



All Ears English Episode 192:

How to Captivate People With Your English Success

Gabby: Avoid brain atrophy due to horrible small talk. In this episode, you'll learn how to make your small talk in English totally awesome.

[Instrumental]

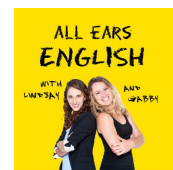
Gabby: Welcome to the All Ears English Podcast, where you'll finally get real, native English conversation with your hosts, Lindsay McMahon, the 'English Adventurer' and Gabby Wallace, the 'Language Angel', from Boston, USA.

[Instrumental]

Lindsay: This is an All Ears English Podcast, Episode 192: "How to Captivate People with Your English Small Talk."

[Instrumental]

Gabby: Lindsay, I'm really worried because there's only a few days left of our Kickstarter campaign. It ends the end of September.



Lindsay: Oh my god. You're right. Absolutely. And it's really important that each of our listeners thinks about what they could do to help us in the Kickstarter campaign.

Gabby: Yeah, I think the problem is that everybody thinks somebody else is going to help, but the problem is, you are somebody and we need each one of you, our listeners, we need your support.

Lindsay: Yeah, absolutely. And in addition, we want to build an app to make All Ears English a better experience for you, for you to listen to us, find us and connect with other people in the All Ears English community through our app.

Gabby: That's what the Kickstarter's all about you guys: to provide better material that's easier for you to listen to and for you to use for your English success. So we need your help now. Please come to AllEarsEnglish.com/kickstarter. That's K-i-c-k-s-t-a-r-t-e-r.

[Instrumental]

Lindsay: Hey, Gabby, how (are) you doing today?

Gabby: I'm doing great Lindsay. How are you?

Lindsay: Awesome. I am psyched 'cause (because) today we have Chris Colin, an author living in San Francisco. Chris is the author of *What to Talk About*, and Chris is here to help us finally learn how to make small talk more interesting in English. Welcome Chris.

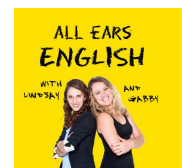
Chris: Thank you.

Gabby: Hey Chris.

Lindsay: How (are) you doing today?

Chris: You can do better than that. Give me your best line.

Gabby: Oh.



Lindsay: Oh my God. Oh, that was a good one. I'm on the spot here. No, you know what? Sometimes when I try to make small talk I bore myself to tears.

Gabby: I know.

Chris: And that's...

Gabby: Seriously.

Chris: That's why we – I, my, I wrote this book with a co-author friend of mine, and that's why we did it because we felt like, "Oh gosh, we can do better than what we've been doing." (You know), we all have great conversations that we can think of, a really fun dinner party, or a really fun road trip with a friend, and then we have plenty of times when – either they're just sort of, (you know), middle of the road, sort of mediocre, or they're just awful, and you just wanna (want to) stab yourself in the face. And we wanted to write the book so we could, (sort of), figure out for ourselves how to improve conversation, both small talk and more substantive conversations – how to make them all be a little more like those great ones that we can, we can all, (uh), remember.

Gabby: Oh...

Lindsay: Yeah because...

Gabby: ...I'm so thankful.

Lindsay: Yeah, I mean, you're right. We have interesting life experiences to talk about and interesting observations, but once we get into that networking event or that party we go back into boring mode.

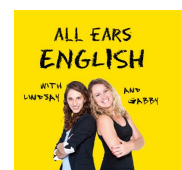
Gabby: Chris, can you...?

Chris: Yeah. I, I think we panic. I think that's a big part of the problem is we...

Gabby: Well, we try to play it safe too.

Chris: We play it safe, we're, we're so deathly afraid of an awkward silence...

Gabby: Yeah.



Chris: ...that we just start running the mouth without really, (uh), thinking about what we're saying.

Lindsay: Absolutely. Absolutely. Can you tell us a story about a time that you were in a really boring, small talk conversation that prompted you to really, okay, "We gotta (got to) do something about this."

Gabby: (Hm).

Lindsay: Was there any situation that you were in?

Chris: Well, it was about 30 years of those situations.

Gabby: Oh.

Chris: There wasn't one that stood out because they, that, by definition they don't stand out. They're all...

Lindsay: Haha

Chris: ...exactly the same, an-and I – what, what stood out was the realization that I go into a lot of conversations, and I think we all do, just trying to sort of muddle through, just trying to tread water...

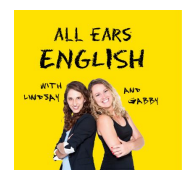
Gabby: Right.

Lindsay: Ooh.

Chris: ...and make it through this conversation with this person, who I don't know very well, rather than thinking about every conversation as an opportunity to have something really interesting happen.

Gabby: (Hm).

