

ELITE LANGUAGE SOLUTIONS

SPECIAL EDITION FOR SPANISH SPEAKERS

SOUNDING NATURAL IN ENGLISH

Stop translating. Start sounding like yourself.

SECOND EDITION

B1-B2 | CONTEMPORARY BRITISH ENGLISH

10 practical units for confident real-world conversation

Conversation chunks • Reading dialogues • Pronunciation • Speaking

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Publication & Licence

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This is an independent educational publication. English varies by region, community and context; examples in this book focus mainly on contemporary informal British English.

About This Course

Most students who open this book already know grammar. They can form the present perfect, they can use conditionals, they can pass a written exam. And yet, the moment they open their mouths in a real conversation, something feels wrong. Their English is correct — but it doesn't sound like English. It sounds translated.

Sounding Natural in English exists to close that gap. This is not a grammar book. It will not teach you new tenses or new structures. Instead, every page is built around one question:

What would people actually say here?

Across this course you will learn conversation chunks, natural reactions, fillers, pragmatic language, and the small spoken habits that make English feel effortless — the language that rarely appears in a grammar syllabus but appears constantly in real conversation.

“You don't need more grammar. You need more natural language.”

How to Use This Book

Each unit follows the same reliable structure, so you always know what's coming next and can track your own progress.

Stage	Purpose
1. Warm-up	Activate the topic through discussion and pictures
2. Why Learners Sound Unnatural	Diagnose the problem before fixing it
3. Natural Conversation Chunks	Learn the building blocks of fluent speech
4. Reading Dialogue	Read the language in context
5. Pronunciation Focus	Train the sound of natural speech
6. Speaking Builder	Practise speaking under real conditions
7. Real English	Go beyond the textbook
8. Avoid Textbook English	Replace stiff phrases with natural ones
9. Speaking Challenge	Push fluency further
10. Reflection	Track your progress honestly

★ ELS Teacher Tip

Encourage learners not to skip the Reflection page. Self-assessment is one of the strongest predictors of long-term fluency gains — students who track their own naturalness improve faster than those who don't.

Speak Naturally

Don't try to sound natural by memorising long sentences. Natural English is built from short, flexible chunks you can combine in the moment. Learn the chunk, not the script.

Map of the Book

Unit	Title	Core Skill	Key Chunks
1	Small Talk That Doesn't Feel Awkward	Starting, sustaining and ending casual conversation	~40 chunks
2	Showing Interest Naturally	Reacting naturally, not mechanically	~30 chunks
3	Giving Opinions & Disagreeing Naturally	Sharing and responding to opinions without sounding blunt or stiff	~34 chunks
4	Telling Stories & Anecdotes Naturally	Structuring and pacing spoken anecdotes	~30 chunks
5	Making Plans & Suggestions Naturally	Suggesting, confirming, changing and declining plans	~26 chunks
6	Complaining & Apologising Naturally	Raising problems and apologising without conflict	~25 chunks
7	Asking for Favours & Saying No Naturally	Requesting help and softening refusals	~26 chunks
8	Giving & Receiving Compliments Naturally	Complimenting and responding without sounding fake or stiff	~26 chunks
9	Talking About Feelings & Emotions Naturally	Describing mood, venting, and offering comfort	~25 chunks
10	Phone & Video Calls Naturally	Starting, managing, and ending calls smoothly	~25 chunks

UNIT

Small Talk That Doesn't Feel Awkward

B1-B2 · Approx. 4-5 hours of study

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, you can:

- ✓ Start conversations naturally, without a rehearsed opening line
- ✓ Continue conversations confidently, keeping the exchange alive
- ✓ Keep conversations flowing even when a topic runs dry
- ✓ Avoid awkward silence with natural filler and follow-up language
- ✓ End conversations politely, without an abrupt or overly formal exit

“Small talk isn't small. It's the doorway to every relationship in English.”

1 · WARM-UP

CONVERSATION SITUATIONS

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. Two strangers waiting for a delayed train. Monday morning. | 2. Two colleagues meeting in the kitchen on Monday morning. |
| 3. Neighbours seeing each other after several months. | 4. Two guests meeting for the first time at a wedding. |

Discuss with a partner

1. Think of the last time you spoke to a stranger in English. What did you talk about?
2. Is small talk common in your culture? Where does it happen — queues, lifts, taxis, waiting rooms?
3. What's the difference between “small talk” and a “real conversation”? Is there a difference at all?
4. Do you find small talk relaxing or stressful? Why?
5. Look at the four situations above. For each one, what might the two people say to each other in the first few seconds?

Speak Naturally

Small talk has a job to do: it's not about the weather or the queue — it's about signalling “I'm friendly, and this interaction is safe.” Once you understand the purpose, the language becomes much easier to predict.

