

АУДАРМАТАНУ
ПЕРЕВОДОВЕДЕНИЕ
TRANSLATION

МРНТИ: 16.31.41

<https://doi.org/10.51889/2021-3.1728-7804.10>

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STRATEGIES AND TACTICS OF SMALL TALK AS COMPONENTS OF
INTERCULTURAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

Abstract

The article examines the problem of business communication and inclusion of phatic communication in the form of small talk while developing communicative skills of university students when studying Business Communication in English. Strategies and tactics of the English phatic genre of small talk are structurally analyzed from the point of view of linguistic means. The authors conclude that an adequate choice of strategies and tactics for small talk aimed at successful conduct of intercultural business communication is the social skill necessary for university students.

Keywords: intercultural business communication, small talk; phatic communication, speech strategy; speech tactics

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ӘЛЕУМЕТТІК СӨЙЛЕСУДІҢ СТРАТЕГИЯЛАРЫ МЕН ТАКТИКАСЫ
МӘДЕНИЕТАРАЛЫҚ ІСКЕРЛІК ҚАРЫМ-ҚАТЫНАСТЫҢ ҚҰРАМДАС БӨЛІГІ
РЕТІНДЕ

Андатпа

Мақалада іскерлік қарым-қатынас және ағылшын тілінде іскерлік қарым-қатынасты үйрену кезінде жоғары оқу орындары студенттерінің коммуникативтік дағдыларын дамыту кезінде шағын әңгіме түрінде фатикалық қарым-қатынасты енгізу мәселесі қарастырылады. Ағылшын тіліндегі кішігірім әңгіме жанрының стратегиялары мен тактикасы тілдік құралдар тұрғысынан құрылымдық түрде талданады. Авторлар мәдениетаралық іскерлік қарым-қатынасты сәтті жүргізуге бағытталған әлеуметтік әңгіме стратегиялары мен тактикаларын барабар таңдау университет студенттеріне қажет Әлеуметтік дағды деп тұжырымдайды.

Түйін сөздер: мәдениетаралық іскерлік коммуникация, зайырлы әңгіме; фатикалық коммуникация, сөйлеу стратегиясы; сөйлеу тактикасы

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СТРАТЕГИИ И ТАКТИКИ СВЕТСКОЙ БЕСЕДЫ КАК СОСТАВЛЯЮЩИЕ МЕЖКУЛЬТУРНОГО ДЕЛОВОГО ОБЩЕНИЯ

Аннотация

В статье рассматривается проблема делового общения и включения фатического общения в форме светской беседы при развитии коммуникативных навыков студентов вузов при изучении делового общения на английском языке. Стратегии и тактики англоязычного фатического жанра светской беседы структурно анализируются с точки зрения языковых средств. Авторы приходят к выводу, что адекватный выбор стратегий и тактик светской беседы, направленных на успешное ведение межкультурного делового общения, является социальным навыком, необходимым студентам университетов.

Ключевые слова: межкультурная деловая коммуникация, светская беседа; фатическая коммуникация, речевая стратегия; речевая тактика

Introduction. The main task of business communication is to form various types of positive and effective business relationships aimed at organizing joint activities. In the process of communication and interpersonal interaction participants increasingly find themselves in situations of intercultural communication with different value systems. This is clearly seen in business communication when "the clash of business interests affect intercultural differences and results in cognitive dissonance" [1, 115]. In this regard, the ability to adequately select tactics and means to implement them is considered as a valuable social skill. This social skill significantly affects both the effectiveness of the interaction of partners during business contacts, and their interpersonal perception of each other, as well as the subsequent process of business communication in a foreign language.

Methods. The process of teaching students of foreign language speech communication within the framework of Business Communication involves the formation of linguistic and cognitive levels of intercultural communicative competence. This process includes teaching not only the norms of language and speech, but also models of the appropriate speech behavior, which, in turn, implies following the rules of interpersonal communication specific for every culture. Ill-considered communicative behavior and incorrect strategies in communication models can hinder the achievement of success at the moment of interaction with a foreign language partner in the context of intercultural communication.