Lindsay: That's it, that's it. So how could our listeners have something more interesting happen? Can you give our listeners three tips for how to actually make small talk more interesting? Because, (you know), we hear about, okay, talk about the weather, or talk about, (you know), the news, but let's go, let's go deeper. Let's get something more interesting here. What could you share with us Chris?



Chris: I think the first mistake that we all make is, (uh), we fall into a pattern of mirroring what...

Gabby: (Mm).

Chris: ...the other person says to us. By that I mean just sort of bouncing back whatever they are throwing at us. So let's say they say, (uh), "How ya (you) doing?" or "Whaddaya (what do you) do for work?" or, (um)...

Gabby: Right.

Chris: ...or "How's your day going?"

Gabby: "What do you do?"

Chris: (uh), tendency to answer the question, (I mean), that's what we're taught since we're kids. Answer the question, and then (sort of) throw the same question back at them, "Fine. How are you?"

Lindsay: Right.

Chris: (Uh).

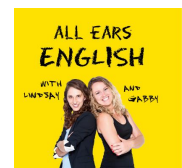
Lindsay: Right, that can be boring. Absolutely.

Chris: Am I right? Or, "What do you do?" (You know), these are, these are dead-end conversations.

Gabby: Ugh

Chris: So, our first bit of advice is, don't be afraid, just totally change the subject. You don't owe them a certain kind of conversation. You don't have to answer the question that you're asked. I mean there's (sort of) a deeper philosophy there that we talk about in the book. (You know), if someone says, "What do you do for work?" don't answer that question if you don't feel like it.

Gabby: Very cool.



Chris: Just change the subject. Talk about something that's actually on your mind. Say, "Hey, who do you think is the luckiest person at this party right now?"

Both: (Hm).

Chris: Or, "What does this house remind you of?"

Gabby: (Hm).

Chris: Or, (um), just totally – (you know), one thing I like to ask is, "How did you get here tonight?" Let's say we're at a party.

Gabby: Yeah.

Chris: "How did you get here tonight?" (You know), it sounds like a mundane question, but it actually gets someone talking about a sequence of events from their life, and actually tends to lead somewhere interesting, more so than saying, "What do you do for work?" Which we're all tired of answering.

Gabby: Right, absolutely.

Lindsay: And what's the initial reaction that people give you when you quickly do that, you (kind of), you, you change the subject? It must initially (kind of) open their eyes wide. They might get...

Chris: Yeah.

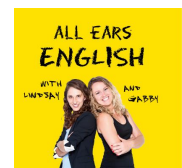
Lindsay: ...a little bit threatened, I would think, and how do you (kind of) smooth...

Chris: Yeah.

Lindsay: ...that out?

Chris: Yeah, no, it throws them off a little bit. And in my experience almost every time they are grateful for it...

Gabby: (Huh).



Chris: ...and they instantly recognize – after being thrown off a little bit – they instantly recognize that they're talking to someone who's awake and who, (uh), wants to have a more deliberate, more fun, more interesting conversation, and they're glad because they don't wanna (want a) boring one either.

Gabby: Yeah.

Lindsay: I love that. Now it really does make you stand out.

Chris: The want a person who's, who's sort of alive on their hands and they're glad for it.

Lindsay: Alive, awake, I love it. Those are great ways to describe it. Yeah, (I mean)...

Gabby: Yeah.

Lindsay: ...I remember in the past I've run into a few people who have done something like this and I've been initially surprised...

Gabby: Yeah.

Lindsay: ...but then I do have more respect for them because they're out there willing to take a risk.

Chris: Yeah.

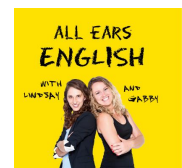
Lindsay: Step outside of the norm.

Chris: Yeah.

Lindsay: Cool.

Chris: So, that's step one. Step two, we always say, "Don't ask for answers. Ask for stories." A lot of times when we ask questions in conversations, we're, we're sort of leading people down a dead end road. If I say, "Where are you from?" Well let's try it, " (Uh), Lindsay, where are you from?"

Lindsay: "Oh, I'm from New Hampshire, da, da, da, da, da."



Chris: Yeah, where, where are we gonna (going to) go from there? We could, we could (sort of) rip on New Hampshire a little bit, but, (uh)...

Lindsay: We could do that

Chris: ...there's not really anywhere to go. No offense to New Hampshire. So, (you know), if I were to say, "How did your family end up in New Hampshire?"...

Lindsay: (Mm).

Chris: ...or "How did you end up leaving New Hampshire?" It's a similar topic, but, it, it pulls a narrative out of you.

Gabby: Yes.

Lindsay: Ooh.

Chris: (Uh), and pretty soon you're telling a story. It may not be the most interesting story of your life, but you're telling a story, and you're guaranteed to say something that I can, (sort of), draw out a little more.

