have to get down on my knees and BEG". And I was going "oh no it's cool". And I'm sure it was because I was just, you know, still in holiday mode, cos I don't normally like speaking in front of anyone [laughs] but ...

Ann: Yeah.

Mary: Yeah I agreed and it was fine.

Ann: So you might have, um, taken, er, a while longer to come to the decision [laughs]

24.	**Mary:**	Yeah, oh yeah, I would have gone "no, no, go away".
25.		But yeah it was really good.
26.	**Ann:**	It was a good trip?
27.	**Mary:**	Yeah, but now back into it again.
28.	**Ann:**	Yeah, things are pretty full on here.
29.	**Mary:**	Yeah, I can imagine.
30.	**Ann:**	Mm, sort of working. I just did my first submission …
31.		for the Minister.





UNIT TWO

REQUESTING/GIVING INSTRUCTIONS

Introduction

Choosing suitable language to make a request can be challenging. If a request is too direct it can be seen as offensive and can have negative consequences for the requester. Indirect requests (i.e. requests that are softened or tentative) are more polite because they indicate that the hearer has a choice.

Part A: Looking at a workplace interaction

The context – Asking for a day's leave

Tom and Greg have worked closely together for some time so know each other well. Greg is Tom's boss. Tom enters Greg's office to request a day's leave on Friday.

1. Thinking about context

Working with a partner, use the context information above and complete the table:

Tom and Greg:	High	Medium	Low
Status difference		✓	
Level of familiarity			
Level of difficulty (how hard is it to make the request?)			

2. Thinking about communication

Here is one way that Tom could make his request:

"Hi Greg. I am going to take Friday off. Any problem?"

What do you think about this approach? How might Greg react?

3. Role-play

The first part of the conversation between Tom and Greg is provided below. Work with a partner to role-play the conversation. When you have role-played, write down your conversation.

The conversation:

Tom: Can I just have a quick word?

Greg: Yeah, sure, have a seat.

4. Comparison and analysis

a. Comparing the conversation

Compare your conversation with the original conversation between Tom and Greg (see p.23). What differences do you notice?

b. Analysing the conversation

Underline words or phrases that Tom and Greg use to make the conversation go smoothly (see pp.31-32 for a range of phrases). Note:

- The phrases they use to agree and acknowledge each other's comments. How frequent are these?
- The way Tom phrased the request. (Did he use 'please'?)
- The words or phrases used to soften the force of the request. Can you think of situations when it is appropriate to be more direct and not use softening words or phrases?
- Whether Tom and Greg are trying to be co-operative. How can you tell?
- Whether humour is used. Why or why not?

Listen to the way the request is expressed. Listen in particular to:

- The volume of Tom's voice (loud or soft).
- The stress pattern of the request. Which words are stressed?
- The use of pauses.
- The use of any sighs or inhaling and exhaling (noticeable breathing in and out).
- The intonation pattern of the request. Is it a falling, rising or mixed falling and rising pattern?

c. Evaluating the conversation

Rate Tom's communication using the scales below (circle a number in each scale). Discuss the evidence you used to make your rating.

(i) How *polite* was Tom?

Polite			**Impolite**
1	2	3	4

(ii) How *direct* was Tom?

Direct			**Indirect**
1	2	3	4

(iii) Overall, how *effective* was Tom's communication style? Note that effective communication involves achieving your purpose efficiently while also maintaining good relationships.

Very effective			**Not at all effective**
1	2	3	4

d. Focus on turn-taking

Read the conversation again and focus on the steps taken in the dialogue.

- How does the dialogue begin? Brainstorm some other useful openers.
- Is small talk used? Why? How effective is the use of small talk?
- Where in the conversation does the request come?
- How many turns does each person have in the conversation? What does this illustrate?

e. Cross-cultural comparison

Compare this communication style with the style used in your country. Are there any differences or similarities?

5. E-mail and telephone communication

a. Imagine that this communication takes place via e-mail. Write Tom's initial e-mail to Greg. How might Greg reply?

b. Write what Tom would say to Greg if he telephoned him about this matter.

c. What changes, if any, have you made to the communication compared to the face-to-face version?

The original conversation between Tom and Greg

1.	**Tom:**	Can I just have a quick word?
2.	**Greg:**	Yeah sure, have a seat.
3.	**Tom:**	Great weather, eh?
4.	**Greg:**	Mm.
5.	**Tom:**	Yeah, been a good week. Did you get away skiing at the
6.		weekend?
7.	**Greg:**	Yeah we did ... Now, how can I help you?
8.	**Tom:**	I was just wondering if I could take Friday off and make
9.		it a long weekend.
10.	**Greg:**	Mm, I don't see any problem with that – you will have
11.		finished that report by then, won't you?

Part B: More workplace conversations for analysis

Following are a further five conversations involving people making a request at work. Analyse each conversation using the questions in activities 1 and 4 on the previous pages. For each conversation, fill in the table below. Consider also how effective each request is, and note other aspects of the conversations that interest you.

		Status difference	Level of familiarity	Level of difficulty	The request
Conversation	1	Request to boss	Medium	Medium	I was wondering if
	2				
	3				
	4				
	5				
	6				

Conversation 2: Instructions to a new assistant

Heather is a manager in a government department and Anna is her new temporary executive assistant.

Heather: Okay, um, now we're about to start with the, um, ... development session this afternoon. We've got an outside speaker,

Anna: Okay.

Heather: Which means that you'll be ... out here by yourself and I wondered if you wouldn't mind spending some of that time contacting ... while no-one else is around ... contacting the people for their interviews and setting up the appointment times for their interviews. What we might need to do is send down a confirmation note. If we just tell them exactly where it is ...

Later in the same interaction

12. **Heather:** ... ring the applicants and say that...
13. ... see if you can ring her first...
14. ... check to see what time the plane actually lands...
15. ... just write down the list of their names...

Conversation 3: Request to stay late

Kate is a manager in a government department. Brenda is her personal assistant. They have worked together for over a year. Kate would like Brenda to work late today.

1. **Kate:** I know this is a bit last minute Brenda, but – but do you
2. think you could possibly stay a bit later tonight? It's just
3. that I need to get the meeting agenda ready for tomorrow.

Conversation 4: Deciding who will take the minutes

Fay and Paula work in a government department and are of equal status. They do not know each other very well.

1. **Paula:** Well, I guess we'll need a record of the meeting.
2. **Fay:** Yeah, that would be really useful.
3. **Paula:** It's really important everything's in writing around
4. the issue.
5. **Fay:** Mm.
6. **Paula:** Since I'll be chairing ...
7. **Fay:** Would you like me to do it this time?
8. **Paula:** Well, if it isn't too much ... I mean if you could.
9. **Fay:** OK.
10. **Paula:** That would be great.

Conversation 5: Keeping the meeting on track

Len is a manager and is talking to his team in a meeting. He has worked with his team for one year.

Len: How do we – can we capture some of these things that we want to, um, ...

Brian: Do you want me to write them down?

Len: Can you? I mean, I just think where we've – we've identified something, we want to carry that through 'cause later on we may want to come back to it ...

Celia: One that I'm – I'm surprised at is this company.

Len: Hang on, can we – we can – we stay in the – do this block first?

Celia: Oh okay, you want to do service first?

Len: All right. Um ... do service first otherwise we'll – we'll – we'll jump around a bit. I just want to try and deal with the scores. Do the scores make sense with people's perceptions?

Conversation 6: Getting computer help

Katie is a manager and Antonia is a member of the computer support team. They know each other slightly.

Katie: I just wanted to ask you for some [laughs] advice about my – what's come up on my computer screen.

Antonia: Oh yeah?

Katie: Yeah, cos my inbox seems to have lost all of its contents, and it's saying zero messages. And what happened was ... I pressed save ... I ...

Antonia: I'll come and have a look.

Katie: But, well when you're ready, don't interrupt what you're doing. It's not that important.

Antonia: Okay I'll just finish this, cos yeah I am desperate cos ...

11. Katie:	Sure.
12. Antonia:	I can't actually do anything till I've got it sorted. And um,
13.	yeah, I'll come and have a look ...

Part C: Focus on workplace e-mail

1 Analysing e-mail messages

Look at the following four authentic e-mails from native speakers. In each, underline the phrases used to make the request. Note the words and phrases that the writers use to:

- soften the request.
- make a request to someone of higher status.
- get to the point efficiently.

E-mail 1: Student names on reports

Susan is the administration assistant at a language school. Peter is one of the teachers. They have worked together for about one year.

Hi Peter,

Your reports are ready to be checked and signed. Can you please check the spelling of the students' names and that I have given them the correct marks.

Could I also ask that if you have a query on the appearance of one of your student's names just stick a post-it to it rather than write on the report (the reports are on letter head and it would be nice to try and save paper).

Cheers

Susan

E-mail 2: The overdue report

Rachel is Tim's colleague from another department. They do not know each other well and have only recently worked together on a joint project.

Hi Tim

It was nice to see you at the lunch on Friday.

I am following up on the report which was due last week. Are you in a position to send it to me shortly?

Looking forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards

Rachel

E-mail 3: Template for the open day

Andrew and Carole are colleagues who used to work together in a large team.

Hi Carole

We are now looking at plans for the Open Day that we were talking about last week. Do you happen to have a copy of the template that we used last year, or know where it might be?

Kind regards

Andrew

E-mail 4: Request for a copy of a model

Belinda is a senior teacher in a large school. Denis is a former colleague who has been working in another country for some time.

Hi Denis

Just one other question that we have, I hope you don't mind. Do you happen to have a copy of that model we were talking about or know where it might be? Julia and I were also just discussing how the model might have been used for example; whether it was given to students to keep or just to view.

We very much appreciate your responses to our questions.

Kind regards,

Belinda

2. Request strategies in e-mails

a. Look at the following e-mail requests from non-native speakers (NNS) and native speakers (NS). Note the level of directness and the use (or absence) of language to soften the request or make it less direct. (Look carefully at the way 'please' is used.)

E-mail requests from non-native speakers (NNS)

These e-mails were written by adult students to their tutor in a workplace communication training course.

1. Could you please give me an appointment to meet you regarding the above matter?
2. Here is my revised plan. Please check it.
3. Please let me have your comments by Friday.
4. Please look for a placement in the health area.
5. Please comment on my grammar and indirect tone.
6. Please let me know on Thursday if I have missed anything.
7. Please give me feedback to make sure you have received my e-mail.
8. Please get back to me ASAP.
9. Please oblige me with an answer.
10. Kindly give me an appointment to meet you.

E-mail requests from native speakers (NS)

11. Your thoughts on this?
12. I am looking forward to any feedback you might have.
13. Do let me know which ones you prefer as soon as you have a moment.
14. If possible, could you have a look at the draft? It would be helpful if you could reply to me by e-mail by early next morning.
15. Would you by any chance have a spare copy of that document?

b. Compare the NNS and NS requests and note the differences between these two groups of e-mails

Non-native speaker e-mail requests	**Native speaker e-mail requests**

c. Choose five of the requests that you think could be improved, and rewrite them to make them more acceptable.

The original e-mail	**Your revised version**
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	

3. Writing request e-mails

Write an e-mail for each of the following situations:

a. You want to ask your secretary to re-format a document you are writing.

b. You want to ask for an appointment with your boss to discuss promotion.

c. You need some information from the HR person about a job you are considering applying for. There is some urgency in getting this information.

Part D. Useful phrases for requesting[2]

Here are some requesting phrases that range from more to less direct.

In each situation, the appropriate expression depends on:

- how difficult, unpleasant or urgent the request is.
- your relationship – your roles, your status, and how well you know each other.

In general, the more linguistically complex the phrase is, the more indirect and polite it is.

- Oh dear, I haven't got a pen.
- I don't seem to have a pen on me.
- I am really sorry to bother you but I don't seem to have a pen on me.
- Have you got a pen?
- Could you lend me a pen?
- Would you have a pen, by any chance?
- Could you possibly lend me a pen?
- Are you able to lend me a pen?
- Could I possibly borrow your pen?
- Do you think you could lend me a pen?
- You haven't got a pen, have you?
- You wouldn't have a spare pen, would you?
- You couldn't lend me a pen, could you?
- Do you happen to have a spare pen?
- You don't happen to have a spare pen, do you? (Response: Yes, sure)

2 Some request phrases from: Jones, L. 1979. *Functions of English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 18-19.

