

Small Talk
Heidi Myers
ETAP 550

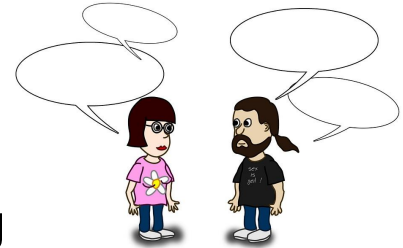
OUTLINE FOR PRESENTATION

Section 1: Definition of Small Talk & Factors that affect the use of Small Talk

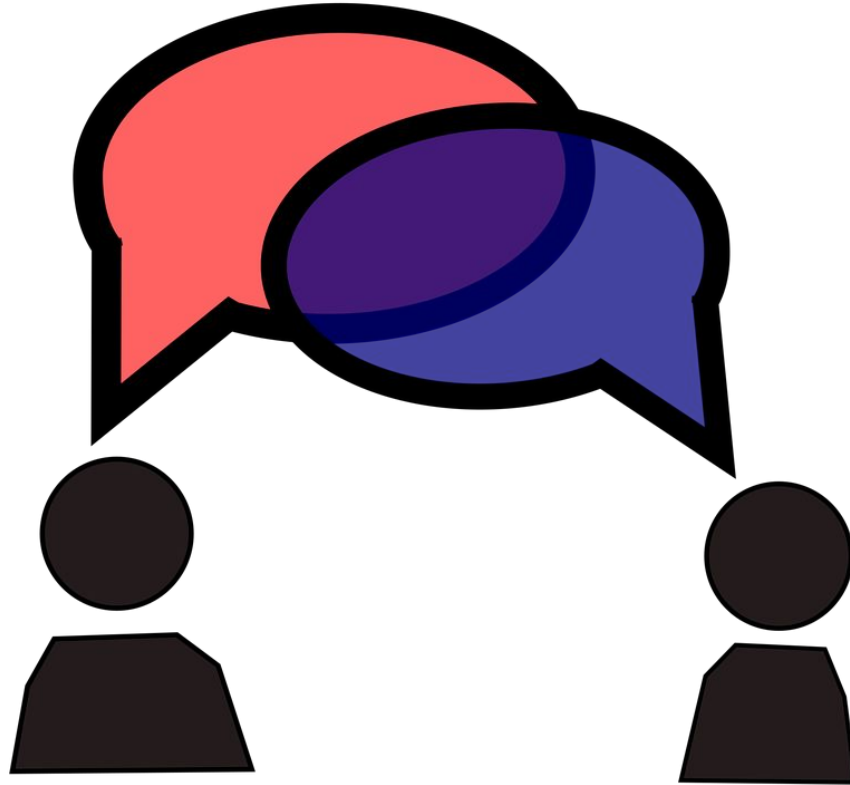
Section 2: Small talk & Lingua Franca

Section 3: Small Talk, Culture, and Language Learning

Section 4: Teaching Small Talk to English Language Learners



DEFINITION AND FACTORS THAT AFFECT USE OF SMALL TALK



WHAT IS SMALL TALK?

- Light, casual conversation (chit chat)
- Serves discourse functions in workplace and personal communications
- Focus around politeness, conversation, and seemingly unimportant things
- Helps people form connections and maintain social bonds.
- Used differently among different groups of people (family members, colleagues, friends, acquaintances, neighbors, etc.)
- Topics discussed, amount of information/details given, questions asked, are all based on who you are talking to. A lack of small talk can signal a closer relationship.

In the workplace

Small talk can be used to do anything from soften directives from management to making it easier to increase engagement. It can be used to fill time in before meetings start and is an essential part of luncheon or dinner meetings. Some sociolinguists focus on how power relationship can be expressed through small talk. Take a look at this conversation...

Tom: *can I just have a quick word*

Greg: *yeah sure have a seat*

Tom: *[sitting down] great weather eh*

Greg: *mm*

Tom: *yeah been a good week did you get away skiing at the weekend*

Greg: *yeah we did, now how can I help you*

Tom: *I was just wondering if I could take Friday off and make it a long weekend*



Who has the power in this dialogue? How do you know?

CONVERSATION ANALYSIS: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC APPROACH

Conversation analysts say there are 3 components of basic conversation.

