

## **Shall We Small Talk?**

Jill Bruellman

Sumikin-Intercom, Inc.

### *Abstract*

*Small talk is a skill that students need in order to become successful communicators. It builds relationships, fills silence, and is the beginning of many English interactions. Yet, Japanese students often do not understand why it is important and often struggle with it. In addition, it is a hard skill to teach and is often overlooked in the classroom. The researcher was surprised to learn that many students at the end of her course rated learning small talk higher than persuading, presentation, and meeting skills. Moreover, she received negative feedback from global managers that many Japanese with advanced English skills do not engage in small talk and instead simply get down to business. This practice-based paper will address why small talk is important and what skills students need to be successful at it. In addition, it will show possible outcomes of teaching small talk in the classroom. Finally, small talk will be broken down into teachable parts and activities will be presented.*

### **Introduction**

Small talk is a skill that can and should be incorporated into English classrooms around the world. It can be introduced at any level in open enrollment programs, workforce language programs, university programs, and ESP programs. Students need it in industries like business and tourism, at conferences, during job interviews, and during interactions with their teacher and other students/colleagues. It is a ‘small’ skill with large implications both for the students and the English classroom.

### **Rationale**

In the book *Global Literacies: Lessons on Business Leadership and National Cultures*, the authors identify four global competencies: personal, social, business, and cultural which are imperative for being a successful in the global business world (Digh, Phillips, Rosen & Singer, 2000). Small talk is one way students can develop this social competency and in turn become successful and active participants in the global business world.

In addition, small talk is one way that students can be ‘recognized’ as competent English speakers. James Paul Gee (2005) talks about this idea of recognition in his book about discourse analysis (p. 27). He writes to pull off a Discourse if you can successfully be recognized by others ‘as a particular type of who (identity) engaged in a particular type of what (activity)’ (Gee, et al., 2005). As educators, we want our students to be recognized as competent English speakers (who) by participating successfully in small talk (what). Therefore, it is our responsibility to give our students the tools they need to be confident and successful communicators, and teaching small talk is one way we can do that.

As further evidence of the importance of teaching this skill, the researcher asked students who work for a Japanese affiliate of a global pharmaceutical company to do a key learnings

presentation at the end of her course covering social communication, email, presentations, meetings, and negotiations. She was surprised to learn that thirteen out of fifteen students rated small talk as one of their three key learnings of the course. In addition, the author conducted a course on global communication behavior for managers where she received direct feedback from their global manager that three out of the eight managers did not engage in enough in small talk and instead just got down to business. Both the students and the managers said (1) they did not know how to do the skill (2) did not realize it is important. Based on this feedback, it is clear that small talk is a skill that seems to be overlooked, is important, and needs to be overtly taught.

### **Definition**

In order to teach small talk, it is important to understand what it is and the roles it plays in English social communication. Small Talk is defined in Longman's Online dictionary as 'Polite unfriendly conversation about unimportant subjects' (<http://www.ldoceonline.com/>). Another definition can be found in a VOA interview with Debra Fine, author of *The Fine Art of Small Talk*, who defines small talk for business as, 'A picture frame around every business conversation' (<http://www.voanews.com/specialenglish/archive/2005-11/2005-11-01-voa2.cfm>). It is important to share these definitions with students.

Although many people may think that small talk is superficial, it has three main functions: it starts and ends almost any English interaction, it fills uncomfortable silence, and it helps build and maintain relationships. It is important to share these functions with students in order to raise their awareness of the importance and role of this skill.

Being good at small talk involves juggling many language skills at once. First, students need to know the structure and rules of small talk. They also need to have knowledge, vocabulary, and fluency to be able to talk about many general topics and especially themselves and their culture. Listening and active listening skills are also needed. In addition, students need to be able to maintain eye contact, respond quickly, ask questions (question forms), and be aware of turn taking.

### **Outcomes**

The main outcome of teaching small talk is that students will become successful and recognized English speakers in the global arena. However, there are three additional outcomes: assertiveness, student-centered classroom, and increased language skills.