- Would you happen to have a pen by any chance?
- You wouldn't happen to have a pen would you? (Yes, certainly)
- Would you mind lending me a pen? (Response: No, not at all)
- I wonder if you could lend me a pen.
- It would be great if I could borrow your pen.
- I was wondering if you could lend me a pen.
- I was wondering if I could borrow your pen.
- I was just wondering if I could borrow your pen.
- I wondered if you wouldn't mind lending me a pen.
- Do you think you could possibly lend me a pen?
- I wonder if you could possibly lend me a pen.
- I was just wondering if I could possibly borrow a pen.
- If you could lend me a pen I'd be very grateful.
- I would be very grateful if I could borrow your pen.
- I would really appreciate it if I could borrow your pen.
- I hope you don't mind my asking, but I wonder if you could possibly lend me a pen.
- I hope you don't mind my asking, but I wonder if I could possibly borrow a pen.
- Sorry to trouble you, but I wonder if it might be possible for me to borrow a pen.

Part E: Practice using requesting phrases

1. Matching[3]

Match each of the following requests with a context from the list below.

Requests	Context
a. Perhaps you could bring me that file now.	1. To a colleague on a routine matter
b. I wonder if you could find that number for me?	2. To your manager
c. If you could just grab a copy of that for a moment.	3. Senior analyst to junior analyst
d. I was wondering if I could have, um, 3 weeks annual leave?	4. Non-routine request to a colleague
e. What we might need to do is send down a confirmation note.	5. Routine request to secretary
f. I think it needs revising, don't you?	6. To a subordinate
g. And, um, I think that you need to look at this.	7. Request to the CEO
h. We want to get this up to Auckland fairly soon.	8. _____
i. I wonder if you have got time to look at this today?	9. _____

2. Discussion questions

a. What reasons did you have for your matchings of requests and settings?

b. What do you think the speaker wants the hearer to do in each case?

c. How does each speaker soften his or her requests and why does each person choose to do it that way?

3 The "Matching" exercises in each unit are based on Yates, L. (2000). *"Ciao, Guys!": Mitigation addressing positive and negative face concerns in the directives of native-speaker and Chinese background speakers of Australian English.* Unpublished doctoral thesis, LaTrobe University, Bundoora, Victoria, Australia.

3. Making requests

Write a suitable request for each context.

a. _____ (borrow car: friend)

b. _____ (borrow a pen: colleague)

c. _____ (day off: boss)

d. _____ (salary rise: boss)

e. _____ (swap one day: colleague)

f. _____ (borrow laptop: colleague)

g. _____ (send report: assistant)

h. _____ (send information: stranger)



UNIT THREE

REFUSING

Introduction

When we refuse a request we are often trying to be considerate while at the same time trying to avoid something that we cannot or do not want (to do). It is important to consider how well we know someone when deciding how to refuse. In the workplace, people of the same status can use a more direct style but the force of the refusal is softened by reasons and arguments, and sometimes by humour. Refusals to people who are less well known, from a different team for example, are usually less direct.

Part A: Looking at a workplace interaction

The context – Responding to a request to write a report

Nicola is a policy analyst and Claire is a senior policy analyst but they are from different sections. Nicola is younger than Claire. They have worked together for some time. Nicola has to ask Claire to write a report. Claire does not want to do this.

1. Thinking about context

Working with a partner, use the context information above and complete the table:

Nicola and Claire	High	Medium	Low
Status difference		✓	
Level of familiarity			
Level of difficulty of refusal			

2. Role-play

The first part of the conversation between Nicola and Claire is provided below. Work with a partner to role-play the conversation. When you have role-played, write down your conversation.

The conversation:

Nicola: Well … um … the thing is that the minister needs to be briefed, remember we talked about that?

Claire: Yeah

3. Comparison and analysis

a. Comparing the conversation

Compare your conversation with the original conversation between Nicola and Claire (see p.39). What differences do you notice?

b. Analysing the conversation

Underline words or phrases that Nicola and Claire use to make the conversation go smoothly (see pp. 47-48 for a range of phrases). Note:

- The phrases they use to agree and acknowledge each other's comments.
- The way Claire phrased the refusal.
- The words or phrases used to soften the force of the refusal. Can you think of situations when it is appropriate to be more direct and not use softening words or phrases?
- Whether Nicola and Claire are trying to be cooperative. How can you tell?
- Whether humour is used. Why or why not?

Listen to the way the refusal is expressed. Listen in particular to:

- The volume of Claire's voice (loud or soft).
- The stress pattern of the refusal. Which words are emphasised?
- The use of pauses.
- The use of any sighs or inhaling and exhaling (noticeable breathing in and out).
- The intonation pattern of the refusal – is it a falling, rising or mixed falling and rising pattern?

c. Evaluating the conversation

Rate Claire's communication using the scales below (circle a number in each scale). Discuss the evidence you used to make your rating.

(i) How *polite* was Claire

Polite			**Impolite**
1	2	3	4

(ii) How *direct* was Claire?

Direct			**Indirect**
1	2	3	4

(iii) Overall, how *effective* was Claire's communication style? Note that effective communication involves achieving your purpose efficiently while also maintaining good relationships.

Very effective			**Not at all effective**
1	2	3	4

d. Focus on turn-taking

Read the conversation again and focus on the steps taken in the dialogue.

- How does the dialogue begin? Brainstorm some other useful openers.
- Is small talk used?
- Where in the conversation does the refusal come?
- How many turns does each person have in the conversation? What does this illustrate?
- How does Nicola respond to Claire's refusal? What other responses would be appropriate?

e. Cross-cultural comparison

Compare this communication style with the style used in your country. Are there any differences or similarities?

The original conversation between Nicola and Claire

Nicola: Well … um … the thing is that the minister needs to be briefed remember we talked about that?

Claire: Yeah.

Nicola: And that you did the original brief and Tom's not wanting me to do the brief … because it's not our work.

Claire: Oh, and you want to bring it over here?

Nicola: Yeah, and so we were wondering if you could do the brief because … we're not going to … and because you've got the first one.

Claire: [drawls] Oh.

Nicola: And we were just hoping you could whittle down what you wrote last year and just …

Claire: The problem I've got is that, um, that, um, … Joseph – well not Joseph … The thing is that the managers haven't decided … where this work's going to fall … so … I won't be able to do it officially … informally yeah, but the thing is that, um, this is the problem at the moment, the managers, er, haven't decided where the work's going to fall.

Nicola: Mm, yeah.

4. E-mail and telephone communication

a. Imagine that this communication takes place via e-mail. Write Nicola's initial e-mail to Claire. How might Claire reply?

b. Write what Claire would say to Nicola if she telephoned her about this matter.

c. What changes, if any, have you made to the communication compared to the face-to-face version?

Part B: More workplace conversations for analysis

Following are a further five conversations involving people making a refusal at work. Analyse each conversation using the questions in activities 1 and 3 on the previous pages.

For each conversation, fill in the table below. Consider also how effective each refusal is, and note other aspects of the conversations that interest you.

		Status difference	Level of familiarity	Level of difficulty	The refusal
Conversation	1	Refusal to subordinate	Medium	Medium	So I won't be able to do it officially, informally, yeah ...
	2				
	3				
	4				
	5				
	6				

Conversation 2: Cannot help with funding details

Bruce and Brenda are of equal status in a government department but they work in different sections.

Brenda: Hello Bruce. Oh no, don't ask me about that funding ... I don't know anything about it.

Bruce: Look, Yvette gave me these and said, um, our section's supposed to be doing something with these. But we haven't been and, er, she said you might know something about them, so to come and have a chat with you.

Brenda: Well, no this one here, our section have had nothing to do with it ... I wonder if anyone in another section might know something about it? You might have a quick chat to Liam, um, there ... but ... no, we've definitely done nothing on it.

Conversation 3: Cannot supply the NCR right now

Ginette and Fran work together in an office. Ginette is the team co-ordinator but Fran is not one of her team.

Fran: Do you have an NCR for that over there?

Ginette: Yeah, I've – I'm waiting for a number ... ... I need to see Vicky about the NCR thing. I haven't got a number for it yet.

Fran: Oh, how would you get it?

Ginette: When I get to see Vicky ... ...

Fran: Oh how about you just give it to me now ... take a copy of it ... so I can compare it and I'll take the number then ... ...

Ginette: Do you want it right now?

Fran: If it's possible. [laughs]

Ginette: It's just I've left – I've got, um, Jennifer's working ... going through it as well.

Fran: Oh okay, is it possible tomorrow then?

Ginette: I'll get it to you tomorrow morning, yeah.

Conversation 4: Cannot attend the meeting

This is a formal meeting of the senior management team in a medium-sized commercial IT organisation. Neil is a consultant who has been brought in to assist the management with a complex HR issue.

Shane: I think it's important you do go to the staff meeting and get introduced.

Neil: Yeah … er, I can't do it today unfortunately. I've – I've already booked in some time with someone else this afternoon. But the next one I can come along to, yeah.

Shane: We'll think about it.

Neil: Pardon?

Shane: We'll think about it.

Neil: [laughs uncertainly]

Shane: We don't take kindly to being rejected.

Neil: Oh, I'm sorry. I've got a, yeah, got a meeting this afternoon which I can't get out of. If I'd have known, I would've changed it, yeah.

Shane: So what is our formal position on Neil?

Conversation 5: Refusing to do the report

Belinda and Len are in a team of eight people who have worked together for a long time and who know each other well. Len is Belinda's boss.

Len: Um … and we would need to do a verbal for this one …

Belinda: I'm not doing it.

[General laughter]

Sione: [laughs] Bags not, yeah.

Belinda: Seriously, seriously …

Len: That's a separate question [laughs] – that's a separate question. But … as a general principle … last year we established …

9.	**Belinda:**	[laughs] I don't think it'd be appropriate for me to do it.
10.	**Len:**	... that any existing provider that we were in danger of
11.		dropping, we did a verbal with ... to ensure that they had
12.		had every opportunity ...
13.	**Aida:**	Mm
14.	**Val:**	I think Iris needs to do it.
15.	**Belinda:**	But it wouldn't be appropriate for me to do it, would it?
16.	**Len:**	Eh?
17.	**Belinda:**	It wouldn't be appropriate for me to do it, would it?
17.	**Len:**	It may well be appropriate for you to do it, Belinda.
18.		[General laughter]
20.	**Belinda:**	I don't think it is. I can't – I can't you know, I'd be biased.
21.	**Len:**	I think we did a verbal for them last year, actually.
22.	**Belinda:**	No, they weren't in anything.
23.	**Len:**	No, they weren't in the mix.
24.	**Belinda:**	I'm definitely biased, Len. [laughs]
25.	**Len:**	Alright so they need to be – they need to be verbalised.
26.	**Sione:**	Good way of getting there. [laughs]
27.	**Len:**	We may be – we may be quite keen on your bias.
28.	**Belinda:**	Use Clive. [laughs] No, I've had enough.
29.	**Len:**	Alright.
30.	**Len:**	So ...
31.	**Val:**	I think that it should be part of Iris's learning curve.
32.		[General laughter]
33.	**Val:**	I said it first.
34.		[General laughter]

Conversation 6: Refusing to get a box

Russell and Ginette have worked together for a long time. Ginette is the supervisor.

1. **Russell:** Can you get me a new box please?
2. **Ginette:** You get one.
3. **Russell:** Ah, you're not doing anything.
4. **Ginette:** You go and get one.
5. **Russell:** F _____ it! Go get your fat legs outta here.
6. **Ginette:** Why didn't you get one before I talked to you about
7. that yesterday?
8. **Russell:** Because we're busy. I gotta get all that out of the way.

Conversation 6 took place on a factory floor. What do you notice about the way the refusal is made in this conversation compared to the other examples?

Part C: Focus on workplace e-mail

1. Analysing e-mail messages

a. Compare the following two e-mails. Underline the phrases used in the second example to soften the refusal.

1. Dear Dr Smith

   I am sorry but I am unable to accept your invitation to join the editorial board of the *Journal of Medical Matters*. I am very busy and cannot find the time to add this to my list of obligations.

   Thank you for your invitation.

   Best regards

2. Dear Dr Smith

   Thank you for your invitation to join the editorial board of the *Journal of Medical Matters*. I am honoured that you would consider me.

   I am afraid however that I must turn down your kind invitation since I am already on the editorial board of a number of journals and due to the extent of my obligations I am unable to accept any further appointments at this time.

   I would like to suggest that you might consider Dr Jones as a possible alternative member of your Board. She is expert in most of the areas in which I work. I will attach her contact details.

   Best wishes

b. Look at the following authentic e-mails from native speakers. In each, underline the words and phrases used to make the refusal.

E-mail 1 and 2: Cannot attend the meeting

Context: An e-mail has arrived from a colleague inviting team members to attend a meeting. Attendance at the meeting is voluntary. Two members respond:

Hi Susan,

Thank you very much for including me on the list, but unfortunately I just don't see myself finding the time at the moment to participate in these meetings.

All the best

Emily

Hi Susan,

I'm afraid my current workload excludes me from attending these meetings.

Regards

Tom

E-mail 3: Declining an invitation

Charles is responding to a request from an international colleague whom he has never met.

