



All Ears English Episode 200:

How to Talk About Money in American Culture

Lindsay: This is an All Ears English Podcast, Episode #200: “How to Talk About Money in American Culture.”

[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]

Gabby: In this episode, you’ll learn how to strike a careful balance between how you should and shouldn’t talk about money in American culture.

[Instrumental]

Lindsay: Would you like to find a Native English speaker to practice English with online when you finish listening to today’s podcast? With Italki, you can quickly get your own professional Native English teacher with the click of a button. Working with Italki teachers is 30% more cost-effective than finding your own English teacher in your hometown and it’s so much easier. We’ve worked out a special deal for you. If you go to Italki before



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[Instrumental]

Gabby: Hey, Lindsay, can you give me an update on that conversation service?

Lindsay: Sure, Gabby. So we actually have decided not to create the conversation service here at All Ears English. But you guys have continued to ask us where you can practice your conversation and we have some awesome ideas for you over on our resources page. Also, you guys have asked us where you can practice your vocabulary, get TOEFL help, IELTS help. Go over to AllEarsEnglish.com/resources and find all your answers there.

[Instrumental]

Lindsay: Gabby!

Gabby: Hey, hey Lindsay. How are you?

Lindsay: Gabby, did you know that today is Episode 200?

Gabby: Oh my gosh, that's so cool...

Lindsay: This is amazing.

Gabby: ...we've made it this far.

Lindsay: It's brilliant.

Gabby: 200. 200 episodes, that's a big number.

Lindsay: That is a massive number and we're still going strong here, guys. We want to thank you guys for giving us the opportunity to help you, to motivate you, and to inspire you with your English. We love your comments. We love your comments on social media and the blog, and we want to keep them coming.



Gabby: Yeah, it's because of you that we're still going. So thank you.

Lindsay: Yeah, thanks guys, and (uh), I have one more question for Gabby.

Gabby: Yeah?

Lindsay: Gabby, how much was your sweatshirt? I really like that sweatshirt of yours. How much was it? How much did it cost?

Gabby: Lindsay, that's a weird question. I, I can't tell you how much my sweater cost or my sweatshirt.

Lindsay: What? Why not?

Gabby: I don't even remember.

Lindsay: Well, (uh) what's the problem? (I mean), Gabby, how much did it cost? (Simp-) simple question?

Gabby: Lindsay. (Uh), I think we should talk about this question. It's, it's (kind of), (kind of) an important point, actually, in communication, especially with Americans.

Lindsay: Right, right. I have bad manners. I shouldn't have asked you how much your sweatshirt cost, but I just didn't...

Gabby: Well...

Lindsay: ...know. I wasn't raised well, Gabby.

Gabby: Well, it's okay, it's okay. (Um), and you, you could ask me since we know each other, but the thing is, if we didn't know each other – and also, we're talking to a lot of people right now, and, (you know), talking about how much I paid for something is kind of personal.

Lindsay: Oh, yeah, I'm sorry I put you on the spot there.

Gabby: It's okay. It's a good way to talk about talking about money.

Lindsay: Absolutely because in other countries it's totally acceptable to ask this question, isn't it?



Gabby: Sure. Yeah, exactly. I'm sure it depends on the person. We don't want to generalize...

Lindsay: (Mm-hm.)

Gabby: ...but I think in other cultures, in other countries it's definitely more acceptable to talk about money and personal financial decisions such as, "How much did you pay for something?" Or "How much money do you make? What's your salary?"

Lindsay: Yeah, "How much do you have in savings?" Well, what about there in...

Gabby: Ooh.

Lindsay: ...Japan, Gabby? Is it acceptable – and maybe some of our listeners can chime in on this, too, at AllEarsEnglish.com/200, but what have...?

Gabby: Yeah.

Lindsay: ...you seen, Gabby, so far? Is it acceptable to ask someone how (m-) how much their sweatshirt costs?

Gabby: (Um), I don't hear that a lot so I, I don't think it's very common to just, (you know), ask someone who you don't know very well how much did they pay for their sweatshirt, no.

Lindsay: Okay. Good to know.

Gabby: Yeah.

Lindsay: Good to know.

Gabby: Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

Lindsay: (Uh-huh), (uh-huh).

