

informal conversations

Age: Adult

Level: Intermediate

Time: 45–60 minutes

Language focus: types of informal conversations and key phrases within them

Skills: speaking, listening

Materials: audio and worksheets, internet access

Aims: to provide students with language to describe and participate in short informal conversations



What are red words?

Ninety per cent of the time, speakers of English use just 7,500 words in speech and writing. These words appear in the Macmillan Dictionary in red and are graded with stars. One-star words are frequent, two-star words are more frequent, and three-star words are the most frequent. 'Language for' lessons are based on red words and encourage students to improve their English through communicative tasks using collocation and commonly used phrases.

- 1 Ask students to look up the word *conversation* in the Macmillan Dictionary, read the whole entry carefully, and find three key verbs that this noun often occurs with. NB. steps 1 and 2 in the lesson could easily be given to students to carry out individually before class, as an alternative to doing them at the start of the lesson.



Teaching Tip: Students could be invited to note their findings in a word cloud platform (e.g. <https://answergarden.ch/>), which could be displayed as the class begins – do they all agree on the three verbs *conversation* regularly occurs with? (= *have*, *make* and *get into*)

- 2 Ask students to follow the thesaurus link within the same entry: (www.macmillandictionary.com/thesaurus-category/british/informal-conversation-about-other-people-or-

[unimportant-things](#)) and look at the words for describing different kinds of informal conversation – are there equivalents in their own languages? How might they translate them?

- 3 Hand out copies of the worksheet to each student.
- 4 Exercise 1 consolidates the three phrases students should have found when preparing for the lesson. Start by reading the sentences and asking students how they think the bold phrases differ in meaning (see the Key. Return to the Macmillan Dictionary entry for *conversation* if necessary, though if students have looked at it in advance, they should have an idea). Then explain that, following on from what they've also read in the thesaurus, the lesson is going to look at different types of informal conversation in English.
- 5 Tell students that they're now going to listen to four speakers describing different types of informal conversation. Ask them to read the questions in exercise 2a and circle the answers they think are correct. Then play the audio. Do they now want to change any of their answers? Check the answers as a class. You might like to point up some fixed phrases the speakers use: *behind someone's back* = *without someone knowing*; *someone's business* = *something that involves a particular person and no one else*; *make fun of* = *make jokes about*.
- 6 Play the audio again, and ask students to complete exercise 2b. As a class activity, invite four pairs of students to role-play each of the short conversations as shown.
- 7 Ask students to look at the phrases in exercise 3a and then work in pairs to complete the exercise. Encourage them to first complete any answers they immediately know so that they can be eliminated. Check the answers as a class. Take a

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moment to explore students' own experiences – have they heard these short phrases in informal conversations? Have they used them themselves? Can they think of any others? Elicit ideas and if necessary add a few other common examples (e.g. *Of course; Cool; That's great/terrible; How awful/exciting; I see/know what you mean; What a shame; Oh dear*). Some other suggestions are also given in exercise 4.

- 8 Before starting exercise 3b, explain to students that it's important to know which of these conversational phrases is appropriate in a particular situation. For instance, if someone said to you, 'My grandfather's very ill,' and you replied, 'Oh well' or, 'Never mind' then you'd be considered impolite. Ask students to complete the exercise in pairs and then check the answers as a class.



Teaching Tip: As an extension activity, ask students to look again at the incorrect options in each case and think of simple conversational statements for which they could be (part of) a response, e.g. for Q.1: A: I've got a new job. B: Cool, where? — A: I think I've lost my keys. B: Oh no! When did you last see them?

- 9 Exercise 3c is a vocabulary exercise which returns to the Macmillan Dictionary thesaurus panel from step 2 of the lesson, putting some of the words there into context. Tell students to first re-read the panel, paying careful attention to the definitions and also remembering what they learnt about some of the words in earlier exercises. Ask them to complete the exercise and check answers as a class. (NB. though *conversation* can plausibly fill more than one gap, it's the only correct option for question 7; i.e. it might be helpful to point out that, unlike *conversation*, *chat* cannot be used with *get into*, or *make*).
- 10 Divide students into pairs for exercise 4. Tell them to spend a few minutes noting down ideas and to then take it in turns to informally tell their partner a piece of news, or to respond to their partner's news. Remind students to look at the conversations and phrases in earlier exercises to help them, as well as the useful phrases box.
- 11 As a brief wind-up activity, play a charades-type game in which two students are secretly given the words gossip, banter or small talk. These students then act out a short conversation (e.g. no more than six turns), and the rest of the class have to guess which of the three conversation types the students are attempting to illustrate.

Answer key:

- 1 *make conversation* = to talk to someone you don't know well in order to be polite (and not because you really want to talk to them)
have a conversation = to talk with one or more people, usually privately and informally
get into conversation = to start talking to someone you haven't met before
- 2a 1 friendly; anytime
 2 other people
 3 friends; the same
 4 don't know; serious
- 2b 1 c 2 d 3 a 4 b
- 3a 1 a 4 b 7 d
 2 e 5 c
 3 g 6 f
- 3b 1 Oh well. 4 That's great. 7 Sure.
 2 Oh no! 5 Take care.
 3 Really? 6 Never mind.
- 3c 1 banter 4 gossip 7 conversation
 2 chatter 5 chat
 3 small talk 6 repartee
- 4, 5 students' own answers