Dear Peter

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak at this important conference. I appreciate the offer. I think, though, I must decline. I feel I am not sufficiently up-to-date with this area to give a wide overview of the current themes. I would be happy to suggest names of possible presenters if that was useful.

Sincerely

Charles

E-mail 4: More information needed

Amanda is responding to an application for funding from a colleague in a different department.

Dear Tim

At the recent committee meeting your application was not able to be approved in its current form. The committee requested more information about the nature of the project and the division of tasks. Would you be able to send a more detailed account?

Best regards

Amanda

2. Writing refusal e-mails

Write a refusal e-mail in response to each of the following situations:

a. You have received an e-mail from your team leader asking you to attend a meeting. You already have a conflicting meeting at that time.

b. You have received an e-mail from your team leader asking you to attend an urgent meeting this evening at 6pm. You have another commitment at 6pm.

c. Your colleague whom you know well has asked you, by e-mail, if you could help him re-format a document as you are more skilled in this area than he is.

d. You are working off-site today and your secretary has sent an e-mail to you asking if she can go home early.

Part D: Refusal Sequences and Phrases[4]

1. Pre-refusal strategies

- Delay, pause and/or use fillers: Well ... Oh .... Um... Uh ...
- State willingness:
  - I'd love to / like to but ...
  - I wish I could but unfortunately ...
  - I wish I could help but I am actually ...
  - I'd like to help you; however ...
  - I'd help if I could but ...
- Indicate a problem:
  - That might be difficult
  - I can see you are in a difficult position but ...
- Apologise: I'm sorry
- Express regret: I feel terrible
- Express a positive opinion: It's a good idea but ..., that sounds wonderful but ...

2. Main refusal (this step can be omitted if the refusal is implied)

- I'm afraid I can't
- I'm sorry I can't ...
- If you don't mind, I'd rather not because ...
- Unfortunately, I'm afraid I won't be able to manage that ...
- I can't help you I'm afraid ...
- I'd rather you didn't, if you don't mind.
- It can't be done at the moment, I'm afraid.
- I'm really sorry, but it's just not possible at the moment.

4 Adapted from Beebe, L. M., Takahashi, T, & Uliss-Weltz, R. (1990). Pragmatic transfer in ESL refusals. In R. Scarcella, E. Andersen, S. D. Krashen (Eds.), *On the Development of Communicative Competence in a Second Language* (pp. 55-73). New York: Newbury House. Retrieved June 19th 2007 from http://www.carla.umn.edu/speechacts/refusals/research.html#structure

3. Post-refusal strategies

- Explain
- Justify with reason (briefly)
- Apologise
- Express regret
- Promise future acceptance (maybe some other time, perhaps next time)
- Pause and use fillers (uh, well, oh, um)
- Suggest an alternative (Why don't you ask ... Had you thought of .... How about ... What about ... ing ...?)
- Express gratitude/appreciation (Thanks for asking me, I really appreciate you asking me, thanks for the invitation)

4. Other possible strategies

- Avoidance
- Silence
- Hesitating
- Switching the topic
- Repeating part of the request – (Monday?)
- Postponing (I'll think about it)
- Hedging (I don't know/ I'm not sure)

5. Identifying refusal strategies

a. Look at the conversation below and identify which of the refusal strategies outlined above and on the previous page, are used. Note the use of 'Uh'.

Boss:	I was wondering if you might be able to stay late this evening, say, until about 9pm.	
Employee:	Uh, ... I'd really like to	Pre-refusal – delay, willingness
	But I'm afraid I can't	_____
	I'm sorry	_____
	I have a meeting tonight	_____
	I can't really stay	

b. Look at the conversations in Part B and identify the refusal strategies used. How often is the main refusal phrase used? What does this tell us about communicating in that white collar workplace?

c. How would you refuse the following requests or suggestions? Use the strategies outlined on the previous pages.

(i) (From your boss) I wonder if you could find this file for me. I need it for a meeting in one hour's time.

"Uh,

(ii) (From your assistant) I was wondering if I could take Friday off and make it a long weekend.

"Well,

(iii) (From your colleague) Have you got a stapler that I could borrow for a moment?

Part E: Practice using refusal phrases

1. Matching

Match each of the following refusals with a context from the list below.

Refusals	Context
a. Sorry about that.	1. To a colleague on a routine matter
b. Well, uh ... unfortunately I have got another meeting at that time.	2. To your manager
c. I'm really sorry, but it's just not possible at the moment.	3. Senior analyst to junior analyst
d. Tuesday? I am not sure if I'll be free.	4. To a colleague on a non-routine matter
e. Thanks for asking me but I'm afraid I have a another appointment then.	5. To your secretary on a routine matter
f. I can't help you I'm afraid .... Have you tried asking ...?	6. To a subordinate you don't know well
g. I can see you are in a difficult position but ...	7. Refusal to a very senior person
h. Sorry, I'd help if I could but ...	8. _____
i. I'm afraid I won't be able to manage that.	9. _____

2. Discussion questions

a. What reasons did you have for your matchings of refusals and contexts?

b. What do you think the speaker wants the hearer to do in each case?

c. How does each speaker soften his or her refusal and why does each person choose to do it that way?

3. Making refusals

Write a suitable refusal for each context.

a. _____ (cannot lend car: friend)

b. _____ (cannot lend a pen: colleague)

c. _____ (cannot attend a meeting: boss)

d. _____ (cannot give salary rise: subordinate)

e. _____ (cannot swap one day: colleague)

f. _____ (cannot lend laptop: colleague)

g. _____ (cannot send report: boss)

h. _____ (cannot send information: stranger)

Part F: Responding to a refusal

- Accept: That's okay, I quite understand, No problem,
- Express regret: That's a pity/shame,
- Ask for suggestions: Is there anyone else who might be able to help? Is there another time that might suit?
- Offer in the future: Another time perhaps?
- Thank: Thanks anyway

Look at the refusals in Part E, task 1 and task 3. With a partner, discuss ways of responding to these refusals.





UNIT FOUR

MAKING SUGGESTIONS/ EXPRESSING OPINIONS

Introduction

Making a suggestion can be problematic if we don't pay attention to the context and to relationships with other people involved in the interaction. A suggestion to someone of higher status that is too direct can be seen as inappropriate and pushy. Similarly, a suggestion that is too indirect might be overlooked in a discussion.

Part A: Looking at a workplace interaction

The context – Making a suggestion about the title of a document
Sarah and Katie are policy analysts. Katie is senior to Sarah. They have worked together for a few months. Sarah is concerned about the title of the document they are working on. However, she is not sure whether Katie approves of the title or not.

1. Thinking about context
Working with a partner, use the context information and complete the table:

Sarah and Katie	High	Medium	Low
Status difference		✓	
Level of familiarity			
Level of difficulty of suggestion			

2. Role-play
The first part of the conversation between Sarah and Katie is provided below. Work with a partner to role-play the conversation. When you have role-played, write down your conversation.

The conversation:

Sarah: Okay, it's about the title for the latest publication.

Katie: Mm.

Sarah: And there was a meeting to discuss the titles when I was away.

Katie: Yeah.

3. Comparison and analysis

a. Comparing the conversation

Compare your conversation with the original conversation between Sarah and Katie (see p. 57). What differences do you notice?

b. Analysing the conversation

Underline words or phrases that Sarah and Katie use to make the conversation go smoothly (see pp. 62-64 for a range of phrases). Note:

- The phrases they use to agree and acknowledge each other's comments. How frequent are these?
- The way Sarah phrased her suggestions and opinions.
- The words or phrases used to soften the force of her suggestions.
- Whether Sarah and Katie are trying to be co-operative. How can you tell?

Listen to the way the suggestions and opinions are expressed. Listen in particular to:

- The volume of Sarah's voice (loud or soft).
- The stress pattern of the suggestion. Which words are stressed?
- The use of pauses.
- The use of any sighs or inhaling and exhaling (noticeable breathing in and out).
- The intonation pattern of the suggestions. Is it a falling, rising or mixed falling and rising pattern?

c. Evaluating the conversation

Rate Sarah's communication using the scales below (circle a number in each scale). Discuss the evidence you used to make your rating.

(i) How *polite* was Sarah?

Polite			**Impolite**
1	2	3	4

(ii) How *direct* was Sarah?

Direct			**Indirect**
1	2	3	4

(iii) Overall, how *effective* was Sarah's communication style? Note that effective communication involves achieving your purpose efficiently while also maintaining good relationships.

Very effective			**Not at all effective**
1	2	3	4

d. Focus on turn-taking

Read the conversation again and focus on the steps taken in the dialogue.

- How does the dialogue begin? Brainstorm some other useful openers.
- Is small talk used? Why?
- Where in the conversation does the suggestion come?
- How is the suggestion responded to? What other responses would be appropriate?
- How many turns does each person have in the conversation? What does this illustrate?

e. Cross-cultural comparison

Compare this communication style with the style used in your country. Are there any differences or similarities?

The original conversation between Sarah and Katie

Sarah: Okay, it's about the title for the latest publication ...

Katie: Mm.

Sarah: And there was a meeting to discuss the titles when I was away ...

Katie: Yeah.

Sarah: I mean you know, I was supposed to be there, but it's just that I got – I've got – I've got a little bit of a concern about the sort of thing that is being opted for, like the title. But I sort of think that, um ...

Katie: That's been used.

Sarah: Well, also, you see, I suppose, my concept of what we want to convey is not something that sounds ... We sort of don't want to sound like it's an agenda we're trying to push because we're political. Right? I think what – what we need to convey is, um, something that's more about ... Do you know what sort of thing I mean? Like it's, cos – I'm trying to think who we're targeting. I just think that word puts them right off.

Katie: Yeah.

Sarah: And I was trying to think of another ...

Katie: It's a very political word.

Sarah: Well, that's right. And I just wonder if, if our market ...

Katie: Yeah.

Sarah: ... is actually policy managers and policy analysts, we should actually go for something different. Do you think that ... that is your sort of gut feeling about it?

Katie: I do actually. I think these are all awful.

Sarah: Yeah. So do I. So I'm just trying to think of some alternatives. I don't just want to say look I think these are awful, but that's – that's – is that your sort of feeling about it too?

32. Katie:	Yes I do. I think none of them are usable at all, I think.
33. Sarah:	Oh good. Okay. No, I don't think they are either.
34. Katie:	I think, they're either wimpy or silly or politically
35.	misdirected.
34. Sarah:	Yeah.

4. E-mail and telephone communication

a. Imagine that this communication takes place via e-mail. Write Sarah's initial e-mail to Katie. How might Katie reply?

b. Write what Sarah would say to Katie if she telephoned her about this matter.

c. What changes, if any, have you made to the e-mail communication compared to the face-to-face version?

Part B: More workplace conversations for analysis

Following are a further four conversations involving people making a suggestion at work. Analyse each conversation using the questions in activities 1 and 3 on the previous pages.

For each conversation, fill in the table below. Consider also how effective each suggestion is, and note other aspects of the conversations that interest you.

		Status difference	Level of familiarity	Level of difficulty	The suggestion or expression of opinion
Conversation	1	Suggestion to senior colleague	Medium	Medium	I have got a little bit of a concern about ... I think what, what we need to convey is, um, something ...
	2				
	3				
	4				
	5				
	6				

Conversation 2: A late application

Kim and Jocelyn are both senior managers in a government department. Jocelyn is the human resources manager and Kim is a senior manager of another section. They have equal status.

1. **Jocelyn:** There's one more late application.
2. **Kim:** Okay.
3. **Jocelyn:** So we might as well put that in, mightn't we?

Conversation 3: Deciding Jocelyn's role in an upcoming job interview

Jocelyn and Kim are now discussing the interview process for a position in Kim's section.

1. **Jocelyn:** Okay ... and what role do you want me to play? Do you
2. want me to play – do you want me to play just a recorder
3. role? Do you want me to ask some questions? What do
4. you want me to do?
5. **Kim:** Well, how do you want to play it? I mean ...
6. **Jocelyn:** Oh I'm easy, I'm easy. I mean, I'm happy to ask some
7. questions but, you know, it depends how you – you and
8. the rest of the panel view my role there. I'm happy to play
9. either role.
10. **Kim:** Well, I'll think about it.
11. **Jocelyn:** Yeah.
12. **Kim:** I did see you as a – as – as a recorder, and a – and an advisor type.
13. **Jocelyn:** Yeah.
14. **Kim:** In a more independent advisor role, in between the ...
15. **Jocelyn:** That's probably – I probably could.
16. **Kim:** When we're – when we're doing the discussion in
17. between, when we need to.
18. **Jocelyn:** Mm. I'll probably feel more comfortable about that.
19. **Kim:** Okay.