Modern researchers and practitioners of communicative linguistics focus on discourse, believing that "communicative actions are performed in "different genres of discourse, the body of knowledge of which constitutes a functional characteristic of linguoculture in the form of communicative behavior" [2]. The researcher V. N. Kartashova notes that the "small talk" discourse is an example of phatic communication, used when people just need to maintain contact with each other, to confirm friendly relations [3]. E. N. Merkulova believes that "small talk discourse is one of the key concepts in Anglo-Saxon culture for the spheres of business, everyday and academic communication." [4]

Correct communication skills are essential not only for university graduates, but also for any person actively involved in social and professional activities. Small talk, or 'exchanging

pleasantries', refers to polite informal conversations about nothing particularly important. While these 'conversations about nothing important' might seem inane, or lacking in meaning, they can potentially have big consequences. In professional networking, the ability to engage in small talk with strangers shows that a) you are able to engage in conversations with new clients or customers, b) you are easy to be around, without awkward uncomfortable silences, and c) you are willing to engage, are friendly and interested in people around you. A key thing to remember is that companies do not just recruit employees who are able to do the job or are technically competent. Companies also want new employees who will fit the culture of the place, and can get along with their other employees. In short whether you are someone they could go to lunch with on a weekday. The ability to engage in small talk, therefore, becomes very important, not just for getting into a company, but potentially for staying in the company and even, getting a promotion.

Research result. In this regard, we can say that the most important function of small talk is to establish relationships with the other party in situations of initial acquaintance and maintain these relationships in situations of existing or previously established contact. The importance of small talk, despite the seeming insignificance or ease of topics discussed, cannot be underestimated at least considering the importance of business situations in which it takes place, for example: during the initial meeting with a potential partner, before starting, and often at the end of business negotiations, during coffee breaks at events such as conferences, symposia, business meetings, training sessions, seminars, in the process of communicating with potential clients and partners during an exhibition or fair, etc.

That is why it is important not only to teach students to speak a foreign language, but to do it correctly in terms of ethics, business protocol and professionalism. Leading specialist in the field of interpersonal psychology Communication Debra Fine takes the same point of view. In the monograph "The Art of Small Talk" [5] Debra Fine recommends using strategic means such as greetings, compliments and casual small talk to initiate effective active communication with a business partner.

Currently it seems possible to talk about the creation of special communication strategies aimed at achieving successful and effective communication in general and business communication in particular. Such strategies are based on the goal of achieving communicative comfort: creating a harmonious atmosphere of communication and a favorable interpersonal relationship between communicators. Thus, communicants must have certain skills aimed at successful communication, namely:

- able to effectively establish, maintain and complete speech contact;
- able to form mechanism of perception of another person;
- use speech etiquette to comply with the principles of politeness. [6]

Speech tactics shape parts of the dialogue by grouping and alternating modal shades of conversation. In phatic communication, in particular in small talk, speech tactics are aimed at maintaining the communicative interest of the communicators, activating attention and awakening interest in the topic of conversation. Thus, speech tactics contribute to the achievement of communicative comfort in the context of intercultural business communication.

According to the research of linguists (V.V. Fenina, Yu.B. Kuzmenkova, M.L. Kuryan), the phatic genre of small talk is implemented through the most common strategies and tactics, such as:

- contact establishing strategy;
- pause filling strategy;
- communication ending strategy. [7, 8, 9]

The contact-establishing strategy is the main strategy of small talk and consists in the exchanging statements aimed at establishing a new or maintaining a previously established communicative contact. Utterances attributable to the contact-establishing strategy follow the etiquette greetings. Greetings are characterized by simplicity and stereotype in form and content.

They serve to directly initiate communication to attract the attention of the partner and involve him/her in the communicative process.

The tactics of the contact-establishing strategy in the process of small talk are the tactics of information, the tactics of remark-commentary and the etiquette tactics.

The most common and stereotype tactic that marks the genre of small talk is the tactic of information. The key speech stereotype of this tactic is open-ended questions: How are you?, How are things?, How is it going?. As a rule, the answers to these questions are also stereotyped and are often implied in the question itself (A: How are you? B: Fine thanks! And you? A: Very well indeed, thank you.)