#### *Assertiveness*

Educators in Japan often complain that their students are not interactive or assertive enough and are quick to blame Japanese culture. However, instead of taking this culturist approach it is better to ask why students are quiet or not assertive. Cheng argues (2000) that 'if some Asian students are indeed observed to be quieter than expected in certain circumstances, the causes are situation specific rather than culturally pre-set' (p. 435). Therefore, we need to teach our students how to be interactive and assertive instead of assuming they are quiet because they are of culture.

One way to do this is by teaching small talk and encouraging them to use it inside and outside of the classroom. This gives them a way and an opportunity to show they are interactive and assertive.

### *Student-centered learning*

Classes should be student-centered, but often the beginning of class is teacher-centered with the teacher asking the class how they are or how their weekend was. This automatically puts the teacher in control during the first five minutes of class. After small talk is taught, students should be encouraged to speak to each other and engage in conversation with each other before the class starts. This puts them in English mode and sets the students as the center before the class even starts. Students should also be encouraged to initiate conversation with the teacher when she enters the classroom. This puts the student at the center of learning and takes focus away from the teacher as total controller.

### *Improved language skills*

Finally, students should be able to improve their language and cultural skills. They will have awareness of small talk in English and their own culture. They will know the basic forms and rules. Teaching small talk should help their listening/active listening, speaking/fluency, question forms, eye contact, response time, and assertiveness.

## **Language activities**

One way to teach this skill is to break it down into manageable parts: beginning, middle, and end. Here are some activities to teach and practice beginnings, middles, and ends.

### ***Beginnings***

1. Schema building: For homework, direct students to this VOA article about small talk: <http://www.voanews.com/specialenglish/archive/2007-10/2007-10-02-voa2.cfm>. You might want to pre-teach vocabulary and give comprehension questions. Students can listen to it or read it. Discuss the questions and article in class.
2. Schema building: Ask students if they know what small talk is. Ask them if they know when small talk is used and how/where/when it is used in their own language. This may be difficult for some levels.
3. Input: Ask students to generate beginnings of small talk-questions and responses-how are you, how're things going.... Give students beginning phrases sheet-see Appendix 1. Go over items on the sheet and have students repeat questions first and then responses after you, using the audio-lingual method technique of choral repeat. Then teacher asks the questions and students respond and vice versa. Students need a lot of practice saying these phrases, so give them time to develop their confidence in a group.
4. Input: Go over the points to remember section. There are many ways to greet, but students do not have to be creative. They can always use the same greeting, but they should be able

understand them all. The greeting is short, and the answer should be short too. The response should be quick; it is not something you think about. Encourage students to try to greet first. Often they rely on native speakers to initiate conversation. This can be one way for them to show they are assertive. Finally, it is important to point out that sometimes people greet quickly in passing. In this case, 'How's it going' simply means hello and students do not have to stop and answer the question. They can just respond with 'hello' or with 'Hey, how's is going?'

5. Output: Have them practice with a partner just going down the list with one person asking the questions and the other responding and then switching. Then have students move around and ask each other the questions.

6. Pronunciation: For a short pronunciation lesson, point out that 'How's it going' when spoken actually sounds like 'Howzitgoing.' This is an example of reduction of function words and linking. You can show this with other examples as well.

7. Additional practice: Cut up the worksheet into strips-both questions and responses. Have students put the questions and responses together. Alternatively, print the worksheet with either the questions or responses missing, and have them provide the appropriate answer.

8. Link to real world: Have students bring in at least two examples from the daily lives or from T.V. shows.

### ***Middle***

1. Schema building: Ask students what people talk about for small talk in their countries. Go over what topics are common or typical in English and what topics should be avoided. Common topics in English are: weekend, job/school, weather, sports, or hobbies, music, movies, T.V. shows, and family. Topics to be avoided are: money, politics, religion, and health problems.

2. Input: Give students middle phrases sheet (Appendix 2). Go over sheet and have students repeat questions/statements first and then responses after you, using the audio-lingual method technique of choral repeat. Then teacher asks the questions and students respond and vice versa. Ask students if they have any other examples.

3. Input: Go over points to remember section. Students also answer the question, "How was your weekend?" with an answer about what they did (answering a what instead of how question). Remind them that they must answer with an adjective and then can tell what they did. Tell them that people do not go into too much detail and often try to stay positive. Encourage them to keep the conversation going. Give them the analogy of tennis match. They can keep the conversation going by adding information and asking questions. In addition, they should use active listening techniques by making comments, nodding, and having good eye contact. Point out that compliments are often used to enter/continue small talk and show ways to respond to compliments. Finally, point out that both statements and questions are used to continue the conversation.

