BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

The English We Speak
Passing ships

This is not a word-for-word transcript.

Feifei
Hello and welcome to The English We Speak, where we explain words and expressions used by fluent English speakers so that you can use them, too! I'm Feifei, and I'm joined by Georgie. How are you?

Georgie
I'm very well, thank you, Feifei. How are you?

Feifei
I'm very well, thank you, Georgie. I haven't seen you much lately. What's going on?

Georgie
I know! I think our schedules are quite different at the moment. Whenever I'm at my desk, you seem to be in meetings, and then when you're back at your desk, I'm doing something else, somewhere else in the office building. We're like passing ships at the moment!

Feifei
Passing ships. That's the expression we're learning in this programme. The longer version is 'like ships that pass in the night'.

Georgie
Yeah, so let's actually imagine that. Two ships at night. They briefly see each other in the darkness, and then they continue in different directions. The encounter is brief and the people on board the ships probably don't have time to speak to each other.

Feifei
Right. So recently, our schedules are different so we're not seeing each other very much, and when we do, the interaction is very short. We're like passing ships.

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Georgie
Yeah. Hopefully our schedules line up a bit soon so we can catch up! 'Passing ships' is often used to talk about busy adult life when two people are finding it hard to meet.

Feifei
That's right. Let's hear some more examples from our BBC Learning English colleagues.

Examples
I really need to meet up properly with my neighbour, and like, have dinner. We talk a lot over the fence, but we never have time. It's like we're passing ships.

My brothers and sister always seem to visit my town when I'm away, so I never get to catch up with them. We're like passing ships.

I've got a colleague I get on with really well, but we work different shifts, so we're like passing ships! We only see each other for a couple of minutes every time.

Georgie
Now, because we're comparing ourselves to passing ships, we often use the word 'like' – we're like passing ships. We can also make the metaphor stronger by removing 'like' – we're passing ships at the moment.

Feifei
Yes. Now, another phrase that expresses a similar idea is 'cross paths'. Again, you can imagine this literally – two people walking on separate paths which then meet. But metaphorically it means that two people's lives intersect in some way.

Georgie
Yeah, so for example, my best friend and I crossed paths at university, but we didn't actually become friends until much later.

Feifei
Great. Now let's recap. We learnt the expression 'passing ships', which means that two people are on different schedules and are limited to brief encounters.

Georgie
Thanks for joining us. Goodbye!

Feifei
Goodbye!

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