

Small Talk as Strategies in the Classroom

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This research explores small talk in the classroom. Since small talk in English classrooms of Korea has lain entirely unacknowledged with little research, its role in classroom discourse needs further theorization. The survey and interview were conducted in high schools in Korea, where 50 Korean EFL teachers, 33 teachers of other subjects, and 118 students participated. The result indicated that the teachers who employed small talk competently understood three aspects of small talk: linguistic aspects that enable meaningful communication, cognitive aspects which facilitate students' background knowledge to link their daily lives to textbook knowledge in an interesting and motivating way, and sociolinguistic aspects that build rapport. Most EFL teachers as well as the students in the survey also acknowledged the necessity of small talk for initiating the class and were willing to learn small talk strategies. From the class observation and the interview with the teachers, it was found that small talk in EFL classrooms is different from real-life small talk in several respects. Finally, after identifying the small talk patterns in the actual high school classrooms, we discussed the findings to develop more feasible and effective ways of implementing small talk strategies in EFL contexts.

[small talk/EFL learning/teaching techniques/스몰토크/EFL 학습/교수방법]

I. INTRODUCTION

The portion of small talk in terms of time may be small in class; however, its importance

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cannot be over-emphasized since small talk between teachers and students frequently occurs in classroom scenes. According to Fine (2005), small talk is a tool for conversational empathy, the source of the bond with others that helps to tighten the bond and serves as a smooth transition to the main topic. Small talk is simple and improvised, lasting only a few minutes. People share experiences, preferences, and opinions in small talk which is light conversation about neutral topics such as weather, aspects of the interlocutor's physical environment (Laver, 1981, p. 290). It is usually about neutral topics whose primary functions are to mitigate face threats, provide an initial time interval in which “the interlocutors can size up each other, to establish interactional style, and to establish some degree of mutual trust and rapport” (Bickmore & Cassell, 1999). It is related to the notion of *phatic communion* coined by the anthropologist Malinowski (1923, p. 307). Its concept is more concerned with the interactional functions of language to build up social relationships, rather than purposeful, transactional uses of talk (Edwards & Westgate, 1994). Coupland (2000) described small talk as “aimless, prefatory, obvious, uninteresting, sometimes suspect, and even irrelevant, but part of the process of fulfilling our intrinsically human needs for social cohesiveness and mutual recognition” (p. 3).

Small talk seems to be the source of curiosity, a manner that enhances conversation, an ability to elicit the important issue from the subject of everyday conversation. At EFL classroom settings, along with other subject classes, evoking students' curiosity and enhancing conversation is what most teachers try to do at the beginning of the lesson. As in our daily life, small talk in the classroom happens almost every day. As the interaction proceeds smoothly with small talk that oils the social wheels (Holmes, 2003), small talk in the classroom provides smooth transition into the lesson and generally brings comfortable and less threatening classroom vibes. Therefore, many teachers consciously or subconsciously tend to employ small talk at the beginning of the class rather than going straight towards the lesson.

However, although there would be no dispute that most lesson plans start with small talk, it seems little research has examined small talk in the EFL classroom between non-native teachers and their students. The reason can be found in the sense “that 'transactional' uses of talk have received most analytical attention, especially from linguistics, psycholinguistics, and philosophy of language” (Edwards & Westgate, 1994, p. 10). After identifying how small talk is used in the classroom, this study aims to provide the background of future small talk research to be utilized as strategies in the classroom of Korea. Here are research questions of this study:

- 1) How and to what extent do Korean EFL teachers use small talk in the class?
- 2) What are the students' perceptions and preferences about small talk in the class?
- 3) How is small talk implemented in the classroom?

II. BACKGROUND

Since 1970s, humanistic psychology has had a great influence on teaching, which suggests that teaching promote learning environments to meet the affective needs of the students (Dembo, 1991). With the emergence of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), there has been the tendency that prioritizes genuine interaction and authentic use of language in the classroom. Several texts (Arnold, 1999; Kyeong-Ouk Jeong, 2006; Richards, 2006) indicated that low-stress and non-threatening language learning environments is important since learning involves feelings as well as cognition. Senior (2012) also pointed out that students learn in an active, engaged, goal-oriented way from the teachers who are sensitive to classroom "vibes" and who teach in pedagogically and socially effective ways, rather than from the teachers who ignore the social context of the classroom and narrowly focus only on their teaching.