(Sharrock & Anderson, 1968, p. 68)

- **Speaking Turn**

This just basically means that people take turns speaking. The conversation contains at least two turns. This is what makes conversation different from a monologue.

- **Adjacency Pair**

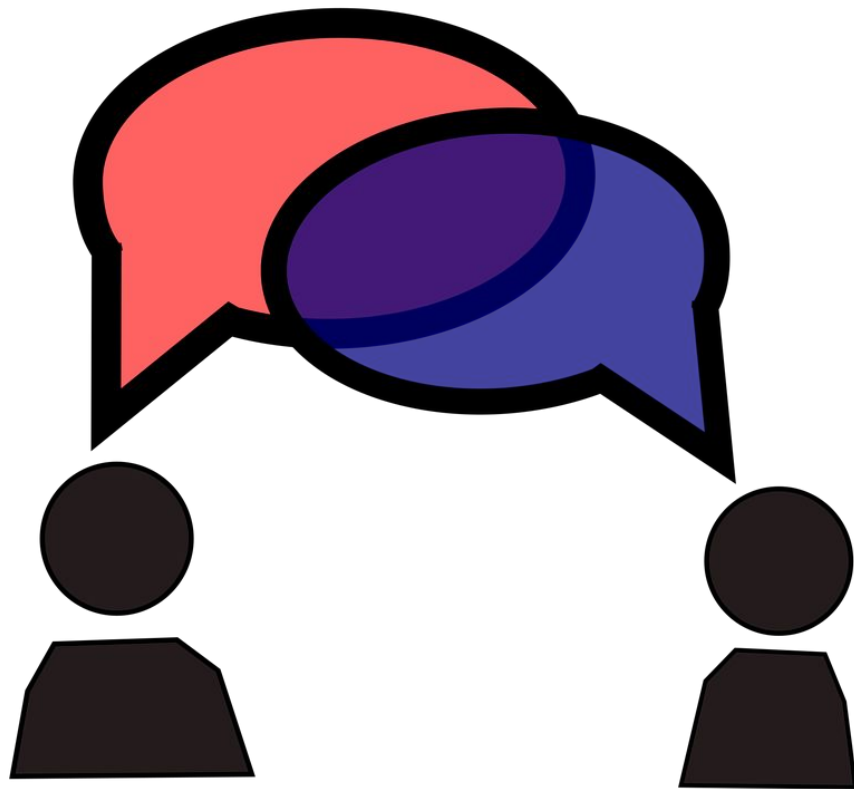
Conversations happen in pairs. First there is an input, which will then give rise to a second input. Examples: A greeting will be followed by a greeting, question followed by an answer, complaint might be followed by an apology, etc. If you are missing the second input it can be perceived as being rude. (For example not saying hello back to someone)

- **Sequential Implicativeness**

Conversations evolve and are sequential. Conversation evolve based upon what partners say, how conversation evolves and builds upon what is said previously is what sequential implicativeness is all about.

(Sacks, 1974)

SMALL TALK AND LINGUA FRANCA, A STUDY BY C. MEIERKORD



MEIERKORD STUDY OF LINGUA FRANCA

- **Turn taking is different in different cultures. For example in Antigua, one person starts talking before the other finishes. You do see cultural transfer of overlaps and interruptions from the native language which will be used in small talk.**
- **Pauses between turns happen much more frequently and are longer between conversation transitions and turns and especially at the end of conversation. However, simultaneous speech does still occur. These pauses may be happening because of a language production problem or because they are focusing on providing and receiving turn taking signals from their conversation partner.**

From study done by Christiane Meierkord (2000)

