

Real Talk #031 – Can I help you?

Episode description

Speaking with a salesperson in your second language can be difficult at times. In this episode of Real Talk, Andrew and Suzanne discuss the ways you can respond properly in shopping situations.

Fun fact

The world's largest shopping mall is called the New South China Mall and is located in Dongguan, China. It has more than 2,300 stores!

Expressions included in the study guide

- Can I help you?
- Direct
- To navigate
- Window-shopping
- I'm OK
- Frantically



Transcript

Note: The words and expressions that appear in **bold text** within the transcript are discussed in more detail in the Detailed Explanations section that follows the transcript.

Andrew: You're listening to the Culips English Podcast. To download the study guide for this episode, which includes the transcript, detailed vocabulary explanations, real-world examples, and a quiz, visit our website, Culips.com, C-U-L-I-P-S.com.

Hey, everybody, my name is Andrew.

Suzanne: And I'm Suzanne.

Andrew: And you're listening to Culips.

Hey, everyone, you are tuned into Real Talk by Culips. This is the series where we teach you the English expressions that you need to know for everyday real-world situations. And today I am joined by Suzanne.

Hey, Suzanne.

Suzanne: Hey, Andrew. How's it going?

Andrew: I'm doing very well, thank you. Suzanne, what are we gonna take a look at today?

Suzanne: Well, today we're going to look at how to answer a question that you'll hear quite often, almost every time that you go shopping. We're going to look at the phrase, "**Can I help you?**"

Andrew: Right, a seemingly easy question, but there are multiple ways that we can answer this question. And, like you said, I think you hear it every time you go shopping, right? So it's a really good one to know how to answer.

Suzanne: Yeah.

Andrew: But just before we get started with this episode, I wanna take a moment here to let all of our listeners know that the best way to study with this episode is with our study guide. And there's a lot of amazing things packed into our study guide. In it, you'll get a transcript, detailed vocabulary explanations of all the key expressions that you'll hear us talk about today, real-life examples about how to use those expressions. You'll get a comprehension quiz and more in the study guide.

Andrew: So if you would like to download it, all you have to do is visit our, website Culips.com, and sign up to become a Culips member. And becoming a Culips member, it's a great way to study English. You support us and what we do here at Culips, as well. So it's good all around. And if you're interested in doing that, just visit Culips.com for all the info.

Suzanne: So today, we're going to learn how to answer the question, "**Can I help you?**" and variations of that question. So that question you hear all the time when you walk into a store or a restaurant. How did you kind of come up with the idea of this "**Can I help you?**" episode?

Andrew: The inspiration for this episode is kind of a funny story. I was recently travelling with my girlfriend, and she's not a native English speaker. In fact, she's a native Korean speaker and, since we both live in Korea, most of the opportunities that she has to speak English are with me. And, of course, this is the type of question that you never really get asked in a relationship, right? This is a shopping question, so this topic would never come up in our personal conversations that we have with each other.

But when we were travelling, this actually happened in Finland. We went into a store together, and the salesclerk at the store asked my girlfriend this question, "**Can I help you?**" And my girlfriend just said no. And I was shocked, I thought, oh my god, you can't just say no, it's too **direct**, it's too rude. And then I realized, oh, the reason that she said that is that she's never actually experienced this situation before. And so that turned on a light bulb in my head, and I thought this would make a great topic for Real Talk, and so that's why we'll talk about it here today.

Suzanne: That's a really good example. It can be difficult to **navigate** that.

Andrew: Yeah, some of these situations you just need to actually experience in real life before you know how to deal with them.

Suzanne: Yeah.

Andrew: So, Suzanne, what's the plan for today?

Suzanne: Yeah, so first we're going to listen to three short dialogues where we hear a shopper responding to a salesclerk or a salesperson asking, "**Can I help you?**" And after each one, we'll talk about it and break it down, see if we can make sense of it all.

Andrew: Sounds good. Let's get to it and listen to that first dialogue.

Salesclerk: Hi there, **can I help you** with anything?

Shopper: No, thanks, I'm just looking.

Salesclerk: Oh, OK, no problem. Let me know if you need any help.

Shopper: Thanks, I'll do that.

Andrew: All right. So in this first example, we heard the shopper respond, "No, thanks, I'm just looking." Right? "No, thanks, I'm just looking."

Suzanne: Yeah.

Andrew: Let's listen to that one more time.

Shopper: No, thanks, I'm just looking.
No, thanks, I'm just looking.

Andrew: Let's talk about it, "No, thanks, I'm just looking." What's your reaction to this? Is it a polite response, is it a common response?

