

## ***Softly, softly....***

Communication is about more than sharing information – it’s also about establishing relationships between people.

Relationships between adults (with a few notable exceptions) are based on a shared understanding of **politeness**. Probably the main way of conveying politeness in English is by using *softeners*. Your learner needs to know about softeners right from the beginning stages of language learning.

- The most obvious softeners are “please” and “thank you”. Both are used much more often in English than their equivalents in some other languages. They are necessary to get people to do things (and to continue doing them).
- We often use “would” or “could” to soften a request (or a command!)

*Egbert, **could** you close the door behind you, old chap? It’s a tad chilly in here.*

*Time’s up, everyone. **Would** you **like to** hand in your papers now?*

“Could” is also a polite way of asking permission to do something

*That’s a most elegant hat, Hermione. Do you think I **could** try it on?*

Sometimes the higher the degree of politeness the longer the softener

*That’s a most elegant hat, Hermione. **Do you think it would be all right if I** tried it on?*

- Softeners are particularly important to introduce a refusal, an apology - any kind of “bad news”, really.

***So sorry** I can’t come to the crochet circle on Wednesday, Mrs Pumpernickel. **I’m afraid** I have to shampoo the poodle.*

More subtle types of softeners-for-politeness:

- Words to establish shared ground between speaker and listener – used to make contact. Tag questions are important here:

*Lovely day, **isn’t it?**  
Yeah, too right. Good game, **eh?***

[Note that **polite** doesn’t necessarily mean **formal**. Call Elaine if you want to discuss this.]

- “Minimising” words, used to ask a favour:

*I **just** wondered if you’d finished with that book on tadpoles,*

*Have you got **a minute**, Letitia? I **just** wondered if you had time to help me with the newsletter...*

- “Qualifying” words, used to soften advice or criticism:

*This might be **just a bit** too pink, Clementine.*

*I’m **pretty** sure you said the 13<sup>th</sup>, Rupert.*

- Finally, sometimes we say things that are so indirect they aren’t strictly accurate -just to be polite:

***You must be tired.** We’ll be off now. (I’m tired. I want to be off now.)*

*Well, **I mustn’t keep you** any longer. (I don’t want to talk to you any longer)*

***I’m sorry,** I haven’t any change. (I don’t want to buy these raffle tickets)*

***I’ll give that some thought.** (No)*

Many of these become the formulaic language chunks that keep social contact going. We’d be lost without them. Help your learner to practise softeners in English– and learn how the wheels of social relationships are oiled in your learner’s language!