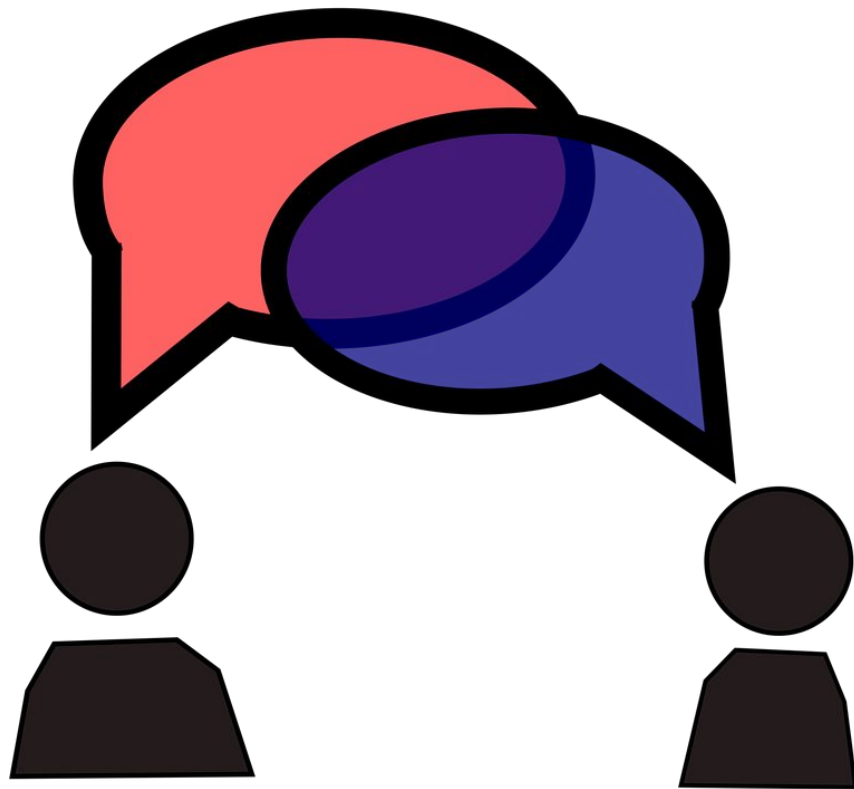
MEIREKORD STUDY OF LINGUA FRANCA & SMALL TALK

- Individual topics are shorter and more superficial. Most topics were changed after less than 10 turns. This phenomenon could be due to lack of vocabulary and choosing of safe topics.
- Small talk seems to adhere to routine politeness with typically heard phrases like “Hello”, “Good Morning”, “How are You?”, and “Bye”. The speakers may choose to use these phrases so they are understood by their speaking partners or perhaps because those were the ones most frequently focused on in textbooks. It could also reflect the economic purpose of only having to retain a few phrases.
- Supportive verbalizations like, “mmhmm”, “yeah”, “right” were seen frequently as well as appeals for sympathy as in “See what I mean...”

GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF LINGUA FRANCA

- “Participants wish to save face. They avoid insulting behaviour and putting their partners into embarrassing situations by e.g. using expressions their interlocutors may not understand.”
- “As a result of the uncertainty regarding the cultural norms and standards that apply to lingua franca conversations, participants wish to assure each other of a benevolent attitude.”

SMALL TALK, CULTURE, AND LANGUAGE LEARNING



CHALLENGES OF SMALL TALK IN ENGLISH FOR NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS AND PEOPLE FROM OTHER COUNTRIES

- Quite a bit of linguistic knowledge is needed to master the art of small talk.
- Small talk can encompass many different subjects so lack of vocabulary can be a problem.
- A knowledge of grammar and syntax is necessary so that listeners can understand what speakers are trying to tell them.
- Small talk can happen anywhere so knowledge of context is important, as certain situations might require special greetings or situational vocabulary. (grocery store vs. neighbor)
- Knowledge of pragmatics. “In producing discourse, speakers routinely provide information that allows addressees to make pragmatic inferences.” (Genetti) These inferences come partly from the meaning of the speaker’s words and also from “extralinguistic factors” or knowledge someone possesses outside of language. This can become pretty complicated for people who may not be as familiar with the language and culture.

MEANING AND CONTEXT



In this cartoon Lucy is trying to help Linus understand the falling of the leaves as a metaphor but Linus only understands the literal meaning, which is out of context. (Muhartoyo, 2013)

MORE CHALLENGES FOR NON-NATIVE AND NATIVE ENGLISH SPEAKERS...

