

## DEVELOPMENT OF JOURNALISM STUDENTS' SMALL TALK: PILOT STUDY FINDINGS

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**Abstract.** Effective communication is crucial for professionals in humanitarian and technical fields. One aspect of communication that is often overlooked is phatic dialogue, which is studied by linguists and cultural experts. However, there is limited research on the practical aspect of developing phatic dialogue skills, particularly in relation to studying English. This study aims to explore students' understanding of the importance of small talk in interpersonal communication, as well as assess students' proficiency in phatic dialogue in the context of journalism. The research involved surveys and tests conducted with students, and traditional statistical methods. The preliminary findings reveal varying levels of knowledge about the significance of small talk in social communication, as well as differences in the development of phatic dialogue skills among students. The results will inform the author's proposed methodology for evaluating the quality of small talk, which will be used as the basis for designing exercises to enhance phatic dialogue skills among journalism students.

**Keywords:** Small Talk, phatic dialogue, Journalism students, social interaction, social skills

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## РАЗВИТИЕ НАВЫКОВ SMALL TALK У СТУДЕНТОВ-ЖУРНАЛИСТОВ: РЕЗУЛЬТАТЫ ПИЛОТНОГО ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯ

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**Аннотация.** Эффективная коммуникация рассматривается как значимое профессионально важное качество (ПВК) для специалистов как гуманитарных, так и технических профилей. Эффективная коммуникация в процессе ведения фатического диалога изучается как языковой и культурный феномен филологами и культурологами. При этом остается недостаточно проработанной практическая сторона оценки сформированности навыков ведения фатического диалога (Small Talk) в процессе изучения английского языка. Представленное исследование содержит попытку изучения базовых представлений студентов о значении Small Talk для налаживания эффективного межличностного общения, а также результаты оценки сформированности навыков ведения фатического диалога студентов-журналистов. В работе использовались эмпирические методы (опрос и тестирование студентов), а также традиционные методы описательной статистики. Представленные результаты пилотного исследования выявили у студентов различные уровни знаний о значении Small Talk в социальной коммуникации, а также наличие у них разных уровней сформированности навыков ведения фатического диалога. Результаты данного исследования будут использованы для детализации авторской

методики оценки качества Small Talk, внедрение использования которой предполагается положить в основу разработки комплекса упражнений, направленных на развитие навыков ведения фатического диалога у студентов-журналистов.

**Ключевые слова:** Small Talk, фатический диалог, студенты факультета журналистики, социальное взаимодействие, социальные навыки

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## Introduction

In competitive environment, the importance of communication has increased with the increase in the scope of business, trade and industry [21]. Effective communication skills may assist students in several contexts: at work, in social life, and in personal life [22]. While there are various aspects of communication that require attention, one that stands out is 'Small Talk', which emphasizes the establishment and maintenance of social relationships rather than the conveyance of factual information.

Small Talk is viewed as a special form of interpersonal communication which is not connected with the quality of information transfer and which is targeted at regulating interpersonal relations. According to R. West and L.Y. Turner, Small Talk consists of words and phrases that are used for interpersonal contact only and are not meant to be translated verbatim. It aims to establish, maintain, and manage bonds of sociality between participants [26]. Moreover, it helps new acquaintances to sense and categorize each other's social position [25]. In its further development, Malinowski's concept of Small Talk or Jakobson's phatic function of language is often referred to by linguists when taking into accounts for phatic communication [12, 15]. The linguists whose accounts are involved in this research are G. Leech (1983), G. Cook (1989), J. Holmes (1992), J. Renkema (1993), T. O'Sullivan et al. (1994), D. Schiffrin (1994), D. Abercrombie (1998), J. Verschueren (1999), J. Coupland (2000), J.L. Mey (2001), M. Saville-Troike (2003), H. Kridalaksana (2004) [1–3, 11, 13, 14, 16–20, 24].

Such a kind of communication can help keep the communication channel between speakers open [9], it can also be thought of as content free because listeners are not supposed to think about the meaning of the statement; instead, they are expected to respond to the polite contact the speaker is making. For example, when someone is asked "Hi, how are you doing?", he is just

being made contact with and the person who asks does not really want to know how the other person is doing.