Lindsay: Yeah.

Gabby: (Mm).

Lindsay: And people love to talk about themselves. So this actually gives them more of an opportunity to talk about themselves essentially.

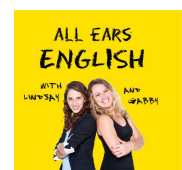
Chris: They can talk about themselves, but in a way that's both interesting and not, (uh), paralyzingly difficult. Sometimes...

Gabby: Yeah.

Chris: ...we have the urge to have a deep conversation and we approach that by asking a deep question like, "What are you most interested in in life?" or, (um)...

Lindsay: Right. "What's the meaning of life?"

Chris: ..."What's the meaning of life?"



Gabby: Right.

Chris: "What are your deepest, darkest fears?" (I mean), yeah, we might, we might all want to hear the answer to those questions, but no one really has one ready to go and it just...

Gabby: (Hm).

Chris: ...(sort of) shuts things down. So, by asking for stories you get at interesting stuff without freaking people out too much.

Lindsay: Yeah.

Gabby: (Mm).

Lindsay: Nice.

Gabby: I think the key there might be thinking about questions that begin with 'how.' You said, "How did you, (you know), leave New Hampshire?" or "How did your family end up in New Hampshire?" So, I think a 'how' question might be likely to generate a good story.

Chris: That's a, that's a great point. Yeah, 'how' is a...

Lindsay: Yeah.

Chris: ...really good...

Lindsay: Ooh, I like that.

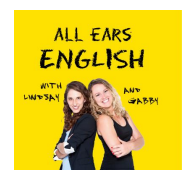
Chris: Then you can, you can work your way up to, 'why' if you've had a couple drinks.

Gabby: Ooh, yes.

Lindsay: Right. So 'why' is a little bit more risky, right?

Chris: Yeah.

Lindsay: You're pressing people a little bit more, so 'how' is a really good alternative.



Gabby: (Mm).

Chris: Yep, yep.

Lindsay: Awesome. How about the next core tip Chris?

Chris: Okay, so, this is one that we all know and we all forget – be curious...

Gabby: Yeah.

Chris: ...listen. I talked about that panic. Let's say you, you've done the first two steps and you get a conversation going, there's always that fear that the plane's gonna (going to) start to lose altitude.

Gabby: (Mm).

Lindsay: Yeah.

Chris: And so, God forbid, there's a little bit of awkward silence. You take this progress you've made and then you, you (sort of) sabotage it by starting to talk about yourself on and on and on. It's fine to talk about yourself, but a little goes a long way. If you can just remind yourself to be quiet and listen, that is the key of great (convers-), of being a great conversationalist, is just listening well. Doesn't mean being silent, it means paying attention actively to what someone's saying, and focusing on something interesting that they've said. So...

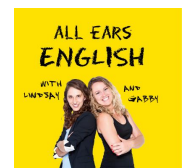
Lindsay: Yeah.

Chris: ...if we talked about how you ended up leaving New Hampshire, (you know), you, you'll probably let slip something, (sort of), revealing at some point, and that's...

Gabby: (Mm).

Chris: ...what I'll ask about. I'll say, "Well, why'd you decide to do that?" (Uh), "And then what?" (You know), another great question is, "And then what?"

Gabby: Ooh.



Lindsay: (Mm).

Chris: I work as a journalist and that's something that journalists use all the time.

Lindsay: Oh, yeah.

Chris: It's just a way of obtaining...

Lindsay: Did deeper right?

Chris: Yeah, dig deeper and just pull a little more of the story out of someone.

Gabby: Yeah.

Lindsay: I like that. Yeah, I think here in American culture, (you know), we don't emphasize listening enough. (You know), the big, (you know) – the people we admire, unfortunately, are people, who, who speak well, but don't necessarily listen well.

Gabby: (Hm).

Chris: Yeah, totally.

Lindsay: And I think in other cultures, (you know), for our listeners across the world, I think listening is much more respected, (um)...

Gabby: (Uh-hm).

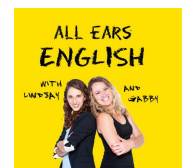
Lindsay: ...as a great skill, but I think it's great to be able to implement that into your own routine here in the US – to be...

Chris: Yeah.

Lindsay: ...able to listen.

Chris: I agree, an-and I think when you go home from a party or from a work function or anything, the conversations you're gonna (going to) remember are the ones where someone was paying attention to you, thoughtfully, and asking you intelligent questions about yourself...

Gabby: Right.



Chris: Rather than being a windbag about their own lives.

Gabby: (Mm-hm).

Lindsay: Totally. Oh, this is fantastic. I feel like I'm learning a ton.

