

# REFLECTIONS

## Cultivating Classroom Community Through Small Talk

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Maximizing learner interaction through student talk time (STT) is a central goal for oral communication classes, and to this end teacher training programs commonly offer strategies to reduce their teacher talk time (TTT). Various studies have found that teachers tend to underestimate the amount of TTT during their classes, and it is therefore important to find techniques to monitor and minimize it (Alemayehu; Dellar, 2004; Nápoles & Vázquez-Ramos, 2013; Tsegaye & Davidson, 2014).

Despite this seemingly simple dichotomy of STT as a constructive force and TTT as an obstructive force for promoting language acquisition, there is a growing understanding of the benefits of judicious implementation of teacher talk (TT) to facilitate student output and engagement (Walsh, 2002). Cullen (1998) argues that a more nuanced understanding of TTT is necessary, and that TT about topics outside the classroom can lead to more authentic and effective communication with and among students. Luk (2004) echoes this, proposing that small talk conducted by teachers with students can offer opportunities for less asymmetrical and more animated interaction. Shamsipour and Allami's (2012) findings suggest that TT is an important determining factor in learners' development, and that the strategic use of TT positively influences learning outcomes. The importance of using TT thoughtfully is also supported by Setiawati (2012), who found that TT can provide models for learners, but also that those learners were more engaged when it was limited to a small part of the lesson. These findings support the potential of carefully and constructively

implemented TT in the classroom, and also point to its risks when implemented carelessly. Keeping these risks in mind, it is important to develop clear and mindful techniques for using TT successfully.

One possible technique is anecdotal storytelling, which has been shown to help learners develop target language vocabulary and listening skills and increase their motivation (Zaro & Salaberri, 1995). In a review of literature on the effects of storytelling in the foreign language classroom, Lucarevschi (2016) recognizes several patterns which point to storytelling's efficacy as a pedagogical instrument. Specifically, he finds that storytelling offers learners opportunities for targeted practice of specific skills, boosts motivation, and promotes positive social interactions in the classroom. Given this, it is logical to think that storytelling as quick, short, teacher-fronted small talk may be one way to make use of the benefits of TT while avoiding the risks. The purpose of this study is to better understand the use of such anecdotal small talk in the EFL classroom in order to determine whether it is a positive factor for learning outcomes, and if so to suggest what types of stories and methods of delivery are most effective. In the next sections, I briefly introduce through narrative reflection the relevant parts of my educational background as both a student and a novice teacher that sparked my interest in this topic and led me to conduct this study. Then I explain the research methods, findings and conclusions about how we can use teacher fronted storytelling to benefit our learners.

## My Experiences with Teacher Fronted Storytelling

### As a Student

One of my most memorable high school teachers was Mr. C (pseudonym) who taught 10<sup>th</sup> grade American Literature. Although the class was meant to cover a range of literary works from history until present day, we did not make it past the 19<sup>th</sup> century because Mr. C spent the majority of class time telling us his own stories. These stories centered Mr. C himself as a protagonist/hero in a changing and sometimes scary world. The stories were purportedly nonfictional and tended to have politically conservative, often religious themes as Mr. C was a devout Christian. The relevance of these stories to the class content was generally questionable but ultimately unimportant. It did not take much for Mr. C to go off on a long tangent about how he convinced a supermarket cashier not to have an abortion, or about the mathematical proof for the existence of god. Because the stories were repeated so frequently, sometimes we students could strategically predict where and how to prompt him to start one. This made Mr. C one of the most popular teachers at school. Students loved his stories, partly because he was an exceptional storyteller with a powerful voice and natural sense of narrative structure, but also at least partly because they represented a reliable and teacher-sanctioned escape from class. It was much easier to relax and passively consume these stories than to actively participate in discussion of the cultural and philosophical themes in the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson.

I often enjoyed Mr. C's stories myself, but I realized at some point that his style of storytelling was not beneficial to our education. It was around this time that I became interested in teaching English as a foreign language, and I resolved to remember this approach to storytelling as a negative model for what not to do. Several years later when I began my career as a

language teacher, I felt quite validated by what I was taught in my teacher training programs.

### As a Teacher

I am privileged to have had several opportunities to participate in a diverse range of teacher training courses from my first experience teaching on the JET Program, then shifting to *eikaiwa* (English conversation) teaching and most recently completing an MA in TESOL while teaching at a private Japanese high school. One common theme across all of these courses has been the importance of maximizing STT while minimizing TTT. If our goal is for students to learn to communicate in the target language, we must give them as many chances as possible to do so, both in and out of class. Part of this means learning to shut up, a simple but important lesson which resonated deeply thanks to my experiences as a student summarized above. Over the years I feel I have improved at delivering instructions efficiently, which has enabled me to shut up to greater effect in the promotion of active student engagement.

