

## Teaching Note

# Small Talk Tackles Big World

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For my university EFL students in Japan, I am constantly looking for ways to help them engage in less protected communication outside the classroom. During my own L2 immersion abroad, I found the ability to initiate and reciprocate in small talk with strangers opened up a world of new friends while "activating" my dormant "School knowledge" (Little, 2009) from 6 years of formal English instruction in Japanese middle and high schools.

The first challenge is to help students get comfortable initiating casual conversations in diverse social situations including conferences, parties, and clubs. To address this, the small talk activity starts at the beginning of the academic term and evolves with some repetition. First it functions to help students get acquainted, and then expands as students team up to plan interview projects. I use a changing mix of roughly the following four steps:

### **Step 1—Individual brainstorming**

Have students imagine a situation such as attending a class on the first day and striking up a conversation with a classmate they do not know. I allow three to five minutes to think of things they could say to start and end that conversation. This step probably will not be repeated as the term progresses, but students should be encouraged to

continue expanding their portfolio of ideas indefinitely.

### **Step 2—Group discussion**

Students form groups of three or four to share and discuss their ideas. Ten minutes is enough time for the groups to evaluate the appropriateness of their topics and prepare to share phrases they agree would be useful.

### **Step 3—Follow-up**

With the entire class, each group shares their discussion results and entertains comments. Useful phrases can be written on the blackboard or typed directly onto slides. I might offer comments or encourage discussion on differences or similarities between cultures. In subsequent sessions, steps two and three can be replaced with a regular invitation for individual students to share any new ideas they have come up with since the last session.

### **Step 4—Action**

Students pair up, initiate conversation with phrases they liked, change partners after a couple of minutes, and repeat. Of the four steps this one is the most repeatable throughout the term.

Any or all of these steps can be repeated in subsequent classes as long as necessary, but ultimately, this sustained, even recursive focus on small talk is

intended to prepare students for "street-level" interview projects which they begin planning in pairs after a few weeks' practice. Minimum project parameters specify initiating contact with English-speaking international students on campus, conducting interviews, reflecting on the results, and reporting on those results in peer-evaluated class presentations.

I would summarize benefits I have observed as follows:

- Used for warm up, this exercise helps students switch to English speaking mode.
- Rotation of groupings helps students get to know all of their classmates. This helps create a safe environment where they can try, fail and try again. (DeVilla & Jiang, 2001)
- Scaffolding among students of different fluency levels is spontaneous.
- Repetitive spontaneous small talk builds confidence.
- Students learn ways to start and end a conversation while helping build a repertoire of good topics.
- Students are empowered and incentivized to engage strangers in spontaneous language usage outside the classroom. (VanPatten & Williams, 2007)
- The brainstorming sessions generate sometimes hilariously creative usage of previous book knowledge gained over years of formal language training.

In end-term evaluations only a few lower level students have given negative feedback about the street level interview projects, saying they did not feel their English was good enough and they were too shy to talk to strangers. However, even those students report enjoying the in-class small talk activity as it provides opportunities to use English in a relaxed non-threatening environment. Students also indicate an appreciation for getting to know all their classmates and making connections with international students on campus. At the end of the term, EFL students in this non-immersion environment demonstrate increased confidence outside the classroom, and bring significant enthusiasm back to classroom activities.

Learners in immersion environments may have more opportunities outside the classroom, but may still lack the tools and confidence to engage those opportunities. For them the above 4 steps could be coupled with a higher frequency of projects for in-class reflection. This activity has progressed differently with each new mix of students and would certainly evolve differently in a different external environment. Ultimately, I hope this description will stimulate innovation across a range of teaching environments where teachers want their students to learn more intentionally outside the classroom.

## References

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*Reiko Fischer received an MA TESOL degree from Portland State University in 2012 after living in the States for nearly 30 years. Since then she has been teaching EFL classes at Hitotsubashi University in Tokyo, Japan.*