DEVELOPMENT OF JOURNALISM STUDENTS' SMALL TALK SKILLS IN LEARNING ENGLISH

I.N. Dmitrusenko[1], dmitrusenkoin@susu.ru, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6633-4327
I.A. Tishevskoy[2], i_tishevskoy@mail.ru, https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0371-057X
L. Zhao[1], zhao07908@gmail.com, https://orcid.org/0009-0001-8530-7356
[1] South Ural State University, Chelyabinsk, Russia
[2] Chelyabinsk State University, Chelyabinsk, Russia

Abstract. In the context of training journalism students, one of the methodical problems is the development of their soft skills to conduct a phatic dialogue effectively, which is not typical for Russian-speaking culture. Therefore, it seems important for this category of students to give the opportunity for the developing phatic dialogue skills in the process of learning English as part of improving their Small Talk skills. The presented study attempts to study the knowledge of journalism students about Small Talk as a type of phatic dialogue that allows successful initiation of communication. In addition, it presents the results of the development and application of the author's course assessment aimed at Small Talk skills development in journalism students in the process of learning English. The study used empirical methods (testing and observation), as well as traditional methods of descriptive and comparative statistics. The presented results of the study of the effectiveness of the author's course indicate, on the one hand, its effectiveness in the improvement of journalism students' knowledge about the specifics and benefits of Small Talk in professional communication. On the other hand, this course allows journalism students to improve their practical skills in conducting this form of phatic dialogue.

Keywords: Small Talk, phatic dialogue, phatic communication, journalism students

ФОРМИРОВАНИЕ НАВЫКОВ ВЕДЕНИЯ SMALL TALK У СТУДЕНТОВ-ЖУРНАЛИСТОВ В ПРОЦЕССЕ ИЗУЧЕНИЯ АНГЛИЙСКОГО ЯЗЫКА

И.Н. Дмитрусенко[1], dmitrusenkoin@susu.ru, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6633-4327
И.А. Тишевской[2], i_tishevskoy@mail.ru, https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0371-057X
Л. Чжоу[1], zhao07908@gmail.com, https://orcid.org/0009-0001-8530-7356
[1] Южно-Уральский государственный университет, Челябинск, Россия
[2] Челябинский государственный университет, Челябинск, Россия

Аннотация. В рамках обучения студентов-журналистов одной из методических проблем является формирование у них надпрофессиональных навыков эффективного ведения фатического диалога, не характерного для русскоязычной культуры. Поэтому представляется важным, чтобы в процессе изучения английского языка для данной категории студентов предоставлялась возможность развивать навыки ведения фатического диалога в рамках совершенствования навыков ведения учебных Small Talk. Представленное исследование содержит попытку изучения знаний студентов-журналистов о Small Talk как о виде фатического диалога, позволяющего успешно инициировать коммуникацию. Кроме того, в нем представлены результаты оценки разработки и применения авторского курса, нацеленного на развитие навыков Small Talk у студентов-журналистов в процессе изучения английского языка. В работе использовались эмпирические методы (тестирование и наблюдение), а также

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традиционные методы описательной и сравнительной статистики. Представленные результаты исследования эффективности авторского курса свидетельствуют, с одной стороны, об его эффективности в отношении улучшения знаний студентов-журналистов о специфике и пользе Small Talk в профессиональной коммуникации, с другой стороны, данный курс позволяет также улучшить у студентов-журналистов и практические навыки ведения данной формы фатического диалога.

Ключевые слова: Small Talk, фатический диалог, фатическая коммуникация, студенты факультета журналистики

Introduction

One of the soft skills that journalism students must master during their studies at the university is the skill of quickly and effectively entering into communication with respondents. In the standard for training journalists, this need is reflected in the requirement of the standard to develop competencies (UK-4, UK-5) within the framework of training journalism students [15]. Communicative competence includes the application of sociolinguistic norms, coherent conversation, strategic language usage, mental organization, and appropriate language use in a variety of social contexts. Since it gives students the tools they need to communicate correctly and confidently in daily situations, adequate communicative competence is essential to advancing and enhancing language education [17]. As a social product, language is unquestionably a container for social behaviors and activities, social aspirations, and cultural revelations [16].