Pair Work

Work with a partner. Choose two of the situations above and act out the first exchange — just the opening 15-20 seconds. Don't worry about being 100% correct; focus on sounding relaxed.

2 · WHY LEARNERS SOUND UNNATURAL

Many learners were taught a version of English that is grammatically correct but almost never used by native speakers in casual conversation. The most famous example:

⚠ Watch Out!

“How are you?”

“I'm fine, thank you, and you?”

This exchange is technically correct, but almost nobody speaks like this outside a textbook. It sounds stiff, overly formal, and — ironically — makes you sound less fluent, not more.

What native speakers actually say

Instead of...	Try...	Register
I'm fine, thank you.	Pretty good, thanks.	Neutral / friendly
I'm fine.	Not bad, actually.	Casual
I'm fine.	Can't complain!	Casual, slightly humorous
I'm fine.	Doing alright, you?	Casual
I'm very well, thank you.	Yeah, good, thanks — you?	Neutral

★ ELS Teacher Tip

Drill these five responses as a chorus activity before moving on. Say “How's it going?” and have the whole class respond with a different option each time, in rhythm. This builds automaticity — the goal is for the natural response to become reflexive, not translated.

Why “and you?” sounds unnatural too

Notice that native speakers usually shorten “And how are you?” to a quick tag: “...you?” with rising intonation, often overlapping the end of their own sentence. Try practising the shortened tag rather than the full grammatical question.

3 · NATURAL CONVERSATION CHUNKS

Below are 40 high-frequency conversational chunks. Learn them as whole units, not word-by-word.

A. Opening a Conversation

Chunk	Meaning	Register	Notes
Nice to meet you.	Greeting on first meeting	Neutral	Said once, on first introduction only
How's it going?	General greeting	Casual	Common mistake: answering with a long story
Long time no see!	Greeting someone you haven't seen in a while	Casual, warm	Grammatically “incorrect” but 100% standard
What have you been up to?	Asking about recent activities	Casual	Answer briefly, don't list everything
How've you been?	Asking how someone's life has been generally	Casual, warm	Contraction of “have” is essential — say it
Hey, how are things?	General check-in	Casual	“Things” = your life in general

B. Reacting and Showing Interest

Chunk	Meaning	Register	Notes
That's good to hear.	Positive reaction	Neutral	Falling intonation for sincerity
Really?	Surprise / interest	Casual	Rising intonation, often a

Chunk	Meaning	Register	Notes
			genuine question
No way!	Strong surprise	Casual	Common with good or bad news
Exactly.	Agreement	Neutral	Often said with a nod
Fair enough.	Accepting a reason without full agreement	Casual	Useful for polite disagreement
Makes sense.	Understanding shown	Neutral	Slightly analytical tone
Sounds good.	Agreement to a plan	Casual	Common in making arrangements

C. Softening and Hedging

Chunk	Meaning	Register	Notes
You know what?	Introducing a new thought	Casual	Signals a shift in the conversation
To be honest...	Softening an opinion	Neutral/Casual	Often precedes mild disagreement
I suppose so.	Reluctant agreement	Neutral	Not full enthusiasm
I mean...	Clarifying or softening	Casual	Extremely frequent as a filler + clarifier
Actually...	Correcting gently	Neutral	Careful — can sound blunt without softening tone
Well...	Thinking / hesitating	Casual	Buys time before answering
Right...	Processing information	Neutral	Often said slowly while thinking

Marcus: Hey! Long time no see!

Priya: I know, right? How've you been?

Marcus: Yeah, not bad. Busy, but good. You?

D. Continuing the Conversation

Chunk	Meaning	Register
Anyway...	Changing subject or returning to topic	Casual
So, what's new with you?	Inviting the other person to share	Casual
Speaking of which...	Linking to a related topic	Neutral
That reminds me...	Introducing a related memory	Casual
Oh, before I forget...	Introducing something important	Neutral

E. Ending a Conversation Politely

Chunk	Meaning	Register
Anyway, I should get going.	Polite exit	Neutral
It was great catching up.	Positive closing	Warm
Let's grab a coffee sometime.	Suggesting future contact	Casual
Take care!	Friendly goodbye	Casual
I'll let you get on.	Releasing the other person politely	British, neutral
Catch you later.	Casual goodbye	Very casual

⚠ Watch Out!

Don't end a casual conversation with "Goodbye." It's not wrong, but it can sound cold or overly final between people who know each other. Save "Goodbye" for formal or one-off encounters.

