

## There is Nothing Small about Teaching and Learning Second-Language Small Talk<sup>1</sup>

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*There's nothing small about small talk: 'I question the very notion that any talk is "smaller" than any other....'*  
(Ragan 2000: 270)

Small talk is often seen as superficial and frivolous in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and secondary to transactional language use – the language of 'getting things done'. Transactional language is the language of ordering a meal or leaving a telephone message. Interactional language – the language of social relations – is all too often downplayed or forgotten. While teachers are encouraged to establish rapport and create a supportive atmosphere in the second-language (L2) classroom, the reality can be very different: there may be very little time to practise interpersonal language use. Too often teachers are under pressure to complete programmes, 'finish' the book and evaluate students. However, I argue that small talk can be given a place in the transactional environment of the second-language classroom. Following Coupland, I characterize small talk as 'talk that carries social and affective meaning' (2003: 2) and I will revisit the work of Aston (1988) on supportiveness and solidarity which offers one way in which learners can be given opportunities to achieve successful social relations in the target language. Within the L2 classroom context, I will use the Illustration-Interaction-Induction mode (Carter 2004; Carter & McCarthy 1995, McCarthy & Carter 1995) to describe how L2 learners can be given opportunities to practise interpersonal language use by describing activities that do not take undue time away from the language learning programme.

### Unimportance of Small Talk in ELT

Small talk has been described as chit-chat, gab, tongue-wagging, idle talk, tittle-tattle, yak, etc. The terms abound and definitions tend to be derogatory. In western society, the concept of small talk is often devalued: it is considered inefficient in that it wastes time and is ineffective in that it does not get on with the business at hand. Coupland sums up a commonly-held view that small talk is 'aimless, prefatory, obvious, uninteresting, sometimes suspect and even irrelevant' (2000: 3).

When it is dealt with in the second-language classroom context, the subject of small talk is all too often treated as a matter of producing formulaic language and as a lead-in to transactional language use. Classroom teaching is more centred on achieving measurable objectives and completing tasks than on offering opportunities for interpersonal language use. Furthermore, the nature of small talk has often been misinterpreted and consequently misused in teaching practice. For example, offering the term 'phatic communion', Malinowski (1923) sees small talk as a way to cement social relations and argues that linguistic meaning is not relevant in the use of phatic communion which serves to establish

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bonds of personal union between people brought together by the mere need of companionship and does not serve any purpose of communicating ideas.

(1923: 316)

Back in the 1920s, Malinowski can be seen to be questioning the transactional focus of language use which is so prominent in second-language teaching and learning today. Phatic communion, argues Malinowski, is 'a mode of action' that can be seen to be 'serving the direct aim of binding the hearer to the speaker by a tie of some social sentiment or other' (1923: 315). Malinowski's point about the purposelessness of phatic communion is often misinterpreted in EFL textbooks which reduce phatic communion to a series of formulaic patterns for greetings or goodbyes rather than reflecting a mode of action which aims to bond interactants.

### Supportiveness and Solidarity

The unimportance given to small talk is often reinforced in the L2 classroom as second-language teaching practice sees language learning in terms of a transactional-interactive dichotomy. Transactional language is usually seen as focusing on an event or situation rather than on the participants. Its purpose is 'to convey information' (Brown and Yule 1983b: 23) and 'to get something or get something done' (Nunan 1999: 228). Success is measured in terms of completing 'tasks' as efficiently and effectively as possible.

In contrast, interactive language is used to achieve objectives that are independent of transactional language: It 'is produced for social purposes' (Nunan 1999: 228) and for expressing social relations and personal attitudes (Brown and Yule 1983a: 2-3). Measuring the success of interactive language radically differs from evaluating success in transactional situations: Interactive language is not an all-or-nothing achievement of objectives or unwaveringly following a pre-determined communicative sequence. Interactants can (and do) change their minds (Clark 1996: 216). There is often no pre-set agenda: Interactive language emerges and develops.

Interactive language can be achieved in different ways. Aston describes these ways in terms of supportiveness and solidarity (Aston 1988). Supportiveness reflects interactants' feelings 'for the other' and is demonstrated through concern, sympathy and appreciation. Solidarity reflects how interactants feel 'as the other' and is expressed through shared experiences and attitudes. In order to differentiate between supportiveness and solidarity, I take the following examples collected from postgraduate students studying in London, England.

Supportiveness means trying to understand the target-language "world" or "worlds" of other participants. Supportiveness is reflected through participant concern and co-operation. For instance, in the following extract, Blanca complains about being followed:

- Blanca: I had this man following me all day  
 Paul: yeah  
 Mariana: oh no way poor thing  
 Blanca: when I saw the man I became  
 Mariana: oh no

The reactions of Paul and Mariana reflect transactional and interactional language use during L2 small talk. Paul's yeah seems to express little concern – perhaps he is expecting to receive information. Meanwhile, Mariana shows interest and concern through the use of 'oh no way poor thing' and 'oh no'.

