

# Taboos and embarrassing situations

You're treading on thin ice there. • It's a bit of a minefield. • I just made some throw-away comment. • No sooner had I said it than I regretted it. • I was mortified when I found out. • It's a major faux pas, apparently. • I think it's de rigueur to buy your teacher a present, isn't it? • She's a bit blasé about the dangers. • He was effing and blinding. • I won't repeat what he called me. • It actually refers to a man's private parts! • I don't think many people would take offence at that. • It's blasphemous. • This kind of thing is just dumbing down our culture.

## Conversation

### 1 Using vocabulary: awkward situations

Put the words in brackets in order to make five common idioms.

- I just made some throw-away comment about how much he smokes, but I think ..... because he got really defensive. (nerve / I / have / a / hit / must / raw)
- It was stupid, really – just ..... I called her Liz instead of Lisa, but she went crazy! (the / slip / of / tongue / a).
- Then he started asking me how long we'd been going out together and I realised he'd ..... Honestly, I don't know where he got THAT idea from! (of / stick / got / the / end / the / wrong)
- A: I don't think you look fat in it at all. Anyway, there's nothing wrong with being a BIT overweight.  
B: Watch what you're saying! ..... here. (are / ice / treading / you / thin / on)
- ..... I asked her if she had any kids! How was I supposed to know she couldn't have any! (my / it / I / foot / really / put / in)

Can you translate these idioms? Do you use similar ones in your language?

Now complete these sentences with the words in the box.

faux pas	mortified	no-no	taboo
minefield	mouth	steer clear	tread

- I've learned from bitter experience that politics is a bit of a ..... subject in their house. It's best just to ..... of it altogether.
- The whole subject of race is a potential ..... on my degree course. You have to ..... very carefully indeed with it.
- I committed a bit of a ..... by making a joke about the king and then laughing my head off – only to realise everyone was just looking really, really annoyed! Me and my big ....., really!
- I left my chopsticks pointing up in the bowl once I'd finished, but apparently that's a real ..... in Japan.
- When I realised my zip had been open all that time, I was absolutely .....

### 2 Speaking

Discuss these questions with a partner.

- Have you ever really put your foot in it – accidentally said something that annoyed or upset someone?
- Are there any subjects you find it's generally best to steer clear of?
- What advice would you give to foreigners visiting your country about things that are real no-nos?
- Have you ever committed any real faux pas when you've been abroad?
- Have you ever felt absolutely mortified? Why?

### 3 While you listen

You are going to hear Erica talking to her friend Kirsten about a recent visit to her in-laws in the Ivory Coast. As you listen, try to answer these questions.

- How does she get on with her in-laws?
- What happened during the meal out?
- How does she put her foot in it at the end of the conversation?

### 4 Vocabulary focus: collocations

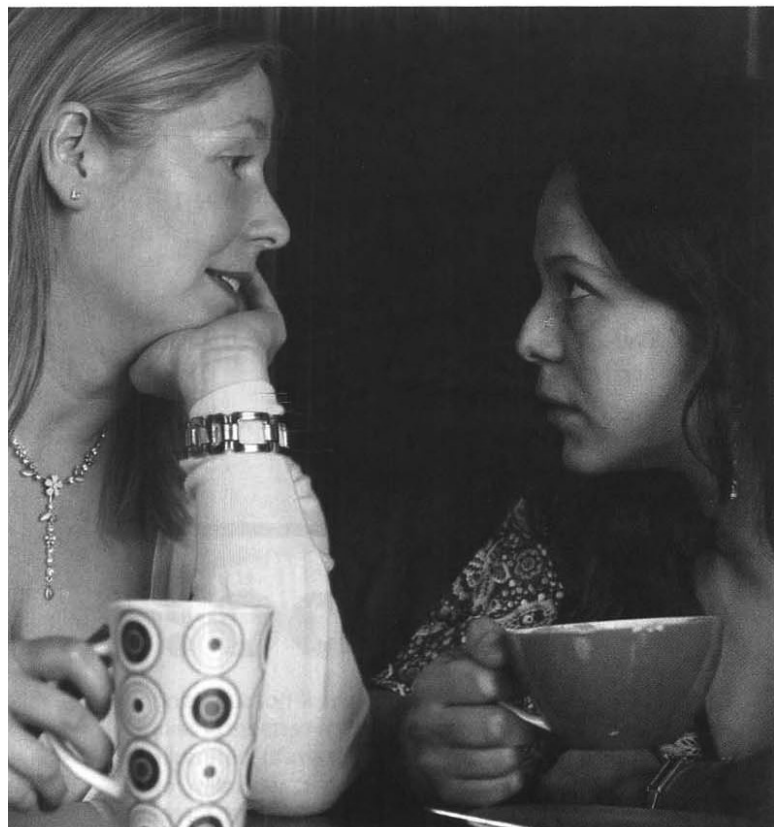
Match the adjectives to the nouns they were used with in the conversation.

