

Teaching Meaningful EFL Small Talk: Exploration, Supportiveness, and Celebration¹

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Abstract

Whilst teaching and learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) rightly focuses on meaningful and purposeful transactional language use, interpersonal language is often downplayed or given cursory treatment even though it is an equally essential and perhaps even more fulfilling dimension of target language interaction. Interpersonal language as expressed through small talk, for instance, represents an important personal and interactional resource for establishing, developing, and maintaining relationships. However, small talk is often reduced to formulaic categorisation or practised through routinised communicative functions. To understand how foreign language users engage in small talk, a qualitative study was carried out through conducting participation-observations. The results of this study reveal the exploratory, celebratory, and supportive relational dimensions to small talk and illustrate how such insights can be exploited in FL teaching and learning. In this article, we argue that small talk should be appreciated, valued, and accentuated not only for its ability to enhance meaningful and productive communication but also needs to be exploited for its exploratory, celebratory, and supportive interactive function.

Resumen

Mientras que la enseñanza y el aprendizaje del inglés como Lengua Extranjera se enfoca en el lenguaje transaccional significativo y con propósito, el lenguaje intrapersonal es comúnmente minimizado o tratado de manera superficial aun cuando es igualmente esencial y quizá incluso más satisfactorio en torno a la dimensión de la interacción del lenguaje seleccionado. El lenguaje intrapersonal como representación de la charla, por ejemplo, representa una importante fuente de interacción personal para establecer, desarrollar y mantener relaciones personales. Sin embargo, la charla es comúnmente minimizada a una categorización formulaica o una práctica mediante funciones comunicativas de rutina. Para comprender cómo los hablantes de lenguas extranjeras participan en *small talk*, se llevó a cabo un estudio cualitativo mediante la realización de observaciones-participación. Los resultados de este estudio revelan las dimensiones relacionales exploratorias, de celebración y de apoyo de small talk e ilustran cómo se pueden explotar tales conocimientos en la enseñanza y el aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera. En este artículo, discutiremos que la charla debería ser apreciada, valuada y acentuada no solo por su habilidad de mejorar comunicación representativa y productiva, sino que también necesita ser explotada por su función interactiva exploratoria, de celebración y de apoyo.

Introduction

In this article, we argue that small talk needs to be given its rightful place in foreign-language (FL) teaching and learning alongside 'big' talk because it plays an essential role in developing both interpersonal and transactional relationships and provides a tried and trusted means of engaging and maintaining target language (TL) communication. (Coupland, 2000) However, teaching and learning TL small talk can be extremely challenging especially when learners have (or have had) little or no contact with TL interlocutors.

Whilst the focus of this article is on adult learners, teaching proposals may also be relevant to younger learners although certain changes and modifications will have to be made (see below). In order to explore how small talk can be taught and learnt in the FL classroom, we have structured the article in the following way. First of all, we argue for the importance of teaching and learning phatic talk in the FL classroom. We then examine how pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic resources can help develop the phatic function (Thornbury & Slade, 2006). Then, we identify the chief characteristics of small talk in terms of its exploratory, supportive, and celebratory functions as interactants establish, maintain, consolidate, and sustain interpersonal relationships. Subsequently, through recording casual conversations in family homes and restaurants, we analyse data which highlight how FL users engage in TL small talk and that underscore successful and productive practices that are often taken from their first language (L1). Finally, we outline ways through which the skills and resources employed by FL users can be adapted and adopted for the teaching of phatic communion.

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Importance of FL small talk

By focusing on phatic communion, teachers can help FL students develop their relational skills. Relational skills refer to the ability to establish, develop, maintain, and consolidate TL relationships. Malinowski (1969), defined phatic communion as 'a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words' (p. 315). However, applied linguists (e.g., Coupland, 2014) have critiqued his label 'mere exchange of words' as they highlight the importance of small talk in developing both interpersonal and transactional relations. A more nuanced approach to teaching small talk highlights its value and importance in reinforcing social cohesion (Coupland, 2014), in seeking an interactional 'working consensus' (Goffman, 1959) and in demonstrating supportiveness and strengthening social bonds (Thornbury & Slade, 2006).

