



ESL Podcast 289 – Communication Problems

GLOSSARY

to communicate – to share one’s ideas, thoughts, and feelings with another person, and in return understand that person’s ideas, thoughts, and feelings

* Do you think people communicate more or less now that we have email?

dialogue – a conversation or discussion between two people

* Two people were having a strange dialogue on the bus this morning.

dysfunctional – not working properly; not working as it should; not effective

* Sharon has a dysfunctional relationship with her mother. They haven’t spoken to each other in years.

pattern – the way that something happens repeatedly over time; the way that something is done many times

* Lately Phou has been in a bad pattern of eating unhealthy food at his desk because he has too much work to do and can’t take a lunch break.

foundation – an idea or fact that something is based on and grows from; an idea or fact that makes something else possible

* The foundation for their marriage is that they trust, respect, and love each other very much.

to relate to (someone) – to understand and be understood by someone; to understand another person’s thoughts and feelings; to understand and be connected to someone

* It’s difficult for me to relate to Samantha because she is so rich and always wants to do and buy expensive things.

to grow apart – to have a relationship become more distant over time; to slowly become less connected to another person

* Even though we thought we would be friends forever, we grew apart after our high school graduation.

cornerstone – the most important part of something, and what everything else is supported by; the critical thing that holds something else up

* Freedom of speech is the cornerstone of American society.

sympathetic – understanding and sharing the same feelings as another person; sharing another person’s feelings

* When Marie’s father was very sick, her teachers were sympathetic, letting her stay home and take tests later.



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to validate – to agree with someone that something is true or correct; to prove that something is true or correct

* Dr. Huang's beliefs were validated by her research.

to make (someone) a deal – to offer to do something for someone in exchange for that person doing something in return

* Alicia's parents made her a deal. They said that if she did better in school, they would allow her to take music lessons.

to put (one's) foot down – to insist on something; to demand that something does or does not happen

* Anton finally put his foot down and told his boss that he wasn't going to work late at night anymore.

hostile – angry; confrontational; very unfriendly; aggressive

* Don't be hostile when a police officer gives you a ticket, or you might create a bigger problem.



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COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. What does Ethel mean when she says, “We have a strong foundation”?
 - a) Their house is built on a very strong foundation.
 - b) Their relationship has a good base to grow from.
 - c) Their foundation has made it difficult to relate to each other.

2. Why is Fred putting his foot down?
 - a) Because he’s stepping on Oprah.
 - b) Because he’s making a demand.
 - c) Because he’s communicating more.

WHAT ELSE DOES IT MEAN?

pattern

The word “pattern,” in this podcast, means the way that something happens repeatedly over time: “Her behavior is a pattern of extreme happiness followed by depression, and then happiness again.” Or, “Many college students get into a pattern of sleeping only 3-4 hours during the week, but then sleeping all day on Saturday.” Another meaning of “pattern” is the repeating shapes or colors in a design: “I really like the pattern on your shirt!” Or, “The pattern on this carpet makes me dizzy.” When we talk about making something, a “pattern” is the instructions or the shape that we follow: “This is a beautiful jacket pattern, but I think it’s too difficult for me to make.” Or, “Do you have any patterns for making baby blankets?”

foundation

In this podcast, the word “foundation” means an idea or fact that something is based on and grows from: “The president said that the foundation for the company’s success is its dedicated employees.” A “foundation” is also the concrete that is on the ground and holds up a building: “During the earthquake, the home moved off of its foundation.” A “foundation” can also be an organization that gives money to people or other organizations for a specific purpose: “The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation provides a lot of money for healthcare in Africa.” Finally, “foundation” is a colored cream that women put on their faces as makeup so that their skin looks better: “Do you think this foundation is too dark for my skin color?”



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CULTURE NOTE

In the United States, bookstores sell many books that are written to help people “improve” (make better) their romantic relationships. John Gottman and John Gray are two authors who are very well known “relationship gurus,” or people who give a lot of “advice” (recommendations) about relationships.

Dr. John Gottman is a psychology professor who researches how people “interact” (act with and around each other). He has written many “journal articles” (stories in professional academic magazines) and he has studied many “couples” (a man and a woman in a romantic relationship). His book, Why Marriages Succeed or Fail, explains that what people do in relationships is different from what they think they do. The book sells well, but it isn’t extremely well known.