Conversation 4: Suggesting another section might help

Bruce and Brenda are of equal status in a government department but they work in different sections.

Bruce: Look, Yvette gave me these and said, um, our section's supposed to be doing something with these. But we haven't been and, er, she said you might know something about them, so to come and have a chat with you.

Brenda: Well, no, this one here, our section have had nothing to do with it … I wonder if anyone in another section might know something about it? You might have a quick chat to Liam, um, there … but … no, we've definitely done nothing on it.

Conversation 5: Suggesting a possible reviewer

Rose is the manager of a policy unit in a government department. Pam is one of the senior policy analysts in the unit. They know each other well.

Rose: Is there anyone else we can talk to?

Pam: John Halligan?

Rose: Talk to him couldn't we? Notice I said we … couldn't you?

Pam: Oh, I suppose.

Rose: I thought we had an okay relationship with …

Pam: I've been fairly grumpy about …

Rose: Oh, some of their criticisms of ours – our work?

Pam: Oh no, I've been really critical of theirs.

Rose: Of theirs? Well they were quite critical of ours. Remember their review? Their external review was a bit …

Pam: Ah, yeah, but that was because he thought it was too narrow and I – we renamed it so that it wasn't, you know.

Rose: It was more reflective of what it was about.

Pam: Where we were at, yeah.

15. **Rose:** Well we haven't received any criticisms of ours that it's
16. not analytically sound.

17. **Pam:** No.

18. **Rose:** So ... okay.

Part C: Focus on workplace e-mail

1. Analysing e-mail messages

Look at the following two authentic e-mails from native speakers. In each, underline the phrases used to make the suggestion. Note the words and phrases that the writers use to:

- avoid sounding too direct.
- get to the point efficiently.

E-mail 1: Feedback on the draft

Joseph is commenting on a document that he and Nadia are working on together.

Hi Nadia

It was interesting to look at the draft somewhat afresh after quite a long break. My overall sense is that perhaps we are a little over analytical in the early part of the document (the fault of my approach, I suspect). How about we have a good brainstorm sometime when I'm back in New Zealand.

Joseph

E-mail 2: Suggestion about attending a meeting

Toby and Shona are both team leaders in the same department of a large organisation.

Hi Shona

With the new arrangements outlined in yesterday's meeting I think our department is going to lose out in some areas. Bob thinks that we have a good case to argue for the reinstatement of some of the previous provisions. Maybe it would be a good idea if Bob and you were at the next meeting to signal the importance of this.

Toby

2. Writing suggestion e-mails

Write an e-mail in response to each of the following situations.

a. You have received an e-mail from your team leader asking you to attend a meeting. You already have a conflicting meeting at that time and want to suggest an alternative time.

b. You have received an e-mail from your team leader asking you to suggest agenda items for the next meeting.

c. You have received an e-mail from the CEO of the company you are working for, asking you to comment on the new proposal to move to flexi-time.

d. You have received an e-mail from a new colleague asking you for feedback on the first draft of her report. You have noticed a number of spelling and grammar errors in the report.

Part D: Phrases for expressing an opinion and making suggestions[5]

Look at the following phrases and decide whether they are strong, medium or soft.

- I propose (that) ...
- I wonder if we should ...
- I wonder if anyone else ...
- I suppose ...
- I think/believe that ...

5 Some phrases from: Goodale, M. (1987) *The Language of Meetings*. Hove: L.T.P. Business Press.

- In my view ...
- We could try ...
- Could we try ...
- I suggest we ...
- May/can I suggest we ...
- It might be an idea to ...
- I believe it would be advisable to ...
- I would suggest that ...
- The only solution seems to be ...
- My advice would be to ...
- How about _____ ing ...?
- What about _____ ing ...?
- What do you think of _____ ing ...?
- Would there be any advantage in _____ ing?
- Wouldn't it be better to ...
- How do you feel about ...
- We must ...
- We've/you've really got to ...
- We need to ...
- One option would be to ...
- One possible solution would be to ...
- I recommend that we ...
- The most important thing is to ...
- If you ask me, we/you should ...
- I've got a little bit of concern about ...
- Well... I think that ...
- My feeling is that we/you should ...
- I believe that ...
- Let's ...
- Could we think of it in a different way?
- Could I just say /ask ...
- It seems to me that ...

- As I see it ...
- Personally, I prefer ...
- I just wanted to say ...
- I think we should actually go for ...
- I did see you as ...
- I would just like to say ...
- Had you thought of ...?
- Do you think it might be good to ...?
- Do you think it might be worth _____ ing ...?

Part E: Practice using suggestion phrases

1. Matching

Match each of the following suggestions with a context from the list below.

Suggestion	Context
a. One possible solution would be to ...	1. To a secretary in a routine interaction
b. I recommend that we ...	2. To your manager
c. How about we ...	3. Senior analyst to junior analyst
d. Let's ...	4. To a close colleague
e. Do you think it might be good to ...	5. To a new colleague
f. It might be an idea to ...	6. To a subordinate
g. I think we should actually go for ...	7. To a very senior person
h. I wonder if we should ...	8. In an informal team meeting
i. Had you thought of ...	9. In a formal meeting

2. Discussion questions

a. What reasons did you have for your matchings of suggestions and settings?

b. What do you think the speaker wants the hearer to do in each case?

c. How does each speaker soften his or her suggestion and why does each person choose to do it that way?

3. Making suggestions

Write suitable suggesting phrases for each context.

a. _____ (change a meeting date: colleague)

b. _____ (change a meeting date: boss)

c. _____ (change a meeting date: assistant)

d. _____ (change strategic plan: team leader)

e. _____ (change strategic plan: CEO)

f. _____ (change strategic plan: colleague)

g. _____ (item for agenda: team leader)

h. _____ (solve a team problem: colleague)

Part F: Interrupting and regaining your turn in a meeting[6]

Interrupting

- Could I just say ...
- If I could just say ...
- Sorry, but I wanted to say/ask ...

Preventing an interruption

- Sorry, but if I could just say this ...
- Just a minute, can I just finish _____ ing ...
- Good point, but if I could just finish what I was going to say, ...

Regaining your turn after an interruption

- Yes, but what I was going to say was ....
- What I was going to say was ...
- As I was saying ...
- Now, where was I?

6 Adapted from: Sweeney, S. 2003. *English for Business Communication*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



UNIT FIVE

DISAGREEING

Introduction

Disagreements at work can be challenging as they carry the risk of damaging the relationships of people who must work and co-operate with each other on a daily basis. It is not surprising therefore that many strategies are used to soften the force of a disagreement and to show that the speaker cares about the feelings of the hearer.

Part A: Looking at a workplace interaction

1. The context – Disagreeing about a software testing strategy

Eric and Callum are part of team of experts in a white-collar, information technology (IT) organisation. The team, which is largely made up of men, has been brought together from several different sections of the company to work on a special project with a fixed time span. Eric does not agree with a proposal that Callum makes during a meeting.

Working with a partner, use the context information above and complete the table:

Callum and Eric	High	Medium	Low
Status difference			✓
Level of familiarity			
Level of difficulty of making the disagreement			

2. Role-play

The first part of the conversation between Eric and Callum is provided below. Work with a partner to role-play the conversation. Eric will disagree with Callum's proposal because of the potential risks. When you have role-played, write down your conversation.

The conversation:

Callum: What we've actually decided to do is, er, to test the new programme by asking – by losing some data or pretending to lose something significant like everything in the shared files – like all our documents and all our codes.

Eric: Yeah but,

Callum: And then asking them to restore it.

3. Comparison and analysis

a. Comparing the conversation

Compare your conversation with the original conversation between Eric and Callum (see p. 71). What differences do you notice?

b. Analysing the conversation

Underline words or phrases that Eric and Callum use to make the conversation go smoothly (see pp.76-77 for a range of phrases). Note:

- The phrases they use to agree and acknowledge each other's comments. How frequent are these?
- The way Eric phrased his disagreement.
- The words or phrases used to soften the force of the disagreement.
- The use of humour.
- Whether Eric and Callum are trying to be co-operative. How can you tell?

Listen to the way the disagreements are expressed. Listen in particular to:

- The volume of Eric's voice (loud or soft).
- The stress pattern of the suggestion. Which words are stressed?
- The use of pauses.
- The use of any sighs or inhaling and exhaling (noticeable breathing in and out).
- The intonation pattern of the suggestions. Is it a falling, rising or mixed falling and rising pattern?

c. Evaluating the conversation

Rate Eric's communication using the scales on the following page (circle a number in each scale). Discuss the evidence you used to make your rating.

(i) How *polite* was Eric?

Polite			Impolite
1	2	3	4

(ii) How *direct* was Eric?

Direct			Indirect
1	2	3	4

(iii) Overall, how *effective* was Eric's communication style? Note that effective communication involves achieving your purpose efficiently while also maintaining good relationships.

Very effective			Not at all effective
1	2	3	4

d. Focus on turn-taking

Read the conversation again and focus on the steps taken in the dialogue.

- How does the dialogue begin?
- Do the speakers interrupt each other?
- Where in the conversation does the disagreement come?
- How is the disagreement responded to? What other responses would be appropriate?
- How many turns does each person have in the conversation? What does this illustrate?

e. Cross-cultural comparison

Compare this communication style with the style used in your country. Are there any differences or similarities?

4. E-mail and telephone communication

a. Imagine that this communication takes place via e-mail. Write Callum's initial e-mail to Eric. How might Eric reply?

b. Write what Callum and Eric would say if they spoke by telephone about this matter. Discuss whether this is something that could be effectively handled by phone.

c. What changes, if any, have you made to the communication compared to the face-to-face version?

The original conversation between Callum and Eric

1.	**Callum:**	What we've – what we've actually decided to do is, er,
2.		test the new programme by asking – by losing some data
3.		or pretending to lose something significant like
4.		everything in the shared files – like all our documents
5.		and all our codes.
6.	**Barry:**	[laughs]
7.	**Eric:**	Yeah but,
8.	**Callum:**	And then asking them to restore it.
9.	**Eric:**	No, don't do that.
10.	**Callum:**	We won't really lose it.
11.	**Eric:**	Yeah right, and what you're going to do is have a file
12.		that's three weeks old, overwritten over the top of all
13.		your, um, stuff that's, um, current.
14.	**Barry:**	Mm.
15.	**Eric:**	Don't do that at all.
16.	**Jake:**	No we're going to pick some ...
17.	**Eric:**	[laughs]
18.	**Jake:**	... that we're not – that we haven't updated ...
19.	**Eric:**	Don't do it.
20.	**Jake:**	No?
21.	**Eric:**	No.
22.	**Jake:**	You don't tr – you don't trust them?
23.	**Eric:**	Please, please don't do it. Please put it in the minutes that
24.		Eric does not think this is [laughs] a good idea.
25.	**All:**	[laugh]
26.	**Eric:**	You don't mess with those people.

Part B: More workplace conversations for analysis

Following are a further three conversations involving people making a disagreement at work. Analyse each conversation using the questions in activities 1 and 3 on the previous pages.

For each conversation, fill in the table below. Consider also how effective each disagreement is, and note other aspects of the conversations that interest you.

		Status difference	Level of familiarity	Level of difficulty	The disagreement
Conversation	1	Low	Low	Medium	No, don't do that
	2				
	3				
	4				

Conversation 2: Disagreeing about costs charged

The context of this conversation is a regular monthly team meeting of about 11 people in a commercial production company. The meeting is chaired by Jason. Sam is the owner of the company and he and Jason have been working together for a long time. Jason and Rob are both managers. Rob is a relative newcomer to the company.

Rob: If you bear the cost of their mistakes, their screw ups, well, of course they'll leave it for you to find these.

Jason: Well, it's not so much that, it's just we need to transfer that responsibility back to them.

Rob: Well then, we need to transfer the cost of it back too.

Jason: Yeah, but in, um, reality the industry has allowed that to happen, Rob.

Rob: Not all.

Jason: Um, for the most it has. And so the prices for our product are exactly the same as anybody else. And you know, um, if we turn around and say that we're now gonna charge

you, whatever, x amount for your mistakes, they'll just say, "Oh okay, thanks, we'll go somewhere else.".

Rob: No, but the incentives have to be in line with the behaviour you want. If anyone continues to allow the customer to make mistakes, and the cost of that is borne by you, you accept that that's your cost not theirs. Then they will use that.

Sam: I think on a well managed account, the account manager can work the swings and roundabouts. And quite often we might ring the client and ask them for a favour … having got some – some of that going.

Rob: Yes.

Conversation 3: Disagreeing with criticism

Vincent and Paul work at the same level in an organisation, are a similar age and know each other very well. Vincent has just criticized a proposal of Paul's for too much academic content.

Paul: I have read your comments and the only thing that I would probably disagree with you about is, um, about the academic approach. And I think that, cos it's a bridging course to university, these guys hopefully gonna move onto there.

