

Small Talk: Pragmatics Lessons for College English Language Learners

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Small talk in the workplace by nonnative English speakers has been widely researched; however, small talk by English language learners (ELLs) in a school context remains an underexplored area. This paper introduces the implementation of pilot lessons on small talk to Japanese college students enrolled in an intermediate conversation class. The focus is on pragmatics-based activities that include ways for students to develop their sociopragmatic awareness.

非英語母語話者による職場内の英語の雑談は広く研究されてきた一方で英語学習者による学校内での雑談の研究は発展途上である。本稿では、中級の英語会話講座を受講する日本人大学生に対して実施された雑談のレッスンの質的研究を論じている。語用論に基づくアクティビティーにより、受講者が社会語用論的認識を高める方法に焦点を当てたものである。

SMALL TALK has proven to be important in both workplace and academic contexts. The main function of small talk is to “oil the social wheels” (Holmes, 2005, p. 353), which includes expressing friendliness and establishing rapport, as well as maintaining good relations and solidarity. Topics for small talk are noncontroversial and cover a wide range, including weather, business, holidays, sports, complaints, appearance, and social events (Holmes, 2005; Holmes & Stubbe, 2003). As the term implies, *small* talk had a negative perception as marginal or purposeless when it was introduced in the 1920s (Jaworski, 2000), as it was considered talk not concerned with information, not purposeful nor task-oriented (Holmes, 2000). While there is the assumption that one’s ability to engage in small talk is a talent, studies show that rather than a talent, “knowing how much small talk to use and whether to extend it into more personal or social talk is a sophisticated sociolinguistic skill” (Holmes & Fillary, 2000, p. 281). As small talk is a skill learned through social participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991), to be successful at small talk one needs to be able to analyze the various dimensions involved in social interaction, such as power, solidarity, formality and function in the workplace (Holmes, 2005).

While small talk is challenging for native speakers of English, it may be even more so for English language learners (ELLs) who face challenges in the acquisition of the target language. The consequences of not having learned the skills to engage in small talk, for example, may result in situations such as international graduate students who are capable of teaching courses



in their areas of expertise in English, but not having the skills to socialize with native English-speaking undergraduate students (Myles & Cheng, 2003). Having pragmatic competence, which is one's ability to use context-appropriate language while communicating based on the status of the hearer, distance between the hearer and speaker, and intensity of the message (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010; LoCastro, 2012), may be crucial when engaging in small talk. A lack of pragmatic competence may result in pragmatic failure when communicating with other speakers of English, resulting in "awkwardness, misunderstanding, or even a temporary communication breakdown" (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010, p. 78). This lack could be attributed to environmental factors, such as the imbalance between EFL learners' pragmatic competence due to not residing in the host country and their grammatical competence, which may be higher due to the focus of their language instruction (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998). This, however, should not mean that EFL learners do not have the potential of acquiring pragmatic competence.

Small Talk—A Community Practice

The concept of Communities of Practice (CoP) can offer insights on how easing into a community's small talk practices can be achieved. Introduced by Lave and Wenger (1991), the CoP proposes that one learns through social participation that evolves from legitimate peripheral participation. In communities of practice, participation refers to people being "active participants in the *practices* of social communities and constructing *identities* in relation to these communities" (Wenger, 1998, p. 4). According to Wenger, the four components of meaning, practice, community, and identity are integrated in a social theory of learning in which social participation becomes a process of learning and knowing. As an immigrant learns to become part of a new community by learning the language and the practices (Norton, 2000), an international student, whose purpose in the

host country is academic research, earning a degree, or both, becomes integrated into the academic community by socializing with host country members in the target language.

Practice and identity are especially relevant in understanding small talk in a community. First, practice connotes "doing, but not just doing in and of itself, . . . [rather in] a historical and social context that gives structure and meaning" (Wenger, 1998, p. 47) to what is practiced. For example, international students learn to take part in different modes of learning in the host country by participating in such activities as small group discussions. While a community may not be a group with boundaries, there is an understanding that participants have the awareness of why they do what they do and what it means to their community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Thus, each community provides a space where learning takes place and through which members define their identity in the community (Wenger, 1998).

The Study

This study deals with lessons on small talk in English to Japanese EFL learners who are engineering students enrolled in an intermediate English conversation course at a private Japanese university. Although the university is known for its exchange program with overseas institutions, in the past engineering students were not encouraged to participate due to demands in the curriculum that prevented study abroad. However, as the department was launching its own study-abroad program with two institutions—one in the US, the other in Thailand—the pressing need to develop pragmatic competence among prospective study-abroad students spurred the development of the lessons.