Dr. John Gray doesn’t have as good an education as Dr. Gottman does. He hasn’t done very much research, either. But he is a very good writer and his books are “bestsellers” (books that are very popular). More than ten million copies of his most famous book, Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus, have been sold. In his books, he explains that men and women think differently, and he offers many suggestions for how people can change the way they think to improve their marriage.

Dr. Gottman is very well respected by other “academics” (people who are professional teachers and researchers). His work is “recognized” (identified) as “top” (advanced) psychology. In contrast, Dr. Gray is very well known among the general public, and his books are entertaining. His work is usually thought to be part of “pop psychology,” or “popular psychology,” which is based on general opinions instead of research.

Which author would you “turn to” (look for advice from) if your relationship were in trouble?

Comprehension Questions Correct Answers: 1 – b; 2 – b



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COMPLETE TRANSCRIPT

Welcome to English as a Second Language Podcast number 289:
Communication Problems.

This is English as a Second Language Podcast number 289. I'm your host, Dr. Jeff McQuillan, coming to you from the Center for Educational Development in beautiful Los Angeles, California. How are you today?

Remember to visit our website – yes, we have a website! – at eslpod.com. On the website, among other many exciting things, you can download one of our Learning Guides, which is a complete guide to each episode of this podcast.

Our episode today is called “Communication Problems.” It's between two people – a dialogue between Ethel and Fred, who are a married couple having difficulty communicating with each other. Let's get started.

[start of story]

Ethel: Can we talk?

Fred: Uh-huh.

Ethel: I don't think we communicate very well. We don't talk to each other like we used to. I think we need to have a dialogue about these dysfunctional communication patterns.

Fred: Hmm.

Ethel: I think we need to work on our relationship. We have a strong foundation, but we have problems relating to each other. Oprah says...

Fred: Hold on! Is this something you saw on the Oprah show?

Ethel: Well, yes, it is. Oprah did a show about how couples grow apart after years of being together, and good communication is the cornerstone of a good relationship. Being a sympathetic listener and validating each other's feelings are very important.

Fred: Stop right there. I'll make you a deal. I'll communicate more with you, but you have to promise not to bring up Oprah again. I don't want a talk show host telling me how to run my life.



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Ethel: She's more than a talk show host. She's...

Fred: I mean it. I'm putting my foot down. No more Oprah. Okay?

Ethel: Okay, if that's how you feel about it.

Fred: It is.

Ethel: That's fine, but I wonder what Dr. Phil would say about your hostile feelings toward Oprah.

Fred: Uh!

[end of story]

Our dialogue begins with Ethel saying to Fred, "Can we talk?" This is a question that no husband wants to hear!

Fred says, "Uh-huh," meaning yes, but it's something you say very informally. "Uh-huh" doesn't mean you are very interested, however.

Ethel then begins: "I don't think we communicate very well" – I don't think we give each other a good idea of our feelings, our thoughts, our ideas. When we talk about communication in a marriage or relationship, we're talking about how well the two people are honest with each other, and tell each other about their ideas and their feelings.

Ethel says, "We don't talk to each other like we used to," back many years ago, perhaps. "I think we need to have a dialogue about these dysfunctional communication patterns." A "dialogue" is a conversation between two people. It's often used in psychological therapy or in business negotiations to talk about or to describe the idea that we need to have extensive communication – we need to talk for a long time, perhaps, about a certain problem. The word "dialogue" can be spelled either D-I-A-L-O-G or D-I-A-L-O-G-U-E; both spellings are acceptable in U.S. English.

Ethel says that she and Fred have "dysfunctional communication patterns." The word "dysfunctional" also comes from psychology. "Functional" means something works properly – works correctly. "Dysfunctional" (dysfunctional) means it isn't working correctly – it isn't working properly. We usually say this about a relationship – within a marriage, within a family, and so forth. You might



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describe someone's family as “dysfunctional,” meaning there are lots of problems, communication and other problems in the family.

A “pattern,” or “communication pattern,” is a way of doing something over and over again – repeatedly. A “pattern” is something that happens repeatedly over time. It's the way that, in this case, Ethel and Fred typically communicate. Ethel is saying they have some dysfunctional patterns – things that are not very good for their marriage.

Fred says, “Hmm.” Again, he's showing that he's interested and listening, but not too interested.