- You are an introvert.
- You are too direct or too indirect. Some people get to the point and that is all you get. That can seem rude, abrupt, or rushed. If you are too indirect you can lose your listeners interest.
- Taboo topics (We will talk about those later)
- Asking about wrong topics (topic doesn't match the event, topic is not appropriate for country like cricket, only talking business, only talking about yourself not trying to find common interests)
- Use of indirect small talk openers like, "Is this seat free?"
- Answering a question you expect rather than what was asked.
- Not using turn taking (asking all the questions but never answering any or vice versa).
- Too short or too long answers. Overusing phrases like, "and you?"
- Transitioning between topics can be awkward.
- Silence (when it is appropriate and when it's supposed to be uncomfortable)
- Understanding body language of people in US (crossed arms, looking at phone, raised eyebrows)

TURN TAKING CHALLENGES

People use a variety of turn-taking strategies to let the other person know when they should/can speak. These clues may include

- verbal, nonverbal and paralinguistic signals (lowering the pitch, pausing).
- Overlaps and interruptions must also be taken into consideration.

These factors can be problematic for students learning English for a variety of reasons. Take for instance a tonal language like mandarin where pitch is used primarily to distinguish between words, not to show it is someone's turn to speak. Korean speakers may have difficulty understanding eye contacts role in small talk. Korean speakers use indirect eye contact to show politeness. This may be seen as rude, or that they may not wish to engage in small talk.

SMALL TALK CHALLENGES



TABOO TOPICS

Small talk can be difficult for native speakers as well as non-native speakers because small talk can be about almost anything. Some topics are considered safe to talk about in the United States.

What do you think are some common small talk topics?



What are some things you think you shouldn't talk about?



CHINESE IMMIGRANTS IN AUSTRALIA

Cui studies Chinese Immigrants and the roots of their difficulties with small talk in Australia. He finds the foundation of the problem is in how Chinese people view interpersonal relationships. He says that in Australia relationships are more loose and equal. In China, there are “distinct degrees of intimacy across relationships, ranging from the closest familial, to the furthest stranger.” In the closest familial range discourse can be critical, intimate, and friendly. In any other social relationship there are only formal interactions and “basic courtesies”.

Australians, like Americans, can participate in small talk with anyone. You can make personal comments and remarks to co-workers (in some instances it is expected). In China, these friendly interchanges have no place. This is one of the reasons why Chinese ELL's may have difficulty in understanding and partaking in small talk. According to Cui, chinese immigrants find small talk awkward as it doesn't fit into their traditional chinese social context. (Cui, 2013)

SILENCE IN FINLAND

One of Finland's national sayings is, "Silence is gold and talking is silver."

In Finland, unless you are among close friends or in a social situation, you do not engage in small talk. Subways and buses are silent. When you order a coffee, you do not engage in small talk with the barista, rather you just tell them what you want.

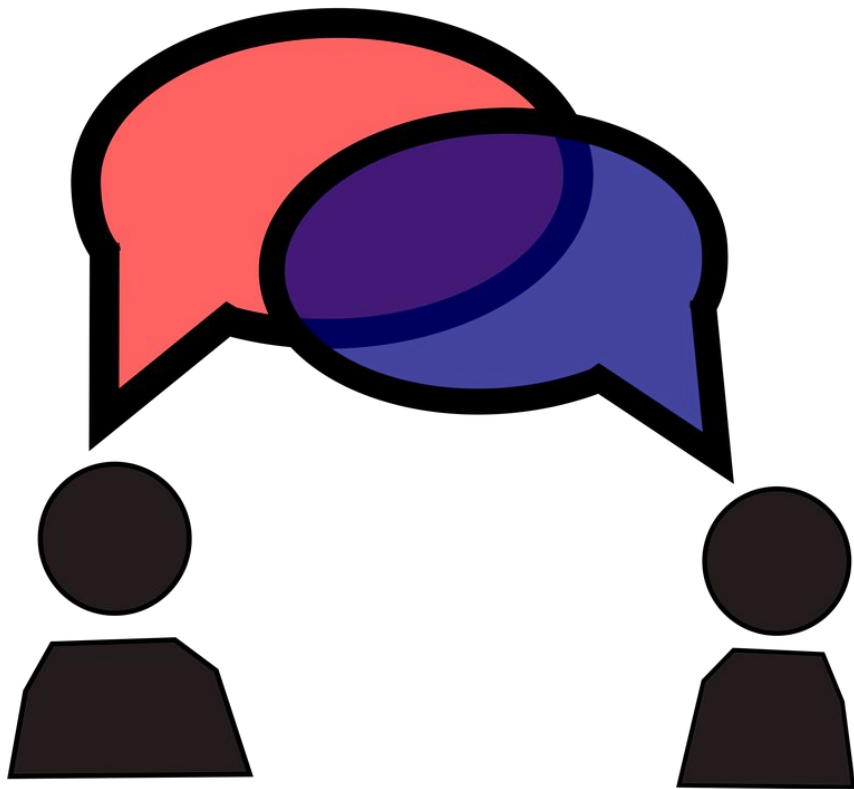
Dr. Anna Vatanen, has completed a study on the "Stereotype of the Silent Finn", she says that Finnish people are communicating in their comfortable silences. Dr. Vatanen states, "It's not about the structures of language, but rather the way people use language to do things." For example, when we say "How are you?", we often are using it as a greeting and don't expect people to really tell us how they are. The Finnish equivalent of this "Mita kuuluu?" would prompt someone to tell you what is new in their life and how they are REALLY doing. However, you wouldn't just ask that of anyone, only people in your very close social circle would hear that question. (Studaris, 2019)



