

Small Talks: Daily Speaking Practice for Vocabulary and Grammar Mastery

by EPHRAIM VIERNES DOMINGO



LEVEL: Upper beginner and above

TIME REQUIRED: 10 minutes or less in class; about 5 minutes for preparation

GOALS: To develop students' communicative competence; to practice using target vocabulary and grammar in a real-life conversation; to foster students' confidence in using English; to provide a review and warm-up activity before the main lesson

MATERIALS: A timer; (optional) an object, book, or video clip that can serve as the day's topic; (also optional) chalk and a chalkboard or markers and a whiteboard

BACKGROUND:

Even teachers who recognize the importance of using authentic texts and language to maximize students' learning experience are sometimes unable to do it; reasons for this include time constraints, difficulty preparing applicable activities, and the comparable convenience of using prepared worksheets. As a result, we may tend to teach grammar and vocabulary by using sentences involving imaginary characters and situations. Moreover, we expect our students to replicate the grammatical structures and practice using the target words in their own made-up sentences.

But we can, in fact, easily provide the opportunity for students to apply their newly acquired knowledge in real-life contexts. What is more, we can do it daily, and it does not require much time.

In the class I co-teach, we begin lessons with an activity we call "Small Talks," recommended and originally designed by the prefectural board of education in Japan. Each day, the lead teacher decides on the topic to match a recent lesson (often, the previous day's lesson). Our students are in middle school, but you can use this strategy with other age brackets and various proficiency levels, from upper beginner to advanced learners. The idea is simple: let the students talk to each other for a short period about a given topic using target vocabulary or a target grammar concept.

MATERIALS AND PREPARATION:

Set the timer for 40 seconds if your students are at the upper beginner level, a minute for intermediate, or two minutes for advanced. (You can vary the time.) You might want to write the topic, target vocabulary, and/or grammar points on the board or project that information on a screen. You might also choose to show an object, a book cover, a video clip, or a movie trailer and introduce it as the day's topic.

PROCEDURE:

1. After greetings, introduce Small Talks as a warm-up and review activity. If you plan to make it a regular part of your lesson, tell that to your students so that they know what to expect. Explain the objectives of the task; emphasize that the idea is to review a topic from a previous lesson. Remind students to keep speaking until the time runs out and tell them they should not worry about making mistakes (however, you might want to make an exception to this if the focus of the review is to practice a specific point of grammar or usage). With advanced students, ask them to take notes on the interesting concepts they discuss and the questions or difficulties they encounter.
2. Introduce the topic of the day. The topic might be *my favorite food* or *a sport I can play*. At first, for lower-level students, it may be helpful to provide a script large enough for everyone to see, but encourage them to not rely entirely on it.

Here is a basic sample:

- A: *What is your favorite food?*
B: *I like pizza.*
A: *Really? Why?*
B: *Because it's yummy. And you?*
A: *My favorite food is fried chicken.*
B: *Why?*
A: *Because it's tasty.*

More-advanced learners can talk about topics that are more challenging, such as *the present I got for my birthday* and *the place I want to visit*. You may prepare a weekly plan and incorporate previous discussions in the new topic. Following are suggestions for other topics and questions:

For lower-level learners:

- *My favorite TV show (or cartoon character)*
- *My favorite fruit / vegetable / dessert / drink*

- *My favorite singer / band / actor*
- *"Do you have a pet?"*
- *"Can you play soccer / tennis / baseball?"*
- *"When is your birthday?"*
- *"How many pens / pencils / erasers do you have?"*

For advanced learners:

- *"What movie do you recommend?"*
- *"What is your favorite restaurant?"*
- *The person I admire the most*
- *The coolest animal I know*
- *"What sport would you like to be good at?"*
- *If I had a million dollars ...*
- *"Where do you want to go this summer vacation?"*

3. Present the target vocabulary and the grammar concept that the students must use in their talk. For instance, if your topic is *my favorite sport*, you can ask the students to name the sports they know. For *a sport I can play*, you may remind them to use the modal *can* in expressing their abilities. *The vocabulary and grammatical points should be from a recent lesson*, especially for lower-level learners.
4. Again for lower-level learners or the first time you use Small Talks with any class, briefly present or review one or two appropriate responses and transition devices. It may also be essential to remind students to ask follow-up questions, especially "Why?" You might want to demonstrate using responses, transition devices, and question words with a student or play a short video clip, then practice saying them with the entire class. Here is a list of useful expressions and their functions:

Showing interest:

- *Really?*
- *Wow!*
- *That's interesting!*
- *Amazing!*
- *Is that so?*

Showing that you understand:

- *I see.*
- *I understand.*
- *I know what you mean.*
- *Oh.*

Sustaining the conversation:

- *How/What about you?*
- *And you?*
- *What else?*
- *Then what happened?*

Changing the topic:

- *By the way,*
- *Before I forget,*
- *Let's talk about*
- *Can I change the subject?*

Asking someone to say something again:

- *Pardon me. Could you please repeat that?*
- *I'm sorry?*
- *What was that?*
- *Could you say that again, please?*

5. The first time students do Small Talks, provide a sample conversation. Since there are two teachers in our classroom, we present our model conversation first. If you are the only teacher, you may take both roles or ask a student to speak with you. Again, it may be helpful to review questions or conversation starters and appropriate responses. Also, encourage students to make the conversation as natural and spontaneous as possible. You might ask them to imagine they are meeting their partner somewhere after school, on a bus, or a popular local meeting place.
6. Tell students to face their partner, usually the person sitting next to them, and signal the start of the activity. Turn on the timer. If someone does not have a partner, you may either talk with them or ask them to join the nearest pair. Each student should have a different partner from time to time, so if possible, have students stand up! As they converse, you should walk around to monitor.

Gather interesting statements and common mistakes to be discussed after the activity. Students can also ask you questions. However, try not to interrupt, coach, or stop to listen intently to a particular pair. Doing so may make them distracted, uncomfortable, and inhibited to speak. When the timer stops, students should also stop talking.

7. You may opt to have another round or two. Have students speak with a different partner. Start the timer again and go around the room while students talk.

VARIATIONS

1. You can conduct Small Talks online. However, you may need to prepare a slide or a document to show the target language and topic of the day. You may also find it convenient to record a model conversation in a video. The activity will be done in breakout rooms, so you must decide the pairing of partners beforehand. Bring students back to the main session after the allotted time is up.
2. You may want to break the pattern in selecting a topic by presenting it differently once in a while: show a recent news headline, a trending music video, or the trailer of a hit anime. Then tell the class to talk about the material, keeping in mind the target grammar and vocabulary. If you teach upper-intermediate and advanced learners, they can be in charge of selecting the next day's topic. Write their names on slips of paper and put them in a bowl. Pick one or two slips each day and have that student, or those students, select the next topic (with your approval). Whatever the topic, Small Talks should include target grammar and vocabulary as a review.
3. If you do more than one round, you can change the instructions for the second round. After the first round, the student may tell the new partner what their first

partner said. In doing so, they shift from the first-person to third-person point of view. Other elements, such as verb tense and number, might also need to be adjusted.

EXTENSIONS

1. After the last round, as a way to continue the review, present a few of the speech samples that you have collected. If you decide to mention errors, choose only the errors connected to the target vocabulary or grammar; remember, this activity serves as a review. If time permits, you can ask the students if they have comments or questions. They usually ask how to say words or statements in English. If so, ask the class first if anyone knows; if no one does, provide the response yourself. When there are no more questions, you can proceed to the next part of the lesson.

2. In order to maximize the benefits of Small Talks, consider making the activity an integral part of your students' daily class routine by having them keep a "Small Talks Journal." Each student must update it after every Small Talks session. However, the content and purposes vary according to their proficiency levels.

For lower-level learners, the journal can be in the form of a table containing columns for the date, the topic, the main question or sentence, (optionally) a three-point self-assessment scale corresponding to how they feel about their execution of the task, and (also optionally) their comments. More-proficient students can record more in their journal, which primarily serves as a log of the details of their and their partners' statements. The table in their journal should include a space for the date, the topic, the grammar point(s), key vocabulary they used, names of classmates they talked to and what they said, and their remarks.

Collect the journals periodically to monitor students' experience and get or give feedback. You can also communicate with students individually if they have a question or problem written in the journal.

3. Students can conduct surveys after a few Small Talks sessions. For example, after four consecutive days of talking about their favorite food, fruit, dessert, and drink, give students a survey sheet on the fifth day. They write their own answers on the sheet, then go around asking others if they like the same items. (You may need to teach or review how to ask and answer the questions appropriately.) Then they write the names of those who have similar answers and count them at the end of the activity.

CONCLUSION

Small Talks is a great motivation and review activity. It is simple to implement and does not require much of your class time. Most importantly, it is an effective way for learners to use their knowledge of the target language in authentic conversations about topics they are familiar with. Even if they have a limited vocabulary, they will try to express themselves using the language they know. Finally, the activity allows students to apply lessons discussed in the classroom in engaging, personal, and real-life scenarios. In our case, I see this teaching technique as a perfect way for our students to use English, especially since, in Japan, they have minimal exposure to it.

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