Although I have developed confidence in this way, the skill has come with unintended consequences. I was made aware of these consequences through a comment I received in an end of year class evaluation in response to the question, "What was your favorite part of class?" I asked this question hoping that most students would focus on the aspects of class that I put the most energy into, such as our robust extensive reading program or the academic writing strand of the curriculum which enables students to write a variety of genres of paragraphs and essays by the time they graduate. However, two of the strongest students independently wrote that their favorite part of class was when I told them what I had eaten for breakfast on a given morning. In this program, vocabulary quizzes were conducted by students in pairs with cards that they made themselves. Because of

this, it took a bit of class time for students to prepare for their cards to deliver the quizzes. Most classes could be ready within a minute, but one class was a bit clumsy at preparing these quizzes and took more time to find and set up their cards. Fearing the silence, I began a routine of talking about what I had eaten for breakfast during this down time to provide some casual but authentic and low-stakes English oral input which would prevent the faster students from disengaging and keep them busy enough until we were ready to start the vocabulary quiz. Sometimes I needed to stretch the explanations for a minute or more, which led to comically detailed explanations of the ingredients of a smoothie or the reason that I could not make it to the store as I had planned to buy eggs the day before. I never imagined that these short, light hearted asides might become some students' favorite part of the whole class.

My first reaction to receiving this feedback was disappointment, because I interpreted it as an indication that students were less interested in the more integral aspects of the curriculum. However, upon reflection I began to consider this feedback more positively and wonder if maybe I had stumbled upon a new tool and strategy to engage students and build rapport. Around the time that I received this feedback, I was in my tenth year of teaching and struggling a bit with the feeling that I was not enjoying as strong teacher-student connections as I had during my early career. Although teacher development no doubt made me a stronger educator, it was not necessarily beneficial to my position in the classroom community. Because minimizing TTT was one of my main goals, my presence in the classroom became weaker. Furthermore, I believe that my growing confidence made me less vulnerable and relatable to the students. I wondered if the breakfast small talk may have been one way to mitigate this and humanize myself by showing short vignettes from my otherwise mysterious life. This positive reception made

me reconsider the experience in Mr. C's classroom and the potential value of TTT. Over time, I gradually became more conscious about setting aside short bits of class time to share anecdotes from my life. In this study, I adopted a systematic approach to the sharing of these anecdotes in order to assess their effects on student learning outcomes.

## Methods

### Teaching Context

This study was conducted in an EFL program at a private senior high school in western Tokyo with a *hensachi* of 73, indicating that the students are academically quite strong. Students at this school tend to have especially high motivation and aptitude for learning English. All students in this study were placed in the lowest proficiency level at this school. The 62 participants were from four different classes I taught, two first year (10<sup>th</sup> grade) and two third year (12<sup>th</sup> grade) classes. The first-year classes met for four weekly periods, and the third-year classes for three weekly periods of 50-minute each. These were all compulsory English classes in the main curriculum, with the goal of enabling students to communicate effectively in all four skills. All data was collected voluntarily and anonymously with informed consent. Students were informed that their participation would not affect their grades.

### Materials and Procedures

By chance, all four classes happened to meet in succession on Monday mornings of the 2019 school year from periods 1 to 4. As such, I established a routine early in the school year of sharing one anecdote at the very start of each class, even before greeting the students. One anecdote was shared to each of the four classes at the start of each week. Based on my own negative experiences as a student with teacher fronted storytelling explained in the previous section, I took care to make sure that these anecdotes were all short (within one to two

minutes), not repeated more than once, relevant to students' lives, and hopefully funny. I also tried to choose stories that focused on my failures or lessons that I have learned in order to maintain humility and avoid using the classroom as a personal soapbox. For example:

How many of you like Harry Potter? Have you read the books or seen the movies? [some students raise their hands] Growing up, I was always a fan of Harry Potter and fantasy stories like that, especially because I liked the fantasy *creatures*. In the west there are lots of fantasy creatures like dragons, unicorns, phoenixes, and I loved reading fantasy books because I found them so cool and interesting. So when I came to Japan at first, I enjoyed learning about traditional Japanese fantasies too. I know about things like *kappa*, and *oni*. What are some examples of others? [Typically someone mentions *tengu*, or *yurei*] Right, *tengu*! And actually, I always included *tanuki* [Japanese raccoon dogs] in this fantasy list too, because I often saw them in the same lists. I think *tanuki* are believed to have some magical powers? Anyway, last month I was riding my bike around campus at night, and I heard a sound in the bushes. A *tanuki* jumped out and started running. It didn't cross me, it was actually running right next to me, at the same pace. So for about 100m, maybe 15 seconds, I was just looking and screaming because I thought it was a fantasy creature. "Waaahhh!" [scream while glancing back and forth from the imaginary road and animal, hopefully students laugh here] So I went home and looked them up on Wikipedia... [dramatic pause] *tanuki* are real! If you see one please take a picture and show me. [hopefully students laugh again] OK, good morning everyone. For today's class agenda...

