

## BEP 45 INT – Socializing: Keeping a Conversation Going

Today is the second in a two-part series on the basics of networking. Last time you learned ways to start and finish a conversation appropriately. Today you'll be studying how to keep a conversation going by maintaining interest.

Today's listening continues dialogue 1 from last time: As you'll remember, it takes place at the Asia-Pacific HR conference for Multi-Fresh, a global producer of health beverages. Penny—an HR officer from Kuala Lumpur—has struck up a conversation with George—the regional learning and development manager. Where we left off last time, Penny had just used a tag question—"Interesting speech, wasn't it?" – to help get the conversation started.

Now, let's listen to how she maintains interest to keep the discussion going.

### Listening Questions:

- 1) Near the beginning of the dialogue, Penny changes the subject. What was the old subject and what is the new subject?  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 2) Where has Penny seen George before?  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 3) What is George's hobby?  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 4) What does George mean when he says "It's not really such a big deal."  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 5) Is Penny going to join George in next year's event?  
\_\_\_\_\_

### Vocabulary:

**showcase:** This word can be used as a noun or a verb. As a **verb**, it means to show or display something. It often collocates (matches) with "talent," "products," "abilities," "skills," etc. For example, "The trade fair gave us an excellent opportunity to showcase our new products." As a **noun**, it refers to an event or occasion that helps you showcase something. In the dialogue Multi-Fresh, George and Penny's company, have created a "talent showcase" as a teambuilding exercise. This is probably some kind of video that displays the talents and hobbies of various staff. Literally, a showcase is a display cabinet (a "case") used to show products in a store or perhaps things you have collected at home, such as china.

**tough:** 1) Hard or challenging. Often used in oral English. You can say, "It's a tough problem to solve." You can also say, "He's being very tough on her." That means that he is holding her to a high standard or perhaps criticizing her. 2) Strong, resistant to damage: "This laptop is really tough. I dropped it three times, but it hasn't broken yet."

**marathon:** The traditional long distance footrace of 26.2 miles or 42.2 kilometers. This word is also often used metaphorically (idiomatically) in spoken English: You can say, for example, that a meeting “was a real marathon.” That means it lasted too long.

## Dialog

<<Fade in... Penny and George are continuing their conversation>>

**Penny:** Interesting speech, wasn't it?

**George:** Yes, looks like we have a few challenges ahead.

**Penny:** Speaking of challenges...

**George:** Uh huh.

**Penny:** Was that you I saw in the talent showcase yesterday?

**George:** Yes, I'm afraid it was.

**Penny:** Did you really run a marathon?

**George:** I sure did. It nearly killed me.

**Penny:** What was it like?

**George:** Well, it was tough. I trained for a year.

**Penny:** A year. Did you really? That's a long time. How about the actual marathon? How did that feel?

**George:** Well, towards the end, I thought I was gonna die.

**Penny:** You poor thing!

**George:** It's not really such a big deal. Lots of people run marathons.

**Penny:** Yeah, I'd like to give it a try some day.

**George:** You should. Why don't you sign up for next year's event?



## Debrief

It certainly seems as though George and Penny are hitting it off, doesn't it? Remember, “to hit it off” means to get along. Penny is doing a good job of keeping the conversation going.

After using a tag question to get the discussion started—“Interesting speech, wasn't it?” — she skillfully changes the subject to something of more interest to George.

**Penny:** Interesting speech, wasn't it?

**George:** Yes, looks like we have a few challenges ahead.

**Penny:** Speaking of challenges...

**George:** Uh huh.

**Penny:** Was that you I saw in the talent showcase yesterday?

As we have seen in BEP 39 “Reporting” and BEP 42 “Opening meetings,” “Speaking of” is a way of directing the discussion: It connects to what was just mentioned in order to bring up a new topic. George has just mentioned “challenges.” Penny says “Speaking of challenges...” to bring up a different kind of challenge—George’s marathon.

What does she mean by “talent showcase”? “Showcase” can be a noun or a verb. To showcase your talent means to display it or put it on show. For teambuilding, it sounds like Multi-Drinks has probably created a presentation or a video showcasing staff hobbies and talents.

Now, let’s practice more ways to direct the discussion. You’ll hear a series of short dialogues. As you listen, pay attention to the key phrase used in each dialogue to change the topic.

### **Example Dialogs:**

A: So I try to get out to a club once a week to listen to some live music.

B: That reminds me... haven’t I heard somewhere that you play piano?

A: Yes, how did you know?

A: Basically, lower taxes are not always better for business.

B: While we’re on the subject of taxes, what do you think about the new tax on beer and wine?

A: It’s been busy, busy, busy. No rest for me at all.

