

## **“Don’t Tell My Father”: Important Lessons Learned Through EFL Classroom Small Talk**

**“No le digan a mi padre”: lecciones importantes aprendidas a través  
de la comunión fáctica en el salón de inglés como lengua extranjera**

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All too often phatic communion is neglected in the English as a foreign language classroom or relegated to the level of formulaic language which merits little or no attention. In this article we argue that phatic communion plays an important role in establishing, developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships between teacher and learners which can be seen in terms of solidarity and supportiveness. Furthermore, small talk offers one of the few opportunities for students to engage in meaningful communicative interaction in the English as a foreign language classroom which is largely characterised by non-authentic language activities. Using classroom data, we attempt to show that teachers and students actively look for ways to enhance personal relationships as they boost the face of other interactants.

*Key words:* English as a foreign language, interpersonal language, phatic communion.

A menudo se descuida la “comunión fáctica” en los salones donde se imparte el inglés como lengua extranjera o se baja al nivel de una fórmula lingüística que merece poca o ninguna atención. En este artículo sostenemos que la “comunión fáctica” juega un papel importante al establecer, desarrollar y mantener las relaciones interpersonales entre maestro y alumno, lo cual puede ser visto en términos de solidaridad y apoyo. Además, la comunión fáctica ofrece una de las pocas oportunidades para que los estudiantes participen de manera significativa en actividades de comunicación en el aula de inglés como lengua extranjera, la cual se caracteriza por sus actividades no auténticas del lenguaje. Utilizamos la información del aula para mostrar que los maestros y alumnos buscan maneras de mantener una relación personal mientras impulsan su “imagen” entre otros interactuantes.

*Palabras clave:* comunión fáctica, inglés como lengua extranjera, lenguaje interpersonal.

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## Introduction

Small talk or 'phatic communion' (Malinowski, 1923/1969) in the foreign-language (FL) classroom is all too often an unexploited propitious opportunity to interact in the target language in meaningful ways. In contrast to the endless class hours spent presenting and practising non-authentic language in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, student-generated small talk reflects motivated and authentic real-life language use and allows teachers to exploit learners' interactive communication skills. Although frequently presented as formulaic and pre-patterned language, small talk is a common theme in ELT coursebooks. However, in the actual classroom, teachers miss the opportunity to take advantage of emerging small talk given the administrative pressures to follow the course programme and perhaps 'finish' the book. Through collecting data in five contrasting teaching contexts in Mexico, this paper investigates how language learners engage in classroom small talk and how teachers respond to such interactional opportunities. Research begs the bigger question as to whether the FL classroom should reflect target-language small talk or local practices i.e. if language users should adhere to target-language norms of phatic communion or develop their own ways of engaging in small talk. After analysing the classroom data, we argue that EFL learner interaction should reflect genuine communication where FL interactants engage in meaningful language use rather than mirror and second-guess target-language usage.

In this article we begin by reviewing the concept of phatic communion and then highlight its relevance to the EFL classroom. After examining the nature and history of the concept, we maintain that it is closely linked to solidarity and support since phatic communion is used to develop, reinforce and maintain interpersonal relationships.

Subsequently, we specifically consider how phatic communion is related to face enhancement and gossip. After conducting and analysing classroom observations, we discuss how phatic communion can be encouraged in the classroom and what the factors working against it are. As a conclusion we argue that phatic communion is an important resource in encouraging meaningful interpersonal language use in the classroom.

## Nature of Phatic Communion

The origins of research on phatic communion can be traced to Malinowski who coined the term in the 1930s. A second era of research focused on discursive and situational approaches which led to our examining contemporary analyses in terms of rapport management and the interpersonal language use which has been the academic focus in this decade. First of all, however, we offer an example of phatic communion in the foreign-language learning context as a teacher interacts with students before the beginning of class.

1. Teacher: How was your day?
2. Brenda: Bad.
3. Teacher: Wow! You're very honest. Why?
4. Diana: I have very busy day.
5. Alberto: Yeah, I always.
6. Benda: It's boring.
7. Teacher: Why boring?
8. Estefan: A lot of work.

