

### **Teaching Small Talk in a Business English Class**

“Talk at work is not confined to talk about work” (Tannen (1994:64))

Teaching Business English is not easy. Our learners need to be able to function effectively in the workplace, and to do this they need to be able to use the language to do various things within a specific context. Our learners need to adapt to the situation as they take on various roles which reflect the task at hand and their relationship with the other participants. Small talk is often used to develop these relationships with others. In this article I want to briefly discuss the nature of small talk, and suggest some ways of dealing with it in the classroom.

Look at this extract from a telephone conversation. The participants have already had a chat and are now getting down to business.

A I'm calling about the project  
B Hmm  
A Basically we want to go ahead with it  
B Hmm  
A It's about well basically what we talked about looking at the competitors that we've got  
B Yeah  
A Then erm just writing a report on each one what they're doing  
B Yes  
A I've got an outline that I've prepared as well  
B Yes

(from Frendo, unpublished data)

In this extract the conversation is purely task-related. A is bringing B up to date and explaining that a project is to go ahead. There is a power difference between the speakers, often found in workplace talk; at this stage of the conversation A is in full control, and B is simply listening.

Compare the following extract from a different conversation. This time we are looking at the beginning of a telephone call:

A Hello?  
B Good morning, John. Tom.  
A Good morning. That was quick.  
B (*laughing*) Well, these emails are fantastic things.  
A How are you?  
B Very well, thanks. I rang about er well just before I sent you that email and the lady said oh he's not in to work yet.  
A got in ...  
B (*laughing*)  
A ... just about when you called actually.  
B Oh, really. I thought she was joking. I thought you were in work at sort of half past six every morning.  
A No, no, no.

(from: Frendo(2005: 141))

Here the two speakers seem to know each other well, (but not well enough to know each other's work times). Note how the conversation includes "routine" phrases (Good morning, Good morning, How are you? Very well thanks). There is a bantering tone which seems to pervade the conversation, but we have no idea what the call is about. This is small talk leading up to the real reason for calling.

So some workplace talk has to do with clear business goals, and could only take place in a workplace context. But the small talk example we just looked at could also only have taken place within a workplace context, yet it doesn't seem to have much to do with a specific task at work. When we start looking at different conversations we find that often task-related conversations include small talk; sometimes this small talk element may be only one or two turns, and sometimes it can take up most of the conversation. Small talk is much more than talking about the weather, or discussing the latest football results. Sometimes it has to do with something at work, but not specifically with the task at hand. It may involve work-related gossip and storytelling; it may be highly routine in character, so that both sides automatically know what to say next. What is certain is that small talk is very common in the workplace. What it does is less clear, but there does seem to be some sort of a relational function; people have to work together, and they use small talk as a way of connecting with each other.

Yet although small talk is a fundamental part of Business English, I suspect it is often neglected in the classroom. Part of the reason is that is not easy to pin down: how do we teach the throw away line in the middle of a list of instructions, or the general chat while we wait for a meeting to start? Part of the reason might be that it seems that in offering our learners "everyday chat" we might not be fulfilling our duties as Business English teachers. But I think the main reason is that it is difficult to "create" new relationships in the classroom - if small talk is about building relationships, then how do we go about ignoring the relationships which already exist in the classroom. In other words, how do we give people practice in building relationships when those relationships are already built? And just to complicate matters, we have to be able to prepare our learners to cope with doing this with people from different cultures.

Having said that, there are a number of things we can do as teachers:

- Spend some time reading up about small talk, and trying to understand how it works
- Discuss the whole issue of small talk, and its importance to the learner, with the learner
- Provide the learner with listening texts (authentic if possible) and analyse the language being used
- Encourage small talk in the classroom when it occurs naturally
- Ensure that learners use small talk in their role plays and simulations, and focus on it during feedback sessions

It seems to me that teaching small talk is a key part of our job as Business English teachers. People do not only do business, they interact with each other as people as

well. If our job is to make that interaction easier and more effective, then small talk must be part of it.

### References

- Frendo, E. (2005) *How to teach Business English*, Longman, Harlow.  
Tannen, D. (1994) *Talking from 9 to 5. Women and Men in the Workplace: Language, Sex and Power*, Avon, New York.

### Further Reading

There are numerous books and articles on this subject. Here are some of the more readable ones.

- Coupland, J. (Ed.) (2000) *Small Talk*, Longman, Harlow.  
Egins, S. and Slade, D. (1997) *Analysing Casual Conversation*, Continuum, London.  
Holmes, J. and Stubbe, M. (2003) *Power and Politeness in the Workplace: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Talk at Work*, Longman, Harlow.  
Koester, A. (2006) *Investigating Workplace Discourse*, Routledge, London.

### About the author

Evan Frendo is a Business English teacher, teacher trainer and writer based in Berlin. His most recent publications are *How to teach Business English* (Longman), and the *Double Dealing* series of coursebooks, co-authored with James Schofield (Summertown).