Here, rapport-building has been one of the primary issues in the classroom. Small talk began as an experiment in the field of learner-centered, reflective teaching of oral conversation over two decades ago (Hunter, 2011), carrying a marginal function for solidarity (Luk, 2004). There are genuine interactions in small talk, between interlocutors without display questions being frequently occurred in the classroom language (Bickmore & Cassell, 1999; Holmes, 2003; Hunter, 2011; Luk, 2004; Patterson, 2009). Walsh (2006) showed concerns over teachers who use display questions too often, since students cannot be encouraged to get involved in class with those questions that teachers know the answer in advance. Wooyoung Park (2014) also agreed that display questions limit learners' involvement in that the usual organization of teacher-students conversation under display question modes consists of Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF). In real communication settings, referential questions are more frequently used to acquire information or to socialize. Small talk is meaningful and non-task-oriented with natural turn-takings, while traditional classroom talk is mostly task-oriented including display questions (Luk, 2004). Through these authentic and meaningful conversations, a relationship can be built on trust which makes students feel competent, capable, and creative (Brown, 2007).

Recently, there has been research that showed small talk could be used for more than rapport-building. The studies pointed that small talk enhanced students' communication skills and language use in English language classrooms (Hunter, 2011; Luk, 2004). From English as a Second Language (ESL) class in Hong Kong, for example, Luk (2004) illustrated how small talk was different from classroom talk which was institutional type of discourse. The non-institutional small talk showed several merits such as students' active participation in choosing the topic, negotiating meaning and initiating turns. These traits were rarely observed in I-R-F pattern of classroom talk (Mehan, 1979; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). Luk concluded that, in small talk, students were treated as conversation

partners rather than target receivers, which promoted the speaking right of students, anxiety-free classroom communication, dynamic interaction by meaningful language use without pedagogical purposes, and enhanced code crossing as an effective ESL classroom interaction strategy. Luk's (2004) study has shown the possibility that, unlike small talk outside of the class, small talk during the class may have pedagogical purpose resulting in a teacher's preparation, rather than improvisation, so that it does not turn into purposeless *chit chat*. However, since it explored informal small talk before the lesson began, it did not deal with small talk during the class.

Hunter (2011) developed a methodology of small talk through empirical research using "Small Talk Session" where students used language communicatively and actively without intervention by the teacher and then received feedback. The teacher had no role but to observe the interactions for most of a typical 50-minute class. Only for ten minutes coaching session at the end of each lesson, did the teacher comment on the interaction and dynamics of the "Small Talk Session" to give a feedback. It was also suggested that small talk was not suitable for those who did not have sufficient language skills or those who did not value verbal participation culturally, but effective for those who were in low-intermediate to advanced levels in language proficiency.

However, little research has examined on the effects of small talk in the language classroom to the subjects of non-native English teachers and their students in EFL settings. Therefore, this paper aims to identify the small talk patterns in English language classroom in Korea and to explore future directions of small talk research in the EFL settings.

III. METHOD

1. Participants

A total of 50 Korean EFL high school teachers, 33 high school teachers of other subjects than English, and 120 high school students participated in this survey. Of them, data from 2 students were excluded since their responses were considered insincere (e.g., the same answer to all items). As a result, data from 50 English teachers and 118 students were included in the analysis. The survey and interview for the teachers of other subjects were conducted to get more insights and ideas that benefit English teaching. We proposed that other subjects' teachers might show different preferences or perceptions about small talk. Therefore, data from 33 other subjects' teachers were compared to see if there were differences from those of EFL teachers. However, the only notable difference was 28% of the EFL teachers, which was a small number compared to teachers of other subjects (40.9%), utilized small talk to activate students' background knowledge related to the main

lesson. Although there were not much difference between EFL teachers and other subjects' teachers in terms of perception and preferences of using small talk, an interesting way of activating background knowledge was found through interviews of other subject teachers.

