

The Social, Intercultural, and Transactional Nature of Small Talk in the Second Language Classroom

Andrea Mason Garner
Independent researcher

Bal Krishna Sharma*
University of Idaho, USA
(Corresponding author. Email: balsharma@uidaho.edu)

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Abstract

Although the value of small talk is traditionally trivialized for its lack of usefulness in accomplishing goal-oriented communication, researchers now largely agree that it has an important role to play in various institutional contexts. However, this phenomenon is under-researched in the ESL classroom context. Attending to this concern, the present study examines various topics, distributions, and functions of small talk in the linguistically and culturally heterogeneous classrooms in an intensive English as a second language program in the United States. The findings show that small talk in the ESL classroom goes beyond its ritualistic function; it serves as an important tool for language learning and a useful resource for developing students' intercultural communicative competence. Based on the findings, we recommend that ESL teachers integrate small talk into their instructional practices in order to achieve various social, intercultural, and pedagogical goals.

Keywords

Intercultural communication, second language, rapport, small talk

Small Talk in Institutional Contexts

Small talk has traditionally been understood as a non-task-oriented conversation in which speakers have no specific transactional goal. More recent studies, however, show that small talk *is* important from a linguistic perspective because it provides the best everyday language data and often conveys information about speaker identities and orientations (Coupland, 2000). These studies further emphasize the significant roles played by contexts of language use and social relationships therein. That is, the conventional meaning accomplished by small talk can be different from one context to another (Coupland, 2003). Moreover, individuals use small talk to build and maintain interpersonal relationships, and this function has significant implications for interactions both at the moment and in the future (Holmes, 2000).

Several studies have focused on the interplay of social and transactional goals via work-related talk (e.g. Jin, 2018; Pullin, 2010; Ragan, 2000; Valencia, 2009), and their findings contribute to understanding the functions of small talk within the given community. There is a general consensus that small talk's key function is social; that is, it serves to establish and maintain interpersonal relationships. For example, Pullin's (2010) study of business communications in English as a lingua franca found that small talk is used "in building, maintaining, and reinforcing rapport and solidarity" (p. 468). Likewise, Ragan's (2000) medical consultation interactions in China indicate that it may not always be possible to separate small talk between

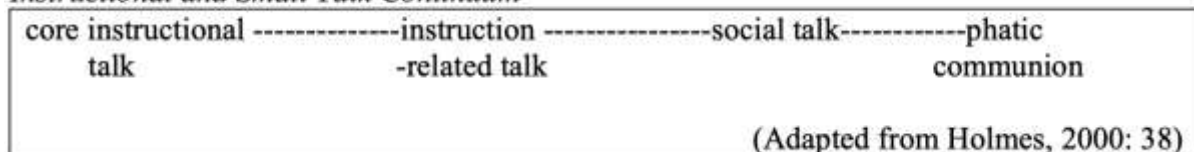
task and relational goals. Additionally, small talk is typically found at boundaries in the pragmatic space between the transactional and the relational functions of talk, and it is multifunctional due to its direct relevance to transactional and institutional goals (Coupland, 2000; Holmes, 2000).

There is minimal research investigating small talk in contexts outside workplaces. Coupland (2000) describes the need to examine small talk in more “specialist” social contexts, including the classroom, to determine how small talk deviates from underlying, everyday practice. Howard (2011) likewise reminds us that schools may create hierarchies not only between teachers and students, but also among students according to performance and abilities, which are difficult for novices to navigate. Small talk plays an important tool in negotiating hierarchical relations in the second language classroom as it allows multiple voices that can constantly adjust status and power between the teacher and students (Luk, 2004). Classroom instructional interaction displays several features of institutional talk which constitutes several predictable forms. Behind this institutional discourse sequence, there are always “restrictions on who may speak, when they may speak, and sometimes in what order they may speak” (Psathas, 1995, p. 36).