Vincent: Mm.

Paul: So I think that they actually do need an introduction to that type of approach.

Vincent: Yeah, well, after writing that, I reflected on that and thought, yeah, no, I'm just being – I'm just reacting to, um, academic snobbery.

Paul: Shall I take the comments off?

Vincent: Yeah, take them off.

Conversation 4: Disagreeing about the booklets

The context of this conversation is in a team meeting in a government department. Clara is the team leader.

Harry: Looks like there's been actually a request for some explanatory booklets. I know it is out of the scope but people will be pretty interested in them. Maybe if you ...

Rob: We can quickly show you that ...

Clara: No booklets.

Rob: We ...

Clara: No booklets.

Peg: Thank you Clara.

Clara: No booklets.

Rob: We know – we know you didn't want them and we, um, er, we've ...

Clara: They don't meet the criteria for our budget. Thanks for looking at that though.

Sandy: So that's a clear, well maybe, no?

Clara: It is a no.

Sandy: It is a no, a royal no.

Clara: Did people feel disempowered by that decision?

Peg: No.

Clara: (laughs)

Part C: Focus on workplace e-mail

1. Analysing e-mail messages

Look at the three authentic e-mails from native speakers. In each, underline the phrases used to make the disagreement. Note:

- How direct or indirect the disagreement is.
- How the context influences the choice of language, the greeting and the farewell in the message.

E-mail 1: Disagreeing with a proposal

Response from a colleague in a large organisation to a proposal that the library buy a new publication.

Amanda

I have to admit that the material I have looked at closely is disappointing in that it hasn't really been carefully thought out/edited and tends to have off beat topics. So I wouldn't really recommend that we buy it.

Charlotte

E-mail 2: Disagreeing with a proposed purchase

The purchasing officer is responding to a plan to buy new digital hardware. She sends a group e-mail message.

I happen to oversee the buying of equipment for the department and in that capacity I have to remind you that this purchase does not fit in with our development needs. Sorry to pour cold water on your plan.

Catherine

E-mail 3: Disagreeing about sending a memo

Leo is responding to a suggestion from a very familiar colleague that he should add his comments to a memo that will be sent out today.

No, I'll say something at the meeting instead.

L

2. Writing disagreement e-mails

Write e-mails expressing your disagreement with the following proposals and comments.

a. Your team leader suggests that everyone come in on Saturday morning to help the move to a new office.
b. Your colleague, whom you know well, suggests that the report you are both critiquing is fine.

c. Your assistant suggests that your team put on a farewell morning tea for a visiting manager.

d. The CEO of your company proposes that everyone takes the concept of casual Friday seriously and that men wear no ties that day.

Part D. Useful phrases for agreeing and disagreeing[7]

Put each group of phrases in sections 1 to 4 into order from mild to strong agreement or disagreement.

1. Agreeing

- That's just what I was thinking.
- You know, that's exactly what I think.
- I agree entirely.
- I think you are right.
- I see what you mean.
- That's right.
- Exactly.
- I completely/totally agree.
- That's true.
- I agree.
- I think so too.

2. Disagreeing politely

- Yes, that's true but ...
- I'm not sure I quite agree ...
- Well, you have a point there, but ...
- I can see what you mean, but ...
- Perhaps, but don't you think ...
- But the problem with that is ...
- Yes, but ...
- Possibly, but ...
- What worries (bothers) me about that is ...
- That's true to some extent, but ...

7 Some phrases from: Goodale, M. (1987) *The Language of Meetings*. Hove: L.T.P. Business Press.

- Even if that is true, ...
- Maybe, but ...
- I'm afraid I don't quite agree.
- Actually, ...
- Well, maybe, but ...
- Oh, I don't think so.
- I don't think ... is a good idea.
- I don't think people should ...
- People shouldn't ...
- Well, in my opinion ...
- With respect, that's not quite correct.
- There seems to be a misunderstanding about ...

3. Disagreeing more strongly

- That's out of the question.
- I totally disagree.

4. Disagreeing using very direct phrases

- You must be joking!
- Don't make me laugh!
- Come off it!
- That's ridiculous!

5. Using 'actually' or 'well' to contradict politely[8]

a. Suggest a response to the following comments which you know are untrue and role-play them with a partner:

- The All Blacks won that game against Australia, didn't they?
- Let's talk about it at our meeting tomorrow.
- You are from Bangladesh, aren't you?
- I imagine the CEO is a man.
- Did you enjoy the game on TV last night?

8 Olga Barsony 'Polite Ways of Correcting or Contradicting our Conversation Partner's Assumptions'. In Bardovi-Harlig, K. and Mahan-Taylor, R. 2003. *Teaching Pragmatics*. Washington DC: U.S. Department of State Office of English Language Programs. Available online at http://exchanges.state.gov/education/engteaching/pragmatics.htm

b. Now try adding the word 'actually' in front of your contradiction of the previous comments and role-play them again. How does it change the force of the contradiction?

c. Try using the word 'well'. Does it have the same effect? When might you use 'actually' and when might you use 'well'?

d. Note the use of 'actually' in the conversation below. Why does Henry use it?

Conversation

Nancy and several other managers have been away at a conference for a week. She has just returned and is checking with her new junior colleague, Henry, about how he managed while everyone was away.

1. **Nancy:** How have you been going Henry?
2. **Henry:** Not too bad.
3. **Nancy:** Kept yourself busy enough while we were gone?
4. **Henry:** Yes, I did some analysis of the budget.
5. **Nancy:** Oh ok.
6. **Henry:** Yeah, finding mistakes. [laughs] Actually, it's not been
7. very busy.
8. **Nancy:** Oh well, gave you time to think about things, didn't it?
9. **Henry:** Yeah, yeah, sure. Thanks for asking.

Part E: Practice using phrases for agreeing and disagreeing

1. Matching

Match each of the following disagreements with a context from the list below.

Disagreements	Context
a. I can see what you mean but ...	1. To a close colleague about a simple matter
b. I am afraid I don't quite agree.	2. To your manager
c. Possibly, but ...	3. Senior analyst to junior analyst
d. That's true to some extent, but ...	4. To a new colleague
e. Sorry to stick my neck out but I really don't think it is a good idea.	5. To your secretary who you know well
f. Perhaps, but don't you think ...	6. To a new assistant
g. Maybe, but ...	7. To a very senior person
h. Actually, ...	8. In an informal team meeting
i. Even if that is true, ...	9. In a formal meeting

2. Discussion questions

a. What reasons did you have for your matchings of disagreements and contexts?

b. What do you think the speaker wants the hearer to do in each case?

c. How does each speaker soften his or her disagreement and why does each person choose to do it that way?

3. Making disagreeing statements

Write suitable ways of disagreeing in the different contexts:

1. _____
   (new proposal from colleague in a team meeting)

2. _____
   (suggestion from a close colleague)

3. _____

(proposal from boss to increase working hours)

4. _____

(proposal from boss to reduce staff)

5. _____

(proposal from colleague to change report)

6. _____

(date for a meeting: colleague)

7. _____

(suggestion from your assistant that the IT person be involved)

8. _____

(advice from colleague in another department)



UNIT SIX

MAKING COMPLAINTS AND CRITICISING

Introduction

We will all face situations in our working life when we are unhappy about someone else's behaviour or work or when someone is unhappy about ours. These situations range from minor issues such as a colleague leaving dishes in a staff kitchen, to more serious issues related to work performance.

Knowing how to talk about such issues can be difficult and usually involves considerable interpersonal communication skill and tact. This unit explores some of the ways that such talk can be carried out more successfully.

Part A: Looking at a workplace interaction

The context – Mistakes creeping into our work

Sara is the manager of a team within a government department. Rebecca, Ella, Simon and Mary are all members of the team. The team has worked together for about one year. Sara has noticed an increasing number of writing errors in documents produced by the team.

1. Thinking about context

Working with a partner, use the context information and complete the table.

Sara and the team	High	Medium	Low
Status difference		✓	
Level of familiarity			
Level of difficulty (how hard is it to make the complaint?)			

2. Thinking about communication

Here is one way that Sara could raise the problem:

> "Look, I'm very unhappy with the quality of your writing. It's full of mistakes and I'm really embarrassed by it. It gives us all a bad name. You need to do something about it or else there might be consequences."

What is wrong with this approach? Find at least three problems with this communication.

(i) _____

(ii) _____

(iii) _____

3. Role-play

The first part of the conversation between Sara and the team follows. Work with a partner to role-play the conversation. When you have role-played, write down your conversation.

The conversation:

Sara … which leads me on to one other item which I haven't got on the agenda, um, is it all right if I …?

Rebecca Yep, yeah, sure

Sara … um, and that's the – the issue of writing [deep breath].

4. Comparison and analysis

a. Comparing the conversation

Compare your conversation with the original conversation between Sara and her team (see p. 86). What differences do you notice?

b. Analysing the conversation

Underline words or phrases that Sara and her team use to make the conversation go smoothly (see p. 94 for a range of complaint strategies). Note:

- The phrases they use to agree and acknowledge each other's comments.
- The way Sara phrased the complaint.
- The words or phrases used to soften the force of the complaint.
- Whether Sara and her team are trying to be co-operative. How can you tell?
- Whether humour is used. Why or why not?

Listen to the way the complaint is expressed. Listen in particular to:

- The volume of Sara's voice (loud or soft).
- The stress pattern of the complaint. Which words are stressed?
- The use of pauses.
- The use of any sighs or inhaling and exhaling (noticeable breathing in and out).
- The intonation pattern of the complaint. Is it a falling, rising or mixed falling and rising pattern?

c. Evaluating the conversation

Rate Sara's communication using the scales below (circle a number in each scale). Discuss the evidence you used to make your rating.

(i) How *polite* was Sara?

Polite			**Impolite**
1	2	3	4

(ii) How *direct* was Sara?

Direct			**Indirect**
1	2	3	4

(iii) Overall, how *effective* was Sara's communication style? Effective communication involves achieving your purpose efficiently while also maintaining good relationships.

Very effective			**Not at all effective**
1	2	3	4

d. Focus on turn-taking

Read the conversation again and focus on the steps taken in the dialogue.

- How does the dialogue begin? Brainstorm some other useful openers.
- Where in the conversation does the complaint come?
- How is the complaint responded to? What other responses would be appropriate?

e. Cross-cultural comparison

Compare this communication style with the style used in your country. Are there any differences or similarities?

f. Work with a partner to identify some ways to communicate effectively based on your analysis of Sara's communication.

(i) _____

(ii) _____

(iii) _____

Can you think of situations when it is appropriate to be more direct and not use these softening words or phrases?

5. E-mail and telephone communication

a. Imagine that this communication takes place via e-mail. Write Sara's initial e-mail to her team. How might a team member reply?

b. Write what Sara would say to a team member if she telephoned him/her about this matter.

c. What changes, if any, have you made to the communication compared to the face-to-face version?

The original conversation between Sara and the team

Sara: … Which leads me on to one other item which I haven't got on the agenda, um, is it all right if I …?

Rebecca: Yep, yeah, sure.

Sara: … Um, and that's the – the issue of writing [deep breath]. Um, when, um, whenever you – well, we're drafting, well, I've noticed a couple of mistakes creeping into our work. That's stuff that – that even I've looked at. I notice them because the letters go through – all the letters that go out of the ministry go through what's called the day file. They also go through … each manager as well as our own staff. But suddenly sometimes as I'm re-reading, I spot a spelling mistake that I didn't see the first time or a grammatical mistake.

Simon: … Mm, yeah.

Sara: I really ask for all of you to make sure that you take it to one other person, okay? At least to look at before – before you post it. Even when you send it to me to look at, it must also be checked by others. Of course, when you're doing a big chunk of work then that's normal for us, we'll always – we always do that checking. But even with just simple letters make sure that they're looked at. It's so easy to overlook just a simple mistake and the fewer mistakes we send out the better.

Simon: Yeah.

Rebecca: I'd – I'd like to take that a bit further too. 'Cos, um, if we're going to use other languages in the letter, I think we should make sure that they're checked as well.

Simon: Mm.

Part B: More workplace conversations for analysis

Following are a further seven conversations involving people making a complaint or giving feedback at work. Analyse each conversation using the questions in activities 1 and 4 on the previous pages. For each conversation, fill in the table below. Consider also how effective each complaint is, and note other aspects of the conversations that interest you.

	Status difference	Level of familiarity	Level of difficulty	The complaint
1	Complaint from a team leader: Medium	High	Medium	Well, I've noticed a couple of mistakes creeping into our work
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				
7				
8				

Conversation 2: Negative feedback about a new employee

Kate and Tara are both staff nurses in a hospital. They know each other well. Kate has recently hired a new employee called Janine.

