

*Fostering Social Communication Skills Through Small Talk Practice in
Post-pandemic Japan*

Tomoko Sugihashi, Showa Women's University, Japan

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Abstract

Small talk is often said to be like a lubricating oil in human relationships. However, the Japanese appear to be influenced by its high-context culture (Hall & Hall, 1987). People often need help to decide on good topics to initiate conversation, even in business settings (Murao, 2021). 3rd-year college students who enrolled at the onset of the pandemic in 2020 and were exposed to its effects longer than other grades appear to have suffered more from not establishing good friendships or nurturing their communication skills. While face-to-face teaching officially started in 2022, students came into the classroom quietly and sat without interacting with their peers. In order to help develop their small talk competency, the author prepared a short questionnaire to uncover students' daily social communication, such as whether they greet the university's president and teachers in the same department. Further questions include how successfully they think they can exchange small talk with "new" classmates and whether they can talk to strangers if necessary. Students are then given time to practice small talk by selecting appropriate topics at the beginning of their classes. The growth in their small talk competence is observed through their journals and the questionnaire results. The small talk session is a simple activity. However, as students start smiling when practicing in class and talking to the author in the corridor, the effect benefits their future careers and can be used in versatile ways.

Keywords: Small Talk, Communication Skills, Pandemic, Japanese EFL Students, High-Context Culture

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Introduction

The Covid-19 outbreak since 2020 has impacted the world. According to Japan's Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, its death toll exceeded 72,000 as of March 1st, 2023. This unprecedented phenomenon cast a dark shadow naturally on the youth. Even after elementary school children returned to school, they had to eat in silence with a plastic shield in front of them. After lunch, they are expected to spend time quietly without interacting with others. The effects on children, both psychologically and in terms of social skills development, have been a major concern for educators. The Ministry also announced on February 28th, 2023 that cases of youth suicide, from elementary to high school students, marked a record high 512 in 2022.

University students are not an exception. The Japan Association of Private Universities and Colleges published a survey result on university students' worries and anxieties in September 2022 regarding the effects of the pandemic on 50,000 college students. According to the survey, which was conducted online between December 2021 and April 2022, somewhat over 55% worry about their future and nearly 34% worry about their health.

The following graph illustrates Dutch social psychologist Hofstede's Cultural survey of Japan and Singapore. Country Cultures were analysed into the following six dimensions, i.e., 1) Power Distance, 2) Individualism Versus Collectivism, 3) Masculinity Versus Femininity, 4) Uncertainty Avoidance, 5) Long-Term Versus Short-Term Orientation, and 6) Indulgence Versus Restraint (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). As the conference's host country, the results for Singapore were included in the comparison sample. Japan ranks as one of the highest countries in "Uncertainty Avoidance." Tourists to Japan, for example, are surprised to see trains arriving on time at intervals of every three minutes, which is taken for granted in Japan. People can infer when the next train will come and whether they will reach their destination on time. As such, the rise in anxiety among young people amid the pandemic is understandable.

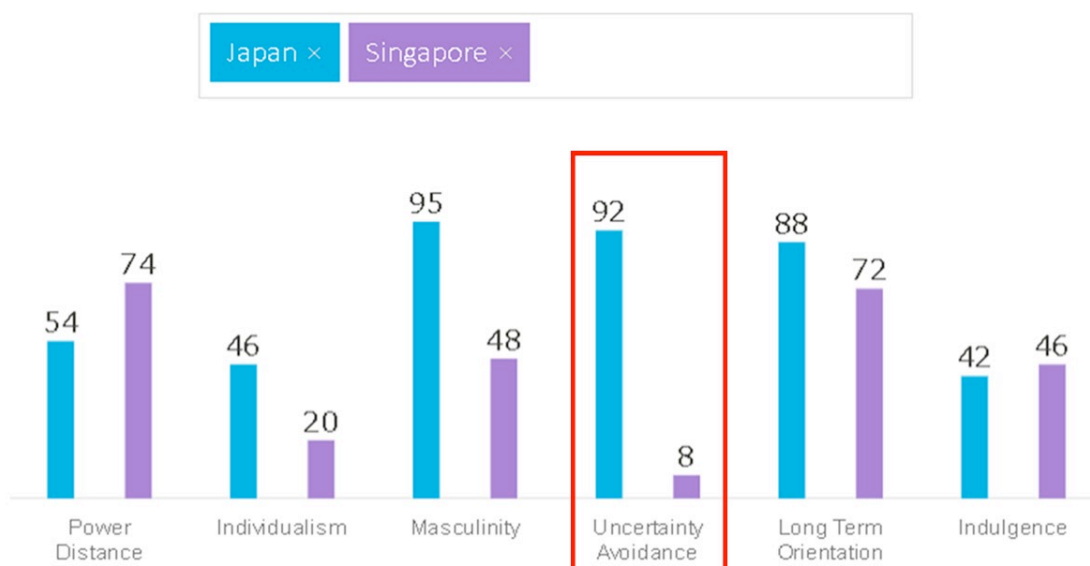


Figure 1: Hofstede Cultural Survey, Source: Hofstede Insight

When we looked at the 3rd-year students, who were robbed by Covid of their entrance ceremony, school retreat trips, and various face-to-face events until April 2022, they were in need of bonding in class. Most Japanese universities have two-term systems starting in April