Bus Stop in Finland

TEACHING SMALL TALK: GRAMMAR/CONVERSATIONAL ACTIVITIES

An overview & 5 activities for teachers to use.



TEACHING SMALL TALK

Teachers often focus on linguistic form and not necessarily grammar of spoken English. McCarthy and Carter claim this is a mistake. McCarthy and Carter state that English Language Learners should be taught spoken English grammar. It is important to teach students phrases they may not see or use in writing like “I dunno”, “Wanna go”. In teaching conversation we need to teach students to sound like a native speaker, more natural and fluent.

(McCarthy and Carter 1995)

Activity 1: Small Talk Method



USING THE SMALL TALK METHOD IN THE CLASSROOM

A problem that many English Language Teachers have is teaching both accuracy and fluency concurrently. As one is often focused on, the other falls by the wayside. This method resolves the accuracy vs. fluency dilemma.

In this method, students are grouped and then asked to use their knowledge and communicative ability to converse **without correction** from the teacher in a session. Each group has a student leader who leads the session.

(Hunter, p. 30)

SMALL TALK SESSION SCHEDULE (HUNTER, P. 33)

- 1 The day before the session, the leader announces the topic.
- 2 At the beginning of the session, the leader writes discussion questions and vocabulary on the board, re-introduces the topic, and clarifies any confusion; the leader also puts the students into groups of three to four and tells the students to begin. (3–5 minutes)
- 3 Groups discuss the topic. (15–20 minutes)
- 4 The leader asks the groups to bring their conversation to a close and prepare for check in; the groups decide what to report to the class and who will do it. (5 minutes)
- 5 The leader invites each group to check in with the class about the highlights of their conversation. (5–10 minutes)
- 6 The leader thanks the class and reminds them of the next 'Small Talk' date and leader. (1 minute)

TEACHER ROLE IN "SMALL TALK" METHOD

The teacher is very much the facilitator in this method.

- The teacher observes, watches, and suggest ways to improve conversation after the session.
- After the small talk session the teacher uses the last 10 minutes to coach students.

Examples of a few Possible Coaching points

- How to get your point across (for introverted students)
- How to interrupt politely to get clarification
- Teaching grammatical points.
- Talking about accuracy.

(Hunter p. 33)

Worksheet Entry Form

WORKSHEET ENTRY FORM

Course: **B2BUI04**

Teacher: **James**

Expression: In the past the womans wear the traditional clothes.

Pronunciation:

Context/Vocabulary:

All Do: ☒

Check this box if you want to mark this sentence for all students to correct.

Worksheet #: 1

Speaker: Fatima

Date: 1/24/2010

Topic: Emirati and foreign culture

Delete this sentence.

Spellcheck Preview Worksheet Anonymous? Preview Student Error Count

Record: 17 of 18 Filtered Search

In this class, the teacher can take notes while listening in on sessions. These notes helped the teacher figure out what to talk about when coaching students in the last 10 minutes of class (noting common errors). These individual notations would also be sent out to the students within 24 hours so they could see what errors they made.