The current emphasis on transactional language and 'getting things done' in the TL means that FL learners focus on communicative functions such as giving directions, describing people, narrating events, agreeing / disagreeing, inviting / accepting invitations, etc. However, as part of everyday interaction, participants need to develop the phatic function that allows them to relate to one another, monitor whether their relationship is on track and assess whether they are 'comfortable' interacting with other interactants.

Pragmatic resources

Teaching and learning phatic communion need to centre on the available communicative resources and their appropriate use in TL situations. These are often described in terms of pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge and resources as they offer interactants a range of communicative options to be used in a variety of different contexts.

When engaging in transactional and interactional talk, FL users need to recognise and be able to employ different ways of expressing a communicative function. For instance, when agreeing, interlocutors need to be able to access a range of options from the direct *I agree* and *I couldn't agree with you more* to the more indirect and less committed *I suppose so* and *Yes, I follow what you're saying*. Rose and Kasper (2001) define pragmalinguistics as referring

to the resources for conveying communicative acts, and relational and interpersonal meanings. Such resources include pragmatic strategies such as directness and indirectness, routines, and a large range of linguistic forms which can intensify or soften communicative acts. (p. 2)

However, having a range of communicative options is not sufficient to achieve interactional and transactional goals. FL learners also need to know which option is appropriate in a given context and this is termed sociopragmatic knowledge. For instance, when asking someone not to talk, interactants may say *Be quiet* and *Quiet down* or the rude and unequivocal *Stop talking* and *Shut up*. Language users face a choice regarding which expression is appropriate in a given situation and this will depend on the relationship, context, and the nature of the interaction. Rose and Kasper (2001) describe sociopragmatic knowledge as

referring to the social perceptions underlying participants' interpretation and performance of communicative action.... in their assessment of speakers' and hearers' social distance and social power, their rights and obligations, and the degree of imposition involved in particular communicative acts. (p. 3)

Therefore, pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge reflect choices regarding interactional and transactional behaviour. With respect to small talk, FL users need to develop a database of acceptable and suitable expressions and structures and be able to access them appropriately and suitably in a given situation especially with respect to small talk's celebratory and supportive interactive functions.

Exploration, supportiveness, and celebration

FL users need to realise that phatic communion is a working arrangement and not a fixed state and that it changes and evolves as interactants explore relationships, express supportiveness, and celebrate a mutual coming together.

Exploration

The exploratory function of small talk seeks to establish common ground, delve into potential and existing relationships, and achieve social cohesion within the framework of a working consensus. The need for a working consensus was identified by Laver (1975):

I am suggesting that an important function of phatic communion is to help the participants to reach what Goffman (1959) has called the 'working consensus' of the interaction, about some aspects of their respective roles in those situations where the role structure is not previously obvious to the participants. (pp. 218-219)

A working consensus is a temporary arrangement which positions the interactants in a structured and organised relationship as they arrive at a mutual understanding of their roles and interactional goals. As highlighted by Goffman (1959):

Together the participants contribute to a single over-all definition of the situation which involves not so much a real agreement as to what exists but rather a real agreement as to whose claims concerning what issues will be temporarily honoured. Real agreement will also exist concerning the desirability of avoiding an open conflict of definitions of the situation. I will refer to this level of agreement as a 'working consensus'. It is to be understood that the working consensus established in one interaction setting will be quite different in content from the working consensus established in a different type of setting. (p. 21)

Working consensus as an ongoing process therefore places phatic talk as a dynamic and evolving activity rather than as a formulaic and staid arrangement that is so often promoted by EFL textbooks.