In real life, Small Talk involves mostly the use of speech to initiate and sustain initial social contact between individuals [5]. Researchers place significant importance on Small Talk as an integral part of communication. B. Malinowski, a renowned anthropologist, conceptualized phatic dialogue as a speech act where in the mere exchange of words creates a sense of connection and camaraderie. In such conversational exchanges, the linguistic aspects play a secondary role, with the primary focus being the fulfillment of social functions [15]. S. Gramley and K. Patzold point that what is important about such a use of language is not the informative value of what is said or the originality or creativity of the language used, but that something is said at all and that silence is avoided so that the speaker and addressee feel at ease and can enjoy each other's company [8]. The aim is to establish an atmosphere of social and personal communication between people, trying to overcome silence and create a feeling of positive rapport with each other [4]. It's clear that incorporating Small Talk into students' daily communication can serve as a valuable tool to enhance their overall communication skills.

As for journalism students, the significance of developing their Small Talk skills can be seen as an important way to perform kinds of social relationships [10] due to the fact that the journalism profession demands frequent communication with diverse individuals in various situations. Therefore, having a strong grasp of Small Talk skills enables students that are from this profession to feel more at ease and establish connections on a deeper, more personal level [23]. The ability to engage in casual conversations is paramount for their studies, daily life, and future careers in journalism.

However, despite the increasing popularity and importance of Small Talk, many students still

face different challenges when they are initiating or participating in Small Talk. Therefore, the goal of this research is to assess Small Talk skills among journalism students. To assess it effectively, a structured qualitative and quantitative assessment procedure for educational dialogues, specifically Small Talk, was created. This procedure utilizes a survey and a test to gather data/information for further analysis.

**Methods**

The goal of this experiment was to assess the students' Small Talk skills. In order to do so, a comprehensive survey and test were conducted.

The participants in this study consisted of 22 first-year students from the Journalism program at South Ural State University in Chelyabinsk, Russia. Out of these participants, 20 were female students while the remaining two were male students, all within the age range of 18–20. It is pertinent to note that the English proficiency level of these students ranged from A1 to A2 (18 students have A2 and another 4 have A1).

The survey was designed to ascertain their background knowledge, preferences for topics, expectations in starting conversations, and understanding of Small Talk skills (Table 1).

The structure of the test developed to assess the development of Small Talk skills reflects three essential characteristics of this type of phatic

dialogue, which can be assessed in written form: 1) the use of appropriate lexical units (set phrases and speech patterns); 2) competence in maintaining topics traditionally used in Small Talk; 3) the skill of regulating Small Talk (the ability to adequately initiate, maintain and complete this form of phatic dialogue). Accordingly, we used these characteristics of Small Talk as criteria for assessing the development of skills in conducting phatic dialogue. Each of them in the test corresponded to one task consisting of several unfinished sentences. For each correctly completed sentence, two points were assigned; for each sentence completed with minor inaccuracies or minor stylistic errors, one point was assigned; in case of an incorrect answer, no points were awarded. Thus, according to the first and second criteria for assessing the quality of phatic dialogue (“use of appropriate lexical units” and “competence in maintaining topics traditionally used in Small Talk”), the student could score a maximum of 10 points, according to the third criterion (“skill in regulating Small Talk”) – 12 points, and the maximum number of points scored for the test is 32.

The test was administered to evaluate the students' foundational knowledge of Small Talk and their ability to effectively initiate and respond to different Small Talk situations in real-life scenarios (Table 2).

**Table 1**

**Survey about students' Small Talk background knowledge**

Questions	Options
1. How much time did you spend on Small Talk skills while learning English?	a. enough time for you to master this type of dialogue b. enough time for you to become familiar with this type of dialogue and try to implement it in practice c. there was only enough time to become familiar with this type of dialogue, but there was no independent experience of participating in such dialogues d. during the learning process you only heard (read) about Small Talk, but you were not shown examples of this type of dialogue e. you do not have a complete understanding of what Small Talk is
2. Do you find it difficult to demonstrate Small Talk skills in a learning situation?	a. yes b. no c. sometimes
3. Is it easy for you to make contact with strangers?	a. easy b. difficult c. depends on the situation
4. During Small Talk you...	a. expect that the participants in the dialogue will both initiate the dialogue b. expect you to be the initiator and organizer of dialogue c. expect your partner to take the initiative d. would prefer not to participate in the dialogue at all
5. What topic area do you like to support Small Talk in?	a. professional themes b. hobby, leisure c. others