In practice, difficulties arise in developing this competence due to the specifics of Russian-language culture. The fact is that the rapid establishment of social communication is carried out within the framework of phatic dialogue, the structure and the content of which, as well as standard phrases for this type of dialogue, are traditionally fixed in different language cultures. The Russian language is not characterized by the fixed traditional content, structure, and vocabulary of phatic dialogue, which reflects the tendency of native Russian speakers not to pay due attention to phatic dialogue, but to move on to the main subject of conversation, dialogue, or interview immediately. If for students of engineering majors, biology students or athletes this feature of social communication is not crucial for professional success, for students of social and humanitarian majors, especially for future journalists, the development of phatic dialogue skills is an important professional quality.

Since phatic dialogue is the most characteristic of English-speaking culture [11], it seems important to solve the problems of developing and improving phatic dialogue skills in journalism students as part of their study the English language course in the process of practicing Small Talk skills. This allows not only to develop knowledge of the specifics and significance of this form of communication in future journalists, but also to practice the corresponding communication skills.

The above-described problem of developing soft skills in journalism students determined the relevance of the research, which is revealed by the fact that teaching students Small Talk as a phatic dialogue helps students to understand and use language in social contexts. Through Small Talk, students can learn how to engage in phatic communication, which will improve their communication skills by teaching them how to adapt their communication style to different audiences and use appropriate expressions in various social situations [9]. Furthermore, students can enhance their social skills and cultivate positive interactions with those in their constant social environment. Teaching students to engage in phatic dialogue, including Small Talk, can also help them develop empathy [18], which is an important skill for professional communication and especially important for future journalists.

The design of the research on journalism students' Small Talk skills while learning English

The object of the research is phatic dialogue as a form of communication. The subject of the research is the efficiency of the authors' training course aimed at Small Talk skills. The purpose of the research is to assess the efficiency of the authors' training course for developing Journalism students' phatic dialogue (Small Talk) skills. The hypothesis of the research is that the created training course aimed at the development

of students' Small Talk skills will be effective for improving their phatic dialogue skills in common.

The tasks of our research are: 1) based on the theoretical analysis of the scientific literature, determine the importance of mastering Small Talk by journalism students for the successful development and improvement of their communicative competence in the professional sphere; 2) to create and implement the training course aimed at Small Talk skills development for the first-year journalism students; 3) based on the outcomes of the experimental training, to assess the efficiency of the authors' training course for developing journalism students' Small Talk skills.

The **theoretical value** of the study lies in determining the possibility of using educational Small Talk in the context of studying English at the university to develop and improve the communicative competence of journalism students.

The **practical value** of the research consists in the development of the compact author's course for the development of communication skills in the situation of educational Small Talk among journalism students, including the proof of the effectiveness of its use in practice.

The **theoretical basis** for this study was the views of such scientists as B. Malinowski, R. Jakobson, J. Holmes and others [3, 8, 10, 13]. The research employed theoretical (literature review), empirical (survey, tests and observation) and traditional statistical methods (descriptive and comparative statistics).

Phatic dialogue, often known as Small Talk, is the use of non-referential language to express thoughts or sentiments, rather than facts or information. It is a part of phatic communication. The ritualized phrases of Small Talk are often intended to attract the listener's attention or prolong the conversation. According to R. Nordquist, phatic dialogue is also known by the terms: social signs, phatic speech, small talk language, and small chat [14]. Phatic communication is a unique type of interpersonal communication that tries to control connections between people rather than being crucial to the information being communicated [12].