Full List — Quick Reference (all 40 chunks)

Nice to meet you · How's it going? · Long time no see · What have you been up to? · How've you been? · How are things? · That's good to hear · Really? · No way! · Exactly · Fair enough · Makes sense · Sounds good · You know what? · To be honest... · I suppose so · I mean... · Actually... · Well... · Right... · Anyway... · So, what's new with you? · Speaking of which... · That reminds me... · Oh, before I forget... · Anyway, I should get going · It was great catching up · Let's grab a coffee sometime · Take care! · I'll let you get on · Catch you later · Pretty good, thanks · Not bad, actually · Can't complain! · Doing alright, you? · I'm good, thanks, and yourself? · Same old, same old · Nothing much, really · Just the usual · Good to see you · You too!

4 · READING DIALOGUE

Reading Dialogue 1.1 — "Running Into an Old Friend" — 2 min 10 sec, two British speakers

Running Into an Old Friend

Sam: Oh my god — Leah? Leah, is that you?

Leah: Sam! Oh wow, I— hi! Long time no see!

Sam: I know, right? What has it been, like, two years?

Leah: Something like that, yeah. Since Katie's wedding, I think.

Sam: Oh, that's right! God, that feels like forever ago. Anyway, how've you been? You look well.

Leah: Thanks! Yeah, not bad, honestly. Busy — work's been mental lately — but, you know, can't complain. How about you? Still at the same place?

Sam: Nah, actually, I moved on about six months ago. I'm at a smaller company now, doing more or less the same thing, but— I mean, it's better, to be honest. Less stressful.

Leah: Oh, good for you! That's great to hear. So, are you still living round here, or—?

Sam: Yeah, still local. Well, I moved, but only like ten minutes away. What about you — you were talking about moving to Manchester, weren't you?

Leah: Oh! Yeah, we did actually. About a year ago now.

Sam: No way, really? How's that going?

Leah: *It's good, yeah — I mean, it took a while to settle in, but we like it now. Anyway, listen, I should probably get going, I've got a train to catch, but it was so good bumping into you.*

Sam: *You too! Let's grab a coffee sometime, properly catch up.*

Leah: *Definitely, yeah. I'll text you. Take care, Sam!*

Sam: *You too — take care!*

Comprehension Activities

A. True or False

1. Sam and Leah last saw each other at a birthday party. _____
2. Leah's job has been very relaxed recently. _____
3. Sam changed jobs about six months ago. _____
4. Leah moved to Manchester roughly a year ago. _____
5. They arrange to meet again immediately, with a fixed date. _____

B. Gap Fill — complete the missing chunk from memory or by reading again.

1. Oh my god — Leah? Leah, _____?
2. God, that feels like _____.
3. Work's been mental lately — but, you know, _____.
4. Oh, _____! That's great to hear.
5. Let's _____ sometime.

C. Ordering Activity — number these events 1–5 in the order they happen in the dialogue.

- Leah mentions she needs to catch a train
- Sam and Leah realise it has been about two years
- Sam explains he changed jobs
- Leah confirms she moved to Manchester
- They agree to get coffee together

D. Multiple Choice

1. How does Sam describe his new job compared to his old one?
 - More stressful
 - Less stressful
 - Exactly the same
 - He didn't say
2. Which chunk does Leah use to soften her answer about work being busy?
 - No way
 - You know, can't complain
 - I suppose so
 - Fair enough
3. Which chunk signals that Leah is ending the conversation?
 - Really?
 - I should probably get going
 - Makes sense

- Right...

★ ELS Teacher Tip

Read the dialogue twice: once quickly for gist (True/False), then again for detail (gap fill). On the second reading, underline the chunks that make the exchange sound relaxed and natural.

5 · PRONUNCIATION FOCUS

Connected Speech in Small Talk

Natural small talk relies heavily on connected speech — sounds link, disappear, or blend between words. Learners who pronounce every word separately sound noticeably less fluent, even with perfect grammar.

Weak forms

Written	Spoken (weak form)	IPA
What have you been up to?	Whadd'ave you been up to?	/wʌd.əv jə bi'n 'ʌp.tə/
How've you been?	Howv-ya been?	/'həʊv.jə bi:n/
I suppose so	I s'pose so	/aɪ spəʊz səʊ/
Going to	Gonna	/'gʌnə/
Kind of	Kinda	/'kaɪndə/

Speak Naturally

Weak forms are not “lazy” or “incorrect” English — they are the standard pronunciation of fluent speech. Trying to pronounce every word fully and clearly, in fact, sounds unnatural to native ears.

Sentence Stress

In the chunk “That's GOOD to hear,” the stress falls on the content word (good), not the grammar words:

- That's GOOD to hear.
- LONG time no SEE.
- No WAY!

Intonation

- Really? — rising intonation = genuine surprise/interest
- Really. — flat/falling intonation = mild disbelief or sarcasm

⚠ Watch Out!

The same word can sound completely different in meaning depending on intonation. Practise saying “Really?” five different ways: surprised, bored, sarcastic, delighted, suspicious.