B: So I understand you are getting a promotion. Congratulations!

A: Yes, how did you know? Thank you.

A: Lovely weather, isn’t it?

B: Yes, beautiful.

B: By the way, you haven’t heard anything about this new training program that they’re starting in Europe, have you?

A: So then she actually told the boss that she thought he was a big, dumb idiot. Right to his face.

B: That’s too funny! Speaking of stupid things to say, you should have heard what Jackie said to Mike the other day.

A: And in my free time, I like to cook.

B: What kind of food?

A: Oh, lots of kinds, but I really like Italian food.

B: Funny you should say that because Italian is my favorite!

A: Really? Do you like to cook too?

Did you hear the key phrase used in each dialogue to change the topic? Let's listen again to just these key phrases.

- That reminds me... haven't I heard somewhere that you play piano?
- While we're on the subject of taxes, what do you think about the tax on beer and wine?
- By the way, you haven't heard anything about this new training program that they're starting in Europe, have you?
- Speaking of stupid things to say, you should have heard what Jackie said to Mike the other day.
- Funny you should say that because Italian is my favorite!

Now you try. Imagine you are speaking to George. He is talking about his business trip to Beijing. Use this chance to ask him whether he is planning on going to the 2008 Olympics there.

### Practice 1

**George:** So after two days in Shanghai, we flew to Beijing.

**Learner:** \_\_\_\_\_

How did you do? Listen to a possible **answer**:

**George:** So after two days in Shanghai, we flew to Beijing.

**Learner:** Speaking of Beijing, how about the 2008 Olympics? Are you planning on going?

Good. So we've looked at the language Penny uses to direct the discussion to something more interesting for George. Now, how do Penny and George keep the conversation going? Throughout the dialogue, they use several active listening strategies. Let's look at these one by one.

**Penny:** Speaking of challenges...

**George:** Uh huh.

Saying "uh huh" is a simple way to show attention. Of course, each language has its own sounds and expressions for showing attention. To make people feel comfortable and to make your English sound more fluent, it's important to use the expressions that native speakers typically use. Let's practice some basic sounds for showing attention.

- Right. right. right. mhm. mhm. mhm.
- Sure. uhuh. uhuh. uhuh.
- Yes. yeah. mhm. mhm. yuh.

How does that feel? If you're not already used to making these sounds—uhuh, mhm, yuh—it can feel pretty strange. But using them a lot when you speak is one of the most basic ways to maintain interest in a conversation.

There are also many other ways. As the dialogue continues, how does Penny show active interest in what George is saying?

**Penny:** Did you really run a marathon?

**George:** Yes I did. It nearly killed me.

**Penny:** What was it like?

"What was it like?" is one of the best questions you can ask to keep a conversation going. As an open question that just means "How was it? Tell me something about it," it gives your partner a lot of freedom to respond.

**George:** Well, it was tough. I trained for a year.

**Penny:** A year. Did you really? That's a long time. How about the actual marathon? How did that feel?

Here Penny uses several strategies. She echoes the word "year." Echo means to say again. After using the echo word "a year," she uses an echo question, "Did you really?" Then she finishes with an open ended question, "How did that feel?"

Each of these techniques is good used on its own. They are also often used in combination, as you'll hear now in some examples: First an echo word, then an echo question, then an open-ended Wh-question.

### Example Dialogs:

A: I went to Bali last week.

B: Bali! Did you really? What was it like?

A: Serena's getting married.

B: Married? Is she really? When?

A: We had 10,000 sales last month.

B: 10,000! Did we really? What's the total amount?

In addition these strategies, Penny has one more great way to keep the discussion going.

**Penny:** ...How about the actual marathon? How did that feel?

**George:** Well, towards the end, I thought I was gonna die.

**Penny:** You poor thing!

**George:** It's not really such a big deal. Lots of people run marathons.

"You poor thing" is a personal comment. Reacting personally is another important way to maintain interest by listening actively. In this case, Penny is showing sympathy or empathy with George. What does George mean by "It's not really such a big deal?" This is an idiom meaning that something is not extraordinary—it doesn't deserve a lot of attention. George is being modest about his marathon.

What other types of personal reaction can you make? There are many.

You can show interest:

- Really?
- How about that!
- That sounds interesting.

Surprise

- No way!
- You're kidding me!
- No!
- That's strange!
- Good heavens!
- Dude!

The last one, "Dude!" is an informal American expression of surprise. Dude is also used as an informal form of address, usually among friends.

You can also react to something that is *not* surprising

- Mhm.
- That's not a surprise.
- Typical.
- I'm not surprised.
- It's always that way, isn't it?

