



Topics to talk about with a foreigner

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The modern way life gives you a lot of various opportunities. One of them is the chance to meet people from different cultures and nationalities on a daily basis. Nowadays you don't even need to travel abroad to get to know the world. People from all around the globe will come to the Czech Republic. Sometimes I hear foreigners discussing their experiences with encountering the locals as well as the locals talking about their encounters with foreigners; sometimes I join such conversations myself. When talking to foreigners, everybody wants to learn as much about them as possible. At the same, however, everybody views them through their own prefabricated patterns. What is it that prevents us from forming our own views of another person, views that would be free of all stereotypes and unbiased by the prevailing general opinion? I believe that classical language courses, which are out of touch with reality, are part of the reason. I have always been a rather average student, but even I have managed to learn to ask – in English, German, and now also in Czech – a basic set of questions meant to "show your interest": Where do you come from? What is your name? How do you like this country? What do you do? How are you? And so on.

Three years ago, I moved from Saint Petersburg to Prague. As a foreigner, I had to find new contacts among the locals. On a trial-and-error basis I found out how these "polite questions" become gradually automated, which doesn't happen only to me, but to others as well. Standardized questions can, to a certain extent, distort your opinion of another person.

Based on my own observations, I would say that the opening questions of a conversation are almost the same for all nations. It almost seems that people all around the world have agreed on them. It may be a result of globalisation or of the general readiness of people to meet different nationalities. It is true that asking a few meaningless questions when you meet a foreigner for the first time can relax the atmosphere and help overcome the language barrier. What is wrong with it? First of all the fact that standardized questions lead to standardized answers. You ask a question and know in advance what the answer will be. Sometimes you

don't even wait for it. In the meanwhile you start preparing the next question from the recommended list. This means that when you meet someone for the first time – that is when your most important impression of the person is formed – you waste your time and energy on asking boring questions, knowing, or at least predicting, the answers. What is even more upsetting is that when this opinion poll is over, we don't know what to do with its results.

After we run out of opening questions, the conversation usually follows our associations which are very often based on stereotypes. One partner is trying to obtain evidence to underpin their previous knowledge about the other nation, while the other partner is trying to challenge these prejudices and stereotypes. If nothing extraordinary and enriching happens during the conversation, the conversation partners may end up disappointed by the encounter with the foreigner, or even come to the conclusion that talking to foreigners is always boring and that all of them are the same. Can we avoid this? Of course. One of the options is to reformulate the standardized questions or to use your own questions. That is the only way to give your foreign conversation partner an opportunity to show his real personal opinion.

I would like to share with you a few tips for topics that can – when approached the right way – arouse interest of your foreign conversation partners and make them want to chat with you.

It is often said that the urge to improve your economic situation, including your standard of living, is one of the main push factors causing people to migrate. I would dare to contradict this statement. Emigrants are not only unsatisfied poor people from distant countries, but first and foremost adventurers. Despite the efforts of the Czech Republic to attract highly qualified workers only, there remain various foreigners in the country. Do not forget that immigrants who take up low-qualification jobs can not only repair a broken machine or clean a house cheaply, but they are also adventurers who, if you approach them the right way, can enrich you with their stories from their homeland.

Living in a foreign country for a long time or emigrating can be compared to being re-born. You suddenly find yourself in an unknown environment, have to learn to speak, you notice how people around you react to your behaviour, and you try to imitate the local habits. But you are still aware of the fact that you are different. Personal successes that were respected in your homeland can usually not be transferred to the new society and they are not even welcome. The whole concept of success is significantly different. What is considered

awkward by one person, may be considered inspiring by another. Immigrants who have managed to overcome their inner discomfort and build up confidence again may become an inspiration for people around them. A certain flexibility of thinking is of crucial importance here. Flexibility of thinking helps the immigrants to recognize and use the possibilities the hosting society is offering them. That is how the immigrant comes to understand his or her own self better and finds his or her own hidden interests and talents.

An interesting topic for discussion with a foreigner can be their reason of staying in the unknown environment – despite the rather complicated life situation and for example despite the efforts of the authorities to limit the number of foreigners in the country.

One of the unpleasant, but ever-recurring questions is the foreigner's opinion on politics. Czechs often ask foreigners: "What do you think of the political situation in your country?" I would like to emphasize that your counterpart will hardly ever be able to clearly describe the complex political situation in their country in two sentences. An analysis of the political climate is a good topic for a comprehensive journalistic article or for a student's thesis, less so for an informal conversation with a foreigner. This doesn't mean, however, that the foreigner cannot know anything interesting about politics, or have any opinion on it. To put it simply, a question asked in such broad terms will usually call for a stereotypical answer. It is not bad, therefore, to find out at the beginning of the conversation whether your counterpart likes talking about politics. If so, such a conversation could be very interesting and inspiring for every Czech. You can ask, for example, which media your conversation partner uses to get information and whether he or she is able to compare the quality of the news broadcast here and in his or her country. You can bring a conversation about politics on a more profound basis by describing a recent event that you have noticed in the newspaper and ask the foreigner about their opinion.

Another typical conversation topic is, of course, food. I would recommend avoiding the standard question "What do you eat in your country?". It is difficult for foreigners to talk about their national cuisine if they have nothing to compare it with. If you want to find out more about the typical dishes of a foreign country, start by describing your own cuisine. You can say that it is typical in the Czech Republic to eat pastry such as "rohlík" for breakfast and you will quickly find out if it is something new for your partner. You can also explain why exactly this type of pastry and what the difference between a "rohlík" and dumplings and

bread is and why you usually buy ten “rohlíks” at once when you go to a supermarket. If you show this kind of openness and ability to critically judge your own habits, you will surely be rewarded with a tasty-sounding description of the cuisine of your conversation partner’s country.

The above tips may sound a bit naive. I know that how happy you are with a conversation depends on the questions asked. The aim of this article is to make you think about the choice of questions in which you will invest your time and energy next time you meet a foreigner, and to think about whether the way you “show interest” really helps you find out something new about foreign cultures, or rather shows your effort to get evidence of what you already know. If you admit to yourself that the standard questions are to a considerable extent stereotypical, you may stop asking yourself why foreigners keep speaking about nothing else than the beauty of the Charles Bridge, the taste of Czech beer and the size of roast pork.

(Translated by: Jan Šmrha)