It should be noted that in the context of small talk, the answer to the stereotype question-information does not carry an informational load with no important or detailed information in it. However, the very fact of the partner's reaction in the form of a clichéd answer to an information question is extremely important, since the question in combination with the answer constitutes a dialogical unity - minimal small talk.

In this regard, the effective start of business communication suggests that a speaker has the ability to interpret the small talk question-information as a direct appeal and the ability to adequately respond to it, allows communication to be further developed and to move from the initial phase to the next. In response phrases, neutral and positively evaluative words such as: fine, good, not so bad, very well, okay are most often used, as well as those that correspond to the etiquette requirements of attention to the speaker. Thus, to be successful in implementing of this tactic in the process of small talk, students need to master the technique of constructing open-ended questions and answers using neutral and positive-evaluative vocabulary.

The second most important tactic of the contacting strategy is the remark-comment tactic. The main speech stereotype of this tactic is dividing questions like: Nice day, isn't it? It's a lovely day actually, isn't it? And in response the use of such positively words and emotive elements as good, nice, lovely, fine, great, etc.

The next tactic in the framework of the contact-establishing strategy of small talk is etiquette tactics, which is implemented directly by etiquette cues such as: Glad to see you, How are things? How lovely to see you again! What a charming photo! to express friendliness, compliment and attention.

In this regard, in the process of small talk in the context of intercultural business communication, as the theme content of etiquette tactics, it is necessary to select the most neutral topics related to the environment, weather, events, entertainments, etc.

The next important point in creating communicative comfort in the process of intercultural business communication at time of small talk is the strategy of filling the pause, which is implemented through the tactics of remark-comment, back-channeling, questioning, message-comment or story.

The effective use of remark-comment tactics suggests that a communicant has the ability to adequately use remarks-comments about the environment, weather, general atmosphere of the day, media events (except for events of political and negative content): It's a nice day, don't you think? Do you know when it's supposed to clear up? It's unexpectedly cold today, isn't it? The conference area is very well organized, isn't it? and so on. Mastering the tactics of back-channeling involves mastering clichéd speech formulas such as: Really?; Right; Oh, of course; I see ...; That's right, How interesting! etc.

The pause filling strategy also assumes that communicants have the ability to use interrogative statements that implement the questioning tactics. The purpose of the questioning tactics may be to involve a partner in a further dialogue. To implement this tactic, students must have the skill of asking general questions: Any plans for summer? Are you taking time off over Christmas? Have visited any sites nearby yet? and so on. In addition, to implement the above tactics in small talk, methods of varying and expanding monosyllabic responses are used with the use of

various kinds of intensifiers (definitely, certainly, indeed); sentences with modal modifiers represented by thinking verbs (I believe, suppose, think, expect) or detailed commentary.

In a number of situations of semi-formal communication (corporate evening, business lunch, buffet, etc.), storytelling tactics can be used to implement the strategy of filling in the pause. In contrast to simple filling in a pause in business communication, where standard general topics are used, in the tactics of the story, personal topics prevail, which should not be related to the business side of the partners' activities, for example, a story about recent travels and curious cases.

The communication closing strategy helps to effectively end the intercultural business contact and strength the long-term partnerships. The tactics used at this stage include the following: (a) tactics of demonstrating the joy of communication and summing up a positive outcome of communication, which boils down to complimenting the partner or expressing gratitude for the meeting, for example: It was nice talking to you, I was pleased to meet you, It was great to meet you, etc .; b) the tactics of mentioning the possibility of interpersonal interaction in the future, which contributes to the creation of the business partner's confidence to continue cooperation: I hope to meet you soon, We are looking forward to our further cooperation; So, see you all then; It's been a pleasure to meet you, etc .; c) the tactics of referring to a previously discussed topic, which involves mentioning the topic under discussion at the end of the conversation, for example: I was really impressed by the first speaker and what do you think? It was great to learn about ...; The meeting was fruitful; Your suggestion about... will bring us to success.