Suzanne: This is a really common response. Sometimes you walk in, you maybe were inspired to come in for one thing, but you're just looking around. You're just browsing, you're seeing if you really want to buy something. That's a really common thing to say. I'm just looking, I don't plan on buying anything right now, I just want to suss out the situation. I want to check things and see if I want to buy something later.

Andrew: Yeah, because many times when you go into a store, you actually aren't intending to buy something, right? You're just seeing what's there and so, yeah, I would say the most common way to answer this question, "**Can I help you?**" is with one of these answers, right? No, thanks, I'm just looking or I'm just looking around or I'm just browsing. They all mean the same thing. It's like just let me look, OK? This kind of idea.

Suzanne: Yeah, give me some time to look and if I need you, I'll ask.

Andrew: It sort of tells the salesclerk, too, to leave you alone, to give you some freedom to look around at the items in the store comfortably without the pressure of them looking over your shoulder.

Suzanne: Yeah, I've had some salespeople ask me, "Can I help, or are you just looking?"

Andrew: Right, right.

Suzanne: And I will say, yeah, I'm just looking.

- Andrew: Now, let's pretend that you're in a clothing store, OK? You're walking around in a clothing store and a salesperson asks you, "**Can I help you?**" And you answer, oh no, I'm just **window-shopping**. Would that be OK?
- Suzanne: Not really, because **window-shopping** is done from the outside of the shop, when you look into the window. When you're inside the store, you're just looking around, you're looking at the stuff inside, not from the window. So **window-shopping** is done on the street, from the street so that you can look into the window.
- Andrew: And it's not very often that the salesperson is outside of the store, right?
- Suzanne: Maybe having a cigarette break.
- Andrew: Yeah, could happen, but as long as you're inside the store then it's not appropriate to talk about **window-shopping** anymore. You're looking around or you're browsing at this point.
- And one more question for you, what happens if you answered like my girlfriend and just said no?
- Suzanne: It's just a rude kind of response. "**Can I help you?**" "No." It's kind of like you're smacking the ball back at the person in a very rude way, you know, you're shutting it down. There's no opening. In North American culture, I would say you don't smack it down with a definitive answer. You kind of say your opinion with leaving a little bit of the window open. The door is slightly open, right? So, "No, thanks, I'm just looking" is better than no because it leaves an opportunity for the salesperson to leave you alone and, yet, if you want help, they are just there to help you. If you say no, then chances are they'll leave you and they will never come back. So if you have a question, they may be far away.
- Andrew: But if you've made this mistake before, don't feel too bad about it because it's not a major mistake. And, like, I mentioned to all of my students, we can tell when you're a second-language learner and we usually don't get offended. It's all about your attitude and the way that you deliver it, so even if you were to say this but you're smiling and you are pleasant, then it's not gonna come across as offensive.
- Suzanne: Yeah, you're right.
- Andrew: OK, let's listen to conversation number two.

Salesclerk: Hello, are you looking for anything in particular?

Shopper: No, **I'm OK**. Thank you.

Salesclerk: Sure, just shout if you need anything.

Shopper: Great, thanks.

Suzanne: In this example, the key expression here is "I'm OK." Let's listen to that one more time.

Shopper: No, **I'm OK**. Thank you.

No, **I'm OK**. Thank you.

Andrew: Very nice. OK. So, "**I'm OK**," the actual meaning of this in this context is no, thank you, right?

Suzanne: Yeah.

Andrew: **Can I help you? I'm OK**. It just means I don't need help, no, thank you, you cannot help me is the meaning that you are conveying when you say this.

Suzanne: Yeah, it's like **I'm OK** just how I am without help.

Andrew: This is a really good expression to know, because native speakers use it all the time. And, actually, Suzanne, I thought we could do a little role-play here. I'm going to ask you a couple of questions and you can use this answer to respond, OK?

Suzanne: Totally.

Andrew: So let's pretend we're at a diner and I'm the server and I notice your coffee cup is rather low, so I ask you, "Would you like some more coffee?"

Suzanne: **I'm OK**.

Andrew: All right.

Or maybe, you know, Suzanne, we are gym buddies, OK? And I wanna invite you to go the gym with me, but you had a long day at work and you're kinda tired, OK? So I call you up on the phone and I say, "Sue, I'm going to the gym tonight, wanna come?"

Suzanne: **I'm OK**, I'm going to stay in tonight.

Andrew: Perfect. So I hope now everyone can see how we can use, "**I'm OK**" just to mean no or no, thank you.

Suzanne: Yeah, it just means **I'm OK** how I am now without the added coffee, without the gym, right? Without the help, **I'm OK**.

Andrew: Very good. All right, so we have one more short conversation example to listen to, and I think we can do that right now.

Salesclerk: Hello, **can I help you** find anything?

Shopper: Actually, yes, I'm looking for a new frying pan. Where are they located?