Gabby: Yeah, absolutely. These are good strategies for improving small talk, and just even continuing a conversation, getting to know someone, but I imagine that kinda (kind of) situation where, (you know), you're at a, kinda (kind of) like a, I don't know – it sounds cheesy – but a, probably like a cocktail party or something. I don't know. Like a networking event maybe, and it's like you, you don't know anybody. You're trying to get to know new people. You don't know what to talk about and, (I mean), you're right, I always hear the same questions, (you know), "How are you?" "Where are you from?" "What do you do?" And after hearing those time and time again it does get old, it really...

Chris: Yeah.

Gabby: ...does, and I love these ideas that, (you know), you can be unique. You don't have to ask the same questions. It's actually preferred if you, (you know), make up something that shows you're alive, like you said, and, and you're thinking, and you're curious, and, (you know), you wanna (want to) know about how people got to where they are today, or why...

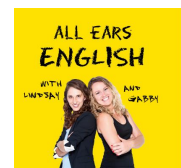
Chris: Yeah.

Gabby: ...they do certain things.

Chris: (You know), research has shown that when we have, (um), a certain number of these same conversations over and over again, the physical brain matter actually starts to decay...

Gabby: Ooh.

Lindsay: Oh, yes.



Chris: ...at the edges and then that decay sort of works it's way inward and people who have been doing this for a long time, they actually have, (uh), smaller – th-their brains actually shrink.

Gabby: {gasps}.

Lindsay: Oh my gosh, this is a good reason to change my small talk habits.

Gabby: Yeah.

Chris: No, I made that up. That's totally not true, but you can also make things up in conversation too. So, that's another trick you can have.

Lindsay: Awesome. I love it.

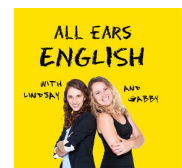
Gabby: Wow. These are great tips. I just wanna (want to) add, (you know), for someone who might speak English as a second language, and, (you know), if you're still learning English, or even if you're a native speaker, this is a strategy – I actually think about questions that I might wanna (want to) ask people, (like) before I'm even in a conversation. (Like), you gave a great example, like, "How did you leave New Hampshire?" but, (you know), you might ask (like), "Oh, how did you end up in Tokyo?" (you know), if you're, if you're talking to someone in Tokyo, but (like), maybe – I know we don't wanna (want to) have canned questions. We wanna (want to) be curious, but just to (kind of) (like) build your confidence with this if you're new to asking questions that are a little out of the textbook, or should I say outside of the textbook – that's what I meant to say – maybe prepare a few questions beforehand. What do you, what do you guys think?

Lindsay: Yeah, you have something in your back pocket, right?

Gabby: Yeah.

Chris: I think there's nothing wrong with having something in your back pocket. It's true, you don't wanna (want to) sound like someone who, who has canned material, or...

Gabby: Right.



Chris: ...or, or, (you know), boiler plate material, but, yeah, if you have a few things ready to go it can help quell that panic. (You know), you'll know that you have something you can go to if you need it.

Gabby: Yeah.

Lindsay: Yeah, completely. Oh wow.

Gabby: Awesome.

Lindsay: Well Chris, this has been super helpful and eye-opening for me, and I'm sure, I'm sure it's been the same for our listeners.

Gabby: Yeah.

Lindsay: Thank you so much. And, and where can our listeners find you online? Where can they check out your book, *What to Talk About*?

Chris: Oh well, the book's called, *What to Talk About*. Thank you for asking, and if you go to SayBetterThings.com you'll find it there, or you can just Google, *What to Talk About*.

Lindsay: Okay, great.

Gabby: Awesome.

Lindsay: So, I think that would really be a great resource for some of our listeners who wanna (want to) learn more about this. Awesome.

Chris: Now, I should, I should warn them it's a funny book, it's not...

Lindsay: Right.

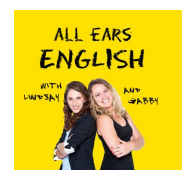
Chris: ...entirely serious. So...

Gabby: It's not a textbook.

Chris: It's not a textbook, yeah.

Lindsay: We wanna (want to) get away from the textbook, so that's okay.

Gabby: Yeah, that's great actually.



Lindsay: Okay, great. Well thank you so much Chris for joining us today.

Gabby: Yeah, thank you.

Lindsay: Again, this has been super valuable. It was fun meeting you as well.

Chris: Likewise, thanks for having me guys.

Lindsay: Yeah, thanks a lot.

Gabby: Thanks Chris.

Lindsay: Take care.

Gabby: Bye for now.

[Instrumental]

Lindsay: If you wanna (want to) put your ears into English more often, be sure to subscribe to our podcast in iTunes on your computer or on your smartphone. Thanks so much for listening and see you next time.