In total, 18 anecdotes were shared between the spring and fall terms. Two bilingual questionnaires at the end of each term and

the end-of-year class evaluations were used to assess students' reactions to these anecdotes and their perceived influence on learning outcomes. These questionnaires provided the option of skipping items in the rare cases that students could not recall a particular story, but they used a four-point scale to encourage students to decide clearly between agreement and disagreement. The results are presented and discussed in the following section.

## Findings and Discussion

### Quantitative Analysis

*P*-values indicated no significant differences between classes or grades. As such, all student responses are compiled and analyzed together in this section. The first item in each survey asked students to assess the routine of anecdotal small talk as a whole, in terms of memorability, enjoyment, and how much it has assisted their learning. These responses are summarized in Table 1 below. In general, students seemed to react favorably in each of these categories. *P*-values indicated that the differences between the spring and fall responses were not statistically significant.

Table 1  
*Student Holistic Feedback on Small Talk*

	Spring	Fall
These stories are memorable.	3.79	3.77
These stories are enjoyable.	3.79	3.81
These stories assist my learning.	3.77	3.78

Note: 4 point scale, 1=disagree, 2=slightly disagree, 3=slightly agree, 4=agree

The second question in each survey asked students to assess their enjoyment of each individual anecdote shared that term. The responses are summarized in Table 2 below.

**Table 2**  
*Student Feedback on Individual Anecdotes*

This story was enjoyable.	4 point scale, 1=disagree, 2=slightly disagree, 3=slightly agree, 4=agree
One more time	3.85
Brother's name	3.76
Morning <i>sayonara</i>	3.70
Fantasy <i>tanuki</i>	3.70
<i>Zarazara</i>	3.68
<i>Ekiben</i>	3.67
Facebook love	3.66
Unforgettable tongue	3.64
Natto disaster	3.60
Coffee desk	3.55
<i>B-kyu</i> gourmet	3.54
Alarm music	3.54
Chinese fail	3.53
Face leaf	3.46
<i>Atsukiri</i>	3.44
Egg disaster	3.32
Casey pee	3.31
Treadmill emergency	3.29

The third question asked students to rate various ways the small talk has influenced their learning. These responses are summarized in Table 3 below. The differences between the spring and fall responses were again not significant.

**Table 3**  
*Student Feedback on the Benefits of Small Talk*

Small talk has had a positive effect on my learning with regard to...	Spring	Fall
English listening practice	3.79	3.77
warm-up at the start of class	3.79	3.81
learning more about the teacher	3.77	3.78
creating a fun class environment	3.89	3.87

Note: 4 point scale, 1=disagree, 2=slightly disagree, 3=slightly agree, 4=agree

Separate from the end of term surveys about small talk, a class evaluation was given to students on the last day of class, in December for 3<sup>rd</sup> year and February for 1<sup>st</sup> year students. Students were asked to rate various topics from the school year. These responses are summarized in Table 4 below. In both cases, small talk was the most popular part of class.

**Table 4**  
*End of Year Class Evaluation Summary*

	This was useful.	Overall feedback average*	Rank of small talk with other items
first year students	5.93	5.31	first of 28 items
third year students	5.35	4.84	first of 24 items

\*Note: 6 point scale, 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=slightly disagree, 4=slightly agree, 5=agree, 6=strongly agree

One final quantitative analysis was conducted on a year-end class review quiz of 15 items, conducted on the online platform of Kahoot on the last day of the first-year class. The purpose of this quiz was not to assess students, but rather to recall various topics introduced in class and see how much they remembered. Students completed the

quiz using mobile phones, and the platform collected data from students' responses, including the time it took them to respond. The question, as follows, was based on the anecdote shared in the Materials and Procedures section above.

Which "animal" did Mr. Ellis see on his bicycle that surprised him?

- A) a monkey
- B) a *kappa*
- C) a *tanuki*
- D) a deer

Data from students' responses are summarized in Table 5 below. Although the story of the *tanuki* was told on May 13, 2019 and not referenced again until this quiz on February 28, 2020, students responded more accurately to this question than any of the 14 other questions. Furthermore, the response time was very quick compared to the other questions, indicating that students were engaged in and retained the content of this story even though it represented a very brief part of the curriculum.