Our societal needs have tremendously changed over the years. We need to think of our students and the challenges that are ahead of them. To make sure our students are well equipped with the necessary tools to face the demands and expectations of the future, there has been a clear need for instructional practices that promote critical thinking, reflection, questioning, collaboration and communication. Therefore, we included elements of small talk in Business Communication program with the following tasks for students to know:

- how to start and end small talk
- good and bad small talk topics and questions
- cultural differences in small talk
- the most common small talk questions that they might be asked and how to answer
- polite forms of questions
- how to respond to questions that they don't want to or can't answer
- how to respond to people's answers to small talk questions
- how to extend conversations
- suitable intonation
- Small talk with different people who they know and don't know (colleagues, fellow guests at a hotel, etc).
- Small talk in particular situations (at a trade fair, while eating dinner, etc)

Discussion. Situations in which students might need to make small talk are almost infinite, including less obvious situations like at the beginning of conferences or at the end of phone calls, with teachers and classmates in class and/ or with fellow hotel guests, taxi drivers etc while on holiday. Therefore, to train and master skills in small talk we use a series of role-playing tasks and role-playing games using, at first, a simple scheme, like in a ball game, including answering the question (receiving a ball); adding at least one more thing (= bouncing it between your team); and asking a related (but not identical) question back (= returning the ball) to models requiring more creative approaches, reaction, fluency in English, including grammar fixed expressions, vocabulary of predictable topics etc. Teaching tips for small talk games, role plays and classroom activities provided by Alex Cane [10], help to master students' skills in small talk strategies. Some examples included in the portfolio are as follows:

Back-channeling which involves the use of expressions such as *Really?*, *Mmm*, *Is that right?*, *Yeah*, etc., and very commonly short rhetorical questions such as *Do you?* *Are you?* *Did*

you?. The use of expressions that show exaggeration such as *Way out*, *Awesome*, *Fantastic* is usually a sign that the two participants are friends, as in the following example:

A. *Look at what my dad gave me for my birthday.*

B. *Fantastic*

A. *He got it in Italy.*

B. *Awesome!*

Echo responses that are another type of back-channelling and involve echoing something the speaker said. For example:

A. *So where are you from?*

B. *Almaty.*

A. *Almaty. That's interesting.*

Modelling and creating providing students with examples of small talk exchanges and creating similar exchanges on the same topic.

Class mingles: each student has one or two topics on a card. The class mingle, students greet, introduce their topic, make small talk for one or two exchanges, close the conversation, and move on to a different student.

Small talk topics and questions card games: a game with a pack of cards with topics and/or question starters like “free time”, “How was...?” and “What do...?” on them. Students take a card and take turns asking and answering as many suitable questions on that topic or using those words as they can think of until you tell them to move onto another card or one person gives up. They then discuss which of those questions would be best in real-life small talk.

Taboo topics small talk challenge. Students get some small talk questions or topics. Students work in small groups give those things a number of points between 1 for “easy to use with almost everyone” to 5 for “(almost) taboo”. They then take turns asking for questions with a particular number of points, getting those points if they (adequately) answer the question but getting no points if they refuse to answer (by saying “I’m afraid I don’t really want to go into that”, “Never you mind!” etc).

Small talk brainstorming: Things related to small talk that students can usefully brainstorm include:

- Questions starting with a particular stem (“How was...?” questions, etc)
- Suitable questions on one topic
- Suitable responses to a question
- Questions that could get a particular response
- Phrases with one particular function (“Responding to bad news” etc)

Small talk roleplays: Things that they can roleplay include:

- talking to different people (business contacts, fellow guests at a hotel, etc)
- talking to people in different situations (at a bus stop, on a plane, etc)
- trying to achieve particular things during the conversation (using a particular phrase, covering a particular topic, etc)
- talking for a particular length of time
- covering a particular number of topics
- dealing with difficult small talk situations (not wanting to talk about some particular topics, one person being uncommunicative)
 - communicating in different ways (face to face, on the phone, etc).