Table 2

Assessment test for the students' Small Talk foundational knowledge

Tasks	Questions
1. Choose the right answer	1) The weather is so good today! 2) How are your parents? 3) I like to visit the cafe, which is near the university. 4) What sports do you like? 5) Last year I visited Canada. a. We are planning to visit them this week! b. I also went to USA during my summer vacation. c. I like to play volleyball and tennis. What about you? d. I agree. I like such weather. e. That cafe is nice! They have delicious snacks
2. Complete the sentences with the given words	1) – This restaurant is so _____. (a. great, b. awful, c. disgusting) – I like it too. 2) – I'm so sorry to hear that your mom is sick. – Don't worry. She is _____ (a. getting worse, b. getting very sick, c. recovering) 3) – This weather is so comfortable. – I _____ it too. (a. hate, b. like, c. dislike) 4) – I really enjoy doing _____. (a. sports, b. homework, c. research) – Me too. I like to play soccer very much. 5) – Where do you plan to _____ this summer? (a. do, b. visit, c. sleep) – I think I will probably go to Canada
3. Put the following conversations in the correct order	Person B: We didn't have a specific plan. We just packed our bags, hopped in the car, and drove until we found a beautiful beach. It was such a liberating feeling. Person A: That sounds amazing! Did you have any specific destination in mind or just went with the flow? Person B: Yes, actually! Last year, my friends and I decided to take a last-minute road trip to the beach. It was so much fun! Person A: I love those unexpected discoveries. Did you stay for long or was it just a quick getaway? Person B: Absolutely! We stumbled upon this charming little seaside town with colorful houses and a vibrant local market. It was such a pleasant surprise. Person A: That's the beauty of spontaneous trips! Did you discover any hidden gems or unexpected places along the way? Person B: We ended up staying for a couple of days. We couldn't resist the beautiful beach, delicious seafood, and the relaxed atmosphere. It was the perfect mini vacation. Person A: Hey, have you ever been on a spontaneous trip before?

All participants were provided with the same survey and test materials in paper, which included a one-page survey and a two-page test. The students were given a designated amount of time to complete both tasks (with five minutes allocated for the survey and ten minutes for the test to maintain a controlled environment). They were instructed not to utilize their smartphones or engage in discussions with their peers. Instead, they were expected to independently complete their tasks while being monitored by the researchers.

Upon completion of the survey and test,

the students' results were collated and subject to thorough examination by the researchers. This analysis would provide some useful insights into the overall proficiency of the students in Small Talk skills and highlight any specific areas where improvement may be necessary. These findings can potentially inform educators and curriculum developers to tailor their teaching methods to better enhance students' Small Talk abilities.

By conducting this survey and test, the researchers aimed to assess the initial level of Small Talk skills among first-year Journalism students. This study serves as a starting point to further

understand the specific needs and challenges faced by these students when engaging in Small Talk. It also provides some useful data to guide future interventions and strategies aimed at improving their Small Talk abilities. Through this research, educators can gain some insights into how to better prepare students for effective communication in various professional settings.

### Results

Based on the previous steps, the researchers have already collected data from the previous survey and test, which aim to understand the varying levels of mastery and challenges students face with Small Talk, their preferences for topics and expectations in initiating conversations and their English level. The results from them are being presented here.

#### 1) Results of the survey

The results of the survey conducted on students' abilities and preferences in Small Talk conversations shed light on various aspects of their proficiency and comfort levels. Out of the total respondents, it was found that 13.6% reported having enough time to fully master this particular type of dialogue. These students demonstrated a high level of competence in engaging in Small Talk conversations and were able to use it effectively in their day-to-day interactions. On the other hand, 40.9% of the students claimed to have ample time to become familiar with fatic dialogues and make attempts to implement them in real-life situations. Although not fully proficient, these individuals were actively working towards improving their skills and gaining more experience through practice. 22.7% acknowledged having only enough time to become