The pilot lessons were given while the department was holding negotiations with candidate institutions for its exchange program. It was hoped that future implementation of the les-

sons would help prepare the students. Eight of the nine students who consented to be part of this study had not previously traveled outside Japan. However, one male student had lived in Mexico for a year as an intern in the year prior to the study. While the level of the course itself was intermediate, the level of English competence among the students varied, as there was no standardized language placement test offered by the academic department at the time of the study.

Although textbooks could be one resource for teaching expressions commonly used in small talk, I felt that an exercise or activity that involved students generating their own language would be to their advantage. Therefore, a discourse completion task, or DCT, which is a way to elicit language for the purpose of collecting samples (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010), was the method chosen to collect data in this study. DCTs allow students to generate responses by imagining themselves in hypothetical contexts and as part of a given community of practice, interacting with others. The study consisted of three 45-minute pilot lessons, with DCTs and role-plays, and addressed the following two research questions:

1. Can lessons on small talk raise the pragmatic awareness of prospective exchange students for their study abroad?
2. Is the students' awareness of the sociopragmatic aspects (status and distance) of small talk reflected in their DCTs and role-plays?

Instruction

Three pragmatics-based lessons were taught for approximately 30 minutes each, for which the objective was two-fold: (a) learners would understand pragmatic aspects in small talk; and (b) learners would perform DCTs, through which their understanding of appropriate sociopragmatic aspects would be checked. Although there are criticisms against written DCTs in that they

do not reflect how we speak, it is a quick and convenient way to collect language samples (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010).

The first lesson opened with an overview of what small talk entails, including a presentation in English by the instructor, followed by a cloze exercise using a video on small talk designed for ESL purposes. While the speed of the interlocations in the video clip was slower than the natural speed spoken by native speakers, the intention was to ensure that the utterances were sufficiently audible to the learners to ensure their comprehension. Participants were expected to identify some small talk topics. In the second lesson, a short segment from an American movie was played in order to expose the students to more authentic language, at an accelerated speed, to raise their awareness on the variations of status and distance between the interlocutors. Then they were paired up for a DCT activity to be performed in the third lesson.

Data Collection Procedures

Student data were collected using a student self-assessment form, DCT worksheets, and an open-ended questionnaire. The self-assessment taken after the first lesson (see Appendix A) asked about previous experience with small talk and what students had learned that day. The written DCT worksheet (see Appendix B) had two scenarios, both of which involved small talk between a Japanese university student and an American university student. The instructor assessed the participants' performance using a separate form to check on the appropriateness of their formality (status and distance), topic, and word choice. The postlesson open-ended questionnaire in Japanese (see Appendix C) asked participants to reflect on their overall thoughts as they participated in the small talk lessons. Items included questions about whether participants thought that prospective study-abroad students would benefit from practicing small talk.

Participants were also asked what else they believed would be necessary to include for effective small talk lessons.

Findings

After the first lesson where small talk in English was introduced, there was evidence in students' self-assessments that one lesson alone had already helped to raise the pragmatic awareness of the participants, which corresponds with the first research question. Their understanding about the role of small talk as explained during the lesson and what they believed were appropriate topics for small talk suggested that a lesson with similar contents might raise the pragmatic awareness of prospective exchange students prior to their study abroad. For example, one student commented that it was helpful to learn how a conversation in English flows, while another thought sharing information with the listener is an important part of small talk.

As for the second research question concerning the sociopragmatic aspects of small talk, the DCTs and role-plays showed that the participants were aware of social status and distance between the speakers. For instance, in one DCT, while students are usually status equals, the status of one student became higher than the other because he offered to teach the Japanese language to the other.

Stepping Into Small Talk

In the first self-assessment form that participants filled out in Japanese, when asked to reflect on what they knew about small talk, six out of nine participants answered that they did not know anything about small talk or had never heard the term in English before. The other three wrote about some level of knowledge. One student stated that small talk is "a short conversation, casual conversation." Another student commented on his understanding of distance between speakers. He wrote,

"I knew I had to be careful about distance." Another student commented on his awareness of having a smooth conversation when he responded, "When talking with others, I have to talk smoothly."

The responses by the first and third students reflected their observation of the video as the small talk topics between the interlocutors changed quickly and there was no elaboration or deep discussion on any of the topics. However, as the second student was on a sports team, where status and distance are emphasized, his response might have reflected the relationships of the members on the team.