Supportiveness

Supportiveness involves showing consideration, interest, and concern for the hearer. In doing so, speakers prioritise the feelings of others over their own and seek to express supportive affect which Aston (1988) says

involves one participant having the other's wants – that is A's wants for A are also B's wants for A. This can be produced by a hearer finding that he has wants for the speaker which match those of the speaker for himself. (p. 226)

Supportiveness is particularly expressed through phatic exchanges. Stubbs (1983) argues that an exchange

is a minimal interactive unit, in which an imitation [I] by A is followed by obligatorily by a response [R] from B, and optionally by further utterances. (p. 131)

At a basic and simple level this would mean that *How are you?* is followed by the near obligatory *Fine, thanks, and you?* As argued by Schneider (1988), this exchange 'indicates harmony and presupposes converging interests' p. 54). At a more complex level, interlocutors may show supportiveness through self-disclosure, trouble-sharing, and gossip.

Self-disclosure involves narrating life stories, telling personal anecdotes and revealing individual weaknesses (Mugford, 2022) as interactants trust their hearers with sensitive information and expect to be reciprocated in kind. Trouble-sharing (Aston, 1988) goes further than self-disclosure as interactants engage in intimate talk, share their problems, and seek understanding and supportiveness from other hearers. Meanwhile gossip has the underlying intention of sharing values, attitudes, and opinions about others so that interactants adopt the same stance towards others which usually involves a negative opinion. Therefore, gossip 'ranges from casual everyday chatty conversation along to its more serious normative functions of trying to undermine other interactants' (Mugford, 2017, p. 156).

Celebration

Whilst FL accomplishment is often described in terms of fluency and accuracy, and proficiency and competence, interactants themselves may focus more on achieving intelligibility (Munro & Derwing, 1999) and comprehension (McKay & Brown, 2016) and enjoy and celebrate their ability to engage in FL interaction. In other words, interactants may be quite happy just talking to each other whilst engaging in small talk.

Celebratory talk can be expressed through connecting and bonding but as Aston (1988) argues:

Affiliation is not necessarily a matter of sympathising with tales of trouble, however. The news disclosed may be good as well as bad – one can recount felicitous experiences as an occasion for collective celebration as well as unfortunate ones for collective mourning. (p. 265)

Celebration will often be marked by reciprocation as interactants exchange views, opinions and experiences or what Aston (1988) terms 'celebration of the ordinary':

I have suggested that routinely successful interaction can constitute an applaudable achievement where a non-native speaker is involved, allowing the sharing of positive attitudes towards acceptable talk. (p. 387)

Celebration of the ordinary may involve simple repetition, formulaic small talk and showing appreciation of other interactants so as to increase their self-esteem through face boosting acts (Bayraktaroğlu, 1991, 2001).

Research Framework

This research into teaching small talk took place over a period of four months. Ten participant-observers recorded informal conversations between Mexican EFL speakers. The 30 recorded conversations generally lasted between 20 and 30 minutes and covered a wide range of topics including personal news, health issues and local gossip.

Participants

The conversations mostly took place during mealtimes which offer a natural socialisation context (Blum-Kulka, 1997). Meals took place in restaurants and at family homes. A total of 20 participants took part in the recorded conversations – excluding the ten participant observers. The participants were between 25 and 55 years old and came from a variety of social and professional backgrounds. They were all middle-class professionals, e.g., secretaries, skilled workers, and teachers. The participants lived in the Mexican state of Jalisco, principally in the Guadalajara metropolitan area. Selection criteria were educational background and C1 level of English, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

The participant observers asked if they could record the conversation and the participants agreed. One of the older participants did ask why she was being recorded but then forgot about the recording as she was soon sharing some gossip with another person.

In order to avoid deliberately engaging in small talk for the purposes of this research, participants were not informed about the nature of the investigation and the overarching research question: How do FL interactants engage in exploratory, supportive, and celebratory small talk?