Kate: How is Janine fitting into your team?

Tara: [laughs] Ah, Janine?

Kate: Yeah. What are you laughing for?

Tara: Look, I dunno how to say this, but, ah, it's just not really working out in more ways than one. She's interesting, but well, quite a few of us have had arguments with her. I don't mean to sound cruel or anything, but she's not very professional and her behaviour is really bad at times. We don't want her on our shift – it's causing too many problems.

Kate: Oh right. Well, look you should have said something earlier. I'll have to talk to some of the other staff before I can sort this out, but thanks for being honest.

Conversation 3: Pointing out a problem

Neil is an IT manager in a government organisation. He is talking to a new, junior member of his team.

Neil: This is the file from the archive isn't it?

Kevin: I'm not sure.

Neil: My gosh, what do you mean you are not sure?

Kevin: Well, Gary and Robert are the ones that are involved with sending off tapes and bringing them back, so ...

Neil: Well, if they weren't here what would you do?

Kevin: I would most probably find their notes ... that don't exist.

Neil: Okay, that's quite surprising, you know that ... It's quite a critical one, don't you think?

Kevin: Yeah.

Conversation 4: Late arrival at a meeting

Tricia is the manager of an IT team who have worked together for some time.

1. **Eve:** Good afternoon.
2. **Serena:** Sorry we're late.
3. **Eve:** It's been noted, chocolates expected next meeting.
4. [laughter]
5. **Serena:** Cos I was considering whether you'd notice if we didn't
6. turn up.
7. [laughter]
8. **Tricia:** We noticed ... Okay Andrew.
9. **Andrew:** Oh, this one is real basic. It's just network cables.

Conversation 5: Deciding who to blame

Barry, the leader of an IT team, has let one of his team take the blame for not picking up on a particular point near the end of a long report. The team has worked together for some time.

1. **Eric:** [smiling voice] Barry sees those sorts of things too by
2. the way, notice that.
3. **All:** [laugh]
4. **Barry:** I don't read them through [laughs]. I rely on you guys
5. to read them.

Conversation 6: Feedback on a letter

Ruth is a senior policy analyst in a government department and Nell is her subordinate colleague, a policy analyst. They have not worked together very long. Nell has prepared an official letter on which Ruth gives her some feedback.

Ruth: It's actually quite, I mean it's well written [inhales]. I just have – I just think the approach is – could – should be a bit different in terms of ... See the organisation wouldn't – we wouldn't usually say something like this, that ... I mean it's true, but, um, we should probably put in there that, um, the organisation – what we did, actually, in terms of providing advice on other avenues of funding.

Nell: Mm.

Conversation 7: Time to finish the social chat

Beth, manager, has worked with her admin assistant Marion for some time. Marion is chatting to another admin assistant.

Beth: Ok, Marion, I'm afraid serious affairs of state will have to wait. We have some trivial issues needing our attention.

[all laugh]

Conversation 8: Late for a meeting

Sandy is the manager of a team that know each other well. Rob arrives late for a 9am team meeting.

Sandy: However, it is a service we've provided for our customers ... Good afternoon Mr Blair.

Rob: I forgot it was on. [general laughter]

Part C: Focus on workplace e-mail

1. Analysing e-mail messages

Look at the following five authentic e-mails from native speakers. In each, underline the phrases used to make the complaint. Note the words and phrases that the writers use to:

- avoid sounding too direct or bossy.
- make a complaint to someone of higher status.
- get to the point efficiently.

E-mail 1: Complaint about lost files

Joanne is the manager of several teams in a large organisation. Annie is a member of the IT support team.

Hi Annie

I've just had a staff member come to see me and he's informed me that about 4 other staff members have lost files in the past few weeks and have had to contact the help desk to get them restored. We were asked to keep all files on the shared and personal drives and were assured that this was the safest/securest method of storing files. So far nothing has been lost and it appears files can be restored, however, once they are restored they are, unfortunately, not the most updated version.

Thanks and I look forward to your response.

Joanne

E-mail 2: Complaint about use of staff coffee

Peter is the office administrator in a large department.

Hi Everyone

Can I just remind everyone that the staff coffee is purchased for use at morning tea to be made by the administrative staff (we are happy to supply ground coffee for one off occasions such as guests and visitors) but this coffee is not purchased for all day/everyday use.

Cheers

Peter

E-mail 3: Complaint about dishes in shared kitchen

Chris is an administrator in a large organisation

Dear all,

My office is directly opposite the kitchen area on level 8. I don't mind wiping the bench or putting the odd cup away BUT … twice this week, groups of people have obviously had refreshments and have left a bench full of dishes . Thank you for washing them … but both times I have had to put them away. Could I please request that if you provide tea or coffee for groups of people that you ensure the bench is left tidy. I apologise for whinging .....

Chris

E-mail 4: Feedback about errors in the print-out

Joan is the administrative assistant for the publicity team in a large organisation. She is responding to the manager of another department.

Michael

Thank you for your e-mail and the print-out for all the sales. There are some slight discrepancies but the total number of titles sold is correct. I don't know if the discrepancies worry you? As you can see from my attachment the numbers all even out so I am happy if you just want to leave it.

Joan

E-mail 5: Missing USB sticks

Henry is the administrative assistant in a medium sized organisation.

Hello team,

As you may be aware our organisation has no fewer than 12 USB sticks, available for use by staff on a sign-out system. Given that USBs are also known as 'memory sticks', it is with some irony that I report that some staff members have apparently forgotten to use the sign-out system when borrowing USBs. Fortunately, most of our USBs are accounted for but others are not. In respect of this I ask that you reply to me if you have one of these USBs, and if you could take a moment to find and report the hand-written number then I, and the sign-out sheet, would love to hear from you.

A thank you.

Henry

2. Writing complaint e-mails

Write a complaint e-mail in response to each of the following situations:

a. The shared kitchen in your organisation is constantly left very messy and you seem to be the only person who cleans up the dirty cups. Send an e-mail to everyone on your floor.

b. You have asked for a review of your work station as you have developed

a sore back. However, the health and safety team in your organisation has not yet sent anyone to see you.

c. You have authorization to claim some expenses relating to a conference you recently attended. You sent in your claim several weeks ago but have not yet been reimbursed. E-mail the finance department about this.

Part D: Making complaints in face-to-face communication

1. Hints for making effective complaints

a. Begin with an explanation of purpose / forewarning of complaint. Examples are: *There is something I need to talk to you about. Do you have a minute to talk about this? Would you mind if we talked about … .*

b. Move to a description of the problem, usually with softeners: *a little bit of concern about, a bit worried about, it's just that it appears that … , slightly.*

c. Avoid blaming language. Say *'We have'* or *'there seems to be'* rather than *'You have made a mistake'.*

d. Express your complaint as a request, not as a demand: *'I wonder if I could be consulted first next time'.*

e. Suggest a solution in a non-blaming way: *'It would be really good if next time we …'.*

f. Use humour (carefully).

2. Common ways of responding to complaints

- Apologise
- Listen
- Ask open questions
- Offer a solution or suggestion
- Point out where the real blame should lie
- Commiserate/agree
- Focus on the problem
- Interrupt and correct the complainer

When somebody complains to you about something you have done, some of these responses are more effective than others. Why?

3. Direct and indirect complaints

A complaint can be expressed in a direct or an indirect way. Look at the following and note the different forms that a complaint can take. What problem is being complained about in each case?

a. "Would you mind closing the office door when you come in?"

b. "Born in a tent were we?"

c. "I think you'll need to have another look at that report you gave me last week"

d. "How's progress on the proposal that you were going to get ready last week?"

e. "Hi, I came looking for you around 5pm yesterday to discuss the new filing procedures."

f. "You're rather faint" (in a telephone conversation).

g. "There's room for improvement."

4. Whinging

a. Complaints are often used to open up a conversation with someone, to share a problem and to express or establish solidarity. These types of complaints are often informally referred to as 'whinges/whinging'.

An example: two colleagues in the staff kitchen.

Paula: There never seems to be enough milk by the end of the day.

Cathy: You haven't got any for your coffee?

Paula: No.

Cathy: That's typical.

---

b. What can you say in response to a whinge?

(i) Yeah (agree)

(ii) How annoying (sympathise)

(iii) _____

(iv) _____

c. Suggest possible responses to the following comments:

(i) This photocopier always seems to jam when I am in a hurry.

(ii) I made a special effort to be early today but the bus was late again!

(iii) You'd never believe the kind of rude e-mails I get here.

(iv) What do those people at the conference centre do all day!

Part E: Practice with complaints in context

1. Matching

Match each of the following complaints with a context from the list below.

Complaints	Context
a. I seem to have received the wrong document.	1. To a close colleague on a minor matter
b. I couldn't find you at the time we arranged last week.	2. To your manager
c. Is there a way I could avoid being overlooked next time?	3. Senior analyst to junior analyst
d. Could we make sure this doesn't happen again?	4. To a new colleague
e. I guess I didn't make myself very clear.	5. To your secretary whom you know well
f. There are a few issues about that new programme.	6. To a new assistant
g. This doesn't seem to be the right one.	7. To a very senior person
h. Could I make a suggestion?	8. _____
i. Did you send me the most recent version?	9. _____

2. Discussion questions

a. What reasons did you have for your matchings of complaints and contexts?

b. What do you think the speaker wants the hearer to do in each case?

c. How does each speaker soften his or her complaint and why does each person choose to say it that way?

3. Making complaints

Write suitable complaint phrases for each context.

a. _____

(messy microwave: colleagues)

b. _____

(late report: colleague)

c. _____

(not turning up to meeting: boss)

d. _____

(lack of promotion: boss)

e. _____

(not coming to a meeting: colleague)

f. _____

(damaged book: colleague)

g. _____

(late report: assistant)

h. _____

(mistakes in report: stranger)

Part F: Responding to positive feedback

1. Ways to respond to positive feedback

- Accept: *Thank you very much*, or *I really appreciate that*.
- Minimize: *It was easy really*, or *My role was really small*.
- Deflect to someone else: *It was really Dave who did all the work*.
- Include others: *Sara's contribution was great too*.
- Express reservations: *Actually, I don't feel so good about it*.
- Disagree: *Actually I thought I did a terrible job*.
- Joke: *You mean you actually liked the mess I made of it*.
- Return the compliment: *Your presentation was very effective too*.

When you are praised or complimented, some of these responses are more effective than others. Which ones are most effective and why?

2. Analysing positive feedback in the workplace.

In the following three conversations what do you notice about how positive feedback is given and received?

Conversation 1: Praise for Hattie

Penny, a manager, is publicly thanking one of her team for her contribution.

Penny: Actually, I mean, I've said this before but I'd like to just put it on record again ...

Jane: Mm.

Penny: ... how extraordinarily impressed and proud we are of the work you've done on this project and how I can't actually imagine anybody else [inhales] certainly in my acquaintance [laughs] who would've actually been able to walk in and do this. And I've said many blessings on the fact that we hired ...

Jane: Mm, mm

Penny: ... Hattie when we did.

Hattie: Thank you.

Conversation 2: Positive feedback for Jock

Ben is a member of a team of which Jock is the manager.

Ben Where did you learn these sort of project management type skills?

Jock Oh, I never did.

Ben Because you seem really good at it.

Jock I've just winged it.

Ben And awfully confident.

Conversation 3: Approval from the chairperson

The speaker is the chairperson at a meeting of senior managers

Chairperson: Ok, um, well, I support the paper and the recommendations. I think you've done an excellent job – well done.



UNIT SEVEN

MAKING APOLOGIES

Introduction

There are many reasons why people make apologies. In most cases the main motivation for making an apology is to re-establish a good relationship with someone. In this unit we explore the language of apologies in English as well as a range of strategies and steps for making effective apologies.

Part A: Looking at a workplace interaction

The context – Apologising for missing a meeting

Joanna and Henry both work in a government department. Joanna, Branch Manager, has higher status than Henry who is the policy manager in that area. They have worked together for over a year. A member of Henry's team (Mary) did not turn up at a recent meeting where she was expected to provide supporting material for Joanna. Joanna raises this with Henry.

1. Thinking about context

Working with a partner, use the context information above and complete the table:

Joanna and Henry	High	Medium	Low
Status difference		✓	
Level of familiarity			
Level of seriousness of offence			

2. Role-play

The first part of the conversation between Joanna and Henry is provided below. Work with a partner to role-play the conversation. When you have role-played, write down your conversation.

The conversation:

Joanna: I presumed that Mary was going to the meeting. Was that my misunderstanding?

Henry: ... Oh?