Ethel then continues: “I think we need to work on our relationship,” meaning I think we need to improve our relationship – to do something about our relationship. She says, “We have a strong foundation, but we have problems relating to each other.” A “foundation” is an idea or a fact that something is based on and grows from. It's an idea or a fact – a situation that you build on top of. The word “foundation” is also used in other contexts, as is the word “pattern.” Take a look at our Learning Guide for this episode for some more detailed explanations of those other uses.

Ethel then says that she and Fred “have problems relating to each other.” “To relate to someone” means to understand that person, and be understood by that person – to understand their thoughts and feelings. She ends by saying, “Oprah says,” and Fred immediately says, “Hold on! Is this something you saw on the Oprah show?”

Oprah is a national talk show, where she interviews famous people and has a lot of programs about psychology. It's a program that is on every day in the afternoon, and is very popular with many women. Oprah is very popular, but not necessarily with men. That's why Fred is not very happy, or is questioning Ethel, because she saw this on this show, the Oprah show that he doesn't like.

Ethel says, “Well, yes, it is” – it is something I saw on the Oprah show. “Oprah did a show,” meaning she had a show – an episode of her program, “about how couples grow apart after years of being together.” “To grow apart” means that you slowly have a less close relationship, a more distant relationship with the person that you are married to, for example.

Ethel says that “good communication is the cornerstone of a good relationship.” The “cornerstone” (one word) here means the most important thing or the item, the idea, the situation that supports everything else – that holds up everything



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else. A “cornerstone” is usually the first stone or brick that is put in a new building or a new house, but it’s more generally used to mean something similar to “foundation” – the critical part, what everything else depends on.

Ethel continues with some very psychological analysis. She says, “Being a sympathetic listener and validating each other’s feelings are very important.” “Sympathetic” here means understanding and sharing the feelings of the other person. When you say, “I am sympathetic to someone,” you mean that you also feel sorry for them or you agree with them about something. Here, a “sympathetic listener” would be someone who listens, who is interested, who understands your feelings.

Ethel says, “Being a sympathetic listener and validating each other’s feelings are very important.” “To validate” (validate), in this sentence, means to agree with someone that something is true or correct – to agree that you are correct. I’m validating your feelings – I’m saying, “Yes, you are right to feel this way.”

Fred then says, “Stop right there,” meaning stop talking. “I’ll make you a deal.” “To make someone a deal,” or “to make a deal with someone,” means to offer to do something for someone in exchange for that person doing something for you. So, it’s like an agreement, where each of you give the other person something that they want.

Here’s Fred’s deal: “I’ll communicate more with you, but you have to promise,” Ethel, “not to bring up Oprah again.” “To bring up something,” or “to bring something up,” means to talk about it, to mention it. Perhaps it wasn’t being mentioned before, it’s a new topic. Fred says, “I don’t want a talk show host telling me how to run my life.” Oprah is a talk show host.

Ethel says, “She’s more than a talk show host,” meaning that’s not her only characteristic or qualification. “She’s...” and Fred interrupts her: “I mean it. I’m putting my foot down. No more Oprah. Okay?” The expression “to put your foot down” means to insist on something – to demand that something happen or not happen. Ethel says, “Okay, if that’s how you feel about it,” and Fred says, “It is,” that is how I feel about it; I don’t want to hear about Oprah.

Ethel says, “That’s fine, but I wonder what Dr. Phil would say about your hostile feelings toward Oprah.” “To be hostile” means to be very unfriendly, very negative, angry at someone. Dr. Phil is another popular U.S. talk show host. He’s a psychologist who has a program on, just like Oprah, every day, where he talks about relationships and how to have a better relationship. Again, these are



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both programs that are very popular with many women, much less popular with men – me, for example. But, I will not criticize Oprah here on the episode! Now let's listen to this dialogue, this time at a normal speed.

[start of story]

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Fred: Uh-huh.

Ethel: I don't think we communicate very well. We don't talk to each other like we used to. I think we need to have a dialogue about these dysfunctional communication patterns.

Fred: Mm-hmm.

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Fred: Hold on! Is this something you saw on the Oprah show?

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Fred: Stop right there. I'll make you a deal. I'll communicate more with you, but you have to promise not to bring up Oprah again. I don't want a talk show host telling me how to run my life.

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Ethel: That's fine, but I wonder what Dr. Phil would say about your hostile feelings toward Oprah.

Fred: Uh!



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[end of story]

The script for this episode was written by Oprah fan, Dr. Lucy Tse.

From Los Angeles, California, I'm Jeff McQuillan. Thanks for listening. We'll see you next time on ESL Podcast.

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