Besides being aware that the conversations were being recorded, the participants also gave their consent for the data to be used for research purposes. Furthermore, the participants were assured of strict anonymity, and they have all been given pseudonyms in this article.

Participant observers

The participant observers were all university students who were in the final year of their degree programme in Teaching English as a Foreign Language. Therefore, they had a C1/C2 level of English (according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). The participant observers were aged between 20 and 35 years old and lived in the Mexican state of Jalisco, principally in the Guadalajara metropolitan area. The participant observers either listened to the table talk or initiated topics themselves. However, generally speaking, since the participants were talkative people, it was easy to start a conversation naturally and the recordings continued smoothly. As argued by Blum-Kulka (1992), 'the presence of participant observers enabled us to enrich the information gathered in many ways (e.g., researchers made notes to accompany each recording session... and later helped with the interpretation)' (p. 17). By taking part in the session, participant observers in this study gained insights into interactional patterns and participative practices which helped to enrich the analysis stage.

Research Methodology

To understand how FL speakers engage in phatic communion, the ten participant-observers sought out 'opportunity samples' (Brown & Dowling 1998, p. 29) at mealtimes which emerged when they found themselves in FL conversations. They recorded the conversations on cell phones since these provided unobtrusive research tools. After the recordings were made, the participant-observers transcribed the phatic dimensions to the conversation and subsequently highlighted instances of spontaneous, interactive, and interpersonal language use (Thornbury, 2005) which help reveal the exploratory, celebratory, and supportive interactive functions of phatic communion.

This research reflects a qualitative approach since it focuses on the nature of relational practices rather than their frequency of use. Furthermore, it is qualitative since participants are presented as individuals with their own unique ways of participating in small talk. Qualitative research allows the researcher to highlight the personal dimension to interaction as participants express their attitudes, feelings, and concerns.

Presentation of Results

In presenting results of this study, we examine the exploratory, celebratory, and supportive relational dimensions with the objectives of drawing out how FL speakers engage in small talk and how such insights can be exploited in FL teaching and learning.

Exploratory

Exploratory phatic communion involves finding common ground as interactants reach common points of agreement as they confirm the status of their relationships.

In the following example, Andrea and Roberto share experiences of having to move from a small town to the city for their classes. They started talking about how much time they expended in moving from one place to another:

Roberto: And thee schedule forrr... the timetable... to come from your... from your town to here has it changed because of the pandemic [COVID-19]? Or not?

Andrea: Umh what do you mean?

Roberto: Is it something that maybe you have to consider as well

Andrea: Oh like the transportation schedule, like the hours that the Cienega [bus company] passes? Or

Roberto: Mhum (confirming)

Andrea: No, it's kind of the same ahh it passes like almost each half hour, even sometimes it takes like forty minutes ahh but its... like... regular the same time ehh I haven't had any troubles because of that maybe the expense of the

Small talk reflects how Andrea and Roberto negotiate meaning as Roberto expresses concern about how Andrea can travel. Andrea does not quite understand Roberto's question: *Umh what do you mean?* His subsequent remark does not clarify the situation: *Is it something that maybe you have to consider as well.* Then Andrea helps out with *Oh like the transportation schedule, like the hours....* The conversation reflects how the interactants co-construct meaning and arrive at a working consensus.

In the following example, Delia, Alex, and Esteban appear to be establishing common ground and common interests which centres on Delia's trip to Hidalgo, a state in the centre of Mexico:

Delia: I'm... I'm going to Hidalgo with my mom, 'cause she is going to move to Jalisco, I hope. Then I want to... to help send your house her house and... eh... keep your, your things and move one.

Alex: Oh that's nice! So you are gonna be closer now.

Delia: Yes, maybe in July.

Alex: Oh excellent!

Esteban: That's really close.

Alex: Oh well, good luck!