(Extract 1)

In Extract 1, the teacher demonstrates concern for his students' feelings and attempts to establish (or re-establish) a level of rapport. He is engaging in phatic communion. He is attempting to show supportiveness by trying to understand how his students feel. Phatic communion offers choices since, alternatively, he could have attempted to establish solidarity, or to use Aston's term,

'solidary routines' (1988, p. 255) by sharing the same feelings.

The term phatic communion was first proposed by Malinowski to describe 'a mode of action' (1923, p. 296) during which interactants develop interpersonal relationships as "ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words" (1923, p. 315). Malinowski, however, gave little importance to the actual words echoed in phatic communion, claiming that words merely fulfil a solidary rather than a referential or reflective function.

Whilst Malinowski pioneered the interactional dimension to language use, further work on phatic communion was limited until Laver revisited the concept and highlighted the social dimension of phatic communion especially in terms of how interactants may engage in exploratory talk at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of conversations. Far more than reflecting "a mere exchange of words", Laver argues that phatic communion is also used to avoid silence and to prepare the way to engage in "an initiatory function, in that it allows the participants to cooperate in getting the interaction comfortably under way [...]" (1975, p. 221). In other words, phatic communion prepares the way for language users to make the transition to transactional language use e.g. asking for or giving information. Stressing the social motivation behind phatic language use, Laver (1975) like Malinowski, underscored the formulaic dimension to small talk whilst downplaying the individual aspect of phatic communion.

Taking a much more local approach to phatic communion, Coupland, Coupland and Robinson (1992) emphasise the negotiatory dimension of small talk. Critiquing Malinowski's and Laver's formulaic and patterned approaches to phatic communion, Coupland, Coupland and Robinson argue that small talk should be examined in terms of 'relational engagement' (1992, p. 217) as language

users approach each interaction on an individual basis depending on what they want to achieve socially and relationally from the interaction as 'this very indeterminacy may be the hallmark of phatic communion and the key to its social utility' (1992, p. 226).

Further highlighting the importance of small talk, Coupland (2000b) has argued for the discursive importance of small talk. In his introduction to a collected volume of papers on phatic communion, *Small Talk* (Coupland, 2000a), Coupland argues for the contextual analysis of phatic communion and the need to examine "the relationship between form and function within those contexts, as is classically the case with discourse analysis" (2000b, p. 22). Coupland also edited a special edition of the journal *Research on Language and Social Interaction* dedicated to examining phatic communion from a more conversation analysis perspective. The collection of the articles "explores how small talk is achieved interactionally, turn by turn, and what this displays about small talk and its achievements for participants in situ" (Coupland, 2003, p. 5).

The study of phatic communion has therefore developed from seeing small talk as a nebulous exchange of words to situated language use. Current work focuses on small talk in terms of rapport management (Hernández López, 2008; Spencer-Oatey, 2008) and the personal dimension to phatic communion (Placencia, 2004). In this paper, we adopt the definition of phatic talk as local interactional language use aimed at establishing, developing and maintaining a given interpersonal relationship. In particular, we examine the solidary dimension of small talk. Rather than seeing phatic communion in generalised social terms (Malinowski, 1923; Laver, 1975) or discursive and situational approaches (Coupland, Coupland and Robinson, 1992; Coupland, 2000a, 2000b), we examine small talk in *interpersonal* terms as

interactants construct or even fail to construct phatic talk within a specific localised context. Dynamic and not always purely formulaic, phatic communion reflects deliberate and often tentative attempts to establish, develop and maintain relationships. Exploratory and hesitant talk may be even more underscored in the foreign-language classroom when teachers and students attempt to establish, develop and maintain their interpersonal relationship in the target language.

### Phatic Communion and Solidarity

Whilst agreeing with Malinowski's assertion that phatic communion reflects solidary talk, we argue that the actual words do matter because the phatic actions do not produce automatic and predictable results. Furthermore, solidarity needs to be understood in terms of how it is expressed. In phatic communion, interaction can convey solidarity by matching the feelings of another interactant, or what Aston (1989) terms supportiveness, e.g.