Solidarity is expressed through shared experiences and feelings as seen in the following extract between two postgraduate students. After feeling depressed about her tutor's comments about her writing, Francesca has now received positive feedback:

- Francesca: perfect so I was very happy yesterday  
Celia: that it's very good  
Francesca: mmm  
Celia: you know when I did my master's degree it happened something like that to me (0.1 second) the first tutorial (0.1 second) I wrote and wrote but I I don't know ....

Celia's comments reveal that she has undergone a similar experience. She can identify with Francesca and establish common ground.

### **Creating Rapport: The Classroom Reality**

While interpersonal language is part of everyday second-language use, the reality in the L2 classroom is that the busy EFL teacher is given transactional teaching objectives and there is little opportunity to practise interpersonal relations. When it is dealt with, small talk tends to be practised in terms of topics, formulaic expressions and communicative functions.

### **Topics**

Common interpersonal topics in EFL textbooks include talking to friends, dating and going to parties. Other, and perhaps even more likely, interpersonal topics are largely ignored (e.g., talking to fellow passengers during a journey, mixing with other tourists/students, interacting with temporary neighbours, responding to chit-chat in a shop or perhaps being approached by target-language speakers who are 'just being friendly'). In such situations, interpersonal relationships may be opportunistic, undefined and negotiatory. The identification of safe topics features strongly in current teaching practice. Safe topics include the weather, hobbies and entertainment. While such topics do provide common ground on which to establish or develop interaction, the problem is that successful relationships are often based on difference rather than on similarity. Especially in the second-language context, small talk is not always about establishing affinity and 'hitting it off' with interactants. It can just as much be about recognising and exploring difference. Similarities do establish common ground and common interests but differences often motivate the further development of interpersonal relations. If interactants shared the same expectations, viewpoints, beliefs and values, there may be precious little to talk about.

### **Formulaic Expressions**

A formulaic approach to interpersonal talk in ELT textbooks can be seen in exercises that ask students to recognise and practise fixed expressions. Formulaic phrases are useful in that they provide ready-to-use language 'chunks'. Such phrases open up conversations, and establish and develop the necessary contacts in order to get on with the business at hand as quickly as possible. While such activities may raise learner awareness of the structured nature of phatic language, they do not underline the negotiatory nature of interpersonal language use where interactants build on or react to each other's contributions. Formulaic phrases may not allow interactants to respond sensitively to individual contexts and individual speakers – the interpersonal dimension of language use.

### **Communicative Functions**

When it comes to language functions and interpersonal language use, categories such as 'socialising' or 'social formulae' contain such 'functions' as starting a conversation, introducing yourself, introducing somebody, answering an introduction, greeting someone, asking how someone is and saying how you are. However, communicative functions in ELT textbooks tend to focus on the speaker rather than on the joint construction of interpersonal language. Textbook exercises do not offer interactants options in how they want to come across in small talk (e.g., as being supportive and understanding or as being distant and detached).

### **Illustration-Interaction-Induction Mode**

Language teachers who are interested in teaching interpersonal language use but have little time or resources can still seize emerging opportunities within classroom teaching practice. Such opportunities are provided through McCarthy & Carter's Illustration-Interaction-Induction mode which is a scheme for noticing and increasing the L2 language user's awareness of interpersonal language use (1995: 217).

The Illustration-Interaction-Induction mode uses real data to examine interactional language use. At the illustration stage, L2 learners are asked to look at real-life instances of language use or, at least, at texts that are developed on the basis of real data. In real-life data, L2 learners can examine the different choices that language users face in the target-language context. L2 learners can be encouraged to examine how L2 language users achieve friendly relations in the target language (e.g., how they express interest, concern and involvement with other language users). McCarthy & Carter (1995: 217) argue that such an approach is in line with communicative approaches to language teaching which aim to enable students to respond appropriately in different 'communicative' contexts.

At the interaction stage learners are also engaged in activities that aim to raise awareness of interpersonal language use and of how native speakers establish, develop and maintain social relations. Learners are

*introduced to discourse-sensitive activities which focus on the interpersonal use of language and the negotiation of meanings and which*

*are designed to raise conscious awareness of these interactive properties through observation and classroom discussion.*

(McCarthy & Carter 1995: 217)

Such activities can help learners to look for expressions of supportiveness (i.e., feelings 'for the other') and solidarity (i.e., feelings 'as the other').

Induction goes beyond illustration and interaction and provides opportunities for the learner to develop his/her own ways of noticing and drawing conclusions about interpersonal language use. In the induction phase learners are encouraged to reach their own conclusions. Carter and McCarthy say that induction:

*stands for making one's own, or the learning group's, rule for a particular feature, a rule which will be refined and honed as more and more data is encountered.*

(1995: 155)

### **Classroom Activities**

The *Illustration-Interaction-Induction* mode offers one way of giving opportunities to learners to engage in the joint construction of interpersonal language use without taking away large segments of time from the language learning programme. Below I outline how conventional textbook activities can be modified to allow learners to examine and practise an interpersonal dimension.