acquainted with Small Talk but were unfortunately unable to gain independent experience by actively participating in such conversations. It is likely that these students were provided with theoretical knowledge about Small Talk but lacked the practical exposure to fully understand its dynamics. Surprisingly, 13.6% of the students had merely heard or read about Small Talk but were not exposed to any concrete examples or given practical guidance. This group lacked both theoretical understanding and practical experience. Consequently, their understanding and perception of Small Talk were limited to a mere abstract concept. Furthermore, 9% of the participants lacked a complete understanding of what Small Talk actually entails. This suggests that these students require further guidance and clarification regarding the nature and purpose of Small Talk conversations. It is essential for them to grasp the significance and basic principles underlying this social interaction skill (Fig. 1).

Moving on, a significant finding from the survey was that 22.7% of the students' encountered difficulties when attempting to demonstrate their Small Talk skills in a learning environment. These individuals faced challenges in showcasing their abilities during practice sessions or within classroom settings. This indicates the need for more effective teaching methodologies and learning approaches to help these students overcome their obstacles and develop stronger Small Talk skills. A majority of 68.1% of the students, however, found it challenging to demonstrate their Small Talk skills in a learning situation at times. This indicates that while these individuals may possess a certain level of proficiency, their per-

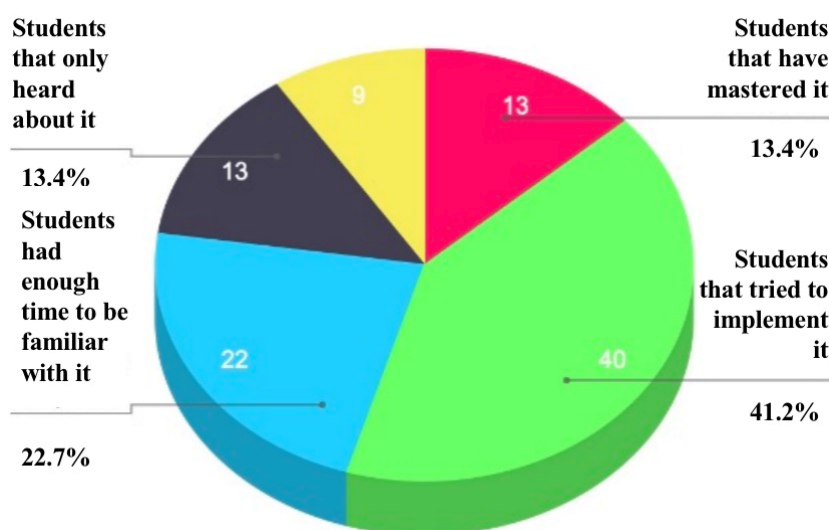


Fig. 1. Students' background

formance may vary depending on factors such as the specific context or their comfort level with the conversation partner (Fig. 2).

Shifting our focus to the students' perspectives on initiating contact with strangers, the survey revealed that 40.9% of the students found it easy to make initial contact with unknown individuals. These individuals possessed a level of confidence and social skills that facilitated their ability to approach and engage with strangers comfortably. However, 18.1% of the participants found it difficult to make contact with strangers. This may stem from factors such as shyness, introversion, or lack of self-assurance in unfamiliar social situations. 40.9% of the students believed that the ease or difficulty of initiating contact depended on the specific situation. These individuals

recognized that some circumstances might be more comfortable, while others might present more challenges or barriers (Fig. 3).

Regarding expectations in a phatic dialogue, 59% of the students anticipated that both participants would take the initiative in starting the conversation. This suggests an equal distribution of responsibility and engagement when it comes to initiating Small Talk exchanges. 9% of the participants expected themselves to be the sole initiators and organizers of the dialogue. This group displayed a higher level of self-confidence in taking the lead during Small Talk conversations. Conversely, 31.8% of the students expected their dialogue partner to take the initiative in initiating the conversation. This implies a certain level of passiveness or reliance on the other