Salesclerk: Oh, just check out aisle 7. And if you have any questions, just let me know.

Shopper: Perfect, thanks.

Andrew: Here the salesperson used a slight variation on this question, "**Can I help you?**" Right? He said, "**Can I help you** find anything?" Essentially this means the same thing, right?

Suzanne: Yeah, this is like find anything in particular, right? Something specific.

Andrew: And a very common question. Salespeople ask you this all the time in a store, "**Can I help you** find anything?" "Oh, yes, I'm looking for a new tie, where are the ties please?" You can answer like this, right?

Suzanne: Yeah, usually when I'm **frantically** looking around for something, they're, like, "**Can I help you** find anything?" Because they see me looking, where is that, I'm looking for something so specific.

Andrew: Exactly. And so in this example, we heard the shopper respond positively, right? She mentioned that, you know, she does need some help finding something. And how did she do that, exactly?

Suzanne: Yeah. So then she responded with the specific item, right? "Actually, yes." And the "actually" is interesting because most of the time people say, no, thanks, I'm just looking, or, **I'm OK**, because most of the time we are just looking, we're just browsing. Rarely do we go in for a specific item. And in this case, she is looking for something specific. So, actually, yes, you can help me. So, actually, is kind of saying, like, in fact, normally I would just be looking, but actually now I need your help. So that's a great way to say, "Yes, actually, yes," and then she states the thing that she's really looking for.

Andrew: Right, yeah, yes, "I'm looking for a frying pan." Or you could say, "Yeah, actually, where are the frying pans?" Or, "Could you show me where the frying pans are, please?" Any one of these variations would be appropriate in this situation.



Suzanne: One of my favourites is, “Yeah, can you point me in the direction of the pool toys?” or something, I’m dreaming about summer, obviously. But point me in the direction, right?

Andrew: Right, point me in the direction of such and such an it. And this one is nice because that kind of implies again that you want the salesperson to leave you alone, you don’t want them to bring you over to the, you know, the pool toys.

Suzanne: Exactly, just point and I’ll go there by myself.

Andrew: Yeah. Exactly.

All right, everyone, well, I hope we shed some light today on how to answer this question, “**Can I help you?**” that you’ll 100% definitely hear next time you are shopping. And I wanna thank all of you for listening today and remind you one more time about our website. It is www.Culips.com and, again, if you wanna get the study guide for this episode or listen to any of our past episodes, then just check out the Culips website and you can do all of that and more.

Suzanne: Like always, we’re on Facebook at Facebook.com/CulipsPodcast and you can get in touch with us by emailing contact@Culips.com and also on Instagram at Instagram.com/Culips_English.

Andrew: We will be back real soon with another brand new episode, and we’ll talk to y’all then. Bye.

Suzanne: Bye, now.

Detailed Explanations

Can I help you?

Idiom

Can I help you is one of the most common questions a salesperson will ask you when entering a store. It is a general expression that the speaker uses to make himself or herself useful. You can also use it outside of a store when you offering to help someone.

Here are a couple more examples with **can I help you**:

Johann:	Hey, Dave, what's up?
Dave:	Hey, Johann! I'm just trying to fix my bicycle. I can't seem to get my brakes tight enough.
Johann:	I've worked on a bunch of bikes. Can I help you with that?
Dave:	Of course. I'm sure you know way more than me.

Nancy:	This is a great party. Everyone is having fun and eating well.
Erika:	Thank you so much.
Nancy:	But you should get out of the kitchen and join us.
Erika:	I will. I still have to prepare this salad.
Nancy:	Can I help you with anything? I could chop the carrots.
Erika:	Actually, that would be great. Thanks.



Direct Adjective

In this episode, Andrew says that he felt his girlfriend's response to a store clerk was too **direct**. That means her answer was to the point, without adding any of the social niceties people usually use. You can say, "Give me water" to someone when you want water, but that would be too **direct** and impolite. A nicer way of asking is to add "please" or some other kind words to your request.

Here are a couple more examples with **direct**:

Andy:	Hello. Is this your first day in the office?
Rona:	Hello. Yes, it is.
Andy:	Welcome aboard!
Rona:	Thank you. Are there any tips you can share with me? I just talked to the boss. He's very direct .
Andy:	That's right, he is. But don't worry, he's like that with everyone. He doesn't sugarcoat things, and he doesn't like to ask twice.
Rona:	Got it. I'll keep that in mind.

Jill:	Did you talk to your boyfriend about his gambling problem yet?
Beth:	No, not yet. I don't know what to say.
Jill:	Just be direct .
Beth:	But I'm too nice. That's not my style.
Jill:	Now is no time to be nice. It's becoming a big problem.