- |                  |                          |             |
|------------------|--------------------------|-------------|
| 1. this icy      | <input type="checkbox"/> | a. look     |
| 2. the pecking   | <input type="checkbox"/> | b. faux pas |
| 3. an awkward    | <input type="checkbox"/> | c. habit    |
| 4. small         | <input type="checkbox"/> | d. silence  |
| 5. a major       | <input type="checkbox"/> | e. order    |
| 6. this annoying | <input type="checkbox"/> | f. talk     |

Now match the adverbs to the verbs.

- |                          |                          |                                 |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 7. I innocently          | <input type="checkbox"/> | g. coming to terms with it      |
| 8. They started shifting | <input type="checkbox"/> | h. said                         |
| 9. I was silently        | <input type="checkbox"/> | i. uncomfortably in their seats |
| 10. They're gradually    | <input type="checkbox"/> | j. getting my head round it     |
| 11. I'm slowly           | <input type="checkbox"/> | k. mouthing.                    |

Look at the tapescript on page 161 and underline the sentences with these collocations. Try to notice any other words which are used with them.



## 5 Using grammar: *No sooner had ... than ...*

In the conversation, Erica said 'No sooner had I finished the sentence than this awkward silence fell.' We often use this structure when we're telling stories to emphasise the fact that the second action happened very quickly after the first.

Notice that we invert the subject and the auxiliary when we start the sentence or clause with **No sooner**. This adds emphasis.

► For more information on how to use *No sooner*, see G24.

**Rewrite these sentences using *No sooner*.**

- It was awful! We got to the check-in desk and then I suddenly realised I'd left the tickets at home.  
.....
- I felt awful! I did it and then I immediately realised I'd made a terrible mistake!  
.....
- It was typical! We offered the unions a decent pay rise and then the very next day they called a strike.  
.....
- It was weird! About half an hour after I booked an appointment with my doctor, the pain just disappeared.  
.....
- It was such a stressful evening! First my ex-wife rang and then about five minutes later my lawyer called.  
.....

## 6 Using vocabulary: loan words

In the conversation, Erica said she 'committed a major *faux pas*.' The expression *faux pas* is originally French, but was borrowed by English and is now a normal part of the language.

Look at these other French words which are often used in English. Then discuss the questions with a partner.

- Have you ever heard any of these words before?
- Do you use any of them in your language?

au fait	coup	en route
au pair	cuisine	en suite
avant-garde	déjà vu	fiancé
blasé	de rigueur	genre
buffet	double entendre	laissez faire
camouflage	duvet	matinée
c'est la vie	élite	nouveau riche
chic	en masse	risqué
cliché		

Tell your partner how you think the words above are pronounced – in English.

🔊 Now listen to the tape and practise saying the words.

Complete 1–8 below by adding words from above:

- There was a military ..... there last year and the army have been in power ever since.
- He went to a very ..... school. It must cost at least twenty thousand a year to go there.
- It's already become a bit of a ..... to describe Paris as the most romantic city in the world – but it's still true!
- I couldn't believe it! He told this really ..... joke – in front of my mother! She looked mortified!
- He's quite ..... about speaking in public. He doesn't seem to get worried about it at all.
- It's a big tourist resort. People flock there ..... every summer.
- I heard she's got engaged. Have you met her ..... yet?
- A: Can you help me install this?  
B: Sorry, but I'm not very ..... with these new computers.

Now discuss these questions with a partner.

- Do you know any words from your own language that are now an everyday part of English?
- How many English loan words can you think of in your language?
- Are you sure they mean exactly the same thing in your language as they do in English?