

Using English in the workplace

This leaflet provides advice on using spoken English in three different workplace situations:

- 1) Informal conversation with colleagues and clients etc.
- 2) In business meetings
- 3) On the telephone

It directs you to useful resources in the Language Commons for preparing and practising for these situations.

1) Informal conversation with colleagues and clients

In many cultures, before any real business is done, a certain amount of ‘socializing’ is required. In most English-speaking workplaces, it is very usual for colleagues to make ‘small talk’ when they meet, for example in an elevator, at the photocopier, or before a meeting.

These brief, informal, social conversations are also referred to as ‘small talk’. Often ‘small talk’ is initiated by the speaker asking, usually about something he/she has in common with the other person (even if it’s simply that they have both just attended the same meeting). Other common conversation

‘starters’ include the weather or a recent sporting event or something topical that is taking place in the news. The following phrases are examples of ways you can initiate a conversation:

That was interesting, wasn't it?
(after a meeting)

Great day, isn't it?
(talking about the weather)

The food's really good here, isn't it?
(in a restaurant/café etc.)

You will notice that these ‘openers’ all have questions at the end. These are called ‘question tags’ and they are included at the end of a statement in order to encourage a response from the person you are speaking to. If you’re not sure about how to phrase such questions, consult a grammar textbook on the *Grammar Reference* shelf in the Language Commons. Of course, you need to be able to more than just start a conversation, so think also about how you will keep a conversation going and, finally, how to conclude a conversation. For more information on opening or initiating conversations, see the materials listed below.

Materials in the Language Commons

Software

Practise chatting about very general topics with this program (located on all Language Commons PCs).

- ◆ *Business English Meeting*

DVD

This DVD focuses on various social situations that might arise in your working day.

- ◆ *Effective Socializing*

2) Using English in business meetings

Business people spend quite a lot of time in meetings. These meetings range from formal committees to informal one-to-one meetings. Preparing yourself for a meeting involves not only thinking about the purpose of the meeting and/or the topic to be discussed, but also the kind of language required for the meeting. In fact, these two matters are closely related.

- ◆ **Preparing for meetings – thinking about purpose**

When you are asked to participate in a meeting, you should begin your preparation for the meeting by completing the following sentence: *'The purpose of this meeting is to...'*

Business meetings usually have one of three kinds of objectives (purposes): information exchange, problem solving or some combination of the two. The best results come out of a meeting when all participants focus on the meeting's objectives instead of their own.

◆ **Preparing for meetings – thinking about language**

You'll find that English speakers use a number of different communication styles to express the same idea. While thinking about the purpose of a meeting, you should also consider whether the language required of you during the meeting should be of a formal or informal style. Your choice of a formal or informal style of language will depend on a number of factors including: the topic of the meeting (is it an end-of-year party or the submission of annual financial report); the place of the meeting (is it in the boardroom or in the coffee shop?); the other people involved in the meeting (colleagues at the same level as you, your superiors, or your subordinates?).

Whether you decide on a formal or informal style of language, it is always important to be polite in a meeting situation. It is often more effective to say things more indirectly than directly if you want to sound polite.

Next, you should consider whether you are equipped with a range of the language functions commonly used in a meeting. For example, how you interrupt another speaker, agree/disagree with another speaker, present your own opinions or suggestions and so on. You'll find resources about how to do this listed below.

Materials in the Language Commons

Textbooks

This book can be found on the *Speaking* shelf and will help you to practise the language and skills required for participating in meetings:

- ◆ *The Language of Meetings*

Software

The program, *Business English Meeting* (located on all Language Commons PCs), contains practice exercises for listening and speaking in meetings.

DVDs

Videos allow you to hear the language but also see the behaviors (body language etc.) required for meetings.

- ◆ *Effective Negotiating*
- ◆ *Effective Meetings*

3) Using English on the telephone

Making a phone call using English, and especially making a first-time call, is not easy. The following are some common causes of problems that occur on the telephone:

- Poor English
- Inappropriate telephone language
- Hesitation due to lack of confidence
- Hesitation due to lack of preparation
- Insufficient/unclear information provided by the caller/receiver

Some of these problems can be addressed relatively easily. One way of improving matters is to prepare for the phone call before making it. To be effective on the phone, you must have:

1. clear objectives
2. the relevant information
3. a clear strategy and structure for the call.

Some specific language functions that you can use for handling communication problems on the telephone include:

- ◆ Asking for repetition ('I'm sorry. Could you say that again?')
- ◆ Asking for clarification ('Could you explain what you mean exactly?')
- ◆ Asking for verification ('Let me just check. Your number is...')
- ◆ Asking for spelling ('Could you spell your name, please?')
- ◆ Correcting information ('Sorry. That's the 13th, not the 30th')

Ask yourself whether you know a range of expressions to deal with the different scenarios listed above. The materials listed below will help you to learn and practise appropriate telephone language. Finally, when problems arise, it's important to have strategies for coping with these. See **S3 – Improving Your Conversational English**, for general tips on dealing with problems when using spoken English.

And now...

If you would like any help or advice, or just a chat about your progress, please get in touch - **we are here to support your independent learning!** To contact us:

- Make an appointment to see an **adviser**. For details of advisers and their availability, please go to

<https://ilang.cle.ust.hk/language-adviser-timetable/>.

- E-mail your questions to **iLANG** (lcilang@ust.hk).
- Ask at the reception counter of the Language Commons — if the receptionist cannot help you directly, s/he will pass your query on to one of the advisers.

What else can you do?

- Browse the many physical (<https://ilang.cle.ust.hk/language-commons/#resources>) and online materials (<https://ilang.cle.ust.hk/resources-speaking/>) for Speaking.
- Join a Speaking activity or short course (<http://ilang.cle.ust.hk/speaking/>).
- Join HKUST Toastmasters - https://www.facebook.com/groups/HKU_STTMC/ - which meets on a regular basis for members to practice various skills useful in public speaking, including giving prepared as well as impromptu speeches, listening, and providing each other with feedback and evaluation. Toastmasters adopts a "learn-by-doing" philosophy.

Last Updated: May 2017