

## How to disagree politely in spoken English?

People disagree very often with each other in everyday communication; in fact, disagreeing is a very common and important part of expressing our opinions and sharing them with others. While it is important to express our opinions, disagreeing with others can have negative impact on people's social relationships. However, there are ways in which we can soften the negative impact of disagreement and lower the likelihood of offending others. This worksheet focuses on different strategies which can help speakers to disagree with each other politely. The worksheet uses examples and findings from two large corpora of spoken English: the *British National Corpus 2014*, which represents current spoken British English and the *Trinity Lancaster Corpus*, which represents spoken English from learners of English at different levels of proficiency, from intermediate to very proficient speakers.

### Task 1

First reflect on these three questions:

- What does it mean 'being polite' or 'speaking politely'?
- Why do people try to be polite?
- What are some ways in which people can show politeness?
- Why do people sometimes avoid disagreeing with others?

To help you consider these questions, think of a situation when you disagreed with one of your friends, a member of your family or someone at your workplace/school. How did you express disagreement in these situations? What did you say? Make a note of some of the expressions that you would use (translate them into English, if they are in a different language). Compare them with your partner or a group.

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### Task 2

Look at the following examples from conversations of British English speakers. Decide whether the speakers **a) agree** or **b) disagree** with each other. Underline the expressions used by these speakers for agreeing and circle the expressions used to signal disagreeing. Compare your answers with a partner.

**Topic: Previous skills and employment**

Emily: you weren't a technician.  
 Peter: well actually I was cos that's what  
 Emily: what?  
 Peter: I went on to do after teaching I I  
 was a technician wasn't I at the uni?

**Topic: Having too many tasks in a teaching job**  
 Helen: I've got so many things  
 Rachel: yeah well that's a good thing innit? better  
 than having nothing  
 Helen: well absolutely but it I mean with the with  
 this, you know, problem came up again

**Topic: Politics and tactics for winning an election**

Michael: and yeah it it lacks substance it just was too easily exposed  
 Josh: it did I and I totally agree but I still think with erm if they had had a Blair type of figure in terms  
 of charisma erm presenting that suite of policies I suspect they would have won

### Task 3

Look at the following examples of disagreement from conversations of English learners in the Trinity Lancaster Corpus. Although they all express disagreement with the previous speaker, they differ in the strategies used to express the opposing view.

Do you think that some of the examples can be considered more polite than others? Rank the examples using the following scale: (1) not polite – (2) polite – (3) very polite

Example	Your score
A I completely disagree with this because er I I repeat as I said ...	
B I agree with this point but don't you think maybe the fact that times are changing is a good thing?	
C but I personally would disagree that that money would necessarily be spent on that	
D erm no no it's not so	
E well I 'm not totally convinced but er you know I live in a really traditional family	
F mm I can understand your opinion erm but I was still wondering...	
G I can't agree with you	
H er er I I think erm I I think they I I think they are wrong	
I I think they're completely wrong	
J no way	
K I I I can understand what you 're saying but I'm not I don't agree with that	

When you are done, compare your rating with a partner and discuss the following questions:

- Did you have similar ratings?
- What expressions made the disagreement more or less polite?
- What strategies of polite communication have been demonstrated in the sentences ranked as polite and very polite?

### Task 4

In this task, we will explore a very common strategy for softening expression of disagreement and making it more polite. This is achieved by, first, agreeing with the previous statement and showing that you understand the point, before saying that you, in fact, disagree with the view.

We will use BNClab to search for more examples of this type of disagreement by typing one of the following expressions in the search window: *yes but* – *yeah but* – *right but*. Go to the Usage button and find three different expressions of disagreement. Note these down and compare them with your partner or a group, underlining any other expressions helping to make the expression of an opposing view less direct and more polite.

Next, pick one of the topics to discuss with a partner. When expressing opposing views, try to use different strategies and expressions that you've identified in Tasks 2-4.

- Everybody should have a right to free education
- People should be able to freely choose the country where they want to live



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