Gabby: Yeah, so I think that talking about money is – it's okay with Americans to talk about money in general. (Like), for example, "Hey, did you know that the dollar is really strong against the yen right now?" We're talking about commonly known facts and so it's not personal. It doesn't reflect on the



person, but, (you know), for example, when Lindsay asked me how much my sweatshirt cost or how much I paid for my sweatshirt, I can't win with the answer. I have three choices. I could say, for example, "Oh yeah, I paid a lot of money for this sweatshirt," and then I seem (like), kind of a snob or kind of stuck up, (like) I wanna (want to)...

Lindsay: Right.

Gabby: ...brag.

Lindsay: And who pays a lot of money for a sweatshirt anyways?

Gabby: Well, I'm sure some people, but the, the perception, (right), your, your perception of me might change. You might think, "Wow, Gabby really cares about fashion," or "She's kind of snobby." Okay, great. Well, how 'bout (about) if I just say, "Oh yeah, I paid \$1 for this sweatshirt, it was so cheap." Well...

Lindsay: That's so cheap, you are so cheap.

Gabby: Exactly! Exactly.

Lindsay: God, did you get it at the Dollar store, too? (I mean)...

Gabby: You're gonna (going to) think that I'm cheap and that I'm not fashionable.

[crosstalk]

Gabby: Right?

Lindsay: (Mm-hm.) Pretty much.

Gabby: Okay, so again, I lose. Now what if I just said, "Yeah, I paid..." I don't know, what's an average price for a sweatshirt? Maybe...

Lindsay: \$25.

Gabby: \$25, okay. "I paid \$25 for my sweatshirt." Well, you might think, "Wow, well, that's kind of unremarkable. That's – (like), you're not very smart



about getting sales 'cause (because) you could have gotten it for \$1 somewhere else." So...

Lindsay: So, it's a no-win situation.

Gabby: Exactly, exactly. So (w-), we, we tend to (sort of) judge people by their personal answers, (uh), related to money. (You know), unfortunately we do that. (Um), so people tend to not want to talk about personal finance decisions.

Lindsay: Right, and so just to go down the other things, when you talk about money – at least in the US, I can only speak for the US, and – again, this doesn't apply to every situation and every conversation in the US...

Gabby: Right.

Lindsay: ...but in – on a – in a general cultural sense, (um), we want to avoid talking about how much money you have in the bank or in stocks, for example. (I mean)...

Gabby: Oh yeah.

Lindsay: ...you don't, "Oh yeah" – you don't wanna (want to) say how much money you have in the bank, that's, that's rude. Absolutely not. You don't want to ask anyone how much money they have in the bank, how much something costs, or how much you make. (Right), so your salary.

Gabby: Yeah.

Lindsay: You want to avoid...

Gabby: Well. So I, I would make an exception here because, (you know), we're, we're talking as, as two friends. We're just talking about my sweatshirt that I already bought, but if you wanna (want to) ask how much something costs that you're about to buy...

Lindsay: Right.

Gabby: ...that's completely different.



Lindsay: Definitely.

Gabby: So if I was selling my sweatshirt, then...

Lindsay: Right.

Gabby: ...Lindsay, you could totally ask, "Well, how much are you selling your sweatshirt for?" and I could tell you. So we're not in a transaction situation, that's different.

Lindsay: Right, it doesn't...

Gabby: If you're...

Lindsay: ...belong to you yet. Yeah.

Gabby: No, (I mean), if you are going to invest your money in the stock market, you have to ask, "How much is this stock?" If you're, if you're going to buy something, you need to know how much it is, you have...

Lindsay: Right.

Gabby: ...to be informed. That's different.

Lindsay: Or like the price of a house in Beverly Hills. It's okay...

Gabby: Oh yeah.

Lindsay: ...to ask about that if you wanna (want to)...

Gabby: If you're...

Lindsay: ...invest in real estate in Beverly Hills.

Gabby: And if you're negotiating, if you're negotiating the price of something then you have to discuss that. You have to talk about the value and your offer and how much you're willing to pay. That's, that's different, though, than asking someone, "Well, how much do you make?" or (um), "How much did you pay for your, your car or your bicycle?" or whatever.



Lindsay: Yeah, exactly. So anything that shows, that shows (kind of) your wealth is something...

Gabby: Yeah.

Lindsay: ...you want to avoid. That would be a question...

Gabby: Or even...

Lindsay: (Uh-huh).