Natural Pauses

Native speakers pause within sentences, not just between them — often before a key word, or while using a filler like “well” or “I mean” to buy thinking time. Practise leaving a natural pause after “well...” rather than rushing to fill the silence.

6 · SPEAKING BUILDER

Guided Conversation

Work in pairs. Use the prompt cards below. Try to use at least 5 chunks from Section 3.

★ **Card A**

You haven't seen your partner in about a year. Start the conversation, ask what they've been doing, react naturally to their news, and end the conversation politely because you have somewhere to be.

★ **Card B**

You bump into a colleague from your old job at the supermarket. React with surprise, catch up briefly, and suggest meeting for coffee.

Role Play

Work in pairs. Read the situation below and improvise a natural, unscripted conversation (2–3 minutes). Focus on sounding relaxed, not on getting every word exactly right.

Situation: You are both waiting for a delayed train. Strike up a conversation with the stranger next to you. Use small talk to fill the silence — the weather, the delay, your journey — then find something in common.

Information Gap

In pairs, Student A and Student B each receive a card with five pieces of “recent news” about their life (new job, new flat, holiday, hobby, family news). Without showing your card, have a natural catch-up conversation and try to find out all five pieces of information from your partner using natural follow-up questions.

Speed Speaking

Set a timer for 60 seconds. In pairs, have a “small talk marathon” — as many natural conversation openers and reactions as possible before the time runs out. Swap partners every 60 seconds. Rotate three times.

★ **ELS Teacher Tip**

Speed speaking works best with music playing quietly in the background and a visible countdown timer — the light pressure pushes students past overthinking and into automatic natural responses.

7 · REAL ENGLISH

Expressions native speakers use every day:

1. “Same old, same old.”

Meaning: Nothing has changed; life is routine.

Example: “How's work?” “Ah, same old, same old.”

Tom: Anything new with you?

Ella: Not really — same old, same old. You?

Usage note: Slightly resigned tone, not necessarily negative.

2. “I can't complain.”

Meaning: Life is fine, possibly even good, but said modestly.

Example: “How's business?” “Can't complain, honestly.”

Usage note: Common in British and American English; humble, understated positivity.

3. “It's been a while!”

Meaning: A long time has passed since you last met.

Example: "Hey! It's been a while!"

Usage note: Interchangeable with "long time no see," slightly more neutral register.

4. "What's new?"

Meaning: Casual invitation to share recent news.

Jay: What's new with you?

Nour: Oh, not much, honestly. Just been busy with work.

5. "I won't keep you."

Meaning: Signals that you're about to end the conversation politely, out of consideration for the other person's time.

Usage note: Very British, very polite — perfect for ending small talk gracefully.

8 · AVOID TEXTBOOK ENGLISH

✗ Textbook English	✓ Natural English
I am very happy.	I'm really pleased. / That's brilliant.
I am very tired.	I'm shattered. / I'm knackered. (informal)
It was very good.	It was really good. / It was great.
I do not know.	I've got no idea. / Not a clue.
I am not sure.	I'm not too sure, actually.
It is very interesting.	It's really interesting. / That's fascinating.
I would like to ask you a question.	Can I ask you something?
I am looking forward to it.	I can't wait!
Thank you very much.	Thanks so much! / Cheers! (British)
I am sorry, I did not understand.	Sorry, didn't catch that.
I have no time.	I'm really pushed for time.
It is not a problem.	No worries! / No bother!
I agree with you.	Totally agree. / Couldn't agree more.
I disagree.	I'm not so sure about that.
Please repeat that.	Sorry, could you say that again?
I do not mind.	I'm easy. / Either's fine with me.
That is a good idea.	That's a great idea, actually.
I will think about it.	I'll have a think.
It was a pleasure to meet you.	Great meeting you!
I must go now.	I'd better get going.
I am very busy.	I'm swamped at the moment.
Excuse me, may I ask something?	Sorry to bother you, quick question—
I did not expect that.	Wasn't expecting that, to be honest.

STOP SOUNDING LIKE A TEXTBOOK. START SOUNDING NATURAL.

You may already know the grammar and understand the vocabulary. But when a real conversation starts, your English can still feel translated, stiff or rehearsed. This book closes that gap.

INSIDE THE BOOK

- Small talk that does not feel awkward
- Natural reactions, opinions and disagreement
- Storytelling, plans, favours and apologies
- Compliments, emotions, phone and video calls
- Pronunciation guidance and speaking challenges
- A dedicated Spanish-speaker language clinic
- Complete answer key for objective activities

BUILT FOR REAL COMMUNICATION

For adult B1-B2 learners, independent study, private lessons and speaking-focused classes. Practical contemporary British English, with targeted support for Spanish speakers.