It might make one wonder that the relatively less structured nature of small talk seems to be incongruent with formal and systematic pedagogical discourse in classroom settings. From previous studies in non-educational contexts, we know that it has strategic use within institutional settings, as social interactions have many communicative goals which do not only convey content meaning but also establish social relationships (Coupland, 2000). Because of the use of small talk as a transitional device, there is a need to explore how it is used by individuals for the transactional goals of the classroom. Following Holmes (2000), we conceptualize the difference between instructional talk and small talk in the classroom on a continuum illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1

Instructional and Small Talk Continuum



Luk’s (2004) study on small talk within the English as a foreign language context in Hong Kong is a notable exception. Through her discourse analysis, Luk (2004) found that by stepping away from their institutional roles and responsibilities, the students and teacher actively engaged in an extended piece of small talk covering a variety of topics. Overall, her findings suggest that although classroom small talk does not at first seem to have well-defined goals and action plans, it performs the function of making the use of the second language a more natural everyday practice by building a community.

In sum, while the previous studies on small talk both in the workplace and classroom contexts indicate that small talk functions as a resource for community building, we know very little about how participants deploy small talk in a linguistically and culturally diverse classroom where English is used as a lingua franca. We take the case of an intensive language program at a university in the Pacific Northwest, United States (US). In this article, we examine various topics, distributions, and functions of small talk in the ESL classroom. We argue that small talk in the classroom goes beyond its ritualistic function; it serves as an important tool for language

learning and a useful resource for developing students' intercultural communicative competence in the classroom community.

ESL Classroom as a Community of Practice

The guiding theoretical framework to support this study builds on the notion of the community of practice (CoP). Following Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992), CoP is:

an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations - in short, practices - emerge during this mutual endeavor. As a social construct, a CoP is different from the traditional community, primarily because it is defined simultaneously by its membership and by the practice in which that membership engages (p. 464).

Furthermore, Wenger (1998) suggests that learning is a natural social process; that CoP focuses on what members do: the practice that indicates that they belong to the community, and the degree to which they belong. Using language appropriately for the context is essential to becoming an accepted member of the community.

There are concerns regarding whether an ESL context can be regarded as a CoP when the norms of interaction lack relative stability and homogeneity. Researchers (e.g. Baker, 2011) remind us that fluidity, not fixity, should be the norm in the ESL communities of practice. The three key features of CoP identified in other contexts (Ehrenreich, 2009) can be applied to the ESL classroom context. First, ESL classrooms show the feature of mutual engagement: students and teachers come together in order to interact on a regular basis and build social relationships. The second is joint enterprise: the members have a shared, common goal: that is, the students come to class for learning English as an additional language. And, the third is shared repertoire: the members of the classroom community deploy linguistic, symbolic or material resources for meaning negotiation within the community. As Canagarajah (2007) stresses, what brings people together in ESL communities is not their pre-given linguacultural values, but a common interest.

Although not framed as ESL research, previous scholarship on second language learning in the classroom has found the CoP framework useful. For example, the mutuality of the participation in classroom work commits participants to one another and the community, while allowing for understanding and negotiation of boundaries for practice (Hellermann, 2008). Another aspect of CoP that is relevant for the language learning classroom is the use of routines as part of shared repertoires (Wenger, 1998). Routines include small talk for students' language development within the classroom. Moreover, the notion of CoP is closely related to second language socialization—the process whereby newer members of a community become aware of norms, practices, values, and beliefs of the community and develop skills and knowledge required to become competent members of that community (Duff, 2011). In the context of second language learning, non-native speakers of a language develop competence in ESL by participating in the practices of communities where that language is used (Dooly & Tudini, 2016). The participants adapt to as well as actively shape their ESL community's socially shared repertoires through practice (Canagarajah, 2007).

The development of intercultural communicative competence is an important aspect of the socialization process in the ESL classroom. Byram (1997) proposed a model of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in which an intercultural speaker mediates between perspectives and cultures that include attitudes, knowledge, skills, and cultural awareness. Key objectives linked to ICC include the ability to communicate in an effective manner that is

appropriate to the context and relationship (Hua, 2014; Spitzberg, 2000). Notably, ICC develops incrementally over time through language socialization in the classroom community of practice, and small talk functions as a significant resource in establishing and maintaining the community norms and relationships. The development of ICC is an important element of second language learning in culturally heterogeneous classrooms. Therefore, this study explores the value of small talk in the L2 classroom, a community of practice and an intercultural communication context, by answering the following three key questions:

1. What topics are appropriate for small talk in the ESL classroom?
2. When does small talk occur in classroom instruction? Who has the right to start and end small talk?
3. What functions does small talk serve in the ESL classroom?