Delia hesitantly talks about her mother hopefully moving to Jalisco and that she wants to help her. Although Delia's use of English is not fluent, it does not undermine the conversation as the other interactants seek out more information, e.g., *So you are gonna be closer now?* and she receives approval with: *Oh, that's nice!, Oh excellent!* and *Oh well, good luck!* The extract shows that language fluency and accuracy are not prerequisites for engaging in phatic communion. Furthermore, exploratory talk reflects the development of potential and existing relationships and how social cohesion is achieved within the framework of a working consensus.

Supportiveness

Supportive phatic communion involves identifying with other interactants and trying to understand their situation. For instance, in the following interaction, Victoria was talking about a trip she made and the implications in being in the 'wild' and not being able to use her cell phone. Ana comments sympathetically on the positive side:

Ana: So at least you had this little free time to take fresh air and to share with your friends

Victoria: Yeah, it is nice to disconnect cause we didn't have ah internet or sign[al] from the phone in there, even if you wanted ah...

Ana [laughs]

Victoria: you couldn't do anything with your cell phone except ahh taking photos soo it was some... I mean, mandatory disconnect... ahh...

Ana: Hmm

Ana stresses the importance of being with one's friends even if one is disconnected from the larger world. Victoria concurs even though she hints that she would have liked to have been connected (or perhaps she even tried?). This makes Ana laugh which can be seen as a backchannel and a sign of supportiveness.

Victoria continues by saying that her phone was reduced to being a camera. Again Ana offers a backchannel through her use *Hmm*. Bowe et al. (2014) argue that backchannelling occurs when '[c]onversation participants not holding the floor typically provide acknowledgement that they are continuing to follow what the speaker is saying' (p. 101). Therefore, as the conversation progresses Ana gradually reveals her frustration and is given a sympathetic ear from Victoria through backchanneling.

Supportive phatic communion also involves sharing mutual feelings. In the following conversation, interactants were talking about how COVID has given them more time to reflect and get to know themselves better but that it could also have negative effects, especially with regard to family relationships.

Carla: Ah like going to the extremes, like not having time for yourself and not having... and now having a lot of time. You start overthinking and overanalyzing

Fabiola: Yeah, and also that... that kind of times with your... with your family, you know? (laughs) very... (laughs)

Carla: Ahh

Fabiola: be close to each... with your family (laughs) it has been like... rough (laughs)

Carla: Yes, that's another aspect because it's like "ok, I love you, I... get along with you but not with... ah so much time" I have my limit

Fabiola: Aja

Carla: So yeah, I understand

Fabiola: Mmm (agreeing)

Pablo: Ah

Fabiola: It makes the home really feel like small, sometimes... (laughs)

Carla and Fabiola show supportiveness and solidarity as they feel the same way about their situation. As Carla focuses on the problems of time to oneself and overthinking and overanalyzing, Fabiola supports her by picking up on the word *time* making direct reference to time spent in close proximity with her family and laughs, as she thinks about spending so much time with her family. Carla supports her with a backchannel: *Ahh*. The conversation then becomes more serious as Fabiola says that it has been 'rough' being close to her family. Carla shows supportiveness by saying: *So, yeah, I understand* and that there is a limit. The conversation reveals how supportive small talk can quickly adopt a serious tone.

Celebration

Small talk does not have to be void of emotion and excitement and this can be seen through phatic communion as interactants celebrate and rejoice at their ability to just talk to each other. For instance, in the following, Erika and Karina were talking about getting together with their group of friends, but they remembered that Toño had a family issue and they have not heard from him. Also, Sergio (another friend of the group) is mentioned but they highlight the fact he is ignoring them.

Erika: Yes, and let's see if we are together like, you know, well, it has... it is the situation with Toño and...

Karina: Mmm

Erika: his family, he hasn't say anything, right?

Karina: No... no, I... I am remembering (laughs) that in this moment. I... we should ask him "how is it?"

