

Lesson 43 – Talking about Hypothetical / Imaginary Situations

Talking about hypothetical (imaginary) situations is often one of the most difficult grammar challenges for English learners. We use the **second conditional** and **third conditional** to do this.

Although you may have already studied these structures, hopefully seeing them in conversation and practicing with your own examples will help you remember them better, so that you can use them more easily in your own speaking.

Conversation #1 – Imagining that the Present was Different

Carrie is a famous actress who is being interviewed on a radio show. At the end of the show, the interviewer asks her some questions that were sent in by fans – all the questions are about imaginary situations.

Interviewer: Before we wrap up the show, I have a few interesting questions from our listeners. Would you mind answering a couple of them?

Carrie: Not at all – let’s hear ‘em!

Interviewer: The first one is: “If you had to pick a different career, which one would you choose?”

Carrie: If I weren’t an actress, I’d be a veterinarian.

Interviewer: That’s quite a departure from acting! You wouldn’t stay in show business – as a director or something like that?

Carrie: No, I’ve always loved acting, but I’ve never liked the entertainment industry in general – it’s too competitive and stressful. But I love animals – so, yes, I’d be a vet.

Interviewer: Very interesting! The next question comes from a listener in Oakland. She writes, “If you could change one thing about your life, what would it be?”

Carrie: That one’s easy – I’d like to have more free time!

Interviewer: So, let's say you had the next four weeks off, with NO commitments whatsoever. What would you do?

Carrie: Well, I *could* do a lot of things... travel, re-decorate my house, spend time with my family... it would be hard to choose! But right now, I'd say.... I'd probably take a trip to a country where no one knows me, so I could just relax and enjoy.

Interviewer: Our final question is a very creative one: "If you had a time machine, and you could live in any century you wanted – which one would it be?"

Carrie: I'd live in the future. That time machine goes forward, too, right?

Interviewer: I assume it does!

Carrie: I wouldn't go back to the past... although there have been some fascinating periods in history, I wouldn't be able to live without modern creature comforts. So I'd travel to the future instead.

Interviewer: That works! Okay, that's all we have time for today. Thanks so much for coming on the show, Carrie.

Conversation Phrases

Let's look at the situations from this dialogue, which Carrie is imagining to be different:

Real situation in the present: I am an actress.

Imaginary situation: If I weren't an actress, I'd be a vet.

Real situation in the present: I have little free time.

Imaginary situation: If I had more free time, I'd travel.

Real situation in the present: I don't have a time machine.

Imaginary situation: If I had a time machine, I'd live in the future.

In all three cases, Carrie is imagining what would happen if something in the present was different. This difference can be **impossible** (as in the example of the time machine) or simply **unreal/unlikely** (as in the example of changing careers or getting more free time).

This type of structure is called the **second conditional**. You can form the sentences with this formula: If + verb in the simple past, + subject + would/wouldn't...

Remember that we are **imagining that the present was different** – even though the verb is in the simple past!

You can also switch the two parts of the sentence/question:

- If you won the lottery, what would you do?
- = What would you do if you won the lottery?
- If I won the lottery, I'd buy a boat.
- = I'd buy a boat if I won the lottery.

Three other ways to phrase the imaginary situation are: **"Let's say..."** **"Imagine..."** and **"What if..."**

- **Let's say** you had a time machine. What century would you live in?
- **Imagine** you lost all your money. What would you do to survive?
- **What if** your kids were caught stealing? What would you say to them?

To answer a hypothetical question, we use:

- **"I'd..."** / **"I wouldn't..."**
for saying what you would definitely do
- **"I could..."** / **"I might..."**
for saying what is possible to do, but not your definite action

For example: "If I found someone's wallet on the street, I **could** keep the money... but I **wouldn't** do that. **I'd** give it to the police."

As you can see, "could" expresses the possibilities, but "would" and "wouldn't" express the definite actions in that imaginary situation.