Currently, phatic dialogue is becoming a more and more popular topic from normal people to professional scholars of linguistics and sociology due to its significant social function and people's rethink about the negative effects of social interaction brought by technology, due to the great development of technology and the success of social medias, the social distance between people is getting further and further, and the communication tends to be done through internet [3]. Despite appearing more effective than traditional communication, it can also lead to a number of possible issues, such as miscommunication and misunderstanding, which can be detrimental to a person's career or relationships. So, it seems urgent to develop people's phatic dialogue skills under this circumstance. Furthermore, phatic communication is essential to many facets of daily living. It can be found in a wide range of settings, including personal interactions, formal meetings, and even in online and digital communication. It helps to establish a friendly atmosphere, break the ice, and create a sense of comfort between individuals. Phatic dialogue fulfills significant cultural and historical roles in addition to its social ones. It represents the beliefs, norms and customs of a particular community or group of people.

Furthermore, the historical background of phatic dialogue can be linked to the study of politeness theory. Scholars like P. Brown and S. Levinson have examined how politeness strategies and linguistic rituals are utilized in discussions to preserve peace in society and prevent conflict [1].

Besides, phatic dialogue joins people in a relatively inoffensive manner and allows them to exchange noncontroversial background information that is unlikely to create conflicts between interactants [6].

R. West and L. Turner define phatic dialogue as words and phrases intended solely for interpersonal communication and not intended for literal translation. One could consider this type of communication to be content-free since the audience is intended to react to the speaker's courteous eye contact rather than consider the substance of the message. When someone says, "Hello, how are you doing?" for instance, they are merely establishing contact; the asker is not very interested in learning specifics about the other person's condition. In order for the speaker and the addressee to feel comfortable and enjoy each other's company, it is more important that something be said in this situation rather than focusing on the originality or creativity of the language used or its informative value [20].

Phatic dialogue is a crucial bonding ritual for handling interpersonal distance even when it has very little practical value. It can not only help people strengthen their social bonds, but also ensures that their communication with other people is open [5]. Relationship building among friends, coworkers, and new acquaintances is its primary

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pragmatic use. Plus, it makes it easier for new friends to discern and classify one another's social standing. According to A. Vanyan, the time during the interaction when the phatic dialogue takes place often determines the intended outcome [19].

The evidence presented above demonstrates that phatic dialogue is a verbal and nonverbal informational communication style that serves a social purpose as opposed to an informative one. It is widely used by people to perform social tasks like forming and keeping cordial relationships between interlocutors.

Thus, according to many scientists, Small Talk is an important and typical form of phatic dialogue and its development helps to increase competence in organizing this type of communication, both routine and professional.

Design of the research and methods

The effectiveness of the developed training course was tested based on the results of the experimental training in the course "the Foreign Language" in 2024. In total, 27 first-year journalism students in the South Ural State University, aged 18–20, took part in the experimental training.

The effectiveness of the course aimed at developing Small Talk skills was assessed by comparing two groups of the parameters before and after the experiment: 1) test results of students' Small Talk knowledge, and 2) the quality of students' phatic communication using the analysis of educational dialogues videos.

The test (Fig. 1) was administered to evaluate the students' knowledge of Small Talk and their ability to effectively initiate and respond