To navigate

Verb

In this episode, Andrew talks about how his girlfriend didn't know how to deal with a new English expression. Suzanne says it can be difficult **to navigate** those situations. In this sense, **to navigate** means to deal with something difficult. This expression comes from sailing, where you **navigate** a ship over water. You can use this expression for dealing with real-life situations or actual travelling, whether by car or boat.

Here are a couple more examples with **to navigate**:

Stephen: What are those papers in your hand?

Sophie: College applications.

Stephen: Oh, I hated filling those out. How are you managing?

Sophie: All right, I guess. It's difficult trying **to navigate** through the various requirements each college has on their application.

Stephen: I know. If you want any help, give me a shout.

Brianna: Have you been to the new department store downtown?

Wilson: Yes, I just came back.

Brianna: It's big, isn't it?

Wilson: Too big! I got lost **navigating** the grocery store in the basement. I wish they would hand out a floor plan of the place!

Window-shopping

Noun

Window-shopping is when you are looking at items on display through the front window of a shop. Often, you are just looking without the intention of buying. It is different from browsing. **Window-shopping** is done from the outside of a store, and browsing is done on the inside or even online.

Here are a couple more examples with **window-shopping**:

Pete:	You're all dressed up. Are you heading out?
Marie:	Yeah. I'm going to meet some friends at the mall to go window-shopping .
Pete:	Make sure it's only window-shopping and not actual shopping. We need to save money.
Marie:	OK. Don't worry.

Trisha:	Other than yoga, do you have other hobbies?
Naoko:	It might sound funny, but one of my favourite things is window-shopping .
Trisha:	Really?
Naoko:	I like to go to really expensive shopping malls and look at all the wonderful things I want to buy.
Trisha:	But you don't buy them?
Naoko:	Not yet. I will when I'm rich!

I'm OK Idiom

I'm OK is a response when declining an offer from someone. It can mean **I'm OK** without help, **I'm OK** with the way things are right now, or **I'm OK** without participating in something when asked. Similar expressions are I'm good, I'm cool, and I'm all right.

Here are a couple more examples with **I'm OK**:

Cashier:	Do you have a membership card?
Wesley:	Yes, I do. Here.
Cashier:	That will be \$12.50. Would you like a bag with that?
Wesley:	Ah ... I'm OK , thanks.
Cashier:	All right. Here you go. Have a nice day.
Wesley:	Thank you. You, too.

Trey:	The first half of the game is almost finished. I'm going down to the store to get a snack. Do you want anything?
Craig:	Actually, yeah. Can you pick up some chips?
Trey:	How are you doing on beer? Want some more?
Craig:	Nah. I'm OK on beer. Thanks.

Frantically

Adverb

In this episode, Suzanne talks about a situation where she is **frantically** looking for something in a store. **Frantically** means in a very hurried and excited way. Think of going into a store and running up and down the aisles looking for something specific, but you don't have a lot of time. That's **frantically** looking around for something.

Here are a couple more examples with **frantically**:

Yuri:	You look a little flustered. Are you OK?
Vera:	I had a pretty bad start to the day.
Yuri:	How so?
Vera:	I was running late and couldn't find my keys.
Yuri:	I hate when that happens.
Vera:	So after frantically looking around for 10 minutes, I gave up and called a taxi.
Yuri:	You still didn't find your keys? That's terrible!

Diane:	How was your trip?
Hattie:	It was a lot of fun. But I really missed my dog, so it was nice to come home.
Diane:	Did he miss you, too?
Hattie:	Like you wouldn't believe! He was barking and wagging his tail frantically when I came to the door. He was so excited.

Quiz

1. **The premise of this episode is a story that happened while Andrew and his girlfriend were shopping. In which country did the story occur?**
2. **Which of the following responses to the question “Can I help you” is too direct?**
 - a) please
 - b) not right now, thank you
 - c) nope
 - d) if you can, that would be great
3. **True or false? Browsing online can also be window-shopping.**
 - a) true
 - b) false
4. **Which of the following is NOT a good example of the verb to navigate?**
 - a) boarding a plane
 - b) going through a maze
 - c) sailing a boat
 - d) filling out complicated paperwork
5. **To act frantically is to act _____.**
 - a) sluggishly
 - b) frenetically
 - c) brightly
 - d) without thinking

Writing and Discussion Questions

1. How do salespeople greet customers in your native language?
2. What do you usually respond when a salesperson greets you and asks if you need help?
3. How do you feel when a salesperson follows you too closely?
4. Which do you prefer: window-shopping or online browsing? Why?
5. How do you react when second-language learners make mistakes of etiquette in your native language?
6. Do you have a good sense of navigation? Can you get around a new city fairly well?

Quiz Answers

1.Finland 2.c 3.b 4.a 5.b

Episode credits

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