Sociopragmatic Aspects in Small Talk Discourse

In the theoretical framework of the CoP, Wenger (1988) discussed the idea of modes of belonging as important parts in the process of creating one's identity and learning. These modes are engagement, imagination and alignment. The findings of the current study show that all three modes were evident in the participants' DCTs. According to Wenger, engagement is defined as the "active involvement in mutual processes of negotiation of meaning" (p. 173), and alignment is the coordination of "energy and activities in order to fit within broader structures and contribute to broader enterprises" (p. 174). In their interactions, the participants were engaging with each other by using their imagination to create DCTs in order to simulate a small talk situation. Through their role-plays, the participants aligned to each other in order to accomplish a purpose, to oil the wheels.

Two sociopragmatic aspects dealing with the relationship between interlocutors, status and distance, which were brought to the participants' attention, were the intended answers to the question, "What are two important elements in small talk?" Seven out of the nine participants responded as intended, while two wrote about individual attitudes to be taken during small

talk. For example, the only student who wrote his responses in English stated that “communication and friendly” were important to small talk. Another student commented, “When having small talk, one needed to enjoy and to be careful not to be disrespectful.”

Status

In the second lesson participants worked on a DCT that was completed when they performed role-plays during the third lesson. Because the scenario was between two students, the participants’ understanding of the relationship between the interlocutors was “close” (for distance) and “equal” (for status). However, one group’s role-play revealed a status difference between the students, albeit briefly.

Situation 1

Your American friend is studying Japanese. You see your friend, who tells you about the test he just took in Japanese class.

You: Hey, how was the Japanese test?

Friend: Well. It was difficult.

You: Don’t mind. I’ll teach you.

Friend: Wow.

In the third line, the Japanese student, while empathizing with the American student, offers to teach Japanese to help the American overcome his difficulties in studying Japanese. Here, the Japanese student’s identity shifts from that of a student to a teacher, resulting in his being a teacher (Richards, 2006). As a result, the two are no longer equals; the Japanese student’s status becomes higher than that of the American student when he volunteers to teach Japanese to the American student. While students in general are aware that teachers have higher status

than they do, this group’s DCT revealed that the status of students could manifest itself in a hierarchical relationship within this particular context.

Distance

Another group’s DCT revealed the aspect of distance between the interlocutors.

Situation 2

You are an exchange student from Tokyo, Japan. You are studying in a small American university in the suburbs. You spent your winter vacation in a big city and tell your American friend about how exciting your trip was.

Friend: Hi, how are you?

You: I’m fine. Are you?

Friend: I’m fine, too. How was your vacation?

You: It was great! I saw many buildings.

Friend: Did you buy something?

You: Yes, I bought. Here you are.

Friend: Wow, thanks! What’s this?

You: It’s a famous chocolate in the city.

Friend: I like chocolate very much!

In this DCT, the Japanese student buys chocolate as a souvenir for the American student. This is possibly based on the practice of Japanese gift giving, in which Japanese usually buy souvenirs for close friends. Therefore, the DCT reveals that the interlocutors are not simply friends, but that they are close friends.

Small Talk Mediating Language Learner Awareness

In the postlesson open-ended questionnaire, the participants' responses showed how their awareness had been raised through the series of small talk lessons. Their comments were not limited to their contextual awareness, such as status and difference, but extended to how their awareness as language learners had been raised. Asked about what participants found useful in the lessons, two participants responded. One wrote that he believed that constructing conversations from scratch would be necessary in the future and found it useful. Another wrote that he understood that conversations could carry on even with short sentences.

Discussion

Pragmatics lessons invite learners to consider contextual factors in language production and seek their own answers through negotiation with others. Although small talk may not be anything new in the participants' first language, to learn about what small talk in English entails through English instruction may have posed some challenges for them.

To paraphrase Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of the CoP, the way for learners to become members of a second language or foreign language community is to learn the language by using it. Wenger's (1988) three modes of belonging—engagement, imagination, and alignment—were evident in the participants' DCTs as well as in their identities as English language learners. The DCTs did not show signs of pragmalinguistic failure of interactions in which, for example, turns lacked a logical sequence. At the same time, the completed DCTs may have paralleled the participants' own level of engagement while they were negotiating during the process of creating their DCTs and attempting to align their thinking towards the shared goal of accomplishing a task while using their imagination.

Reflections by the participants suggest the importance and the need to provide learners with thought-provoking activities that encourage them to use the target language. The advantage of DCTs is that they can help students generate skits in a variety of situations. This lends itself to instruction on conversation structures appropriate for different situations, such as how to open and close conversations, as well as on adjacency pairs (e.g., "Thank you" "You're welcome").