1. Teacher: Did you bring your umbrella today?
2. Pedro: No.
3. Alicia: Yes, do you like it? It has flowers.
4. Teacher: Yeah, it is really beautiful. Personally, I don't like the rainy days.  
Do you like the rainy days.
5. Pablo: Only when I am in my house. (Laughs)
6. Students: (Laugh)
7. Teacher: What about you guys?
8. Sergio: Yes.
9. Ivan: Yes, only when I am in my bed sleeping.
10. Teacher: (Laughs) Yeah or when you are not around Plaza del Sol where there is a big river.

(Extract 2)

The common thread of laughter (lines 5, 6 and 10) and joking (e.g. line 9) reflects solidary talk as the interactants share common perceptions

and feelings regarding rainy weather since they have all gone through the same experience. Furthermore, we would argue that the words do matter as interactants engage in speech acts (e.g. the compliment in line 4: *Yeah, it is really beautiful*) and creative language use (e.g. line 9: *...when I am in my bed sleeping*).

At the same time, interaction can involve 'doing' phatic communion rather than just expressing commonly-felt experiences. For instance, in the following extract:

1. Teacher: Really, what do you want to study?
2. Carlos: I'm going to study "controlador aereo" [air traffic controller]
3. Teacher: Air traffic controller? It's great. Actually, my father wanted me to study that, because he works in the airport. This job is a great. Responsibility right?
4. Carlos: Yeah!

(Extract 3)

Carlos has just told the teacher that he is learning English in order to pursue a second career. After saying that he wants to be an air traffic controller, the teacher reveals -through 'self-disclosure'- that his father also wanted him to pursue the same career. Self-disclosure between interactants establishes common ground as interactants engage in phatic communion. Given Carlos's enthusiastic answer, the interactants are in a stronger position to create what Malinowski calls 'ties of union'.

Self-disclosure plays an important part in how interactants want to present themselves to other interactants as Wardhaugh argues:

You must "present yourself" in a conversation, and part of that presentation is the way you choose to display yourself to others and how you view your relationship with the rest of the world. In fact, every encounter with another person requires you to come to a decision about how you want to appear in that encounter, that is, how you wish to present yourself to the other or others.

(1985, pp. 26-27)

When engaging in phatic talk, FL users need to decide how they want to come across. Therefore, words employed in phatic communion are important.

### Face-boosting

Solidary talk can go much further than expressing or doing phatic communion. Interactants can also engage in face enhancing acts where they attempt to boost the 'face' of other interactants. The term 'face' is taken from Goffman (1967) who argues that participants present a 'face' when they are interacting in a conversation. Goffman argues that participants will "claim a positive social value" for themselves "in any particular contact" (1967, p. 5). Face is not fixed and stable as House argues: "Face can be likened to a person's public self-esteem or self-image, which can be damaged, maintained or enhanced in interaction with other others" (1998, p. 57). Face is "only on loan" (Goffman, 1967, p. 10) during a given interaction and other interactants can take, augment and decrease another participant's face. A decrease can lead to a loss of face or a face-threatening act (Brown and Levinson, 1987) whilst an increase can lead to intimacy enhancement (Aston, 1989), face-boosting acts (Bayraktaroğlu, 1991, 2001), face enhancement (Sifianou, 1995) and rapport enhancement (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). Face enhancement becomes an important factor in non-formulaic phatic communion i.e. small talk that aims to develop meaningful interpersonal relationships. An example of the face boosting can be seen in the following example:

1. Teacher: Hey, Dave, your team won, right? 6-o
2. David: Yes, teacher.
3. Teacher: How much time did you play?
4. David: The complete game.
5. Teacher: Oh, really? That's great.

(Extract 4)

The teacher's opening question is designed to make David feel good as he respects his English-language name and has done his 'homework' by finding out that David's team won the game. He then congratulates David on playing for the whole game. Face boosting acts run the risk of sounding formulaic but in this case the teacher appears to take a real interest in the student.

### Phatic Communion and Gossip

Whilst often maligned as mean-spirited and malicious talk, gossip has attracted the attention of discourse analysts and sociolinguists because it reflects the nature and strength of interpersonal relationships. For instance, Eggins and Slade (1997, p. 283) have identified two key social functions of gossip: 1) to establish and reinforce group membership; 2) as a form of social control. Since it involves talking negatively about a third party not present in the conversation, gossip 'provides a means of exploring similarity and shared values' as it 'draws boundaries between a "we" and a "they"; it forges ties that bind a group together' (Eggins & Slade, 1997, p. 283). At the same time, gossip exerts social control since "it is a way of asserting collective values and increasing group cohesion, and it also enables the group to control the behaviour of its members" (Eggins & Slade, 1997, p. 283).

