


Using Softening Phrases to Make Polite Requests

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In this lesson, students learn some softening phrases for making polite requests.

Warm-up

Write the following on the board. “Can I have Friday off?” Ask your class if this is an appropriate way to ask a supervisor for a day off (assuming the supervisor isn’t a friend or someone the student has known for a long time). Then, put students in pairs and have them come up with a more polite way to make this request. Give students a few minutes and then put their ideas on the board.

Intermediate students usually come up with something like this:

Could I have Friday off?

Could I have Friday off, please?

Softening Phrases

Explain that using “could” instead of “can” does make a request more polite but that there are phrases we use to be less direct and more polite when we make requests. Explain that we mostly use these phrases in the following situations:

1. When the person to whom we are making the request does not have an obligation to say yes.
2. When we are making a big request.
3. When we are making a request to someone who is at a higher level within the company.

Write the following softening phrases on the board:

I was hoping you/I could...

I was hoping you could work this Saturday.

I was hoping I could take Friday off.

I was wondering if you/I could...

I was wondering if you could cover my shift next Tuesday.

I was wondering if I could take an extended lunch break to run some errands.

Do you think you/I might be able to..?

Do you think you might be able to help me out with these reports?

Do you think I might be able to leave a few minutes early so I can pick up my child from school?

Emphasize that these are polite, indirect ways of asking for something.

Practice 1

Have students look at the following scenarios and write an appropriate request for the situation. Remind them to use softening phrases.

- 1. You need to give a presentation in two weeks. Someone you used to work with has recently written an excellent article on the same topic that you have to present on. You would like to print the article and hand it out to the attendees at your presentation. How would you ask your former coworker for permission to do this?*
- 2. Your company has just purchased a new projector for the conference room. You don't know how to use it yet, but a coworker of yours has already used it several times. You would like your coworker to show you how to use the projector on his lunch break. How would you ask him to help you?*
- 3. Your car is in the shop and you had to take the bus to work. It's raining really hard, and you don't want to take the bus home. One of your coworkers lives a few miles from you. You want her to give you a ride home. How would you ask her for a ride?*
- 4. You own a construction company. Your company has just completed an addition to a customer's house. The job was finished on time and the customer is happy. You'd like to put a small promotional sign outside of your customer's house that says "Another quality job done by (your company's name)." How would you ask your customer if you can do this?*

Go over the possible answers with the class. Emphasize that all 5 of these examples probably require softening phrases because of one or more of the following reasons:

1. The person to whom we are making the request does not have an obligation to say yes.
2. We are making a big request.
3. We are making a request to someone who is at a higher level within the company.

Practice 2

Now, break students into groups. Give each group a copy of the scenarios below. Tell the class that they need to do the following:

1. Read the scenarios.
2. Decide if the situation calls for a softening phrase or not.
3. Make an appropriate request and say it out loud for the group.

Walk around the class and listen to their requests. Make sure that students are using softening phrases when appropriate and using simple requests with “can” or “could” when a softening phrase is unnecessary.

Scenarios:

- 1. You have a conference call in English tomorrow. You'd like your English teacher to stay after class and help you prepare for the call. How would you ask her to help you?*
- 2. You are at a restaurant and would like the check. How would you ask the waiter to bring the check to you?*
- 3. Someone from outside the company visited your office and gave a presentation. You thought it was a great presentation and you would like a copy of the Power Point slides. How would you ask the presenter for the document?*
- 4. Your daughter has a championship soccer game tonight. Unfortunately, the game starts at 4:30 p.m. and you don't get off work until 5:00 p.m. How would you ask your supervisor to leave an hour early so that you can see the start of the game?*
- 5. Something unexpected happened this morning and you are late for work. You realize that you do not have your supervisor's phone number. You decide to call a coworker and ask her to tell the boss that you will be late. How would you ask your coworker to do this for you?*
- 6. You work in sales. A customer has just called you and complained about always receiving his shipments late. He's very upset and wants you to expedite his current order. The computer system shows that your customer's order won't ship until tomorrow, so you decide to call the warehouse manager and ask if she can make sure the order ships by the end of the day. How would you ask her for this favor?*
- 7. Some members of your team are having some technical issues with their computers. You decide to ask Gary, the company's network administrator, to come by and see what the problem is. How would you ask Gary to do this?*
- 8. You are looking for a new job and are sending applications to prospective employers. You would like to supplement your applications with letters of recommendation from previous employers. You decide to call Carol, your former supervisor, and ask her to write you a letter of recommendation. What would you say to Carol?*
- 9. Your department has a company car. Typically, only senior members of your team can use the car. However, you have an important meeting with a client, and you want to use the company car to make a good impression. How would you ask your supervisor to use the car for your upcoming meeting with your client?*

Answers: Numbers 1, 3, 4, 6, 8, and 9 would most likely require softening phrases. Numbers 2, 5, and 7 would require a more direct request.

