When small talk is a big deal: developing socio-pragmatic competence for the workplace

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Where are we going?

- Wellington Language in the Workplace Project
- Professional Migrants’ Communication Skills Programme: small talk in the workplace
- Developing learners’ socio-pragmatic skills in class
- Transferring skills to the workplace
- Evaluation
To date we have recorded more than 2000 interactions involving approx 500 participants in 22 different workplaces.

Analysis

- Management style
- Directives & Requests
- Cross-cultural pragmatics
- Miscommunication
- Workplace culture
- Small talk
- Gender and Ethnicity
- Power and Politeness
- Leadership and Mentoring
- Meetings and Decisions
- Narrative
- Problem solving
Small talk in the workplace

*Dimensions of analysis*

- **Content**
  - What topics are appropriate?
  - What level of detail is appropriate?
- **Distribution**
  - Where does it occur in an interaction?
  - How much is appropriate at any point?
  - Who has right to start/end small talk?
- **Functions**
  - What can be achieved through small talk?

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**Example of small talk from our database of Wellington professional white collar workplaces**

*Context: administrator’s office in large organisation*

*Diana* is a senior manager; *Sally* is her administrative assistant

*Diana*: good morning Sally, lovely day
*Sally*: yes don’t know what we’re doing here we should be out in the sun
*Diana*: mm pity about the work really
*Sally*: how are your kids?
*Diana*: much better thank goodness any mail?
## Small talk in Wellington professional white collar workplaces

**A. Context: Joan and Elizabeth pass in the corridor**

Eli:  
> hi Joan

Joan:  
> hi how are you

Eli:  
> oh busy busy busy

Joan:  
> mhm terrible isn’t it

**B. Context: Jon and May pass on the stairs**

Jon:  
> hello hello haven’t see you for a while

May:  
> hi well I’ve been a bit busy

Jon:  
> must have lunch sometime

May:  
> yeah good idea give me a ring

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## Boundaries between small talk and work talk often permeable

*Context: Peg and her manager belong to a large commercial organisation. They are chatting at the end of a regular meeting of their project team. Peg is pregnant.*

Clara:  
> how is the baby

Peg:  
> good still just a baby though

Clara:  
> right not a boy baby or a girl baby

Peg:  
> no can’t tell it’s legs crossed

Clara:  
> haha you gonna have to wait … are you feeling tired

Peg:  
> yes but I just think it’s summer too because I didn’t you know … cos I wasn’t pregnant last time as AS pregnant in the summertime so it was much easier um I had help until December last time so it was easier

Clara:  
> hey so you’re hoping you’re gonna work through …
Course Director
Angela Joe

Overview
A programme of intensive communication skills training for underemployed or unemployed skilled migrants.

Goals
• to develop appropriate communication skills in professional workplaces
• to improve cultural understanding of New Zealand workplaces
• to gain New Zealand work experience

Course Coordinator
Nicky Riddiford

Course Structure

Full time: 12 weeks
• 5 weeks: guided communication skills practice in the classroom: units on a range of aspects of relational talk e.g., small talk, requests, refusals

• 6 weeks: Work placement
  – Supported by workplace consultants
  – One afternoon per week in classroom

• 1 week: Classroom follow up and de-briefing
Teaching socio-pragmatic skills
Relational talk

“When Sara first came here she asked how to respond if someone said “hello” in the lift and whether she should get into a conversation or not, and is it polite”

Comment from Kate, an employment consultant, identifying the “nuances of cultural appropriateness” as an important aspect of being able to relate to people.

Example of how small talk from LWP is used in class

Diana: Good morning Sally, lovely day.
Sally: Yes, don’t know what we’re doing here. We should be out in the sun.
Diana: Mm, pity about the work really.
Sally: How are your kids?
Diana: Much better thank goodness, any mail?

Nicky draws attention to
- Typical topic
- Can they tell who is boss?
- Evidence of familiarity
- Joking with boss is OK in NZ
- Who speaks first and why?
- Who finishes the small talk?
- Note how Diana moves from small talk to work talk

Used especially to point to relevance of status and familiarity as influences on appropriate patterns of interaction.
Example of how small talk from LWP is used in class

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 wondering if I could take Friday off and make it a long weekend.

To consider

- What is the function of this interaction?
- Can you identify any small talk?
- What is its function?
- Could this conversation occur in your culture?

Participants in migrant workplace research

- 6 men and 5 women
- Taiwan, Russia, China, Hong Kong, Philippines
- Occupations:
  Accountant, business analyst, public relations coordinator,
  financial analyst, mechanical engineer, legal advisor
- Gathered course data of various types
- Recorded data from a range of interactions in authentic workplaces where they had been placed as interns
Small talk: role play description

Role play
You have just started a new job and you and your manager are standing next to each other waiting for the lift.

Start a conversation with your manager.

You and your manager have arrived at the first floor in the lift. Your manager is going to a meeting and you are going to your office.

How can you end the conversation?