In the following example of phatic communion, students are gossiping with the teacher about their school:

1. Teacher: Hey, how are you?
2. Maria: Not so good.
3. Teacher: Why? What's the matter?
4. Maria: Can you believe they want us to go to school on Sunday?
5. Teacher: Really? Why? What did you do?
6. Maria: Just because the school is going to be evaluated!
7. Teacher: That's too bad, but hey! Such is life.

(Extract 5)

Maria is talking negatively about a third party i.e. her school authorities which she claims are making students go to school on Sunday (line 4) in order to be certified (line 6). The teacher appears to side with the student by expressing his sympathy (line 7).

### Research Structure

This research project took place over a period of six months as four Mexican teachers recorded conversations that reflected interactional language use during their EFL classes in five private language institutions. Generally lasting 40 hours, the courses ranged from basic to advanced levels with an average of eight students in each class, which lasted, on average, 120 minutes.

The four teachers –two males and two females– are between 22 and 26 years old and are completing their final year on a BA programme in TEFL. They are advanced level English-language speakers who will soon be presenting their TOEFL examination where they are expected to achieve 600+ points. So as not to deliberately or even inadvertently engage in phatic communion for the purposes of this study, the teachers were not informed about the overarching research question guiding this study which is: How do teachers and students engage in phatic communion in the EFL classroom?

However, when they had collected the necessary data they were fully integrated into the project and asked for their comments and insights.

### Research Methodology

The teachers were initially asked to write down instances of classroom small talk, which took place at the beginning and the end of class. They recorded the conversations through a reconstructed dialogue technique i.e. the teachers wrote down the instances of phatic communion at an opportune moment as soon as possible after the

interaction. Reconstructed dialogue was chosen since overt recording would have been too intrusive and could have stifled the spontaneity of classroom small talk.

All the participants involved in the project were asked to sign consent forms authorising the use of the classroom data. To protect the participants' identity, pseudonyms have been used throughout this paper.

### Findings

Phatic communion is used by both teachers and students to develop and reinforce solidarity in the EFL context. Often it will involve self-disclosure as seen in the following extract:

1. Teacher: Good morning, Blanca. How are you?
2. Blanca: Sleepy, I went to bed at 1:00.
3. Teacher: What were you doing so late?
4. Blanca: Don't tell my father, but I was watching a movie.
5. Teacher: OK.

(Extract 6)

Whilst the small talk commences in a formulaic way with a greeting i.e. *Good morning, Blanca. How are you?* (line 1), there is a non-standard response: *Sleepy, I went to bed at 1:00.* (line 2). Blanca's follow-up comment in line 4, *Don't tell my father, but I was watching a movie*, reveals a degree of trust and closeness as she explains why she stayed up late. Therefore the phatic communion aims to shorten distance through self-disclosure and gossip as Blanca asks the teacher to hide the information from her father, who obviously does not approve of his daughter staying up late. With the *OK* (line 5), the teacher appears to collude with Blanca.

Phatic communion may also involve shared feelings as interactants experience the same feelings as seen in the following extract when the students and the teacher talk about studying on Saturday mornings:

1. Teacher: Hi! Good morning!
  2. Students: Hi, teacher!
  3. Teacher: How are you?
  4. Marco: Fine, teacher!
  5. Moisés: *Yo tengo mucho sueño*, teacher! [I am really tired]
  6. Teacher: Yes, I know... I know it is difficult sometimes to wake up on
  7. Saturdays but today we will have a great class! But first, why
  8. don't you tell me what did you do during the week?
  9. Esteban: Me! I had 3 exams, and 2 projects!
  10. Teacher: And did you get good grades?
- (Extract 7)

Once again, small talk starts off with formulaic greetings (lines 1, 2, 3 and 4). However, Moisés reveals his 'true' feelings by saying in Spanish that he is sleepy: *Yo tengo mucho sueño*, teacher! (line 5). By answering in Spanish, Moisés seems to be appealing to teacher's first language and thereby attempting to create a degree of solidarity. The teacher picks up on this commonly-felt feeling and answers in English with *Yes, I know... I know it is difficult sometimes to wake up on Saturdays* (lines 6 and 7) and tries to respond to the students by offering to give *a great class* (line 7). Phatic communion is not being used in formulaic ways but rather to talk about student motivation and how to get the class going.