The Research Context, Participants, and the Data

The context of the study is an intensive English language program at a university located in the Pacific Northwest of the US. The program's major goal was to provide second language speakers of English with the linguistic, academic, and cultural skills necessary to successfully navigate university environments in the US. The program enrolled international students from a wide range of countries and the majority of them were from China, South Korea, Kuwait, Japan, and Saudi Arabia. Class size ranged from 6-12 students with the average age of 23 years. Most classes had an equal number of male and female students.

Four teachers volunteered to participate in the study. All four had an MA in Teaching English as a Second Language from various universities in the US. Cindy (female) and Thomas (male) identified themselves as native speakers of English from the US. Cindy had been teaching a range of English courses in the program for the last 12 years while Thomas had been there only for a year. Before he started teaching there, Thomas had taught English for four years in Hong Kong. Likewise, Fatima and Kamala were identified as non-native speakers of English. Fatima, who originally was from Libya, had a Ph. D. in applied linguistics from a US university and had been teaching in the program for seven years. Kamala, who was from Nepal, was a recent graduate and it was her first semester of teaching in the program.

Data consisted of recordings and observations from eight hours of teacher-led instructional discourse collected during the one-and-half-month period based on the researchers' convenience and the participating teachers' permission. There were four levels of language classes in the program, and the data were collected from levels 2 and 4 since we were granted access only to these classes. Using modified conventions of conversation analysis (ten Have, 2007), the audio recordings were transcribed first and then the instances of small talk were sorted out from the corpus. The analytical framework is adapted from Holmes' (2005) study of small talk in the workplace. The framework is based on three major features of small talk discourse: content, distribution, and function. Content addresses topic and level of detail; distribution involves timing and participation; while function describes the purpose of the small talk. This approach emphasizes the need to understand the wider context for interpreting the discourse at a local level as well as in a wider social or institutional order (Wenger, 1998). Keeping this framework in mind, we first independently coded the data to discover micro-details of small talk and agreed on a number of themes that are presented as findings. All the names used in the article are pseudonyms.

Findings

We identified the total of 29 small talk episodes in the data. Since we placed only one audio recorder next to the teachers, we were not able to capture the potential small talk episodes that

took place in student-student interactions. After briefly discussing the summary of findings within the content and distribution categories, we will analyze small talk excerpts in detail to illustrate the noteworthy findings regarding their functions and features.

Topic and content

The topics identified in the corpus were often used in response to changes, such as changes in recent past events as the news or weather, and changes in circumstances, such as health or weekend plans. Table 1 summarizes the topics, definitions, and frequency.

Table 1
Small Talk Topics

Content/Topics:	Definition	Frequency
Health	Participant(s) ask about overall health	9
Weather	Participant(s) comment about the weather	7
Weekend	Participant(s) ask or share about weekend plans	5
Self and family	Participant(s) ask about self and family members	5
News and events	Participant(s) talk about recent news/events in the world	3

In small talk interactions, conversational partners usually have greater freedom to initiate, elaborate, or switch topics and turns. If the interaction is mainly transactional, a newcomer would find it difficult to join in at first. Successful participation in the classroom community typically involves learning the intricacies of interactional norms for handling small talk and patterns of informal chat (Holmes, 2005). By working together to sustain the topics that are interpersonal in nature, the participants find a common ground by indicating an agreement that the topics of weather or health, and their sharing of these topics matters. Coupland (2000) refers to this as “mattering” (p. 5). Our results are consistent with small talk topics identified in studies in the workplace and institutions. For example, Holmes (2005) noted that small talk typically focused on non-controversial topics: the weather (e.g., 'cold eh', 'lovely day'), ritualized inquiries about health (e.g., 'how are you?'), out-of-work social activities (e.g., 'wonderful concert last night'), and weekend events (e.g., 'great match on Saturday, eh') (p. 353-54). These topics are usually neutral and are largely accessible to all parties in conversation. It is worth noting that small talk topics and content are not random; they represent social and cultural norms, and both the teacher and students are socialized into such norms through their recurrent participation as members of the classroom community. We will provide their detailed analysis in the “functions” section.