Tasks	Questions
1. Choose the right answer.	1. Did you go to the concert yesterday? 2. Have you seen the new movie? 3. Do you enjoy reading books in your free time? 4. I'm thinking about joining a dance class. 5. How was your weekend? a. It was great. b. It was fun! I went hiking with my family. c. Yes, I like to read novels! d. I love dancing, it's a great way to stay active. e. I have, it was really good. You should go see it.
2. Complete the sentences with the given words.	1. – The new movie that just came out is so _____. (a. boring, b. bad, c. interesting) – I can't wait to see it! 2. – I had a really _____ day at work today. (a. stressful, b. easy, c. fun) – Oh no, what happened? 3. – I love to try new _____. (a. food, b. drinks, c. clothes) – Same here, I'm always looking for new restaurants to try. 4. – I think it's important to _____. (a. exercise, b. sleep in, c. watch TV all day) – I completely agree. Prioritizing health is key. 5. – Have you heard about the new _____ opening up downtown? (a. restaurant, b. gym, c. library) – Yes, I'm excited to check it out soon. I like to read books.
3. Put the following conversations in the correct order.	(__) Person 2: I agree, there's something so comforting about tea. I like trying out different flavors, do you have a favorite? (__) Person 1: I love starting my morning with a nice cup of tea. It just sets the tone for the day. (__) Person 2: Those are great choices. I tend to go for black tea, it gives me that extra caffeine kick. (__) Person 1: I'm a fan of herbal teas, especially chamomile or peppermint. They're so soothing. (__) Person 2: Yes, I've heard that too. I should probably incorporate more green tea into my daily routine. (__) Person 1: Have you ever tried green tea? It's supposed to have a lot of health benefits. (__) Person 1: Definitely, it's a great way to stay hydrated and take care of your health at the same time.

Fig. 1. Assessment test of students' Small Talk knowledge after experiment

to different Small Talk situations in real-life scenarios.

To assess the quality of students' phatic communication, video recording of educational Small Talk was carried out. In order to record the videos, the students were divided into two-person groups. Each group was given a different topic by the researchers. Every student group was given approximately three minutes to have a phatic dialogue about their subject. The researcher used a mobile phone to record them while they spoke in turns so that they could be further examined. The videos were then used to analyze the quality of student interaction in a Small Talk learning situation. The quality of the phatic dialogue was assessed using two groups of criteria that represented the verbal and nonverbal aspects of communication [2, 4].

The first group of criteria is intended to assess the quality of students' verbal communication. "Participation in the organization of the conversation" and "Language errors (grammar, vocabulary, and phonetics)" are its two parameters. The purpose of the second group of criteria is to evaluate how nonverbal communication techniques have developed. According to the principles of communication assessment used in psychology [7], two more parameters are assessed: "emotional tone of the communication" and "paraverbal and non-verbal communication methods." This group of criteria is also represented by these parameters. The first ("Participation in the organization of the conversation") and third ("paraverbal and non-verbal") parameters have a maximum score of five points each. These parameters are evaluated "cumulatively" based on the sum of the desired characteristics of the conversation that the student has demonstrated. The principle outlines a number of perfect conversational attributes, each worth one point.

The traditional method is to assign a score based on the description of the corresponding aspect of the student's behavior during the conversation, rather than the sum of the desired behavioral characteristics for the second ("Language errors: grammar, vocabulary, and phonetics") and fourth ("Emotional tone of the communication") parameters. On a five-point rating system, the highest evaluation of the corresponding indicator's development was assigned to each of the four parameters in the first and second groups.

Results and Discussion

The use of the method of theoretical analysis of scientific literature in the process of solving **the first task** allowed us to reveal that successful acquisition of Small Talk skills by students contributes to the improvement of such communication characteristics as the organization and control of personal interactions, formal meetings, and even in online and digital communication, as well as successful orientation in the communication process to the norms and customs of a particular community or group of people. Moreover, mastering Small Talk skills creates the necessary conditions for avoiding conflict situations within foreign language communication, which is especially important for international journalists.

In order to solve **the second task**, based on the communicative method of organizing the educational process, the structure of exercises was developed aimed at expanding the knowledge of journalism students about the importance and features of conducting a phatic dialogue (Small Talk), as well as practicing and improving Small Talk skills. The description of the training course for developing journalism students' phatic dialogue (Small Talk) skills is presented in Table 1. In order to teach phatic dialogue (Small Talk) and help students improve their communicative competence, the researchers have organized the various exercises and tasks into the following systematization. When developing the training course, the authors believed that if these activities (exercises and tasks) are incorporated into the language curriculum, students will be better equipped to handle communication in real-world situations. Additionally, phatic dialogue exercises come in a range of difficulty levels, so students can practice and eventually become proficient in this important communication skill.