Students will often use phatic communion to develop the relationship with the teacher inside and outside of the classroom. In the following extract, a student attempts to find out about the teacher's private life:

While the teacher is waiting for students to finish an exercise, Clarissa, a student, grabbed the teacher's cell phone.

1. Clarissa: She's your girl, teacher?
2. Teacher: Yes, but you shouldn't look at my stuff. (Clarissa stares at the picture)
3. Clarissa: Sorry... *¿Y cuánto llevan?* [For how long?]
4. Teacher: Ha ha ha ha, two months and counting.

5. Clarissa: *Neta?* It's serious? [Really?]
  6. Teacher: Yes, the only serious relationship I've had.
  7. Clarissa: oh! *'ta chido*. [that's cool]
  8. Teacher: Thanks, I know. Now FOCUS!
- (Extract 8)

Clarissa asks personal questions about the teacher's girl-friend (line 1) by using an affirmative grammatical structure and appears to be seeking out gossip about the girl-friend. The teacher mildly admonishes Clarissa as he engages in self-disclosure by revealing how long they have been going out *two months and counting* (line 4) and revealing that this is *the only serious relationship I've had* (line 6). Clarissa engages in face-boosting by saying in Spanish *'ta chido* (that's cool) (line 7). The teacher accepts the compliment in line 8 and asks Clarissa to concentrate on her work.

Student interest in their teachers was a common feature of small talk as revealed in the following interaction that took place as the teacher was trying to take attendance.

1. Teacher: Fine, guys!
  2. Elena: Teacher? How old are you?
  3. Teacher: I'm 24 years, why?
  4. Elena: Because you have a ring in your finger! Are you going to get marry?
  5. Teacher: Jajaja. Yes!
  6. Sandra: When, teacher?
  7. Teacher: On March!
  8. Adriana: Teacher? Y nos vas a invitar? [And are you going to invite us?]
  9. Teacher: Jajaja, I am not sure... Maybe. Jajaja... This is a strange situation for me. I think it is better if we start the class...
- (Extract 9)

Once again small talk is far from formulaic and mainly takes place in English as students express an interest in knowing more about their teacher e.g. *How old are you?* (line 2) and *Are you going to*

*get marry?* (lines 4 and 5). After engaging in self-disclosure by revealing her age (line 3) and when she is going to get married (line 8), the teacher feels embarrassed by the level of intimacy and assumes her role as a teacher and tells the students that they should begin the lesson (line 9).

Student interest in their teachers did not solely focus on their personal relationships outside the classroom. In the following extract, students are interested in where the teacher works.

The student came across the teacher after his class and starts a conversation.

1. Roberto: Teacher! How are you?
2. Teacher: I'm fine, thank you. How about you?
3. Roberto: I'm great. [Here there was a moment of silence as Roberto signed some school papers]
4. Roberto: Teacher, do you work? (Teacher stares at Roberto)
5. Roberto: I mean, besides here.
6. Teacher: Yeah, I work on Saturdays in another school.
7. Roberto: Oh! That's why you never come on Saturdays?
8. Teacher: Exactly, that's why.

(Extract 10)

The small talk reflects a genuine interest by Roberto in the teacher. Whilst the small talk starts off with the formulaic *How are you? - I'm fine, thank you. How about you? - I'm great* (lines 1-3), it quickly becomes potentially face-threatening i.e. "acts that intrinsically threaten face" (Brown and Levinson 1987, p. 60), when Roberto asks *Teacher, do you work?* (line 4). In a remedial interchange (Goffman 1971), Roberto self-corrects with *I mean, besides here* (line 5). The phatic communion is now back on track with *Yeah, I work on Saturdays in another school* (line 7).

### Phatic Communion and Face Enhancement

Face enhancement reflects a personal dimension to phatic communion and is a common fea-

ture of student-student and teacher-student talk. Its use further reinforces the argument that small talk does not have to be predictable and formulaic.