and October. Last October, students sat quietly in the first class, waiting for the author to start the class. Normally, girls would be quite excited to meet up again with their friends after the summer holiday. I felt that the situation needed to be addressed.

Yokota (2022), who teaches presentation skills at universities, also noticed this phenomenon. He says that 3rd-year students' communication skills have been affected by the absence of face-to-face learning experiences. He noticed this when he taught the 3rd-year and 4th-year students simultaneously. The difference is that 4th-year students had one year of face-to-face class experience before the pandemic emerged, whereas the 3rd-year students did not physically interact in class for their first two years.

Online meetings also highlighted the lack of small talk skills of Japanese business people. Murao (2021), who teaches MBA skills, often hears their concerns, such as “I don't know what and how I should talk to acquaintances or people I meet for the first time” or “I'm worried that the absence of small talk will create gaps of silence.”

There are more than a few sociologists who illustrate the differences of the “Public and Private Self” between Japanese and Americans. For example, Barnlund's study (1989) found that Japanese are more guarded in disclosing their private feelings whereas Americans have a narrower area of the private self. Miyake (1994) illustrates the psychological barriers between them through concentric circles. At the center is what she calls the mindset of self, which is identified by the Chinese character “自” (Figure 2), and the next circle is the in-group such as family (*Uchi*). The third circle, called “*Soto*,” includes groups such as one's bosses. The outermost circle is for psychological settings for strangers (*Yoso*). The left diagram shows that the Japanese in-group mindset (*Uchi*) is smaller and has higher barriers (illustrated by the solid line) compared with that of Brits & Americans (illustrated by the dotted line). Likewise, the barrier between *Soto* and *Yoso* for Strangers is clearly defined, and the mindset for strangers is noticeably larger.

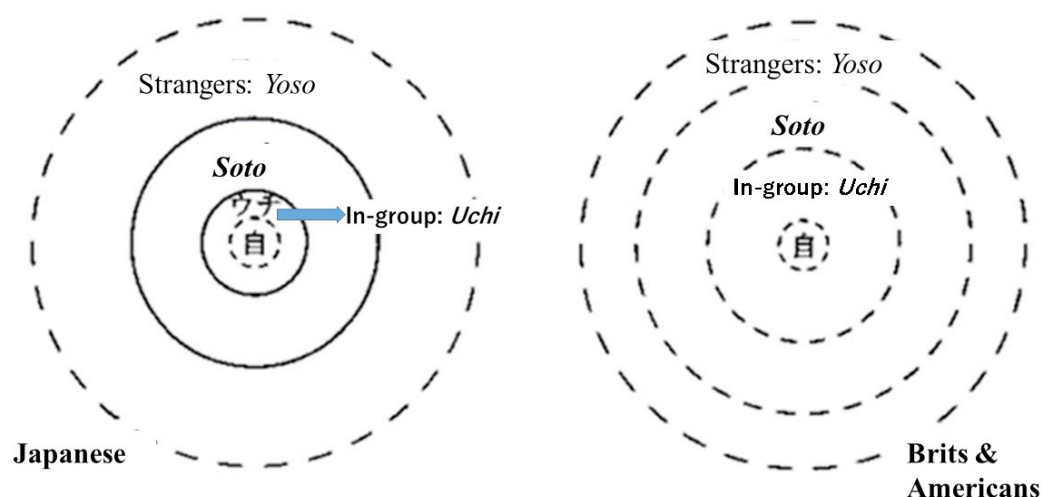


Figure 2: Source: Patterns of Japanese Linguistic Behaviour: Miyake, 1994 p. 35
English translations are added by the author

Ting-Toomey (1999) also analyzed that collectivists like the Japanese have limited self-disclosure. Further, Gao warns that “collectivistic, high-context individuals often are reluctant to provide strangers with elaborate and explicit responses” (1991, p.113) for researchers.