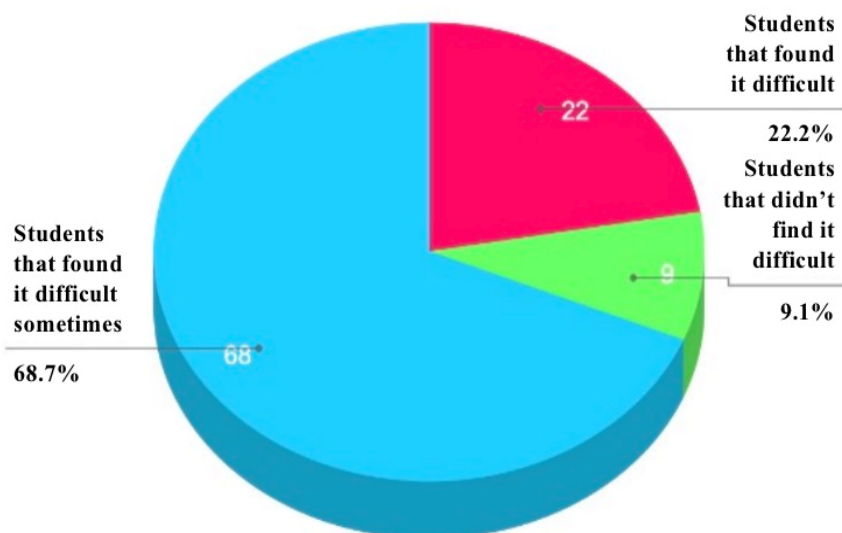


Fig. 2. Students' self-evaluation

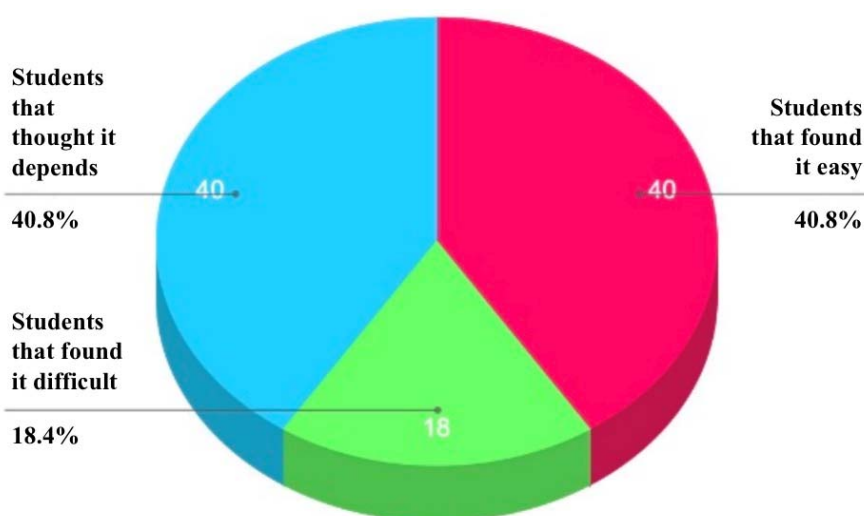


Fig. 3. Students' attitude to initiate small talk with strangers

person's willingness to engage in Small Talk. Intriguingly, none of the students expressed a preference for not participating in the dialogue at all. This reflects the recognition of the significance and value of Small Talk in establishing connections and fostering social interactions (Fig. 4).

Furthermore, when it came to selecting the preferred topics for Small Talk conversations, 9% of the students expressed a preference for discussing professional themes. This indicates an inclination towards conversations that revolve around their respective fields of study or career aspirations. Shocking the majority, a staggering 81.8% of the students favored topics related to hobbies and leisure activities. These individuals valued engaging in conversations that provided an opportunity to share their interests, passions,

and personal experiences outside of academic or work-related contexts. 9% of the students expressed a preference for other topics that were not explicitly mentioned. The exact nature of these topics could be subjective, depending on individual preferences, cultural backgrounds, or personal experiences (Fig. 5).