4. Output: Have them practice with a partner just going down the list with one person asking the questions and the other responding and then switching. Then have students move around and ask each other the questions, but allow them to pick and choose and have them start from the beginning of small talk. Have them work with one partner and try to keep the conversation going, and the teacher yells ‘Switch’ and then move onto the next partner.

5. Additional activity: Students should have general knowledge about many topics, so encourage them to simply read the headlines of an online newspaper or search engine such as Yahoo. They only need general information, so headlines are enough. Additionally, have students do fluency practice about sports, hobbies, family, music, movies, and weather to have them practice talking and learn the vocabulary that goes with these topics.

6. Additional activity: Students also need to be able to talk about their own culture, but often lack the vocabulary or do not know much about their own culture. Having students give mini-presentations, practice describing food or cultural objects, Doing these activities involve other skills such as presenting and describing, but can be tied into the middle section of small talk. Dr. Pat Dougherty (2007) has great ideas about describing culture in his article, ‘Tell Me About Your Country: Native Culture and EFL/ESL.’

7. Active listening: Talk to students about what active listening is and what it is-see Appendix 3. Give students worksheet and ask them to practice the phrases. Put them in pairs and have students talk about different topics. Have them check off the active listening phrases they used.

### ***End***

1. Schema building: Elicit from students any phrases they might know which are used to end a conversation.

2. Input: Give students end phrases sheet. Conduct activities similarly to beginning and middle.

3. Input: Go over points to remember. Point out that many phrases can be mixed and that often many are used at one time. Also, if you need to be somewhere, feel free to end the conversation. This is also true if you only want to get out of the conversation.

4. Output: Give students opportunities to go through the list with a partner, practicing both the statements and responses. Then have them walk around just practicing ending phrases with different people.

5. Output: Have students put it all together and walk around making small talk with different people in the class. When the teacher yells ‘switch’, the students must end the conversation, and move to the next person. For a more difficult option, allow students to begin and end the conversation or join and leave conversations on their own.

6. Link to real world: Have students make goals to use small talk with other students before class and with teachers/supervisors outside of class. Have students share their goals with each other or at the beginning class. The teacher can also collect the goal sheets and make comments.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has shown why small talk should be incorporated into any English classroom because many students do not know how to use it or do not know the important role it plays in communication. Small talk can enable students to become successful and recognized English communicators. In addition, it can help students to become more assertive, make classes more student-centered, and improve student language skills and awareness. Teachers are encouraged to incorporate any activities and adapt them for their classrooms. It is a small skill but can have a big impact for your students and classes.

### **Biographical Statement**

Jill Bruellman has been teaching ESL/EFL for over ten years in the United States, Japan, and Germany. She earned a Master's degree in Linguistics from Northeastern Illinois University and is currently a Business English Communications Instructor for Sumikin-Intercom, Inc. in Kobe, Japan. Her current research interests include Business English, Pragmatics, Pronunciation, and Vocabulary. She can be contacted at [jbruellman@gmail.com](mailto:jbruellman@gmail.com).

### **References**

Cheng, X. (2000). Asian students' reticence revisited, *System* 28, 435-446.

Digh, P., Phillips, C., Rosen, R. & Singer, M. (2000). *Global literacies: Lessons on business leadership and national cultures*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Dougherty, P. (2007). Tell me about your country: Native culture and EFL/ESL. *The Proceedings of Teaching Helping Teachers*, 9-17.

Fine, D. (2005) Small Talk: Think of it as an Appetizer for a Full Meal of Conversation. Retrieved November 1, 2008 from <http://www.voanews.com/specialenglish/archive/2005-11/2005-11-01-voa2.cfm>

Gee, J. (2005). *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.

Longman English Dictionary Online. Retrieved November 1, 2008 from <http://www.ldoceonline.com/>

Weinstein, N. (2007) How to Use Small Talk to Build a Bridge to the Heart of a Conversation. <http://www.voanews.com/specialenglish/archive/2007-10/2007-10-02-voa2.cfm>

## Appendix 1. Small talk: The Beginning

### Greeting

Hi. How are you?