There is room for consideration on how pragmalinguistic aspects need to be incorporated in the lessons. The instructor should have criteria for instruction on forms or grammar points, or on how to handle grammatical errors in the participants' language production or in the DCTs, as these criteria provide direction on error correction and instruction, as well as contributing to comprehensibility of the speaker's utterance (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). This may require the creation of a unit within the bigger picture of pragmalinguistics, for example, through speech act instruction, prior to introducing small talk.

The limited availability of resources for small talk instruction presented difficulties on how to teach sociopragmatic skills, especially the subtleties and complexities of small talk (Holmes, 2005). As such pedagogical methods were not incorporated in the current study, they need to be further researched and modified to teach language learners. In terms of exposure to language by native speakers, availability of level-appropriate materials needs to be further explored. Movies can serve as authentic language resources, yet balancing their authenticity and the speed of interaction needs to be considered to ensure that language learners can keep up with the fast pace and the length of turns in interaction.

Assessment tools to be used in the future need to be further developed and refined to fulfill the teaching objectives and to ensure higher reliability and validity. Furthermore, criteria need to be further broken down into details, for example, addressing

“(1) directness, politeness, and formality in context; (2) choice and use of supportive moves; and (3) overall pragmatics-focused comprehensibility” (Ishihara, 2009, p. 452). Using audio- or video-recordings, or both, of learner production to check tone of voice and body language may be added for detailed assessment.

As the lessons were intended for prospective study-abroad students, after their predeparture implementation, a postdeparture follow-up on progress in the target language country or community would ensure the validity of the predeparture lessons (Holmes & Riddiford, 2010). Upon return, more research conducted with the students could further improve the quality of future lessons as the students’ feedback would be a vital resource for revising and creating materials which fulfill their needs.

Conclusion

The pilot lessons helped generate interest in small talk in English among the participants. It is therefore hoped that small talk instruction could benefit prospective study-abroad students once such instruction becomes established in the department’s regular curriculum. However, application of learner awareness of sociopragmatic aspects (status and distance) to appropriate language production in real-life situations may be a lifelong learning process. While small talk may seem trivial and meaningless, research has shown that it has an extremely important role in communication. If it is crucial for those living in the target culture, it can be even more so for those who are preparing to live there as a way to help them adjust to the host country.

Bio Data

Reiko Takeda teaches undergraduate English courses at Aoyama Gakuin University. Her interests include using conversation analysis to enhance students’ speaking and pragmatics ability.

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Appendix A

Self-Assessment

- What did you know about small talk before the lesson?
- What have you learned about small talk in English?
- What are two important aspects in small talk?
- What are some possible small talk topics?

Appendix B

Discourse Completion Task

Situation 1

You are an American student taking a Japanese class. You see your Japanese friend on campus and tell him/her about the test you just took in Japanese class.

You:

Friend:

You:

Friend:

Situation 2

You are an exchange student from Tokyo, Japan. You are studying in a small American university in the suburbs. You spent your winter vacation in a big city and tell your American friend about how exciting your trip was.

Friend:

You:

Friend:

You:

Appendix C

Postlesson Questionnaire

English Communication 受講の皆さんへ

(To students enrolled in English Communication))

3回にわたるSmall Talkの練習へのご協力をありがとうございました。

終了するにあたり、皆様のご感想・ご意見を伺いたいと思いますので、お手数ですが、以下の質問にお答えください。

(Thank you for your cooperation in the Small Talk lessons of the past three sessions. I would appreciate it if you could answer the following questions)

1. 海外留学、または海外渡航前にSmall Talkのミニレッスンを実施することは、留学や渡航を控えている学生にとって良い準備になると思いますか？
Yes / No (理由)

(Do you think students will be better prepared if they go through mini-lessons on Small Talk prior to their studies or travel abroad? Yes/No. Why?)

2. これまでのレッスンで、何が興味深かったですか？

(What did you find interesting in the lessons that have been conducted?)

3. 何が役に立ちましたか？

(What did you find useful?)

4. 今回ご紹介しましたレッスンの内容のほかに、この先、何が必要だと思われますか？(例) ネイティブの音声を通したリスニングの機会を増やす。ロールプレイングなどの発話練習を増やす…など。

(In addition to what was instructed in the lessons, what else do you feel would be necessary for effective small talk lessons?)

e.g., More opportunities to enhance listening through the native speakers' recordings; more opportunities to speak through role-plays, etc.)

5. ご意見・ご感想など

(Other comments and thoughts)