3. Comparison and analysis

a. Comparing the conversation

Compare your conversation with the original conversation between Joanna and Henry (see p.103). What differences do you notice?

b. Analysing the conversation

Underline words or phrases that Joanna and Henry use to make the conversation go smoothly (see pp.109-110 for a range of phrases). Note:

- The phrases they use to agree and acknowledge each other's comments.
- The way Henry phrased the apology.
- The words or phrases used to soften the force of the complaint.
- Whether Joanna and Henry are trying to be co-operative. How can you tell?

Listen to the way the apology is expressed. Listen in particular to:

- The volume of Henry's voice (loud or soft).
- The stress pattern of the apology. Which words are stressed?
- The use of pauses.
- The use of any sighs or inhaling and exhaling (noticeable breathing in and out).
- The intonation pattern of the apology. Is it a falling, rising or mixed falling and rising pattern?

c. Evaluating the conversation

Rate Henry's communication using the scales below (circle a number in each scale). Discuss the evidence you used to make your rating.

(i) How *polite* was Henry?

Polite			**Impolite**
1	2	3	4

(ii) How *direct* was Henry?

Direct			**Indirect**
1	2	3	4

(iii) Overall, how *effective* was Henry's communication style? Note that effective communication involves achieving your purpose efficiently while also maintaining good relationships.

Very effective			**Not at all effective**
1	2	3	4

d. Focus on turn-taking

Read the conversation again and focus on the steps taken in the dialogue.

- How does the dialogue begin? Brainstorm some other useful openers.
- Where in the conversation does the apology come?
- How is the apology responded to? What other responses would be appropriate?

e. Cross-cultural comparison

Compare this communication style with the style used in your country. Are there any differences or similarities?

The original conversation between Joanna and Henry

Joanna: What happened to Mary? I presumed that Mary was going to the meeting and that she would bring the background notes. Was that my misunderstanding?

Henry: … Oh?

Joanna: To the … briefing meeting.

Henry: … I presumed she was going as well … … Okay [laughs] okay. So she just didn't show at all?

Joanna: No … and … well, that's not like Mary.

Henry: No … no, oh well … I have no idea.

Joanna: Okay, so can you check that out?

Henry: Okay, I'm sorry you ended up in that awkward position but … … mm … mm.

Joanna: Yes, I was a little bit surprised.

Henry: Yeah, yeah, that is unlike … …

Joanna: I was unclear about … where, where the guilt should be.

Henry: All right, okay … [sighs]. Oh look, I'm dreadfully sorry about that …

Joanna: Oh well, just check out to see what happened … because there was – there was clearly some miscommunication somewhere.

Henry: Yeah.

4. E-mail and telephone communication

a. Imagine that this communication takes place via e-mail. Write Joanna's initial e-mail to Henry. How might Henry reply?

b. Write what Henry would say to Joanna if she telephoned him about this matter. Discuss whether this is something that could be effectively handled by phone.

c. What changes, if any, have you made to the communication compared to the face-to-face version?

Part B: More workplace conversations for analysis

Following are a further five conversations involving people making an apology at work. Analyse each conversation using the questions in activities 1 and 3 on the previous pages.

For each conversation, fill in the table below. Consider also how effective each apology is, and note other aspects of the conversations that interest you.

		Status difference	Level of familiarity	Level of seriousness of offence	The apology
Conversation	1	Apology to boss	Medium	Medium	I'm sorry ... I'm dreadfully sorry ...
	2				
	3				
	4				
	5				
	6				

Conversation 2: Apology for blocking the view

Jane and Patricia are of equal status as both are general managers of different companies. Patricia is slightly younger than Jane. They are attending a meeting.

1. **Jane:** Patricia ... excuse me. Can I ask, I'd like to be able to see
2. Georgia and I can't see through your hair [laughs].
3. **Patricia:** Oh, okay, I'm sorry.

Conversation 3: Humorous apology for avoiding taking minutes

A group of senior policy analysts meet for a regular team meeting. They have worked together for more than one year.

1. **Elizabeth:** Oh, who wants to take the minutes next week?
2. **Rebecca:** Oh, that's a point.
3. **Elizabeth:** I won't be here.
4. **Jennifer:** I'll do it next week then.
5. **Georgina:** I think it might be my turn, actually.
6. **Rose:** It must be my turn soon.
7. **Elizabeth:** So it's at three, isn't it? And Jennifer can scribe.
8. **Sally:** I must be due for a turn too … and I'll put in my
9. apologies now.
10. [laughter]
11. **Jennifer:** No, you are not at all sorry. [laughs]

Conversation 4: Apology for late arrival at meeting

Rose, the manager of a policy unit in a government department, joins the regular team meeting of senior policy analysts in that unit.

1. **Rose:** Sorry, I'm sorry that I'm late. I was talking to Margaret.
2. **Katherine:** Mm.
3. **Rose:** Just summarize for me what the two points are so that,
4. um, I can also raise them with Dorothy.

Conversation 5: Apology for not replying

Becky, a policy analyst, phones Cathy, a policy analyst from another group. They know each other well.

1. **Cathy:** Hi, Cathy speaking.
2. **Becky:** Oh, hi Cathy, its Becky here.
3. **Cathy:** Hi, how are you?
4. **Becky:** Hi, I'm okay thanks. I'm sorry I didn't get back to you
5. this morning.
6. **Cathy:** Oh, that's alright.
7. **Becky:** Mm, did you come over for morning tea or ...
8. **Cathy:** I didn't. I got involved with work.
9. **Becky:** Oh, right. [laughs]
10. **Cathy:** Terrible.
11. **Becky:** Dreadful thing to do.

Conversation 6: Apology for not informing a colleague about a briefing session

Rachel, manager of a unit in a government department, apologises to Heather, manager of another unit.

1. **Rachel:** Yeah, okay, I was going to, um, I've – I think I owe you an
2. apology. I forgot to tell you that we were briefing the
3. Minister – the Associate Minister, this morning. But we
4. were just doing the issues paper.
5. **Heather:** That's okay.
6. **Rachel:** Um.
7. **Heather:** Not a problem.

Part C: Focus on workplace e-mail

1. Analysing e-mail messages

Look at the following three authentic e-mails from native speakers. In each, underline the words and phrases used to make the apology. Note where the apology comes in each message.

E-mail 1: Omitting a colleague from the e-mail list

Ben and John are colleagues in the same team. Ben is temporarily acting as team leader. They know each other well.

Hi Ben

I'm not on your e-mail list so haven't been receiving e-mails from you.

John

Oops. I'll put your name on the mailing list now.

Sorry.

Ben

E-mail 2: Error in instruction notices

Maddy is the team leader of a group of teachers who have worked together for some time.

Hi Class Teachers

I own up to this muddle. Sorry everyone. The instructions notices covered the first week, and I blithely distributed them without noticing the gaps.

Maddy

E-mail 3: Apology for poor service

David apologises to a client of a large organisation.

Dear Becky

Thank you for your e-mail regarding the contact you have had with our department.

I apologise for the unsatisfactory service you have experienced, and for the delays in getting the information to you but I hope that everything is now in order for you.

Kind regards,

David

2. Writing apology e-mails.

Write an e-mail apologising for each of the following situations. You can use the vocabulary items set out below to help you.

a. You have forgotten to send certain information that is vital for the report your team leader is writing. The report was due early today so you have missed the deadline.
b. You forgot to turn up to a regular team meeting.
c. You forgot to turn up to a special team meeting where the CEO outlined some new proposals and asked for feedback.
d. You were too busy to return your assistant's phone call.
e. You were 15 minutes late for a presentation you were scheduled to make to your colleagues at the regular weekly meeting. Send an e-mail to the group.

Apology vocabulary

The following are a mix of verbs, nouns, adjectives and adverbs that are often used when making an apology.

Sorry, regret, apologise, mistake, accident, misunderstand, inadvertently, fail, forgive, reimburse, understanding, violate, misinterpret, amend, explain, misquote, offend, compensate, acknowledge, admit, excuse, intend, repair, patience, neglect, rectify, repay, wrong, redress, unwittingly.

Part D: Making apologies

1. Useful phrases for apologising

Apologies are often formulaic and certain words, such as 'sorry' are used a lot.

- Sorry!
- I'm sorry.
- I'm very sorry.
- I'm really sorry.
- I'm terribly sorry.
- I'm so sorry, I didn't realize.
- I'm afraid that ...
- I apologise.
- My apologies for ...
- I think I owe you an apology.
- I feel I must apologise.
- I'm sorry, I really regret that I ...
- Forgive me if I have already said this but ...

Note the use of intensifiers such as *very* and *really*. They are often used to strengthen an apology. Which is stronger?

Look back at conversations 1 to 6. How often is the word 'sorry' used?

2. Parts of an apology[9]

Apologies can contain up to five parts, as follows.

- Apologies for small offences often contain only parts 2 or 3.
- Apologies for more serious offences also require the use of parts 4 and 5.
- The order of the parts can vary. For example, some apologies begin with the explanation followed by the expression of regret. *The meeting went overtime so I couldn't pick up that report we discussed, sorry about that.*

When the relationship is very close, or the issue is very familiar to the people involved, sometimes an explanation is all that is necessary as the apology is implicit.

9 Adapted from Holmes, J. 1989. Sex differences and apologies. *Applied Linguistics* 10,2.

Part 1. Begin with a pre-apology strategy to forewarn the hearer such as:

a. *I'm afraid I have got something to tell you ...*
b. *I hope you don't mind but ...*
c. *I have got a bit of an apology to make, you see ...*
d. *You know that arrangement we made, well I'm afraid that ...*

Part 2. Express regret and/or apologise: *I'm sorry*

Part 3. Explain the offence

Part 4. Acknowledge responsibility:

a. accept fault: *It was probably my fault, It was my fault entirely, It was because of me*
b. admit error: *I was confused, I am so forgetful*
c. express lack of intent: *I didn't mean to, I didn't realize*
d. express embarrassment: *I feel awful about it*
e. justify hearer: *You have every right to feel annoyed*
f. offer to fix the problem.

Part 5. Promise for the future: *I promise it won't happen again, I will make sure it doesn't happen again*

Look at the following conversation and identify the steps taken by the speaker when making the apology (e.g., explain, apologise).

Maria is Simon's team leader

Maria: Have you got a minute Simon? I just wanted to say sorry for causing any embarrassment for you yesterday at the meeting.

Simon: Oh, well.

Maria: It might have looked as if I was deliberately using your section as an example of what needs changing but I didn't mean it to sound like that.

Simon: Oh, yeah.

Maria: I am actually really interested in what you have been doing on this project and I am sorry if that wasn't clear.

Simon: That's okay.

Maria: I will make sure I am clearer next time.

Simon: Ok, thanks.

Part E: Practice using apology phrases

1. Matching

Match each of the following apologies with a context from the list below.

Apologies	Contexts
a. I am really sorry about this.	1. Bumping into your team leader and making her spill her coffee over her notes.
b. Oh dear, I am extremely sorry.	2. Gently touching your colleague's arm with a box you are carrying.
c. Oh, sorry.	3. Forgetting to attend a team meeting.
d. Really sorry to disturb you but ...	4. Being late with a section of a report you are writing with a colleague.
e. I apologise for ...	5. You picked up your colleagues notes at the end of a meeting.
f. Sorry about this but ...	6. Squeezing past a colleague at the photocopier.
g. Sorry. (spoken softly)	7. Interrupting a meeting.

2. Discussion questions

a. What reasons did you have for your matchings of apologies and contexts?

b. What do you think the speaker wants the hearer to do or say in each case?

Part F: Responding to apologies

- Accept: *That's okay, No problem, Don't worry, These things happen, I understand,*
- Acknowledge: *Ok (but)*
- Reject: Silence, or *But ...*
- Evade: *Let's make another time*

Look at Task 1 in Part E and suggest responses to the apologies in each situation. Role-play these with a partner.

APPENDIX 1: TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Here are some strategies for making your communication more indirect.[1]

1. Use modals: could, would, might:
   I would prefer, could we meet, it might be better if

2. Change the verb from the active to the passive so that the person doing the action is not emphasized:
   You promised us – *We were promised*

3. Change the pronoun from 'you' to 'I':
   You said – *I understood*

4. Use a question rather than a statement:
   We would need to meet fairly soon – *Could we meet fairly soon?*

5. Use a negative question:
   It would be better to – *Wouldn't it be better to?*

6. Use the continuous tense where possible:
   I hope you can – *I am hoping you can*
   I wonder if you can – *I was wondering if you could*
   I hope you will – *I was hoping you would*

7. Use the past tense where possible:
   How much do you want – *How much did you want?*
   I wonder – *I was wondering*

8. Use comparatives with modals:
   It is a good idea to wait until tomorrow – *It might be a better idea to wait until tomorrow.*

9. Use the second conditional rather than the first conditional:
   If there is a chance to ..., I will be very grateful
   If there was a chance to ..., I would be very grateful

10. Use a positive adjective with 'not' rather than a negative adjective:
    That's wrong – *Actually, that's not quite correct*
    Your products are expensive – *Your products aren't cheap*

1 Some of the above material adapted from:
Emmerson, P. (2007). *Business English Handbook, Advanced*. Oxford: Macmillan. p.82.
Goodale, M. (1987) *The Language of Meetings*. Hove: L.T.P. Business Press. pp. 10-14.