The mentioned above types of tasks were structured within the training course as follows. The training course has a setting with six lessons total – six units ("Music", "Family", "Travelling", "Food", "Hobby" and "Weather"). And an hour and thirty minutes is allotted for each lesson. There are 8–13 tasks in each unit. 1) "Answer the questions", 2) "Match the picture", 3) "Read the words and pay attention to the pronunciation", 4) "Fill in the blank", 5) "Arrange the following questions in the correct order", 6) "Combine the dialogue", 7) "Complete the conversation", 8) "Discuss the following hobbies by using non-verbal communication strategies (facial expression, body languages, etc.)", 9) "Imagine that you meet an alien from another planet and try to tell him about your hobby with non-verbal language", 10) "Use back-channeling to respond the sentences", 11) "Watch the video and answer

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Table 1

**Systematization of the types of exercises and tasks used for teaching phatic dialogue
for developing students' communicative competence**

Types of exercises	Types of tasks	Stage of teaching
1. Competence of developing the language skills	1. Answer the questions. 2. Match the picture. 3. Read the words and pay attention to the pronunciation. 4. Fill in the blanks. 5. Arrange the following questions in the correct order	Primary stage
2. Develop the competence in regulating phatic dialogue (the ability to adequately initiate, maintain and complete Small Talk – the form of phatic dialogue). 3. Develop the competence of non-verbal communication strategies	1. Combine the dialogue. 2. Complete the conversation. 3. Discuss the following hobbies by using non-verbal communication strategies (facial expression, body languages, etc.). 4. Imagine that you meet an alien from another planet and try to tell him about your hobby with non-verbal language. 5. Use back-channeling to respond the sentences. 6. Watch the video and answer the questions	Secondary stage
4. Develop the competence in conducting and maintaining topics traditionally used in Small Talk	1. Discuss on the given topic. 2. Role play scenario	Final stage

Table 2

Comparative statistics of Small Talk parameters before and after the experiment, n = 27

Parameter	Before the experiment	After the experiment	Significance of differences, p
Participation in the dialogue organization	3.6 ± 1.0	3.9 ± 0.7	$p < 0.01$
Language errors	3.5 ± 0.8	3.5 ± 0.9	$p < 0.1$
Paralinguistic and extralinguistic	3.2 ± 0.7	3.7 ± 0.7	$p < 0.01$
Emotional tone of communication	4.3 ± 0.8	4.3 ± 0.6	$p < 0.1$

the questions", 12) "Discuss on the given topic", 13) "Role play scenario".

Thus, as a result of solving the **second task**, the authors managed to develop a training course for developing Small Talk skills of journalism students, consisting of six units, for 12 academic hours. This course was implemented during the 2023/2024 academic year for first-year journalism students studying at South Ural State University.

The **third task**, to assess the effectiveness of the authors' training course for developing journalism students' Small Talk skills, was accomplished using empirical methods (testing and structured observation), as well as traditional statistical methods (descriptive and comparative statistics for nonparametric parameters).

The results of the students' Small Talk knowledge test demonstrated significant increase ($p < 0.01$) of scores after the experiment (25.1 ± 6.2) in accordance with the scores before the experiment (21.7 ± 2.5). This result demonstrates the effectiveness of the author's course in relation to students' knowledge of Small Talk as a type of phatic dialogue.

The results of the observation for the dynamics of the quality of Small Talk before and after the training course are presented in Table 2. As can be seen from the table, a reliable improvement in the characteristics of conducting phatic dialogue after the author's course was manifested in the parameters "Participation in the dialogue organization" and "Paralinguistic and extralinguistic". The other two characteristics ("Language errors" "Emotional tone of communication") did not undergo significant changes.