In the following extract, the students express their appreciation of their classmates and therefore develop another dimension to solidarity.

1. Teacher: Good morning, Alejandra. How are you?
  2. Alejandra: Good morning, teacher, I am very happy because Berta is coming
  3. Today.
  4. Teacher: I am glad!
  5. Alejandra: Glad?
  6. Teacher: I am happy too.
  7. Carla: May I come in please?
  8. Teacher: Good morning, Carla; come in.
  9. Naylea and Paula: Can we come in?
  10. Teacher: Good morning, girls! Come in.
  11. Alejandra: Berta, I am happy to see you!
  12. Berta: Me too, *te traje unas pulseras*. [I brought you some bracelets]
- (Extract 11).

The conversation begins with formulaic greetings followed by self-disclosure as Alejandra reveals that she is happy since she expects her friend, Berta, to come to class today. The teacher makes a supportive move by saying that she is glad – although it is not clear whether she is happy because Alejandra is happy or because Berta is coming to class. When Berta does finally arrive, Alejandra greets her with a Face Boosting Act (FBA): *Berta, I am happy to see you!* (line 11). Berta responds to the FBA with *Me too* (line 12) and subsequently code-switches to Spanish. The code-switch may have further signalled closeness and solidarity. It should also be noted that the teacher uses the phatic communion to introduce the word *glad* as a synonym for *happy* (lines 4-6) without specifically teaching the word.

In the following extract, the teacher engages in face boosting as he jokingly talks to the students

about an upcoming examination. The small talk reflects intersentential code-switching as the teacher speaks in English and the students talk in Spanish:

1. Rodrigo: *¿Está difícil el examen, teacher?* [Is the exam difficult?]
  2. Teacher: No, I don't think so. You are very intelligent. I think it is easy for you!
  3. Ricardo: Really?
  4. Teacher: Yes!
  5. Alberto: *¿Nos vas a pasar las respuestas, teacher?* [Are you going to give us the answers?]
  6. Teacher: No! Jajaja, I am going to take attendance, jajaja.
  7. Ricardo: *¿Nos deja ver el examen mientras toma la asistencia?* [Can you let us look at the exam whilst you are doing the attendance?]
  8. Teacher: Of course not!!! Jajajaja. Relax, guys, everything is going to be ok!
- (Extract 12)

The conversation starts off with Rodrigo asking whether the examination is going to be difficult. The teacher appears to give an honest answer *No, I don't think so* (line 2) and then engages in face boosting: *You are very intelligent. I think it is easy for you!* (line 2). Then the students switch to Spanish to engage in language play as they ask the teacher whether he is going to give them the answers or at least look at the examination (lines 7 and 8). The teacher appears to make no effort to force the students to speak in English which raises the question as to whether small-talk has to be completely in the target-language or can reflect interaction in two languages.

### Discussion

Phatic communion inside and outside the EFL classroom reflects both formulaic and inventive language use as both teachers and students employ a range of discursive resources to establish, develop, maintain interpersonal relationships which can be seen in terms of solidarity and supportiveness.

A key resource is self-disclosure (extracts 6-10), which enables teachers and students to step out of their fixed classroom roles and come across in more individualistic ways. Such a strategy is important for foreign-language learners so that they can develop personal rather than anonymous relationships in the target-language i.e. they can participate as a somebody rather than as an anybody (Aston, 1989; Sacks, 1970 - 1971; Schenkein, 1978).

Self-disclosure can develop into supportiveness i.e. understanding how the other feels e.g. complimenting the teacher on his girlfriend (extract 8) or into solidarity i.e. having undergone the same experience as other interactants e.g. feeling sleepy (extract 7).

However, small talk can go wrong as seen in extract 9 when the teacher feels uncomfortable being asked about her wedding plans or in extract 10 when the teacher is asked whether he works. The incidences offer opportunities for students to deal with unsuccessful small talk. In extract 9, the teacher ended the small talk but in extract 10 the student demonstrated the ability to rephrase his request.