2) Results of the test

Based on the test results, it is clear that most of students scored within the range of 20–25. This range indicates that most students possess a similar level of proficiency. The average score of 22 further supports this finding, suggesting that the majority of students possess a solid foundation in vocabulary and grammar necessary for engaging in Small Talk. However, there is a small subset of students who scored lower, specifically with scores of 16 and 18, suggesting that they

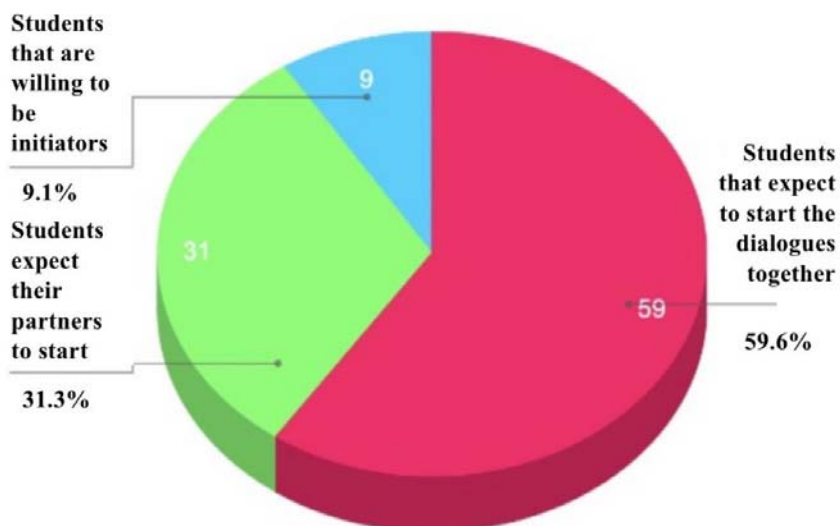


Fig. 4. Students' willingness about the initiators

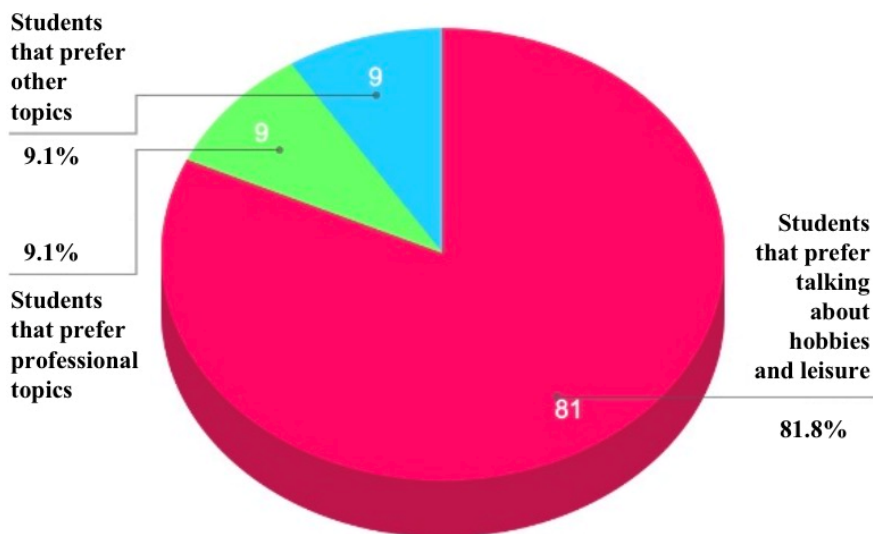
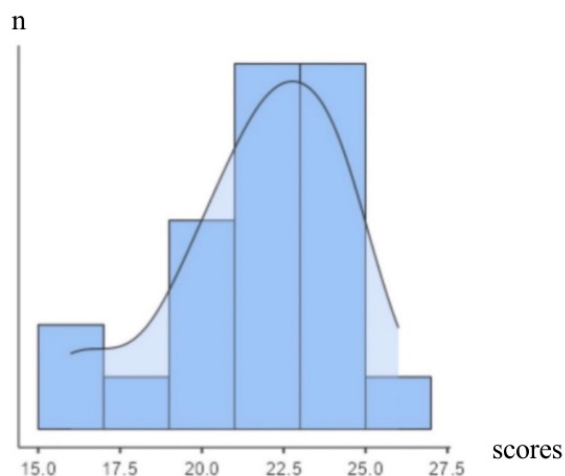


Fig. 5. Students' preference for topics

may have some deficiencies when it comes to Small Talk (Fig. 6).



**Fig. 6. Distribution of students according to "Small Talk foundational knowledge test" scores (n = 22)**

To analyze the test scores, the data was processed using a software called Jamovi. This allowed for a comprehensive examination of various statistical measures, providing a clearer understanding of the overall performance of the students. When observing the measures of central tendency, it was observed that the mean score was 21.7, the median score was 22, and the mode score was also 22. These values indicate that the majority of students share a similar level of English proficiency, suggesting a common English level among the students (Table 3).