11. Use qualifiers that minimise the issue:
    I have *some* reservations about this.
    There is a *bit of* a problem.
    I am *slightly* concerned about the proposal.
    I need *a little* more time.
    Could I *just* see you for a *moment?*

12. Add 'it seems' to a statement:
    The document has been lost – *It seems the document has been lost.*

13. Use vague, indefinite language:
    Did you read my e-mail – *Did you have a chance to read my e-mail?*
    It's getting late. I have to leave now – *It's getting late. I should probably leave soon.*
    There are two things I need to discuss with you – *There are a couple of/ one or two things I would like to discuss with you.*

14. Use introductory phrases that prepare the listener:
    Actually, well, to be honest, I'm afraid, frankly, as a matter of fact, to put it bluntly, unfortunately.

Practice using more indirect language

Read the dialogue below and make the language less direct. Use the words in brackets.

Peter: I want to talk to you about the new proposal. *(Sorry to interrupt, I would like, I was hoping to, if there was any chance)*

Jane: OK but I am too busy right now. *(Unfortunately, slightly pressed, just)*

Peter: But I need to talk to you today. *(Oh sorry, the problem is, I would like to, I was hoping to see someone)*

Jane: I see, how about later this afternoon?

Peter: Will you be free at 4pm? *(Would, by any chance)*

Jane: 4pm is hopeless for me. *(not very good)*

Peter: Will after 5pm suit you? *(Would, be a possibility)*

Jane: Ok, but I can't meet for long. *(I'm afraid, only 15 mins)*

APPENDIX 2: ROLE-PLAYS

Role A

(Role A always begins the conversation)

Small Talk

1. In the lift at work

Role A

You are the manager of large team. You are waiting for the lift and realise the person standing next to you is your newest team member. Begin a conversation with this person.

2. Weekend plans

Role A

You are in the lunch room with your colleagues and you are chatting about plans for the weekend. You have finished your cup of tea and must return to your office. How can you end the conversation?

3. Friday lunchtime

Role A

It is Friday lunchtime and there is a long weekend coming up. You are sitting with some fellow workers you know a little. Start a conversation.

4. Monday morning tea break

Role A

It is Monday morning tea break. You are sitting in silence with a fellow worker you met just this morning. Start talking.

5. At a conference

Role A

You are at an international conference in Sydney. You are waiting in a queue to collect your lunch. The delegate behind you is from NZ but you have never met before. What will you say?

Requesting and Refusing

1. More time for the report

Role A

You have been assigned to write an important report. It is due in the boss's office tomorrow. However, if you could have an additional day, it would be a much better report. Discuss the matter with your boss.

Source: Di Pietro, Robert J. 1987. *Strategic Interaction.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

2. Scissors

Role A

You want to borrow your typist's scissors. You will need to keep them for a few hours. What can you say?

3. Confidential documents

Role A

You are a new employee in an organisation. During the training period, you have read some documents but have not understood them well. You would like to take them home to read after work. Ask your manager.

4. Parcel for China

Role A

You have forgotten that your mother-in-law's birthday is coming up next week. She lives in Beijing and even if you send a present now it will not arrive in time. You remember that the chief buyer in your husband's company is going to Beijing tomorrow. Ask her to post it when she gets there.

5. Checking some documents

Role A

You have some documents that need checking. This is a routine occurrence and you always ask one of your colleagues to do this as it is part of his job description. How will you ask your colleague?

Making suggestions/ Expressing opinions

1. Rotating the role of chairperson

Role A

You are in the weekly team meeting and the chairperson, your team leader, has asked for any additional matters for discussion. You would like to suggest a change to the way meetings are run and suggest that the position of chair is rotated.

2. Unrealistic deadlines

Role A

You are a graphic designer and work in an advertising agency. Your new manager is not familiar with working in a design team and often approves deadlines that are unrealistic. This puts her team under a lot of pressure. Talk to your manager and make a suggestion to improve the situation.

3. Outline of the project

Role A

You are the project manager in a small company. You have prepared an outline of the current project based on the requirements of the client. You send the outline to your team and ask them to review it.

4. The new software

Role A

Your team is involved in developing new software. You have found some bugs in one part of the software that has been developed by a colleague. You need to bring the problem to his/her attention and help find a solution.

5. The team lunch outing

Role A

You are a team leader and your team has decided to have a special lunch at a restaurant. Several of the team members are from different countries and are keen on eating their local food. What would you suggest?

Agreeing and Disagreeing

1. Annual leave

Role A

You propose to close your small business over January so that you do not waste money during the quiet time of year. This means everyone in the company must take their annual leave during this month. Discuss this idea with one of your managers.

2. Casual Friday

Role A

You are the team leader of a group of policy analysts in a government department. You make a suggestion that the team adopts a casual form of dress on Fridays.

3. The Christmas break

Role A

You need someone to keep your small company open during the Christmas period to manage the sales with your Asian contacts. One of your employees has just returned from a trip away and may be happy to stay at work over this period. Discuss this with your employee.

4. Help with moving the office

Role A

You are a team leader and you would like all the team to come back to work on Saturday morning to help move the office to a new building.

5. The invitation

Role A

You are the manager of a department in a large organisation. You suggest that members of another department be invited to your regular team meetings to discuss future projects.

Making Complaints and Criticising

1. Promotion

Role A

A co-worker who joined the company after you has just been promoted to a position you expected to get and you are unhappy about it. You go to your manager to discuss the situation.

2. The lost contract

Role A

You work in a small business supplying paper to many companies. Your newly appointed assistant has just lost a valuable contract. Talk to him/her about it.

3. Problems with the report

Role A

You are the manager of team in a government department. You have read the report written by the senior policy analyst in your team. You feel that there is some information in the report that should be removed, as it is unnecessary.

4. Pressure at work

Role A

Your boss has put pressure on you to make your team speed up their work on a particular project. You feel this is unfair. Talk to your boss.

5. The workstation

Role A

Your workstation is in poor condition and you are getting a sore back as a result. You go to see the person in charge of health and safety in the organisation.

Making Apologies

1. Missing a meeting

Role A

A member of your team misses a meeting because he/she didn't see the e-mail that reminded everyone of the change in the meeting time. Speak to this person.

2. Loud music

Role A

Your colleague plays music as he is working and his desk is close to yours. You find the music very distracting. You do not know each other well as you have been in your job for only three months. Your colleague has worked for the organisation for two years. Talk to your colleague about the problem.

3. A collision

Role A

While you are checking your cell phone for messages you bump into your manager who is carrying a large pile of books. The books fall all over the floor and you discover that your manager is already late for a meeting. What will you say?

4. Missing the meeting

Role A

You discover that a colleague has neglected to tell you about an important meeting that you were both meant to attend. Your absence was not commented on but would have been noted by your manager. Furthermore, several issues were discussed at the meeting that you are very interested in. Talk to your colleague.

5. Name not mentioned

Role A

In your speech of thanks at the completion of an important project you neglected to include the name of someone who has made a significant contribution. You are hoping that this person will participate in your next project. Talk to him/ her.

Role B

(Role A begins each conversation)

Small Talk

1. In the lift at work

Role B

You have just started a new job and you and your manager are standing next to each other waiting for the lift. Your manager starts to talk to you. How will you keep the conversation going?

2. Weekend plans

Role B

You have been talking to your colleagues about plans for the weekend. One of your team gets up to leave for his office. What will you say?

3. Friday lunchtime

Role B

It is Friday lunchtime and there is a long weekend coming up. You are sitting with some fellow workers who you know a little. One of them will begin the conversation. What will you say to keep the conversation going?

4. Monday morning tea break

Role B

It is Monday morning tea break. You are sitting beside a fellow worker you met just this morning. Keep the conversation going.

5. At a conference

Role B

You are at an international conference in Sydney. You are waiting in a queue to collect your lunch. The delegate in front of you is from NZ but you have never met before. What will you say?

Requesting and Refusing

1. More time for the report

Role B

A meeting with an important client has been pushed up from tomorrow to this afternoon. As a result the report being written by your assistant is needed today rather than tomorrow, as originally planned. How will you encourage your assistant to speed up the writing of the report without endangering its quality?

Source: Di Pietro, Robert J. 1987. *Strategic Interaction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

2. Scissors

Role B

Your boss asks if you would lend your scissors to him for a few hours. You would like to but you also need them for the next hour. What can you say?

3. Confidential documents

Role B

Your new employee asks to take home some documents about the background of the organisation. You are concerned that some of these documents are confidential and should stay in the office.

4. Parcel for China

Role B

You are going to Beijing on a business trip tomorrow. Your boss's wife asks you to post a parcel once you get to Beijing. You already have a lot of luggage.

5. Checking some documents

Role B

As part of your regular duties you check your colleague's documents when needed. However on this occasion, when she asks you, you are unable to do this straight away as you have just been given an urgent task from your boss.

Making suggestions/ Expressing opinions

1. Rotating the role of chairperson

Role B

You are the chair of your team's weekly meeting. A member of the team makes a suggestion that you do not agree with.

2. Unrealistic deadlines

Role B

You have recently been appointed as manager of a design team in an advertising agency. You are unfamiliar with the way designers work and think they are very slow. Listen to a suggestion from one of the team. Do you agree or disagree with it?

3. Outline of the project

Role B

Your project manager has sent you an outline of the current project that you are both working on. You discover that he has omitted a requirement that the client particularly wanted. What will you say?

4. The new software

Role B

Your team is involved in developing new software. You have had a lot of difficulty with one part of the software that you are responsible for. You would like more support with it.

5. The team lunch outing

Role B

You are originally from Thailand. You are a member of a team that is planning a lunch at a restaurant. The team is discussing where to go for lunch and you would like to eat at a Thai restaurant. Several other members of the team are not from New Zealand and they are keen to eat their local food too.

Agreeing and Disagreeing

1. Annual leave

Role B

Your boss has asked you to consider a proposal that will force all employees to take their annual leave in January. You strongly disagree with this idea.

2. Casual Friday

Role B

In a team meeting your manager outlines a proposal that the team adopt a casual form of dress on Fridays. You don't agree.

3. The Christmas break

Role B

Your boss would like you to work over the Christmas period when many other employees are on holiday. You disagree with this idea as you would like to be at home for some of the school holidays.

4. Help with moving the office

Role B

Your team leader has suggested that you come back to work on Saturday morning to help move the office to a new building. You would much prefer to stay late on Friday night and help with the move then.

5. The invitation

Role B

You disagree with the suggestion to invite members of another department to your regular team meetings as you are concerned that their presence will prevent a frank discussion of the issues.

Making Complaints and Criticising

1. Promotion

Role B

You recently promoted a new member of your staff as she has had extensive experience elsewhere. Another staff member who applied for the same job will come to see you about this. He/she is an efficient member of staff but not as experienced as the person who got the promotion. You think that there will be other opportunities next year.

2. The lost contract

Role B

You are new to your job in a business that supplies paper to many companies. Your predecessor gave you incorrect deadline details for a certain contract. You subsequently lost this valuable contract.

3. Problems with the report

Role B

You are a senior policy analyst in a government department. You have just sent a report to your manager. You realize the report is too long but are unsure about which parts should be removed.

4. Pressure at work

Role B

You are the manager of a small team in an IT organisation. One of your clients is putting pressure on you to have a job finished before the due date.

5. The workstation

Role B

You are in charge of health and safety requirements in your workplace. However, your budget is very tight and you have no more money for new furniture until next year.

Making apologies

1. Missing a meeting

Role B

You accidentally missed a team meeting because you forgot to check your e-mails. What will you say to your team leader?

2. Loud music

Role B

Your new colleague mentions that the music you are playing is disturbing her concentration. What will you say to her?

3. A collision

Role B

You are carrying a large pile of books that you want to hand out at a meeting. You are already running late for the meeting. Your assistant who is coming the other way bumps into you and knocks the books out of your hands. She/he apologises. What will you say?

4. Missing the meeting

Role B

You have forgotten to tell a colleague about a meeting that you were both meant to attend. You remembered just before the meeting but couldn't find your colleague so you attended the meeting alone. Several interesting issues were discussed at the meeting that you know your colleague would have liked to be part of. Talk to your colleague.

5. Name not mentioned

Role B

You are attending the formal launch of a project that you have contributed to in an informal but significant way. You are surprised to find that your name is not mentioned in the acknowledgements. What will you say?

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WORKPLACE TALK IN ACTION – AN ESOL RESOURCE

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