Distribution

Table 2 summarizes the distribution of small talk in the four teachers' classes. The majority of small talk episodes took place at the beginning of the class (N=22), were initiated by teachers (N=19), and took the form of multiparty interactions (N=18). Since the beginning of the class includes some routine tasks such as warm up activities, wait time for students to join in, attendance taking and so on, it becomes pedagogically more rewarding to utilize this time for a social purpose. The distribution-related findings are also comparable to small talk studies within the workplace context, as small talk was often found at the margins of classroom activity – most often at the beginning of class. In her workplace study, Holmes (2005) noted that “it is almost mandatory to exchange small talk when people who work together first arrive at work or meet for the first time in the working day” (p. 357).

Table 2
Distribution of Small Talk

Distributional feature	Definition	Frequency
Beginning of class	Small talk occurs at the beginning of class	22
During instruction	Small talk occurs during teaching	6
End of class	Small talk occurs right before the class ends.	1
<hr/>		
Teacher initiated	Teacher initiates small talk	12
Student initiated	Student(s) initiates small talk	7
<hr/>		
Multiparty	Teacher and multiple students participate in small talk	18
Dyadic	Teacher and one student participate in small talk	11

The majority of the episodes were initiated by the teacher, which suggests that although the moments of small talk have more democratic participation structures, they still involve power differences between the teacher and the students. Coupland (2000) notes that the distribution of power is often associated with knowledge and experience. In the context of the classroom, teachers retain the institutional power through their epistemic authority. That means they usually reserve the right to decide if and when they want to use small talk, on what topic, for what purpose, with whom (e.g. individual student vs. whole class), and for how long. This observation shows similarity with Holmes' (2005) and Jin's (2018) results and demonstrates that the superior in an interaction often has the deciding voice in small talk conversations.

Functions

From our corpus, we identify three broad functions of small talk in the second language classroom context. The categories were created after they were independently coded by each author. We took into account the "primary" function of each small talk episode to create these categories. It should, however, be noted that these functions are not mutually exclusive: one category may include elements of other functions.

Table 3
Functions of Small Talk

Functions	Definition	Frequency
Social rapport	Small talk is used primarily to enhance social relationship	20
Interculturality	Small talk contributes to the development of intercultural communicative competence	5
Transactional	Small talk has a clear language learning goal	4

Social rapport. The majority of small talk in our data corpus falls in this category. It serves what has been traditionally recognized as the phatic communion function. Malinowski (1923, cited in Coupland, 2000) used the term phatic communion to refer to the function of language that is used to achieve social companionship and relationship. Compared to core transactional talk, phatic communion is considered as a ritualized and semantically less important form of discourse. Here is an example that occurred at the beginning of Fatima's class.

Excerpt 1

Context: Listening and Speaking Level 4. Beginning of class. Instructor: Fatima

1. T: So, how are you today?
2. Ss: Good.

The teacher initiates the small talk addressing the whole class, and all the students respond to the ritualistic health-related question with a positive token 'good.' Another example is from Thomas's class.

Excerpt 2

Context: Reading Composition Level 2. Beginning of class. Instructor: Thomas

1. T: Yesterday was freezing in here and now it's warm.
2. Ss: (no responses)

This excerpt also took place at the beginning of the class. This small talk on a weather-related topic makes a temporal comparison of weather in terms of the temperature. There, however, is no verbal response from the students. The lack of response can perhaps be explained by the fact that the announcement is launched by the instructor in the form of a statement rather than a question, and this does not necessarily elicit verbal responses from the students.

The proportion of small talk initiated by the students was relatively small (7 out of 29). This excerpt initiated by a student in Cindy's class expressed an important content message in addition to a ritual social function.

Excerpt 3

Context: Grammar Level 4. Middle of class. Instructor: Cindy

1. S: I feel sick today.
2. T: I'm sorry. I'm sorry to hear that.
3. Do you need to get a drink or something?
4. S: Yes.
5. T: Okay. Take care.

This brief exchange takes place as Cindy was making a class round during pair work. The student's announcement to inform that she was not feeling well invokes sympathy from the teacher: 'I'm sorry,' 'take care.' Small talk such as this used by the teacher demonstrates that the teacher genuinely cares about the student by showing interest in students as well as by providing them the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings.