#### **Giving Advice**

Advice is often seen in terms of passing expert knowledge on to someone else (e.g., how to lose weight or dealing with illness). A structure of a typical textbook activity might, for instance, be the following:

Work with a partner and give advice on:

- ▶ whether to change jobs
- ▶ getting into shape
- ▶ going on holiday to a foreign country
- ▶ trying to get over a cold

Try to use the following structures....

The exercise has a transactional focus (i.e., conveying information). The activity does not take advantage of the opportunity to explore the use of interpersonal language use and examine how interactants may achieve what Aston terms affective convergence – 'negotiating shared attitudes or feelings' (1988: 76). The exercise can be developed beyond just giving advice by taking one or two of the situations (or by modifying them slightly) and giving students the opportunity to practise the achievement of affective convergence.

The first step, as suggested by Aston (1988), is for learners to try to add more biographical details to interactants in a given situation. Such information can be taken from personal experience, from people the learners actually know or, at least, from people about whom they have a lot of personal information. For

example, the meeting with a person who wants to get into shape (suggested above) can be converted into a meeting between two friends (talking about the same topic). As learners build up the biographical details of the interactants, the more individualistic the interaction becomes. As a consequence, the talk that develops is more likely to reflect the interaction of somebodies rather than anybodies (Aston 1988). The next step is to decide whether, in the case of the 'getting into shape' scenario, for instance, the friend only identifies with the friend (i.e., feels for the other and expresses supportiveness) or has actually experienced the same situation (i.e., feels as the other and expresses solidarity). By deciding which stance to take, there is an issue of affective convergence at stake as interactants try to achieve positive rapport. Learners can attempt to achieve supportiveness or solidarity by utilising the resources that they have previously examined during the illustration stage, i.e., examining real L2 data.

### Showing Sympathy and Empathy

Roleplays offer similar opportunities for displaying supportiveness and solidarity. For instance, the following topics can come up in a radio phone programme.

- ▶ making friends after moving to a new town
- ▶ getting on with one's parents
- ▶ surviving the end of a difficult relationship
- ▶ dealing with next-door neighbours

The activity may have one or two objectives: trying to show supportiveness / solidarity or trying to come up with solutions.

### Script Writing

ELT textbooks often exploit learner interest in soap operas by providing a story line which runs through the book. Soap operas may be the subject of a complete unit. For instance, *American Inside Out Intermediate* (Kay & Jones, 2001 / 2003) devotes unit 9 to soap operas while *Cutting Edge Intermediate* (Cunningham & Moor, 1999) asks students in module 12 to write a soap opera script.

Soap operas have the advantage of projecting a context and biographical details of the interactants. Teachers can use the ELT textbook story line – an interactional context and the personal history of the interactants – to practise L2 interpersonal language use. Context and personal history can make L2 interpersonal language practice more meaningful and more related to specific individuals.

One of the problems with learners writing their own soap opera scripts is that other learners in a given role-play may not have access to the same biographical details. One solution would be to take a well-known sitcom (a television comedy about a group of people in a given situation) or soap opera where learners have the same access to biographical information (or could easily make themselves familiar with such information). In using a popular sitcom, learners can share the same knowledge of the characters – their history,

attitudes, values, including their likes and dislikes. Learners can then be asked to develop the story line in a certain direction that calls for affective convergence. Such activities offer the opportunity for the learner to use and experiment with interpersonal language use and give the learner opportunities to practise 'doing' social relations.

### Conclusion

It is too trite to say that second-language learning is only concerned with achieving transactional objectives. Second language users often want to be just as 'involved' and 'engaged' in a second language as they are in their first language. In using the Illustration-Interaction-Induction mode in the L2 classroom, teachers can provide learners with the opportunity to examine and 'do' social relations. The Illustration-Interaction-Induction mode allows learners to explore ways of expressing supportiveness and solidarity and making their own choices regarding affective convergence.

Any evaluation of successful L2 small talk has to be given by the participants themselves since they are the ones involved in the communicative event. Only they can assess the degree of success they have achieved (or failed to have achieved) in establishing, developing and maintaining relationships. It cannot be determined through the correct use of prepatterned and formulaic phrases and the use of safe topics. Outsiders to an interaction (e.g., language teachers) cannot judge in absolute terms the degree of success in a given interaction. The role of teaching must be to help second-language users improve their interpersonal skills (e.g., by raising awareness of interactional processes), understand conventional and novel patterns of use and negotiate L1-L2 cultural differences. Ultimately, teachers need to offer the L2 learner choices so that she can express her individuality while, at the same time, establishing, developing and maintaining relationships in the target-language context.

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