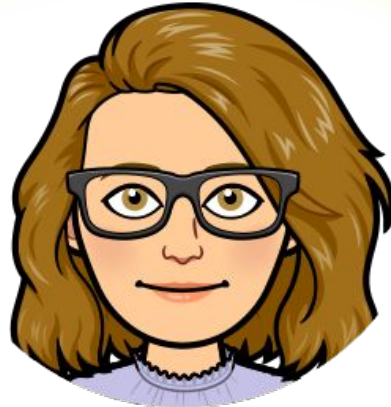
(Hunter, p. 34)
















WHO CAN BENEFIT FROM THE SMALL TALK METHOD?
















- Students who are lower intermediate to advanced English Language Learners show growth in fluency.
- Students from cultural backgrounds that do not encourage participation in speaking.
- It does not work with true beginning or entering ELL students as they don't have the communicative competence to engage in small talk.

Activity 2: Matching Purpose, Expression and Structure

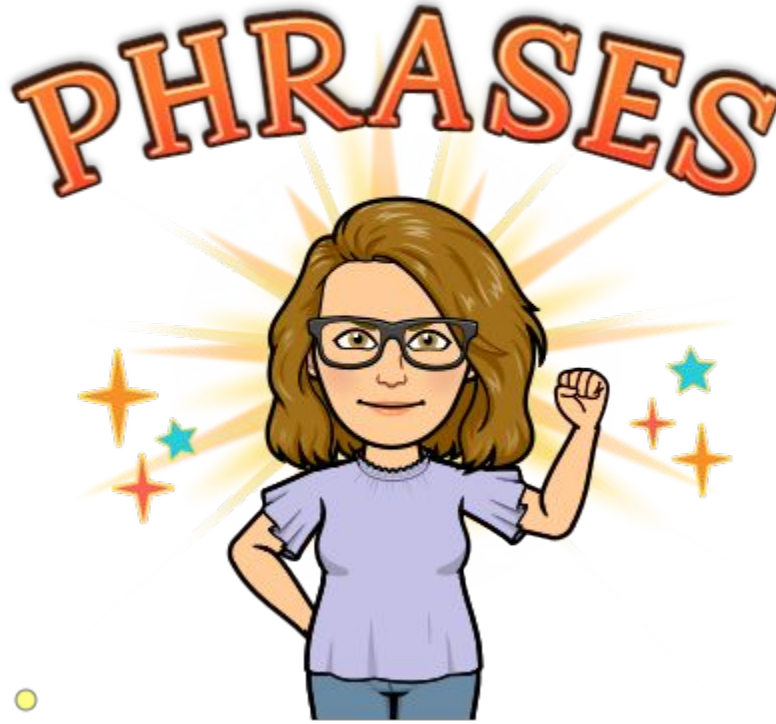
MATCHING



Purpose	Expression	Structure
Ask about an experience 	You should go get that checked out. 	Question Tag 
Give Advice 	Where can I find out more? 	Present perfect for experience. 
Confirm Information 	Have you ever lived in Europe? 	Informational Question 
Ask for more details 	Go to the door. Look left. 	Modal verbs such as “should”, “ought to”, “had better” 
Provide instructions 	You work at the coffee shop. Don't you? 	Imperative Form 

Purpose	Expression	Structure
Imagine a situation 	Would you like some water? 	In my opinion, to me, I think 
Offer something 	To me, that seems like a bad choice. 	I'm afraid, I don't see/think/feel that way 
Agree or disagree 	Let's go for a walk. 	Conditional form 
Offer an opinion. 	If you were to make that cake, how would you decorate it? 	Let's, why don't you, how about 
Make a suggestion 	I'm afraid I don't see things the way you do. 	Use of some and any in questions. 

Activity 3: Phrases Activity



One thing I'm really passionate about is...	My idea of a dream job is to... (be the manager of a bar on a Pacific island).
One thing I'd like to take up is... (salsa) as/because...(say why).	I'm a big fan of ... (cricket/Australian football)
I'm really into ... (U2/Lady Gaga).	I'm not so fond of ... (Elton John/paperwork/early mornings).
One thing I really can't stand is... (being in a crowd).	I spend most of my free time ... (training at the football club).
I look up to (eg Brad Pitt) because...	The last time I had a good laugh was... (at my uncle's party).
One thing I dread is... (waking up early when it's - 5 C outside).	My idea of fun is to ... (do grammar exercises/go clubbing).
The top 3 items on my bucket list are...	If I could tweet the American President, I'd ask him...
My idea of a great night out is...	The most unforgettable holiday I've ever had was...