Small talk pair work worksheets. Good activities with different Student A and Student B worksheets include:

- Students working out which phrase is better/ correct (e.g. “It’s a fine day” on Student A’s worksheet or “Lovely day, isn’t it?” on Student B’s worksheet)
- Matching the question or phrase on one worksheet with the response on the other worksheet (“Do you have any plans for the weekend?” on the first worksheet with “Not really, but I might go

and see “The Lord of the Ring” on the second). To add more speaking and challenge, all the activities should be done without students showing their worksheets to each other. This works best if there is a whole conversation and students have to first find the differences between the conversations and then work out which option is best in each place where they are different. However, it also works fine with just a list of sentences that are all different on the two worksheets.

Improving the small talk: Problems that students can be asked to find and improve on in small talk conversations include:

- Questions that are too direct and/ or taboo
- Questions and answers that don't match
- Answers that are too short or too long
- Not responding to what people say
- Starting or ending that is too sudden
- Not taking an equal part in the conversation
- Small mistakes with questions and responses (“How's your business?”, etc)
- Particular phrases which are rude in English (“Why are you here?” etc)

Particularly with mistakes that occur in small parts of the conversation such as particularly unsuitable phrases or typical grammar mistakes, students can correct these mistakes in the way explained in pair work above. Alternatively, they can just look at conversations together and try to rewrite them.

There can be many options for situational models. The implementation of small talk practices in the educational process depends on creativity of teachers and students, their social orientation and communicative flexibility.

To determine the outcomes in developing students' skills in small talk, in May 2021 the first-, second-, and third-year students of the Translation Faculty of the Caspian University aged 17-19 were surveyed with the help of express questionnaire. This method helped to get and analyze information from the respondents as quickly as possible. The express questionnaire consisted of 6 questions, 5 of which were closed-type questions and 1 - open-ended. The questions were aimed at identifying attitudes, needs, problems and effectiveness of small talk issues at time of learning Business Communication in a foreign language.

Findings of the express-survey have revealed as follows: none of students have clear understanding of what small talk is and that small talk requires knowledge of various tactics and strategies in business communication. Over 90% responded that they find interesting to know “secrets” of small talk, except of 2 (3%) saying that they find it difficult to answer. Almost all (except 1) confirmed that they are looking forward to master small talk skills. The responses to the question what for small talk skills would be useful distributed between “for developing general communicative skills” (51%); “for achieving success in future career or business” (31%); to have a high status in society (around 15%); 2 students (3%) find difficult to answer the question. The responses to the question whether training models, role plays and role situations help them in developing small talk skills, 100% responded definitely “yes”. However, the pool of barriers students faced at time of small talk training exercises can be subdivided into two groups. The first group refers to the language barriers, including “lack of vocabulary on a specific topic,” grammar, especially with times / tenses questions or tag questions, “knowledge of clichéd phrases in answers,” “fluency in responding to people in English”. The second group are individual barriers relating to the small talk issues and behavior are as follows “lack of confidence,” “choosing a topic for a conversation,” “cultural differences,” inability to fill in pauses” and “sympathetic sounding.”

Conclusion. Students, as non-native speakers, can be discouraged to speak in front of more fluent foreigners or natives for a variety of reasons. There is always at least a tiny bit of fear of not knowing what to say next, awkward pauses and silence, looking at the ceiling trying to think of a question. Therefore, small talk trainings at lessons of Business Communication have a good chance to equip students with the necessary tools to face the demands and expectations of the future.

Trainings in small talk provide instructional practices that promote critical thinking, reflection, questioning, collaboration and communication. The ability to make small talk comfortably is one of the most desired objectives of almost any student. This is especially true for business English learners. However, which approach to choose can vary from culture to culture, teachers and students. We consider that inclusion of small talk elements into the body of English lessons besides Business Communication can help to overcome both language and individual barriers for students, and foster their social orientation and communicative flexibility, as well as communicative competence, including intercultural. The ability to adequately choose tactics and means at time of small talk

is a valuable social skill. This social skill has a significant effect on the effectiveness of interaction between partners.

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