Some of these ritualized small talks extended over a few minutes, inviting more engaged participation from the students. These extended talks blur the boundary between the ritualistic function and the pedagogical function of the interaction. The following excerpt that occurred at the beginning of Thomas's class includes the topic of his personal habit: drinking coffee.

Excerpt 4

Context: Reading Composition Level 2. Beginning of the class. Instructor: Thomas

1. T: I forgot my coffee at home. I was running because
2. I didn't want to miss my bus (0.2) I left it on the table (.).
3. Later, when I was inside the bus I said, 'oh no, I forgot
4. my coffee'. (0.2) So, if I sleep (.) then just study on your own, okay?
5. Ss: (Laughter)

6. T: Just kidding. Do you guys drink coffee?
7. (0.3)
8. S1: Yeah, sometimes.
9. S2: I don't like coffee.
10. T: Oh, you don't like coffee. Good for you. I love coffee! (.)
11. I have been drinking coffee since 2002. That is what? 16 years? Wow!

Although most of the interactional space is taken by the instructor in Excerpt 4, students demonstrate their participation with minimal response tokens 'yeah sometimes' and 'I don't like coffee' (lines 8, 9). The teacher's use of a humor-inviting expression in line 5 'So, if I sleep – then just study on your own, okay?' is particularly notable to create a sense of an anxiety-free community in the classroom. In addition, this small talk is an authentic example of a narrative discourse, which can function as language input for the students.

The final example in this section is from Kamala's class. After the break, the teacher and the students are waiting for a student (Roger) to enter the class.

Excerpt 5

Context: Reading Composition Level 4. After breaktime. Instructor: Kamala.

1. T: Alrighty. Roger is late!
2. S: Roger is dead.
3. T: Roger! (Roger enters the classroom)
4. S: Roger is dead.
5. T: Ten minutes break means 10 minutes (0.3) not 11(.) not 9. (chuckles)
6. T: (directed at Roger) Are you okay?
7. R: (nods)
8. T: Alrighty kids. Let's be a big, happy family.

In this excerpt, small talk is used as a class management tool. The instructor enforces the ten-minute rule for the class break (line 5). She handles this face threatening act with care, using the metaphor of 'family' for class. There is humor collaboratively co-constructed by the students and the teacher. A student in line 2 makes a humorous expression: 'Roger is dead'. Rather than for expressing the word's literal meaning, 'dead' is used metaphorically to indicate Roger's delay in rejoining the class.

The use of humor in the two excerpts above deserves some comments. There is an apparent tension when we put small talk and humor together since small talk often draws on the formulaic nature of language use while humor, which draws on creativity in language use, falls toward the less formulaic end of the continuum. Bell and Pomerantz (2016) in this regard argue that even what may be considered as formulaic language use can be used for creative humorous purposes as long as both the speaker and audience are familiar with the norms on which the humor is built. The informal tone and the deployment of humor by the teacher function as an important resource to minimize the distance between the students and the teacher, helping the students participate more actively in the learning process (Nguyen, 2008).

Overall, although the brief exchanges of small talk occurring at the various stages of instruction first appear to be ritualistic and of minimum value for instructional goals, the teacher and the students deploy these resources to accomplish important interpersonal goals. Its main function is to "oil the social wheels" (Holmes, 2005, p. 353) for maintaining good relations between the teacher and the students. The building of a harmonious social relationship is an important

element of student-teacher rapport in the classroom. Positive rapport creates a comfortable classroom climate and trust between the teacher and students so that students can learn better (Nguyen, 2008; Park, 2016). The fact that the majority of small talk occurs in the beginning of the class suggests that phatic communion routines were important resources for the participants to transition to core talk—that is, instruction. In addition, it will be less convincing to argue against the value of phatic communion for its language learning value. Students have the opportunity to engage in various socio-pragmatic endeavors such as taking conversational turns, displaying stances, and making humor.

Intercultural communication. In addition to the function of enhancing harmonious interpersonal relationships, small talk in the classroom can serve as a vehicle for teaching intercultural interactional norms (Liddicoat & Corzet, 2011). Existing scholarship in this area has shown diversity in the forms of conversational routines available to speakers to establish and maintain interpersonal relationships (McConachy, 2008). The teaching and learning of English as a global lingua franca has given diversity of norms and identities (Baker, 2009). Lingua franca speakers of English appropriate native speaker norms in various ways. As a result, the teaching of English is shaped by the cultural identities of the teacher and the students in the given community. The seemingly ritualistic questions about weekend activities can potentially generate very detailed responses depending on the participants and the context of use. We provide two examples of small talk about weekend activities used by two different instructors.