Small Talk

The benefits of small talk are described by many researchers. For example, Endrass, Rehm, and André (2010) describe the following:

Small Talk can be used to influence social relations positively. (...) to develop trust and rapport toward a virtual agent. In applications where the development of social relations is intended, Small Talk can be a crucial part of the system's social intelligence. (p. 3)

Pullin's (2010) study also concludes that "small talk functions in a number of ways in building, maintaining, and reinforcing rapport and solidarity (...) small talk can help reestablish more harmonious working relations and also set a favorable tone for ensuing business talks" (p. 469).

Politeness is regarded as a universal attitude to maintain good relationships and enjoy interaction. Lakoff (1973) clarifies the three rules of politeness with small talk as follows; i.e., 1) Don't impose, 2) Give options, and 3) Make the person you are talking to feel good (p. 298). Topics of small talk at work should naturally be non-controversial, such as the weather, (...) health, out-of-work social activities, sports, generalized complaints about the economy, positive comments on appearance, and work (Holmes 2005, pp. 353-354).

Student Survey Results (Pre)

Figures 3 and 4 show the results of a small survey of students conducted last October at the beginning of the second term. The students are majoring in English and Communication and studying at a women's university in central Tokyo.

25 responses

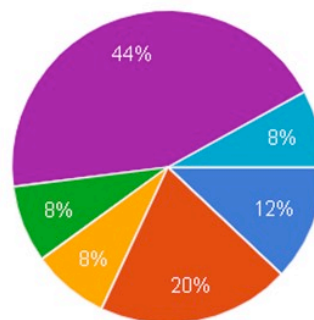


Figure 3: How Confident Are Students Talking to Strangers (1st-year students)

15 responses

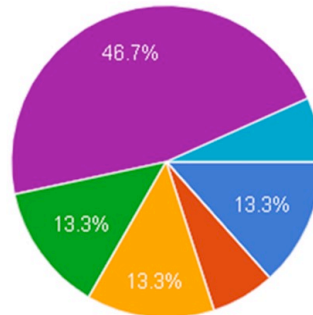


Figure 4: How Confident Are Students Talking to Strangers (3rd-year students)

These pie charts show how well they can talk to strangers. The top chart (Figure 3) represents 25 1st-year students and the bottom 15 3rd-year students. The colours indicate different sets of strangers. The purple area, which accounts for almost half of both charts (11 students, or 44%, and 7 students, or 46.7%, respectively), indicates they are comfortable conversing with all generations. The green, yellow, and red areas distinguish their comfort levels according to gender and/or age. Of the 1st-year students, 20% (5 students) feel capable of talking with female strangers of the same generation, whereas this shyness falls to 6.7% (1 student) in the 3rd-year group. The dark-blue area indicates the share of students that avoid eye contact (12-13.3%, 3 and 2 students, respectively), and the light-blue area indicates the “indifferent” share (8-6.7%, 2 and 1 students, respectively). These results suggest that the students majoring in English language and Communication need to improve their small talk skills.

Figure 5 shows whether the students acknowledge the following groups of people and greet them or give a slight bow; a) neighbours, b) teachers of the department, c) teachers they had classes with, d) guards at the school gates, e) teachers of other departments, f) chancellor, and g) president.