Erika: Yes, and also Sergio that is just answering some messages but when it comes to getting together, he ignores... ignores us

Celebratory talk is often difficult to follow since it is insider talk, i.e., conversation that is understood implicitly by the participants. In planning the get-together Erika and Karina express concern about Toño. However, this quickly turns to laughter as Karina remembers a funny incident: *I am remembering (laughs) that in this moment. I... we should ask him "how is it?"* This is 'topped' by Erika who mock scolds Sergio with *when it comes to getting together, he ignores... ignores us*. Erika and Karina appear to celebrate the talk even though they feel 'ignored' by their friends as they appear to 'conspire' in their stance towards Toño and Sergio while co-constructing their plan of action.

In the following conversation, four friends, Angie, Berenice, Camilo, and Marco, are talking about being on the beach and getting sunburnt.

Camilo: I would rather not have a lot of sun on the beach.

Marco: yeah, you will be burnt

Angie: like a shrimp!

Camilo: yes

Berenice: That's why I hate going to the beach, I hate it, I hate it, I cannot stand
Camilo: because of the sunburn?
Marco: It must be sad to be a white person
Angie: I'm brown and I hate going to the beach, I don't like it it's not a colours stuff
Marco [laughs]
 ...
Angie: There is a lot of humidity and the sun is too high!
Camilo: well, that's true there's a lot of humidity
Marco: Oh my God you are so pessimist (laughs)
Camilo: yes!!
Angie: No no no no, well yeah
Everyone: [laughs]

The conversation starts off with Camilo saying that he would not want to be on the beach and get sunburnt. His comment finds general agreement. Then, Marco switches the conversation to jokingly 'sympathise' about the problems white people have whilst being on the beach. This is met with all-round laughter from the other participants. Angie adds a tone of seriousness by saying she is not white but does not like getting sunburnt. Marco appears to laugh at such unwillingness to go to the beach. Angie explains about the humidity and the hot sun which receives support from Camilo. However, Marco still has a go at Angie with *Oh my God you are so pessimist* followed by laughter. This remark is also supported by Camilo and Angie agrees. This is all accompanied by general laughter – a sign that this is not serious but rather celebratory talk.

Discussion: Teaching small talk

Small talk is about negotiating relationships, finding common ground, making interactants feel good and celebrating talk. FL users need to employ small talk to create bonds, establish networks and generate a positive atmosphere (Capras, 2014). This can be achieved by employing existing pragmatic and discoursal resources and assets, especially in terms of pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge and resources. It is important to recognise that these skills may be transferable from the learners' first language or, at least, teachers can compare and contrast L1 and TL practices.

Pragmalinguistic assets

Pragmalinguistic assets provide FL speakers with the different ways of expressing communicative functions and helps them engage in predictable topics and interaction patterns. However, it is important to realise that these should only serve as the basis for developing exploratory talk. FL learners need to be aware of conversational organisation of phatic communion which embraces self-disclosure, speech acts and adjacency pairs. Teachers may want to start by examining the learners' L1 pragmalinguistic practices.

Exchanging pleasantries and engaging in conversation openings should be seen as pragmalinguistic steppingstones to interactants revealing information about themselves that can lead to more meaningful relationships, i.e., self-disclosure as argued by Svennevig (1999)

Self-disclosure allows social actors to reduce uncertainty about each other and thus predict how costly or rewarding future interactions with each other will be (Berger & Bradac 1981). The degree of self-disclosure has been considered a reliable measure of the depth of a relationship.... (p. 20)

Therefore, FL interactants need to be able to reveal pertinent and conversationally enhancing information about themselves. Self-disclosure helps a conversation to move forward and breaks out of the rigid question-answer format, e.g., *How are you?.... Where are you from?.... Do you work?....* etc. However, it needs to be pointed out that engaging in self-disclosure practices are ethically unacceptable for younger learners (and dangerous at a personal level). Emphasis needs to be placed on appropriate ways of developing rapport and mutual interests.