**Table 3**  
**Descriptive statistics parameters of the "Small Talk foundational knowledge test" scores (n = 22)**

Measures of central tendency	Measures of variability	Measures of frequency distribution
Mean = 21.7 Median = 22.0 Mode = 22.0	Standard deviation ( $\sigma$ ) = 2.5	Skewness = -0.8 Kurtosis = 0.3

### Discussion

According to the survey findings, a large portion of students have enough time to become familiar with Small Talk through practice and mastery. However, there are also many students who only have time to become familiar with Small Talk but lack the opportunity to independently engage in such conversations. Additionally, a few students have only heard or read about Small Talk without being exposed to actual examples of such conversations. This suggests

a need to provide these students with more practical experience and exposure to Small Talk. Furthermore, a significant proportion of students do not fully understand what Small Talk is, indicating a need for clearer explanations and guidance. Many students also find it challenging to demonstrate Small Talk skills in a learning setting, suggesting that they may require more guidance and practice to feel confident in performing these skills. In terms of interacting with strangers, a large proportion of students find it easy, while a smaller proportion finds it difficult. However, a considerable number of students feel that approaching strangers depends on the context, indicating a need for additional strategies and support to effectively engage in Small Talk in different situations. Regarding expectations for dialogue participants, most students expect both parties to initiate the conversation. A few students prefer to be the initiators and organizers themselves, while many prefer their partners to take the lead. None of the students expressed a willingness to not participate at all, indicating that most students are willing to engage in Small Talk but may benefit from guidance in taking a leading role or adapting to different roles. It can be observed that their interactions were performed differently in any situations and different participants that possibly caused by their problematic behaviors and equal or unequal status [6]. When it comes to preferred topics for Small Talk, most students prefer discussing hobbies and leisure, while a smaller proportion prefers professional topics. A few students expressed a preference for other topics, indicating the importance of incorporating a variety of subjects to cater to different preferences.

Analyzing the test results, most students scored between 20 and 25, indicating similar proficiency in Small Talk. The average score was 22, suggesting that most students have a solid foundation in vocabulary and grammar for participating in Small Talk. However, a small group of students scored lower, indicating some deficiencies in their Small Talk skills. This highlights the need for targeted support and additional practice to enhance their proficiency in this area. Using Jamovi software for analysis, it was found that the mean, median, and mode all revolve around 22, indicating relatively consistent English proficiency among most students. The standard deviation of 2.5 suggests a balanced distribution of scores close to normal. However, the negative skewness and positive kurtosis values indicate a slight asymmetry in the distribution, with a small



number of students having significantly lower English skills compared to their peers.

### **Conclusion**

All in all, Small Talk skills are very important for journalism students. It joins them with others in a relatively inoffensive manner and allows them to exchange noncontroversial background information that is unlikely to create conflicts between interactors [7], the results of the survey and test can provide important insights into the students' experiences, preferences, and abilities of Small Talk. The findings show us that while most students have had enough time to become familiar with Small Talk, there is a need for more practical experience and exposure to this type of dialogue. Furthermore, some students require additional clarification and instruction to fully understand Small Talk concepts. Additionally, many students find it challenging to demonstrate Small Talk skills, highlighting the importance of providing guidance and practice opportunities. The survey results also shed light on the

students' expectations for dialogue participants and preferred topics for Small Talk. The majority of students expect both parties to initiate the dialogue, and they express a preference for topics related to hobbies and leisure. However, it is crucial to incorporate a variety of topics to cater to the diverse interests of students.

The analysis of the test scores reveals that most students have a similar level of proficiency in Small Talk, with a solid foundation in vocabulary and grammar. However, a small group of students exhibited deficiencies in their Small Talk skills, indicating the need for targeted support and additional practice.

Educators can utilize this information in order to create effective teaching methods that will improve students' Small Talk skills and boost their confidence. Furthermore, this study lays the groundwork for future research and intervention strategies aimed at developing students' abilities in Small Talk and helping them integrate socially.

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