Show pleasure

- Really!
- Fantastic!
- Great!
- Wonderful!
- Terrific!

Agreement

- Exactly.
- Of course.
- Sure.

Or, as we've seen, sympathy

- How awful.
- What a pity.
- Poor you.

Now it's your turn to practice.

Imagine you are talking to Penny. Listen to what she has to say, then react appropriately by showing interest.

## Practice 2

**Penny:** I can't believe it! The weather report said it's going to be 40 degrees tomorrow!

**Learner:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Now listen to a possible **answer**:

**Penny:** I can't believe it! The weather report said it's going to be 40 degrees tomorrow!

**Learner:** 40 degrees! Did it really? No way! How long is it going to last?

Now try with George. Listen to what he says, then show interest appropriately:

## Practice 3

**George:** Sandra lost her new Nokia cell phone.

**Learner:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Listen to a possible **answer**:

**George:** Sandra lost her new Nokia cell phone.

**Learner:** Her new Nokia? Did she really? How awful. Where did it happen?

Well that about does it for today's show. You've practice many ways of directing the conversation and keeping it going, including changing the topic and showing active interest.

Make sure to visit [www.businessenglishpod.com](http://www.businessenglishpod.com), where you can sign up for the learner's notes for this and other episodes. There you'll find vocabulary and definitions, a full transcript, language exercises and learning strategies to take your study further.

Thanks for listening! See you next time!

## Language Review Questions

Respond appropriately by showing interest to the following statements. The cues tell you what kind of personal reaction to make, i.e. surprise, no surprise, sympathy etc. Wherever possible, you should also make use of echo words, echo questions and wh-questions.

1) I heard a rumor that the boss is going to get fired. (surprise)

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2) Actually, if the person behind you is not wearing a seatbelt, it doesn't matter if you. (interest)

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3) Stephanie broke up with Milton again. (no surprise)

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4) I think listening to podcasts is a great way to improve your English skills. (agreement)

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5) I think I just lost my wallet. (sympathy)

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## Learning Tip:

When you're watching an English movie or film, or even just the nightly news, you can practice your English by keeping yourself in constant dialogue with what you're hearing. That means, when a character speaks in a movie, you can react by showing interest—either silently in your head (if you're with other people) or even out loud (if you're alone). Actively listening means constantly thinking in English as you listen, repeating (echoing) and responding to what you hear. In this way, when you're listening you're also practicing speaking, and you can kill two birds with one stone (get two things done at once). Now that's efficient practice!

## Answers

### Listening Comprehension:

1. The old subject was "the speech"—probably a speech that they had just seen at the conference. The new subject is "the talent showcase," where Penny has seen that George ran a marathon in his spare time.
2. Perhaps many places, but we can at least be sure that she has seen him in "the talent showcase."
3. One of George's hobbies (of course he may have many) is running. He has run a marathon.
4. "Not a big deal" means it's not very extraordinary. George uses this idiom to describe his participation in the marathon. This is a way showing modesty.
5. Maybe. She says she is interested in giving it a try. And who knows? This could be the beginning of a romance. We'll have to watch how the relationship between Penny and George develops in future episodes.



## Language Review Answers:

Of course there are many possible answers. Here are some suggestions:

1. No! Fired? Is he really? Who told you?
2. Doesn't it? How about that! Why?
3. Again? I'm not surprised. When did it happen?
4. Of course it is. I listen every day. How about you?
5. You did? Oh dear, poor you. Where do you remember having it last?

## Useful Language

### Directing the conversation and changing the topic:

- That reminds me... haven't I heard somewhere that you play piano?
- While we're on the subject of taxes, what do you think about the tax on beer and wine?
- By the way, you haven't heard anything about this new training program that they're starting in Europe, have you?
- Speaking of stupid things to say, you should have heard what Jackie said to Mike the other day.
- Funny you should say that because Italian is my favorite!

### Basic words/sounds for showing attention:

- Right. right. right. mhm. mhm. mhm.
- Sure. uhuh. uhuh. uhuh.
- Yes. yeah. mhm. mhm. yuh.

### To show interest:

- Really?
- How about that!
- That sounds interesting.

### To show Surprise:

- No way!
- You're kidding me!
- No!
- That's strange!
- Good heavens!
- Dude!

### You can also react to something that is *not* surprising:

- Mhm.
- That's not a surprise.
- Typical.
- I'm not surprised.
- It's always that way, isn't it?

**To show pleasure:**

- Really!
- Fantastic!
- Great!
- Wonderful!
- Terrific!

**To show agreement:**

- Exactly.
- Of course.
- Sure.

**To show sympathy:**

- How awful.
- What a pity.
- Poor you.