**Table 5**  
*Student Responses to the Kahoot Quiz*

	small talk question	overall quiz average	Rank
accuracy	91%	57%	first of 15 items
speed	4.8 seconds	8.0 seconds	third of 15 items

### Qualitative Analysis

There was a section on each of the end of term surveys for students to respond freely in English or Japanese with their thoughts on the small talk routine. 33 of 62 students in the spring and 20 of 62 students in the fall wrote responses, all of which were positive. The data was thematically coded, and several patterns which appeared in these responses are summarized with illustrative examples in the following sections. These

patterns were identified and coded through an inductive approach, not according to predetermined concepts. English responses are unedited with errors included. Japanese responses are translated into English and indicated as so.

### *Language Learning*

The most common comments were about the benefits for language learning. Students mentioned vocabulary, and how the stories helped them to learn new words. One student said the stories helped them to learn the genre of storytelling, which isn't explicitly taught in this school's curriculum. "I can learn the way of giving short talk humorously!!" This response suggests that these anecdotes might have served as a model for how students can tell their own stories in English.

### *Classroom Environment*

Another common pattern was comments about how the small talk contributed to a positive classroom environment. For example, students said that starting the class with these stories "made me relax," or how "class became more fun and I smiled" [my translation]. One student commented "small talk is introduction of ELA3," indicating that they felt it was an important and clearly established routine.

### *Content*

A few students commented about the content of the small talk. This was surprising to the researcher, as compelling lessons were not one of the considerations in choosing the stories to share. Relevance and humor were prioritized over depth. Even so, one student wrote that these anecdotes "teach us important lessons," pointing to the potential value of small talk in conveying meaningful content, despite its short length.

### *One Heartfelt Response*

One student wrote their response on the fall survey in some detail, and touched upon all of the patterns summarized above.

The stories were so memorable I would suddenly remember them a month later and start laughing. My English ability is weak and I couldn't catch everything, so I felt disappointed when I couldn't understand why everyone was laughing. That's how much I looked forward to these stories. [my translation]

This response points to both the potential effectiveness of small talk when used in class this way and the risks if students are unable to follow the story. Though this student ultimately had a positive attitude towards small talk in the classroom, their response indicates the need to keep the language level appropriate and to choose the content carefully.

### Coda

Before proposing conclusions which might be made from this study, I will quickly revisit my experiences with teacher-fronted storytelling and explain how this study has contributed to that journey. When I first decided to analyze student reactions to these anecdotes, I was beginning to positively reevaluate a negative experience I had as a student and a teaching practice discouraged in my teacher training. In this way, this study represents a kind of climax to a transformative experience of losing my blanket aversion to TTT. Since then, I have continued to share these anecdotes with the same considerations placed on those in the study, and have more consciously reconsidered other aspects of my teaching practice which might benefit from a more nuanced understanding.

### Limitations and Further Research

The main limitation of this study is that most of the data were self-reported by the students themselves. It is possible and perhaps even likely that they are overestimating the utility of small talk simply because they enjoyed it as a form of unassessed, low-stakes authentic

communication with their teacher. While the importance of this type of communication in the classroom should not be underemphasized, it will be necessary to develop instruments to more precisely measure the benefits of small talk.

Further research might thus seek to quantifiably measure the positive benefits of small talk for students' language learning, especially with respect to listening fluency gains and vocabulary acquisition. It would also be fruitful to determine how much of the students' positive reaction was a result of it being a short aside from the main curriculum, and whether anecdotes such as those in this study would be useful as the central focus of a class or unit. If this speaking genre could be targeted in a unit, the logical next step would be to present and scaffold the task of storytelling to enable students to share their own anecdotal small talk.

### Conclusions

This study supports the argument that judicious use of TTT has a place in the communicative foreign language classroom and offers one such technique for employing it. While the extent of the various benefits suggested by the survey may be questioned, the results demonstrate unambiguously that this particular implementation of anecdotal small talk was well received by the students, and that this approach merits further study in the future. The results of this study provide evidence that this reevaluation was worthwhile, and confirmed to me that I had found a powerful new tool in an unexpected place. The results also echo findings from other studies and provide further evidence of storytelling's benefits for skills-based language practice, motivation, and social interactions in the classroom. Although the study was conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic in exclusively face-to-face classes, the technique may also be adapted to cultivate classroom community in online teaching, which are generally felt to be isolating and lonely. In these ways, the study

has implications for teacher training programs, which might better serve novice teachers by fostering understandings of the complexity of TTT. Likewise, veteran teachers who have been conditioned to avoid TTT might benefit from unlearning some of those rules. As language teachers, it is OK to take the figurative microphone and talk about ourselves. Sometimes.

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