Hey. How's it going?

Hey. How're things going?

Hey. Long time no see.

What's up?

What's new?

### Response

Good, and you?

Pretty good, and yourself?

Great/pretty good/okay/not so good. How about with you?

Great/pretty good/busy/okay/not so good. How about with you?

Yeah, it's been a long time. How's it going?

Not much. How about with you?

Not much. How about with you?

**Your Turn:** Do you know any other greetings that are appropriate for small talk? Write your ideas in the space below.

1.

2.

3.

### Points to remember:

- (1) There are many ways to greet. You only need to be able to use one, but you need to be able to understand them all.
- (2) The greeting is very quick. You must also answer quickly. Usually the answer is short.
- (3) If you can, try to ask the first question. Often non-native speakers rely on the native speaker to start the conversation
- (4) Sometimes native speakers say very quickly, 'Hey, how's it going' in passing. You don't have to stop and answer the question. You can simply reply, 'Hey' or 'Hey, how's it going?'

## Appendix 2. Small talk: The Middle

### Greeting

How was your weekend?

What did you do?

Do you have any weekend plans?

How is work going?

Did you see the game yesterday?

I like your necklace.

It is hot today.

You looked stressed. Is everything okay?

### Response

Great/pretty good/okay/uneventful.

I went to my friend's house. How about you?

No, I don't have anything planned yet./I am going to go shopping.

Good. I just finished a project, so it is not so busy right now. How about you?

No, I missed it, but I heard it was really exciting.

Thanks. I bought it in Korea. Have you ever been there?

I know. It is always so hot during this time of year.

Yeah, I have a big presentation tomorrow, so I am kind of nervous.

**Your Turn:** Do you know any other conversation starters that are appropriate for small talk? Write your ideas in the space below.

1.

2.

3.

### Points to remember:

- (1) There are not set phrases for this part, but people often talk about their weekend, their job/school, the weather, or sports. These are safe topics.
- (2) People usually don't go into too much detail and often try to stay positive.
- (3) Try to keep the conversation going. You can do this by:
  - Adding information. Just don't say yes or no. Try to give a one sentence answer.
  - Asking questions to the other person. Often the native speaker only asks questions, so it seems like an interview, not a conversation. Try to ask questions too.

### Appendix 3. Active Listening

Active listening is a skill used to show that you are paying attention and interested in what the other person says. It is an interactive and assertive way to listen to someone.

What are some behaviors or words that you use in Japanese to show you are listening?

- 1.
- 2.

In English, we often use the non-verbal behaviors of nodding and maintaining eye contact to show we are listening.

In addition, we often use phrases to show we are listening, interested, and paying attention. Here are some of those phrases:

*Sorry?*

*Pardon?*

*I see*

*Right...Right...right*

*Okay...okay...okay*

*Really?*

*Exactly*

*(Yeah), Me too*

*That sounds stressful/fun/busy.*

*I'm jealous.*

*I totally agree/I disagree.*

*Oh, wow*

*Amazing*

*Cool*

Can you think of anything else you have heard/used?

- 1.
- 2.

In order to practice active listening, pick a topic and talk to your partner about it for three minutes. Your partner should use active listening strategies and check off the ones he/she says. Then you will switch. Any topic is okay, but here are some suggestions:

Food, family, current news story, hobby, music, sports, books, work, weekend

## Appendix 4. Small talk: The Ending

### Farewell

Well, it was nice talking with you.  
Have a good day.  
Have a good one.  
Well, I have to get to a meeting.  
I've got to go. See you later.  
I've got to run.

### Response

Thanks, you too. See you later.  
Thanks, you too. Bye.  
Thanks, you too. See ya.  
Me too. See you later.  
Okay. Have a good day.  
Me too. Have a good one!

**Your Turn:** Do you know any other ways to end the conversation that are appropriate for small talk? Write your ideas in the space below.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

### Points to remember:

- (1) These can be mixed. Often many are used at one time.
- (2) If you need to be somewhere, you should use one of the bottom three examples. You can be direct.
- (3) Even if you don't have to go anywhere, but you want to end the conversation, you can also use the bottom three.