The test results and video evidence unmistakably demonstrated that the students' level had somewhat increased in comparison to before the experiment; however, there are two issues that need to be addressed: 1) there are some discrepancies in the students' levels; 2) the improvement level is not readily apparent.

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The following are some possible causes of this phenomenon: 1) researchers will not be able to make significant progress in the near future due to students' inadequate English foundation and lack of fundamental knowledge; 2) students lack discipline and fail to prioritize classroom order, leading to distractions that inhibit their ability to fully engage in learning activities. This lack of focus can hinder their comprehension of course content and participation in class discussions; 3) the limited course time and intervals in between are too long which create challenges in maintaining momentum and continuity in learning. The gaps could impede students' progress and interfere with the learning process.

The revealed reliability of differences while maintaining the average value is explained by the large variability of the parameter prior to the experiment and the increase in their homogeneity in the range of the average value. However, the results allow us to conclude that the differences are reliable ($p < 0.01$) for the first parameter ("Participation in the dialogue organization") and the third parameter, ("Paralinguistic and extralinguistic"), for the second parameter ("Language errors") and the fourth parameter ("Emotional tone of communication") the differences are not reliable, the increase in these indicators was revealed only at the level of statistical tendency ($p < 0.1$).

Conclusion

The results obtained from the solution of research tasks, the authors formulated the following conclusions:

1. Successful acquisition of Small Talk skills by students helps improve their communicative competence.

2. A training course aimed at developing Small Talk skills should, to be minimally effective, consist of six units (12 teaching hours) and include exercises on 1) competence of developing the language skills, 2) developing the competence in regulating phatic dialogue (the ability to adequately initiate, maintain and complete Small Talk – the form of phatic dialogue), 3) developing the competence of non-verbal communication strategies and 4) developing the competence in conducting and maintaining topics traditionally used in Small Talk.

3. The training course developed and described by the authors in this paper, aimed at developing Small Talk skills, is effective both in terms of increasing students' level of knowledge about this type of phatic dialogue and in terms of two Small Talk parameters ("Participation in the dialogue organization" and "Paralinguistic and extralinguistic"). The other two Small Talk parameters ("Language errors," and "Emotional tone of communication") did not change significantly after students completed the course.

Taking into account the successful solution of the tasks set in the study by the authors and the receipt of substantiated conclusions on each of them, it can be stated that the goal of the presented study has been achieved.

Based on the conducted research, it can be stated that the author's course, developed on the basis of the theoretical analysis of methodological literature on the problem under study, allows to improve the knowledge of journalism students about Small Talk, as well as to develop the skills of conducting this form of phatic dialogue. These findings highlight the effectiveness in enhancing various aspects of communication skills among the students. Further research and interventions in this area could continue to improve communication competencies in Journalism education.

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Information about the authors

Inna N. Dmitrusenko, Candidate of Pedagogy, Associate Professor of the Department of Foreign Languages, Institute of Linguistics and International Communications, South Ural State University, Chelyabinsk, Russia.

Igor A. Tishevskoy, Candidate of Medical Sciences, Associate Professor of the Department of Psychology, Faculty of Psychology and Pedagogy Chelyabinsk State University, Chelyabinsk State University, Chelyabinsk, Russia.

Lei Zhao, Lecturer of the Department of Linguistics and Translation, Institute of Linguistics and International Communications, South Ural State University, Chelyabinsk, Russia.

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Информация об авторах

Дмитрусенко Инна Николаевна, кандидат педагогических наук, доцент кафедры иностранных языков Института лингвистики и международных коммуникаций, Южно-Уральский государственный университет, Челябинск, Россия.

Тишевской Игорь Андреевич, кандидат медицинских наук, доцент кафедры психологии факультета Психологии и педагогики, Челябинский государственный университет, Челябинск.

Чжоу Лэй, преподаватель кафедры лингвистики и перевода Института лингвистики и международных коммуникаций, Южно-Уральский государственный университет, Челябинск, Россия.

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