

SMALL TALK – BIG CHALLENGE

You're in the supermarket and the 15-year-old checkout assistant says to you, "And what have you been doing this weekend?"

Resisting the inclination to say things like "And what would I be telling you for, young man?" you make a non-committal but friendly noise and go off with your groceries.

You're waiting for change at the corner shop and the assistant says "Pretty cold this morning, isn't it?" You agree, take your milk, newspaper and change and off you go.

You're in the supermarket (again) and meet a friend you haven't seen for some time. She says, "How are things with you?" or perhaps "So, how's everything going?". You give some sort of response along the lines of "Fine, thanks," and the conversation moves on, or you move on.

The really important part of this small talk is not the type or quality of the answer. It's **the answer itself**.

The topic is unimportant (that's when it's called small talk!). A response can be a word, a smile, a nod, a phrase... but **a response of some sort is essential**. If there is no response, the way is open for misinterpretations like "This person isn't listening to me/ this person doesn't want to talk to me/this person is ignoring me/this person doesn't have a clue about conversing in English..."

It doesn't matter too much what your learner says or does in response as long as s/he does respond.

SO

how can we help learners? By giving

- Practice – in giving non-committal, friendly responses
- Practice – in identifying "small talk" questions which don't need a full reply (e.g. "How are you?" as opposed to real questions such as "What's your phone number?")
- Practice – in coping with small talk questions without understanding each individual word (e.g. "How's things with you?", "what have you been doing lately?" – versions of the same thing, really)
- Practice – in turning the conversation over to the other person ("OK, thank you. How about you?")
- Practice – to increase your learner's confidence with these situations, which are positive and important opportunities to be included in the everyday communication between New Zealanders.