Face enhancement was a commonly employed strategy, which reflects local language use since it is a common feature of Mexican Spanish. Extracts 11 and 12 indicate that face-enhancement is used by both teachers and learners. Since face-enhancement is not particularly characteristic of target-language usage in the United States and the United Kingdom, teachers are faced with the pedagogical choice regarding whether students should be using EFL small talk to engage in meaningful relationships or whether they should mimic target-language practices.

### Encouraging Phatic Communion

Given that classroom data in this study have recorded the widespread use of phatic communion, we argue that teachers should provide the necessary opportunities to develop and work on

phatic talk and practices. The kind of predictable, formulaic patterns of small talk are dealt with in most EFL textbooks. However, the personal and unpredictable nature of small talk cannot be tackled solely through textbook exercises and needs to be developed, rehearsed and practised in a classroom context.

Whilst learners cannot be taught phatic communion, they can be given opportunities to examine its features and how resources are used in terms of 'skills-getting' as opposed to 'skills-use' (Rivers & Temperley, 1978, p. 4). Skills-getting activities provide learners with the opportunity to practise different features of communication in a classroom setting. With respect to phatic communion, learners can be given the chance to examine supportiveness, solidarity, self-disclosure and gossip. Skills-use means using phatic knowledge in a communicative context.

Skills-getting can be developed either through deconstruction or construction activities (Aston, 1989). Deconstruction activities invite students to notice and analyse how target-language users employ resources to achieve communicative aims whilst construction activities encourage FL users to use resources to achieve interactional objectives. Noticing is a key aspect of developing interactional ability in the target-language. Batstone (1994, 1996) argues that noticing gives learners the opportunity to consciously attend to language 'input' and structure it so that it becomes part of the student's language 'intake' and is ready for future use.

Deconstruction activities can be used to examine how target-language users achieve supportiveness and solidarity and engage in gossip. Easily accessible TL language instances of phatic talk can be found by inviting learners to watch such sitcom shows as *Two and a Half Men*, *The Big Bang Theory* and *The New Adventures of Old Christine* to examine how the leading characters show

concern and interest with each other as they share experiences or talk behind each other's backs.

Construction activities can help learners to develop, for instance, self-disclosure and face-boosting. For example, icebreakers and warm-ups can be used to encourage learners to reveal aspects about themselves that enable them to come across as individuals. For instance, students may be asked to write up three revealing statements about themselves, one of which is not true, and in a probing and personal question-and-answer session his/her classmates have to establish which statement is wrong. With regards to face-boosting, learners can be asked to write down three qualities they like about a classmate and then design a role-play into which they incorporate the FBAS.

### Discouraging Phatic Communion

Whilst we have argued that phatic communion is a common feature of classroom interaction, it is often discouraged by administrators, coordinators and teacher trainers. Phatic communion is often considered 'wasteful' because 1) it detracts from the transactional nature of the classroom e.g. learning grammar, communicative functions; 2) it undermines the importance of timing which is considered to be an essential feature of a successful and balanced class; 3) it potentially undercuts teachers' efforts to complete the programme on schedule; and 4) phatic communion is best observed and learnt in the target-language environment.

Whilst such arguments reflect the reality of classroom teaching and learning, we argue that phatic communion should be given its place (and perhaps time slot) in the syllabus as it reflects authentic language use and may improve students' ability to participate in unplanned spontaneous discourse which must be a key factor in developing communicative competence. With regard to learning and practising phatic communion in the

TL context, Mexican learners often use English for work e.g., in the computer and tourism sectors, and need to interact with other non-native speakers and therefore may never have the opportunity to practise phatic communion in the TL environment.

### Conclusions

In this paper, we have argued that teachers need to be aware of the learning opportunities afforded to their students by phatic communion. To pursue this argument, we reviewed the concept of phatic communion arguing that it is more than just a "mere exchange of words" as Malinowski (1923, p. 315) would suggest. We then examined how phatic communion as spontaneous and unplanned talk is a feature of the foreign-language classroom as learners use phatic language to express support or solidarity, to engage in face enhancement, and to participate in gossip. Such findings reveal meaningful interpersonal language use. For many students, classroom phatic communion may be one of the few opportunities they have to engage in authentic language. Therefore, we would argue that teachers need to know how to exploit opportunities for engaging in phatic communion and help learners develop their linguistic competence with regards to small talk.

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