Excerpt 6

Context: Listening/Speaking Level 4. Beginning of the class. Instructor: Fatima

1. T: So, how are you today?
2. Ss: Good.
3. T: How was your weekend?
4. S1: Not bad.
5. T: Not bad? What did you do?
6. S2: Exercise in gym.
7. T: Perfect. (0.2) I went to the gym as well.
8. T: What did you say?
9. S3: Go to the gym uhm: and then to friends (.) and then drink.
10. Ss: (Laughter)
11. T: That's not good.
12. S3: Because we visit our friends. (.) We have dinner and play
13. some games and drink. I drink too much.
14. T: Be careful. Okay? (.) What [else?]
15. S4: [Drink apple juice.
16. T: Howard, what did you do?
17. S5: Nothing.
18. T: Nothing?
19. S5: Nothing. (0.2) Just called home.
20. T: Okay.

In Excerpt 6, instead of exchanging only a brief ritual talk, the instructor uses the extended form of social talk to ask each of the six students in class about their weekend activities. Using the conventional form of the initiation-response-feedback (IRF) sequence, the teacher selects the next speaker until everybody finishes taking turns. The conversation has a humorous and informal tone, especially notable when S3 mentions 'I drink too much' in line 13. Although the

teacher starts the conversation as a ritualistic greeting, the way she asks questions turns this conversation into a genuine question-answer sequence. For example, the teacher seems to find S1's response 'not bad' and S5's response 'nothing' rather incomplete. She wants to know the actual details of the students' weekend activities. Moreover, the use of student names creates a sense of community in the classroom and giving the opportunity for each student to speak conveys the message of empathy in that the teacher in fact cares about her students.

In another class taught by Kamala, the conversation takes a different form than a typical IRF sequence. The instructor elicits a detailed weekend plan from one student.

Excerpt 7

Context: Listening and Speaking Level 4. Beginning of class. Instructor: Kamala

1. T: Can you tell me your plans for this weekend?
2. S1: If we didn't have homework, then maybe we would have a fun time.
3. T: Perfect. So, what would you do?
4. S1: (0.2) like ah: maybe I would go to Seattle.
5. T: W[ow?
6. S1: [I visited last week (0.2) visited last week (.) and I ate (.) sushi.
7. S2: Sushi bar?
8. S1: (0.2) sushi? (0.2) [sushi?
9. S3: [raw fish.>
10. S1: Yeah (.) because I have friend (0.2) he- who lived in Japan
11. eight years ago and he has ah: really good experience
12. about sushi (0.2) he give us (.) and we visited together.
13. This was the first time. I ate sushi. Delicious (0.2)
14. Maybe I will go back.
15. T: Again? (0.2) So: you will be there for two or three days
16. S1 No (.) just one day.

The student mentions his possible future trip to Seattle as well as narrates his past weekend's activity-- eating sushi in a restaurant. The response again goes beyond a brief ritualistic token; the student uses complex sentence structures and deploys a number of stance-indexing words such as 'good experience' and 'delicious' to evaluate his experience (lines 11, 13). Researchers have noted that conversations about food have important intercultural functions (Kinginger, et al., 2016). In this excerpt, the use of a cultural food item from Japan 'sushi' serves two important functions: first, it is used as a linguistic resource for S1, a student from China, to construct his intercultural identity in the classroom; second, the food talk provides an occasion for the students from diverse cultural contexts to learn about the details of a Japanese food item.

Excerpts 6 and 7 are important in understanding the role of small talk in potentially contributing to the development of students' intercultural communicative competence in the second language classroom (Byram, 1997). Applied linguists have noted that seemingly ritual questions such as "How was your weekend?" may be answered in different ways depending on who the speakers are (Beal, 1992). For example, Liddicoat and Crozet (2001) noted that the question is understood as similar to "how are you?" in Australian English, but the same question is interpreted quite literally to mean a real question in French society. In a similar vein, McConachy (2008) also noted in the context of Japan that the participating students in his study had expressed a general unfamiliarity with "how was your weekend?", which made him wonder whether the question was an apt choice as a social talk in Japanese society. These observations show that there might be different expectations of cultural norms from different

first language speakers, and this is especially significant when intercultural communication takes place among English as a lingua franca speakers (Baker, 2009).

