

Working the Weather: A Lesson on Small Talk

By Martha Wilson

Small talk is an essential part of our daily lives and some of the best relationships that I have began as small talk. It is important for students to understand the importance of this social networking skill in order to become good communicators. In the classroom, small talk can be used to teach students about various interaction strategies and speaking topics that are useful and authentic. By employing the same ritual in our classes, we can efficiently simulate the real-life situation while still maintaining a safe environment for students to make mistakes and to increase their willingness to communicate.

Materials: Whiteboard, markers, laptop, projector, worksheet (provided).

Audience: Adult English learners, Intermediate to advanced adult/secondary learners.

Objective: Students will be able to practice making small talk with their classmates using the tools and topics learned in class.

Outcome: Students will initiate small talk with strangers and write a one-paragraph summary about their experience.

Duration: 60–75 minutes (approximately)

Warm-up (10–15 minutes)

Step 1: Free Write

Begin the class with a journal writing/ free-writing activity. Topics may vary and the following questions can be adapted to your individual classroom:

- *What did you do last weekend? Rate your weekend on a scale of 1 to 5.*
- *Have you seen/read/watched anything interesting lately? Please describe.*
- *What do you do for fun? What are your hobbies?*

Step 2: Sharing Time

Instruct students to find a partner and to tell their partners about what they did over the weekend.

Step 3: Class Discussion

Call on a few students to share their stories or ask for volunteers.

Presentation (30 minutes)

Step 1: Tools for Small Talk

Before the Video

Distribute the worksheet provided (can be printed one-sided or double-sided) before playing the video and go over the questions to make sure that the students understand each question.

During the Video

Play the video: "[The Art of Small Talk](#)," by Jeffrey Benjamin (4:30).

- Students will answer "The Art of Small Talk Video Worksheet."
- Repeat the video again if necessary.

After the Video

Instruct the students to find a partner to compare their answers and discuss their personal experiences with small talk and the effectiveness of the tools mentioned in the video.

Step 2: Topics for Small Talk

Worksheet: Making Predictions

Turn over to the next page of the worksheet and have students predict whether the topics listed on the page are appropriate or inappropriate. Model the task, and give examples if necessary.

Lesson

Discuss these topics with your class. Regardless of your instruction site, teachers are encouraged to have a good understanding of the target culture where instruction is taking place prior to introducing this lesson and be able to provide insight into these topics for the students. If you are not native to the target culture, some familiarization with these topics may be required before teaching this lesson.

Share your own experiences dealing with these topics. For example, instances when inappropriate topics made you feel uncomfortable or when appropriate topics became the starting point of a good friendship or relationship.

Sharing Time & Class Discussion

Instruct students to answer the discussion questions with a partner and call on a few volunteers to share their answers or their experiences with these topics.

Practice (20–25 minutes)

Step 1: Role-Play

Students will practice making small talk with at least three different partners for 5 minutes each.

- Taking the possible scenario from the discussion questions, write one scenario on the board and pretend that the whole class is waiting at a bus stop. **Model the task and give examples.** Have students role-play and initiate small talk with one other person for about 5 minutes.

- While the students are role-playing, write another scenario on the board for the next scene (in an elevator). Have the students recreate an elevator scene and initiate small talk with a different person.
- Repeat this step one more time with another scenario.

Step 2: Student Demonstration

Ask for volunteers or call on a few pairs to demonstrate their small talk scene. Rewards may be provided as incentive (extra credit points, candies, cookies, etc.).

Production

Homework/Project

For homework, instruct the students to initiate small talk with at least three strangers outside of class and write a one-paragraph summary of their experiences.

- This may be done over the weekend or due at a later date to give time for students to collect their data.
- Ask students to share their experiences with a partner next time in class.

Reference

Benjamin, J. (2008, December 12). *The art of small talk* [Video file]. Available from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jYeX5oEw0h8>

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THE ART OF SMALL TALK VIDEO WORKSHEET

1. How can small talk benefit you?

2. First tool: _____

a. What does it mean to be an “ice-breaker”?

b. What is the purpose of “breaking the ice”?

c. Examples:

3. Why don't people like to start small talk?

4. Most great talkers are _____

5. Second tool: _____

a. What are the characteristics of a good listener?

b. Examples:

6. Bonus tool: _____

a. Examples:

TOPICS FOR SMALL TALK

Check (X) whether these topics are appropriate or inappropriate. Share your guesses with a partner.

TOPICS	APPRROPRIATE	INAPPROPRIATE
Politics		
Hobbies		
Religion		
Weather		
Gossip/Negative Comments		
Health Problems		
Salary		
Job Description		
General Personal Information		
Favorite TV Shows, Movies, or Music		

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: Discuss these questions with a partner

1. Why do you think these topics are appropriate/inappropriate?
2. How can you start small talk in these situations?
 - At a bus stop
 - While waiting in line for coffee
 - In an elevator
 - When you see an attractive person