All too often phatic communion speech acts are reduced to a pragmalinguistic list of communicative functions in EFL teaching, e.g., making introductions or saying goodbye. However, the emphasis should be on language as action and achieving interactional outcomes such as establishing, maintaining, consolidating, and sustaining interpersonal relationships. Therefore, communicative functions should not be seen as an end in themselves but rather in what they allow FL interactants to achieve in the TL.

The interactional dimension can be highlighted through the use of adjacency pairs (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973) and preferred/dispreferred responses (Levinson, 1983). Adjacency pairs are functional exchanges which are met with an expected response:

If someone approaches you and says Nice day isn't it? they expect a paired response, such as Yes, isn't it. If we say D'you fancy a coffee? the adjacency pair is either Yes, please, or No, thank you. (Harmer, 2007, p. 345)

The desired reaction to an adjacency pair is seen as the preferred response (as opposed to the dispreferred response) as argued by Paltridge (2006)

... the second part in an adjacency pair may be preferred and others may be dispreferred. For example, a question may be followed by an expected answer (the preferred second pair part) or an 'unexpected or non-answer' (the dispreferred second pair part). When this happens, the dispreferred pair part is often preceded by a 'delay', a 'preface' and/or an 'account'. (p. 117)

If FL students can identify the use of adjacency pairs and preferred responses, they are in a stronger position to understand the flow of phatic communion and how interactants develop, maintain, and consolidate interpersonal and transactional relationships. Adjacency pairs and preferred responses can be identified, analysed, and practised through roleplays, simulations and watching English-language sitcoms and talk shows.

Sociopragmatic assets

Sociopragmatic assets allow interactants to utilise pragmalinguistic resources contextually and appropriately so as to demonstrate supportiveness and celebration. The judicious and measured use of sociopragmatic assets allows interactants to convey closeness, show affiliation and build connections as they highlight interest, express concern, and enjoy relationships. Once again, learners may want to compare and contrast their L1 practices with those of the TL.

As seen in the findings regarding exploratory, supportive, and celebratory phatic communion, closeness, affiliation, and connection can be developed through collaborative interchanges as interactants practise sharing attitudes, showing agreement, offering matching assessments and enhancing each other's face (Aston, 1988). Exploratory phatic communion helps interactants find common ground and reach common points of agreement. Supportiveness helps interactants understand and relate to others' situations. Celebratory talk honours the ability to enjoy talking to one another. All this needs to be done through practising reciprocity, satisfying other's wants and 'taking it in turns to recount and affiliate with each other's joys and troubles' (Aston, 1988, p. 273). Closeness, affiliation, and connection involve 'doing' small talk rather than practising conventional language and structured conversations. It means activating and implementing pragmalinguistic resources. This can be an extremely challenging task for teachers since FL phatic talk involves developing a high level of pragmatic competence such as 'knowing how much small talk to use and whether to extend it into more personal or social talk...' (Holmes, 2000, p. 132). This can be achieved by identifying, noticing, and analysing how TL speakers engage in supportiveness, solidarity, camaraderie, and communion. All too often small talk is seen as monolithic. In reality, it is contextualised and user-oriented and its objective depends on what interactants want to achieve whether it be exploratory, supportive, or celebratory.

Conclusion

Teaching phatic communion represents a daunting task for EFL teachers who may have limited experience of interacting with TL speakers. Braine (2010), for instance, estimates that 80% of the world's ELT teachers are non-native speakers which would imply that they enjoy limited contact with TL speakers and not versed in the intricacies of TL phatic talk. Nevertheless, in their own local teaching context, English language teachers are still expected to teach interactional language. To exacerbate matters, ELT materials all too often relegate phatic talk to formulaic speech routines such as greetings and goodbyes with a focus on safe topics, such as talking about the weather. In this article, we have examined how pragmatic resources, which are often transferable from the learners' L1, are a viable and practicable way effective way to develop TL small talk in its exploratory, supportive, or celebratory functions.

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