Completing Small Talk Phrases Activity

Students complete the phrases above to talk about themselves, and to use as a springboard for discussion.

After they complete the sentence, they should then either add more information or a partner can ask them for more information.

eg. "One of my favourite things to do on a Sunday is listen to soul. After a stressful and hectic week, it helps me to relax."

Cards/cut-ups

I find cut-ups more effective. If you wish to use them, cut them up for students to pick one card at a time and complete the phrases.

Alternative: **True or false**

A variation on this is for students to complete each sentence, either telling the truth or giving a false answer. The others have to guess if it's true or a lie!

This might work better with students who don't wish to say as much about their lives or opinions.

Time

This could take 20-40 minutes. To keep things moving, you might wish to give a time limit of 20-25 minutes.

Lifted from David Sweetnam's
Blog Get into

Activity 4: Storyboard

STORYBOARD



FOCUSING ON USING TENSES WHEN LEARNING SMALL TALK.

[HTTPS://WWW.STORYBOARDTHAT.COM/](https://www.storyboardthat.com/)

Add a Scene!

Drag a scene into
the first cell.



🔍 Hide these tips

Next

Create your own at Storyboard That

Activity 5: Question Tags



Using Question Tags

Share pictures of weather. Have students write question tags. Then have them ask and answer question tags with a group or a partner.



Another activity you could do with question tags is writing who, what, where, when, why, and how on top of poster paper and having students work together in teams to come up with as many small talk related questions as they can think of for each question tag. Students rotate from poster to poster adding more questions to other students work. Students then try to answer the questions in small groups.

Small Talk Discussion Questions

Do you think elementary/high school teachers should try to find ways to teach ELL's how to engage in small talk? Can teachers incorporate "small talk" opportunities into their curriculum? If so, how?

Do you think small talk has been changed by the pandemic? If so, how?

THE NEW STOCK PHRASES

"HOW ARE YOU?"



"FINE, THANKS."



"I HOPE YOU'RE WELL."



"BYE."



**Illustration of
how small talk
has been changed
by the pandemic.
Can you guess
the new phrases
that have become
the norm?**

Cartoon by Liana Finck

L. FINCK

REFERENCES:

- Carter, Ronald & McCarthy, Michael. (2015). Spoken Grammar: Where Are We and Where Are We Going?. *Applied Linguistics*. 38.
- Cui, X. (2013, July 30). Tongue-tied. *South China Morning Post*, p. A11.
- Ellen Show (2014, June 5). Memorable Monologue: Small Talk. Youtube. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MXxrFIgUK0Q&t=130s>
- Ferencik, Milan. (2004). A Survey of English Stylistics. University of Presov.
- Finck, Liana (2020, July 27). The New Stock Phrases (cartoon). *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from <https://www.newyorker.com/cartoon/a24210>
- Genetti, C. (2015). How Languages Work: An Introduction to Language and Linguistics. Cambridge UP.
- Hunter, James (2012, January). Small Talk: Developing Fluency, Accuracy, and Complexity in Speaking. *ELT Journal*, vol. 1(66) 30-41.
- Meierkord, Christiane (2000). Interpreting Successful Lingua-Franca Interactions. An Analysis of Non-native Small Talk Conversation in English. *Linguistik Online*, vol. 5.
- Park, Christina. (2015, March 15). An Introvert's Guide to Small Talk: Eight Painless Tips. *Forbes*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/christinapark/2015/03/30/an-introverts-guide-to-small-talk-eight-painless-tips/?sh=2a7d1aa3574a>
- Sacks, H. Schegloff, E., & Jefferson, G. (1974). A Simplest Systematics for the Organization of Turn Taking in Conversation. *Language*, 50, 696-735.
- Sistofa, Muhartoyo. (2013, April). Conversational Implicature of Peanuts Comic Strips. *Humaniora*, vol. 4(1) 102-121.
- Studarus, Laura (2018, October 17). How the Finnish Survive without Small Talk. *BBC Travel*, Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/travel/story/20181016-how-the-finnish-survive-without-small-talk>
- Sweetnam, David. Small Talk Phrases. *Get into English*. Retrieved March 15, 2021, from <http://getintoenglish.com/small-talk-phrases-download/>
- Ventolo, E. (1979). The Structure of Casual Conversation in English. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 3, 267-298.