Helena’s comments on speechless small talk in lift with CEO roleplays

“It’s hard [laugh] in our culture we try to avoid talking to the CEO”

Practicing with volunteers from business community
End of course: Small talk roleplay transcript

Hel: oh hi angela I have a good time isn’t (the) party nice
Ang: it was great actually I was surprised to see so many people there tonight
Hel : yeah yes I’m s- I met um some um work mate we worked before er
Ang: right
Hel: I don’t know you remember them or not but [laughs] they are really
they’re all in good shape it’s really really um glad to see them
Ang: right and um which team are you with
Hel: oh the marketing //marketing\ team
Ang: /right\ well marketing team’s //done a\ Hel: /really\ exciting team [laughs]
Ang: well it’s done a lot of good work for the company this year
we’re absolutely delighted at the number of new clien- clients
you’ve brought in
Hel: wow I’ll tell my boss [laughs] I’ll tell my boss [laughs]
um so um do you have any plans for holiday
Ang: well yes I mean I just hope to um have a bit of a break really
Hel: oh okay well that’s good //that’s\ good and er ok merry christmas
Ang: /right\ right well merry christmas to you as well okay

What happens when they venture out into professional workplaces?

- Tracking 11 participants into the workplaces where they were placed as interns

- Challenges of data collection

- Cooperation required
Edw: mm three two eight five
   mm where do you go  where do you come from
   where do you er you where in Wellington are you
Hel:   Lower Hutt //+ yeah so\
Edw : /oh okay\\                             
Hel:   I catch a train and then I went into the campus
       to do some um school work [laughs]
Edw : wow [laughs]

Helena’s control of small talk

Helena’s control of small talk
(continued)

Hel:   [laughs]: quickly: walk [laughs] from the railway station
       to here um that's okay less than fifteen minutes though
       that's really really good walking exercise [laughs]
       in the morning
       what about you where do you //+ live\
Edw:   /oh\\ in Churton Park
Hel:   Churton Park so you //+ own your own transport\
Edw:   /yeah (        )\\ no I ride a bus
Hel:   oh yeah (     )
Edw:   um we can't +++ [laughs]
Hel:   so when you do the offshore one
       I think they’ll be much more difficult
       than this one + yeah
Potential problem areas are identifiable from our recordings

Some workers have trouble

- managing the boundaries between small talk, social talk and work talk

- sustaining their part in small talk

Helena’s comments on small talk at work

• So a lot of mistakes I made cos like I … just want to get the work done and ignore the social talk, the small talk. And working long hours, cos I want to pick up quickly so make me make myself always tired I don't want to talk. because I will be left out … Yes in like birthday parties or farewell parties um or happy hours, can't join in.

• They are open but you sit down I got nothing to say and the people they talk about their own topics so I I can't communicate well… Actually I can say something but just no confidence to stand up and say. Yeah because what I can say only short sentence and then stop. Other people talking and then one sentence stop. It's not like conversation [laughs].
**Andrei’s control of relational talk**

Emma: he's on the Victoria's um workpla- /what-\
Andrei: /work\ er English for professional purposes
Conrad: oh //okay yep oh\ nice
Emma: /yes and so he's working\\
Andrei: but anyway I graduated from
the University of Otago
Conrad: oh did you
Andrei: the Department of Tourism
Conrad: lovely
Andrei: in two thousand and five

**Andrei’s relational talk (contd)**

Conrad: my family's down in Dunedin it's a lovely
//place I lived there for a while\
Andrei: /oh so really I know I know I know\ all Dunedin
Emma: mm //laughs] //laughs]\
Andrei: /it's a very small place [laughs]\
Conrad: /nice nice place it is it's got character though\\
Andrei: it's becomes er just ( ) city when I- er when ( )
Conrad: oh yeah I know no I was in the fire service
and we were very quiet eh over Christmas
Benefit to employers

• In a recent interview at our recruitment agency, the manager made the following observations:
  “several employers identified that they had originally thought they were giving to the programme, but found that they had gained more than they gave because the input from the skilled migrant added to their processes and understanding”.

• An employment consultant added that responsive employers find that employing the skilled migrants
  “bring different ideas, different thinking, a different understanding of how the world operates, what’s important to people, that people work differently, live differently”

The migrant workers’ evaluations

Comments from post-course interviews:

“My close friend said you sound bossy. I heard that a lot but I didn’t take it seriously. But now, from this course I think about that seriously. I should think about that all the time.”

“The way New Zealanders deal with [a] complaint is really surprising me. In my mind, if a waitress did not have good customer service skills, then she should be complained [to] directly. This will make her improve. New Zealanders tend to complain more indirectly. … And this way is more acceptable.”
Cost-benefit analysis
of VUW Skilled Migrants Communication course

Benefits to New Zealand’s gross domestic product

- Aggregate benefits to participants over 30-year careers discounted to present value = $39 million
- Minus: gross costs to government ($400k) and opportunity costs to participants ($300k) = $700k
- Difference (net benefit to NZ): $38 million
- Net benefit for each year of teaching: $9.5 million
- Return on each dollar of taxpayer expenditure: $98

Analysis by John Prebble

Cost-benefit analysis (cont’d)

- $98 return on $1 of expenditure seems almost unbelievable

How does it happen?

Two reasons:

1. Government expenditure in New Zealand is for 12 weeks’ teaching and internship
   Captures 25+ years of overseas education, training, and experience

2. Payback is throughout career
   Ages 35 to 65
   30 years’ additional productivity
Benefits to New Zealand

• In the 5 years that the course has been running, close to 85% of the participants have found relevant employment within six months of finishing the course.