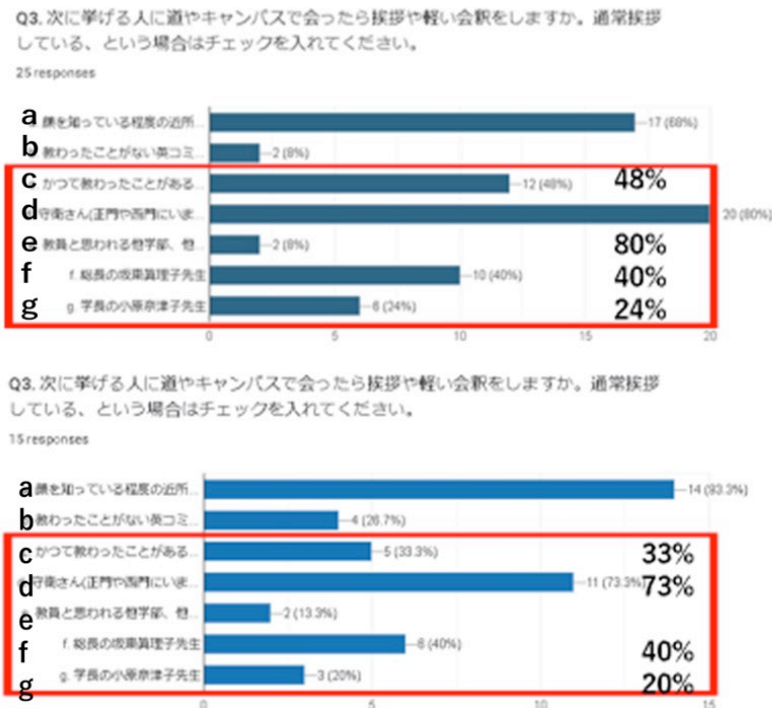


Figure 5: Students' Acknowledgement by Greeting or Giving a Slight Bow

The 25 1st-year students' results are shown in the top bar graph and the 15 3rd-year students' results in the bottom graph. It should be noted that less than half of both 1st-year and 3rd-year students greet their teachers (12 students, or 48%, and 5 students, or 33%, respectively), whether past or present, and a much larger percentage greet the campus gate guards (20 students, or 80%, and 11 students, or 73%, respectively) than they do the chancellor (40%) or president (20-24%) of the university.

These issues raise the following research questions.

1. Can the small talk sessions improve students' social attitudes?
2. Can students feel more comfortable with small talk in English after the small talk sessions?

Method

Classes

In an attempt to answer these questions, small talk sessions were applied to two classes for the 3rd-year students. Each class was held once a week.

Class A: 28 students

Main activities; learning marketing, Customer Relationship Management, Supply Chain Management, and email writing.

Class B: 12 students

Main activity is learning different formalities of business email writing.

The small talk session was divided into the following categories:

1. Body Language

Students learned and came to realise that smiling was the first universal communicative "language" before starting a conversation. Moreover, they noticed that hand and arm movements often demonstrated their feelings. They were warned not to talk or listen to their partner(s) with their arms crossed as it might suggest they were bored.

2. Find Good Topics

Some students were unsure what to talk about, so the class discussed possible topics for the day, such as recent news, train delays, and school events.

3. Diplomatic Questions

Students were introduced to some polite and indirect expressions, such as "Can I ask where you are from?" instead of "Where are you from?" or "I understand what you mean, but..." instead of "I don't think so" to express different ideas.

4. Ways to Respond and Acknowledge (e.g., Tag Responses and Giving positive adjectives)

Students often give non-verbal or one-word reactions such as "Ah-huh," "Yes," or "Really?" without applying their grammar knowledge. So they were encouraged to use this knowledge, such as tag responses. To emphasise the importance of exchanging some opinions or one's impressions rather than returning short one-word reactions, some examples of successful and unsuccessful dialogue patterns were shown. As an unsuccessful example, the failure of a Japanese speaker to establish rapport by not giving emphatic responses, described in Murata

(2006), was used. In the example, the American partner says “It’s so funny, I sit here going on and on and you just say, “uh huh,” it’s like I’m in an interview or something” in the end (p.151).

5. How to Start and End

Some students did not know how to start and end the conversation naturally.

This suggested that learning some small talk skills would be useful.

In 10 classes over 15 weeks, the students practiced small talk during the first 6 to 8 minutes of each class. Initially, they practiced in pairs, but eventually expanded to 4 or 5 people. On two occasions, the students were asked to record their conversations and listen to how they talked. The Learning Journal they kept might be the most revealing of their experience, as their reactions were traced. Journal entries were assigned 10 times for 2 points each.



Figure 6: Class Photo Taken by the Author

Post Survey and Final Journal Entries

These pie charts (Figure 7) show their emotional changes after the course. The students were not given time to answer this questionnaire in class, so only 7 students in class A and 9 in class B responded. The blue areas (14.3% in class A and 11.1% in class B) indicate that one student in both classes “feel much more comfortable with small talk compared with the beginning of the term,” and the red areas (57.1%, 5 students in class A and 88.9%, 8 students in class B) indicate “feel a little more comfortable with small talk than before.” The yellow area (14.3%, one student) shows that the student was already good at small talk, so did not feel any improvement. The green area (14.3%, one student) indicates “not yet very confident.”

7 responses

9 responses



Figure 7: Students' Emotional Change After the Course

The following bar graphs illustrate whether the students feel confident in the following situations and manage to talk with strangers (multiple answers).

- I can talk with smiles and give short responses.
- I can find common topics and ask questions.
- I can find good questions while talking and enjoy interactions.
- I can express my opinions even when they are different from the other person(s)' and also refuse their requests politely.
- I can express complaints and make a fuss politely.
- I do not feel confident in any of the above situations.