Gabby: Sorry. E-e-even asking someone how much they pay for their apartment. I feel like you could ask if you made it clear that *you* were looking for an apartment. Like, (you know), "Hey, (um)..." Let's say one of my friends wants to move to Tokyo and they wanna (want to) know, "Well, how much, how much should I expect to pay for an apartment in Tokyo?" Well, they're not asking me how much I pay for my apartment, they're asking in general, (you know), what's the market rate. So it's, it's a little different. I think you can...

Lindsay: Yeah.

Gabby: ...be sensitive to...

Lindsay: Right.

Gabby: ...getting information, but also talking in a (sort of) impersonal way so you don't put someone on the spot. You don't make them (re-), (uh), release too much personal information about themselves.

Lindsay: Right, so you want your question to really be in context.

Gabby: Yeah.

Lindsay: So the context of asking about, (you know), how much do apartments cost in...

Gabby: Right.

Lindsay: ...Shibuya in Tokyo, right?



Gabby: Right.

Lindsay: That's fine, but then you go to a party and you say, "How much do you pay for your apartment?" in the context...

Gabby: Yeah.

Lindsay: ...of a different conversation that would be really rude.

Gabby: Oh yeah, right, and so if I, if I ask you, Lindsay, if I say, "Hey, well, how much do you make and how much do you pay for your rent?" and well...

Lindsay: Gosh, Gabby, you're so rude.

Gabby: Well, I think – wouldn't it feel, (like), really invasive of your privacy?

Lindsay: It's pretty invasive.

Gabby: To me it would, yeah.

Lindsay: Yeah, and yes, absolutely.

Gabby: Well, I already know all that stuff about you...

Lindsay: How do you know that? I would be ashamed to admit.

Gabby: But I'm just saying, (you know), as an example, if I didn't know you that well then, yeah, that would be kind of invasive. I think it takes time, it takes trust – maybe after you've had a friendship for, I don't know, a month or so, (I mean), it's hard to put a...

Lindsay: Right.

Gabby: ...a time on it because every relationship is different, but, (you know)...

Lindsay: Right.

Gabby: ...don't just jump right into talking about personal finance.

Lindsay: Right. Or also, obviously, (you know), if you're – it's all about context, right Gabby? So...



Gabby: Yeah.

Lindsay: ...(you know), we participate in a mastermind group where we talk about money, we talk about how much we...

Gabby: Yep.

Lindsay: ...make because we're all business owners...

Gabby: Exactly.

Lindsay: ...and we have to share those, those, (th-), (you know), that information. So that's okay. So Americans are a little weird about money, but, I don't know, this is something that's pretty important so we want to help you guys out. (Um)...

Gabby: Yeah.

Lindsay: ...so if you're here, just to know.

Gabby: Well, look, what I think is really behind this issue, what is at the root of it, I think it's always good to look at the why? What is the reason? Why are we so touchy about money? I think it's because Americans have this ideal that we're all equal.

Lindsay: (Mm).

Gabby: We have an egalitarian society and so we don't need to know how much you make or how much you spend on rent because we're all equal...

Lindsay: Yeah, or we all have an equal chance to build...

Gabby: Yes.

Lindsay: ...wealth. So...

Gabby: Yes.

Lindsay: ...yeah. We all have the same shot, or in theory...

Gabby: Exactly.



Lindsay: ...that's (kind of) the, the basic American...

Gabby: Right.

Lindsay: ...value, belief.

Gabby: Or I'm going to talk to you and you can talk to me regardless of how much we make.

Lindsay: Right, so we don't necessarily want to stand out as making so much more than our peers. (I mean)...

Gabby: (Uh-uh.)

Lindsay: ...you do have different classes in the US, right, obviously?

Gabby: (Mm-hm.)

Lindsay: And you can...

Gabby: Right.

Lindsay: ...tell by what they wear, but we try to make it a little less obvious. (Hm)?

Gabby: Yeah, I would, I would even say it's not always obvious by what people wear. It's not always an outward, (um), reflection, (uh), what you wear is not always a reflection of how much money you make, but, (um), I think the basis of our ideas in American culture is that we want to be equal. Of course, like you said, (you know), we have different classes. Americans are not all financially equal, but (you know), that's, that's the idea is the American dream is something that we can all achieve. (You know), that's the, that's the idea.

Lindsay: Whether it's a myth or the reality, it is the dream.

Gabby: Yeah, yeah, so that's, that's a good thing to understand why, and then I think this will make more sense.

Lindsay: Absolutely, so thanks for listening today guys.

Gabby: Thanks, guys.



[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.