Conversation #2 – Imagining that the Past was Different

Now the interviewer is talking to Olivia, a successful businesswoman who founded a multimillion dollar company. They are talking about how Olivia's life would have been different if certain things had happened in the past.

Interviewer: So tell me, Olivia – what has been one of the big turning points in your life?

Olivia: Right after graduating from college, I applied for my “dream job” at a big corporation – and I didn’t get it. And that was when I decided to go into business for myself.

Interviewer: *If you had gotten that job, you probably **wouldn’t** have started your company.*

Olivia: That’s right. My company started very small; it took about ten years to reach a point where it was really profitable. *If I’d had a lot of money to invest in it, then it might’ve grown faster.*

Interviewer: Do you ever regret not taking the more “traditional” route and just finding another job?

Olivia: No, not really. I like working for myself. And on a personal note, I actually got to know my husband at an entrepreneurship conference – *if I hadn’t gone to the conference, I wouldn’t have met him!*

Interviewer: I guess not! Could you tell us about one of the problems you’ve had in your business?

Olivia: One mistake we made in the early days was buying the absolute cheapest material for our products. *If we’d invested a little more in higher-quality material, we could’ve sold our products at higher prices, and we would’ve made more profit in the beginning.*

Interviewer: Right. Who would you say has been the biggest inspiration to you, in your life as an entrepreneur?

Olivia: I would say my grandmother. She’s not an entrepreneur herself, but she’s always believed in me. *If not for her encouragement, I probably wouldn’t have had the courage to pursue my goals.*

Conversation Phrases

Again, let’s take the real situations in the past and compare them with the situations that Olivia is imagining:

Real situation in the past: I didn't get the job.

Imaginary situation: If I had gotten that job, I probably wouldn't have started the company.

Real situation in the past: I didn't have money to invest in my company.

Imaginary situation: If I'd had a lot of money to invest in it, then it might've grown faster.

Real situation in the past: I went to a conference and met my husband.

Imaginary situation: If I hadn't gone to the conference, I wouldn't have met my husband.

Real situation in the past: We didn't invest in high-quality material.

Imaginary situation: If we'd invested in higher-quality material, we could've sold our products at higher prices, and we would've made more profit in the beginning.

Real situation in the past: My grandmother encouraged me.

Imaginary situation: If not for her encouragement, I probably wouldn't have had the courage to pursue my goals.

This structure is called the **third conditional** and it is used for talking about how other things in the past would have been different, if one thing had been different.

The basic structure is:

- If + past perfect, + subject + would/could/might have + past participle.
would = more certain; could/might = less certain

Again, we can switch the two parts of the sentence, with no change in meaning:

- If I hadn't gone to the conference, I wouldn't have met my husband.
- I wouldn't have met my husband if I hadn't gone to the conference.

In the last question, about Olivia's grandmother, she uses a shortened form: **"If not for..."** – you can use this expression followed by a noun:

- If we hadn't had the map, we would've gotten lost.
- = If not for the map, we would've gotten lost.
- If you hadn't helped me, I wouldn't have succeeded.

- = **If not for your help**, I wouldn't have succeeded.

These structures can be confusing, so it's essential to practice creating your own sentences! Today's homework is to answer these questions using sentences in the second and third conditional:

Imagining the Present was Different (Second Conditional)

1. If you were the president of your country, what would you change?
2. If you had only one year left to live, how would you spend it?
3. If you could only take three things with you to a deserted island, what would you take?
4. If you won the lottery, what would you do with the money?
5. If you were an animal, which animal would you be?

Imagining the Past was Different (Third Conditional)

Think of five important decisions/moments in your life – then write/say 5 sentences imagining how your life would have been different if the opposite was true.

Ex) If I hadn't studied chemistry in college, I wouldn't have received a science scholarship.

If I had married my ex-boyfriend, I'd probably still be living in the U.S.

You can record your answers here: <http://www.speakpipe.com/espressoenglish>

Or e-mail them to me: homework@espressoenglish.net