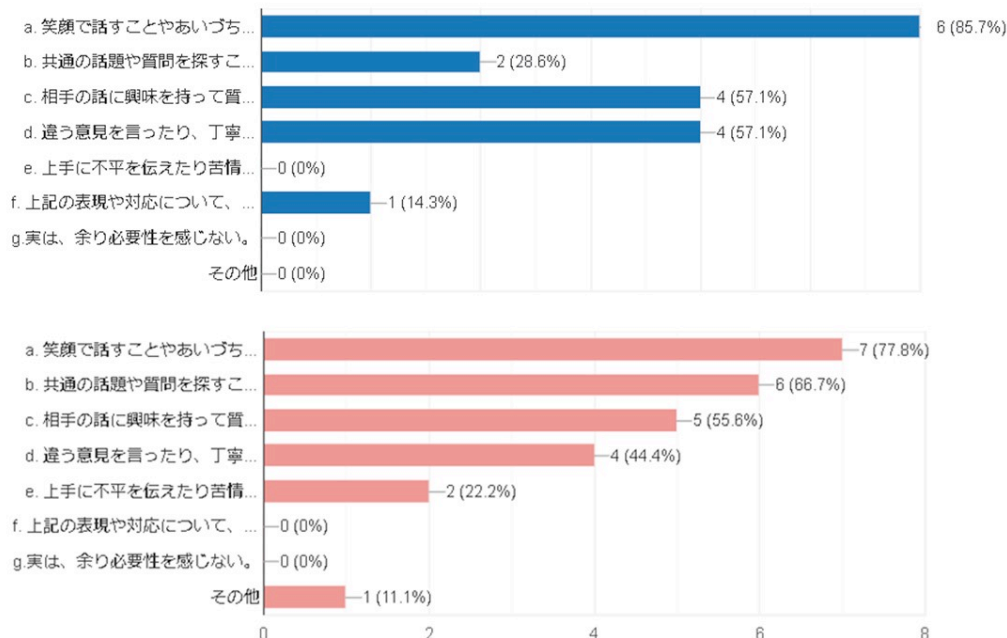


Figure 8: Students' Confidence Levels in Small Talk with Strangers in Various Settings

The above blue graph shows Class A's result and the bottom pink Class B's. The results show that 85.7% and 77.8% of the students, respectively, are confident with small talk while smiling, and over half can express their opinions and ask questions while enjoying the talk. So although the number of respondents was small, it appears the small-talk sessions were helpful.

Lastly, some students' final journal entries are introduced. They are reproduced verbatim.

A: Through this class, I think I have reduced my resistance when talking to new people. Because I'm not good at speaking on my own. However, I was able to learn what kind of content I should talk about in the class. Thus, I was able to break down my own barriers and speak on my own. In addition, I learned that content is very important when I talk with new people. I learned that close Q&A is NG such as an address. So, I want to continue to use what I have learned and do my best!

B: The Small Talk activity has improved my communication skills because I have had many opportunities to talk to people I don't know very well. I used to be a shy person, but through this class, I am no longer afraid to talk to someone. Last week I was asked for directions by a foreigner in *Harajuku*, so I used the directions I learned in class.

C: Before taking this class, it was difficult to talk with unknown people for me. However, through this activity, I became able to talk with new people without hesitation. I can start the conversation and ask a question first now. I learned tag responses and how to ask questions politely. I've never used those two expressions before. But not only during class but also in daily English conversations with my friends I can use those expressions naturally. Also in this class, it was the first time to record and listen to my conversation. I think it's a good way to improve my pronunciation.

D: I learned the difference between conversing in a group of four to five people and in a two-person conversation. When it was just the two of us, it was either me talking or the other person talking. But when in a group, I thought it was important to pay attention to see if anyone was silent the whole time. I tried to speak things up and make sure that the topic of the talk was something that everyone could easily talk about.

E: Previously, after saying my name, "What are your hobbies?" I had asked. However, since I have developed the habit of thinking about topics in small talks in class, the range of conversation content has broadened. ...Finally, I have overcome shyness in conversation. I was able to do that in each class with an attitude of "Let's converse better than last time." Since the coronavirus caused me to distance myself from people and avoid conversation, I felt more uncomfortable conversing than before. In particular, I was shy in small talk situations where topics were not specified. However, after repeated practice, I am now able to speak openly in person. In addition, my instructor made sure that everyone understood the class, which made the lessons very easy to understand. I really enjoyed your class!

Based on these results, the previous research questions can be answered affirmatively.

Conclusion

The unprecedented pandemic robbed us of face-to-face learning opportunities. Young people have suffered the most losing not only academic subjects but also social communication skills. Small talk is a straightforward daily activity, so the benefits of small talk may be taken for granted. We tend to be unaware of its significance in developing friendships and relationships. University students in the high-context collective culture may have needed opportunities to disclose the self and widen the in-group layer to grow their friendship. So learning how to exchange simple communication benefitted them in their school life as well as in their future careers.

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