Small talk on the weekend-related topic was frequent in classes taught by all four teachers in the intensive English program. However, Fatima and Kamala utilized small talk more frequently and in more elaborate forms than the native-English speaking teachers. It was used as a genuine question rather than in the sense of “how are you?” by these two teachers. It can be argued that their use of an intercultural topic and its details were shaped by their respective linguacultural backgrounds as transnational English speakers from Libya and Nepal respectively. Also, to be noted is that the teaching and learning of culturally-embedded interactional norms and discourse styles is unlikely to take place through exposure to linguistic input from textbooks and other instructional materials (Luk, 2004). In the excerpts, there are no metalinguistic comments on the interculturality of the talk, nor is there a prescription of any cultural patterns of conversations to the students by the teachers. The teachers, however, were still able to indirectly draw on intercultural communicative resources to support students to develop their socio-pragmatic repertoires. This was a unique opportunity for the students to get involved in the intercultural nature of communication, which might otherwise be lacking from the native English teachers.

The transactional nature of small talk. In contrast to the traditionally conceived understanding of small talk as non-goal oriented, our observations documented several instances where small talk was used to achieve the transactional goals of language use in the classroom. The examples show that extended social talk has its language learning value when teachers strategically use the social talk for introducing a language learning item. The following two excerpts illustrate this.

Excerpt 8

Context: Listening/Speaking Level 4. Beginning of the class. Instructor: Fatima

21. T: Abdullah?
22. S6: I changed my plan. I visited some places in: Pullman
23. (.) and spent a lot of time in my home.
24. T: Okay, perfect. (.) Sabi?
25. S4: I stayed with my roommates and uhm: we watched some movies.
26. T: What kind of [movies?
27. S: [Action movies.
28. T: Action movies. Okay.
29. T: Tae Heon?
30. S1: I went to Winco and cleaned my shoes.
31. Do I say I washed my shoes (0.2) or cleaned my shoes?
32. T: Did you polish your shoes or wash them in a machine?
33. S1: Polish.
34. T: Then you cleaned your shoes.

Excerpt 8 is a continuation from Excerpt 6. As Fatima keeps on asking about the students' weekend activities, she nominates the students with their names. The interactional and turn taking patterns are typical of the IRF sequence: the teacher asks a question, a student responds, and the teacher provides feedback/evaluation, and nominates another student with the question. Extended side sequences such as the one in lines 26-27 provide students the opportunity to elaborate on their previous response (T: What kind of movies? S: Action movies). By taking part in this dyadic conversation, students are practicing the important socio-pragmatic skill of

turn taking—which is an important element of developing interactional competence (Hall, Hellermann & Doehler, 2011; Waring, 2013). Lines 30-34 are notable for their transactional goals. As Tae Heon was responding to the teacher’s formulaic question, she seemed unsure about the verb choice: whether ‘wash’ or ‘clean’ was the appropriate word. This reverse polarity question (Koshik, 2002) provides an occasion for the teacher to offer another word ‘polish’, which is taken up by the student. After this goal-oriented side sequence, the teacher confirms that ‘cleaned’ is the appropriate word choice (line 34).

In another instance, Kamala offers students the opportunity to guess a particular vocabulary item.

Excerpt 9

Context: Reading Composition Level 4. Beginning of the class. Instructor: Kamala

1. S1: The weather (0.2) like Moscow. What do we call this one?
2. T: Unpredi[ctable?
3. S1: [Unpredict(.) No:: no another (0.2) another word.
4. S2: (0.2) <Yeah>, I know what you mean.
5. T: Did we talk about it here in class?
6. S1: (0.2) I (.) we learn this word [(0.2) level 3.
7. T: [In level 3 (0.2) ok. What did it start with?
8. S1: (0.2) The weather (.) one day sunny (.) one day raining.
9. T: Ah:: I don’t know (.) unpredictable. I don’t know(.)
10. What else can we say? I can’t think of anything,
11. (.)>My brain is frozen?<
12. S1: (0.2) This is warm up.
13. SS: (laughter)
14. T: (0.2) changes? (0.2) alternates? (0.2) [varies?
15. S: [ah (.) yeah variable?
16. T: Variable (.) is that the word? Good job.
17. T: (0.2) the weather varies () Well (.) yesterday I think we saw five
18. different types of weather in what (0.2) five hours?
19. And the day before (.) right?

This brief interaction in Excerpt 9 illustrates a number of features of classroom small talk-- it fills a gap while participants wait for work to begin; the topic is weather; it assumes shared experience and background information (e.g., the participants live in the same town so they experience the same weather; participants were in a previous level together); and its function is primarily social and interactive, as reflected in the multiple questions (lines 1, 2, 5, 7), and the humorous comments which are intended to amuse (lines 10, 11).

Moreover, the excerpt is worthy of more detailed analysis due to its goal-oriented function. The very first question ‘What do we call this one?’ is used by the student to elicit a specific word from the teacher. The teacher offers the word ‘unpredictable’ in line 2, but the student response shows that she is looking for a different word that they learned in class at Level 3. S1 explains the meaning of the word ‘one day sunny, one day raining’. After several guesses with possible words, the students and the teacher collaboratively work to find the right word ‘variable’ (line 15). The teacher then takes the opportunity to offer feedback ‘good job’ and explains the meaning of the word in its verb form ‘varies.’ From a second language acquisition perspective, students are actively engaged with the teacher in the negotiation of meaning (Foster and Ohata, 2005), which enhances their development of the second language. Also

notable in this excerpt is the fact that the interaction is student initiated, which displays student agency in interaction. The fact that the student knows the social nature of this ‘warm up’ talk suggests that the teacher-student hierarchical relationships are suspended for a moment so that students feel more comfortable to take charge of the interaction.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that small talk is multi-functional in the ESL community of the second language classroom. We show that social interactions that build on small talk play an important role in raising an awareness and knowledge about a range of socio-pragmatic skills such as turn taking, responding to questions, and so on in students (Waring, 2013). Our findings show similarities with findings from other contexts in that the social nature of small talk functions as a useful resource for “cementing a positive ongoing relationship” (Pullin, 2010, p. 458); for example, to build rapport, sustain harmonious relationships between the teacher and the students, and help build solidarity and understanding between the members of the classroom community. The informal discourse structure of small talk within the institutional context allows second language learners to flex their agency while promoting anxiety-free learning. Instead of the teacher dominating or leading interaction all the time, students manifest their agency in conversation by initiating topics, shaping the direction of the talk, and cueing next turns (Luk, 2004). Because small talk is perceived as non-institutional, participants can exercise more freedom from the conventional roles of teacher and student. They view their roles as those of conversation partners, engaging in talk for purposes of social interaction, understanding social norms, and building interactional competence. It should, however, be cautioned that the social nature of small talk in the ESL context does not completely dismantle the power hierarchy between the teacher and the students. As noted, within the largely egalitarian context of the classroom small talk, the teacher still reserves the right to decide when and for how long to engage in small talk and enacts the institutional entitlement of providing evaluative feedback to student responses.

Previous studies, including those from the second language classroom context (e.g., Luk 2004) have noted that informal interactions between teachers and students are not intended for formal pedagogical purposes. However, we were able to document several instances of social talk where language learning goal was imbedded in interactions. We argue that small talk functions as a useful resource for second language socialization since it takes into account the social, cultural, and pragmatic norms of small talk within the classroom community. We had numerous examples in the data where language learning episodes were embedded within social conversations that built on small talk. Based on our findings, we recommend that ESL teachers integrate small talk into their instructional practices in order to achieve various social, intercultural, and pedagogical goals. For future studies, expanding the parameters of teacher participants, class levels, and extended observations can provide a broader range of data for analysis.

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Andrea Mason Garner is an ESL consultant working in higher education. Her research interests include intercultural communication, international academic writing centers and multilingual tutoring.

Bal Krishna Sharma is an associate professor of applied linguistics at the University of Idaho. His research interests include intercultural communication, sociolinguistics, language and social media and linguistic ethnography.