TABLE 1
Korean EFL Teachers' Biographical Information (n=50)

Variable	N (%)	Variable	N (%)
Age (yrs.)		Academic Degree	
20-less than 30	12 (24)	B.A.	41(82)
30-less than 40	31 (60)	M.A	8(16)
40-less than 50	6 (12)	Ph.D.	1 (2)
Over 50	1 (2)	Study/ Travel Abroad	
Gender		Yes	49(98)
Female	42 (84)	No	1 (2)
Male	8 (16)	English Use in the Classroom	
Teaching Experience (yrs.)		Never	3 (6)
Less than 5	6 (12)	Rarely	13(26)
5 - less than 10	20 (40)	Half of the time	29(58)
10 - less than 15	19 (38)	Frequently	4 (8)
15 - less than 20	4 (8)	Always	0 (0)
Over 20	1 (2)	No answer	1 (2)

Students were divided into two groups. One group was composed of 59 first grade students of high school, 28 males and 31 females each. The other group consisted of 59 third grade high school students, 29 males and 30 females respectively. All teachers were from high schools located in Gyeonggi Province, Korea. Detailed information about the teachers is described in TABLE 1. All the teachers were employed as full time English teachers in high schools at the time of this study. Their ages were ranged from mid 20s to 50s and there were three times as many females as males (75.8% and 24.2% respectively). As for their average English use in the classroom, majority of them (87.9%) responded they used English less than half of the class time.

2. Instrument

This study employed three main instruments; questionnaires, unstructured interview with teachers and students, and non-participant class observation (self-uploaded teachers' demonstrational teaching on the e-class of the school). We identified the patterns of small talk in the classroom to develop the questionnaire. Twelve videotapes of the actual English classrooms were analyzed with their permission, whereupon four categories of the questions were found, namely (1) the teachers' preparation for small talk, (2) the teachers' preferences on what way small talk is conducted, (3) the frequency and (4) the length of

using small talk. Their mean teaching experience was eight years ranging from one year to 17 years, and the mode was 9 years that fell on 7 teachers out of 50. With questions in accordance with the four categories above, three versions of questionnaires were developed for Korean EFL teachers, teachers of other subjects and students respectively. The questionnaire for the teachers of other subjects and for the students were revised based on the original questionnaire for Korean EFL teachers. The preliminary questionnaires were piloted to three EFL teachers, three teachers of other subjects teaching history, physics and chemistry, and 40 students of attending another public high school in Gyeonggi Province. All questionnaires were presented in Korean. For better understanding of what small talk is, both brief written and oral explanations were given to the teachers and the students in advance.

As a qualitative approach, the unstructured interview with four teachers (those who were chosen as competent small talk users by students on the questionnaire) and twelve students (three male and female students each from 1st and 3rd grades) were conducted to supplement the questionnaires. At the bottom of the students' questionnaire, students were asked to write down the names of the teachers who they thought manage small talk in class outstandingly. There were three teachers of other subjects, whose subjects were History, Ethics, and Law & Politics; three of them were female, and their teaching experience varied from five to 14 years. While interacting freely on the interview, informants elaborated their responses and remembered what they had not come up with or previously forgotten. Finally, four types of small talk were analyzed based on interview and non-participant class observation through recorded videos of twelve English classes and three classes of other subjects: personal stories, using video clips, using key words, and students' initiated small talks.

IV. RESULTS

1. Korean EFL Teachers' Use and Perceptions about Small Talk

TABLE 2 represents if and how Korean EFL teachers include small talk in class based on Likert's scale. Most EFL teachers (84%) use small talk before starting the lesson, 60% of whom start with small talk frequently or all the time. Among them ($n=43$), only 23.3% responded that they regularly prepared small talk ahead of the class. Although the trait of small talk improvisation is widely reflected in EFL classrooms, 55.9% of the teachers regarded small talk as a part of classroom techniques that could be prepared ahead of lesson.

TABLE 2General Information on Small Talk Use in the Classroom by Korean EFL Teachers ($n=50$)

Statement	Mean ^a	1 ^b	2	3	4	5
			N (%)			
1. Do you start with small talk in class?	3.6	2 (4)	5 (10)	13 (26)	21 (42)	9 (18)
1-1. If your response would be “sometimes, frequently, always”, do you prepare for what and how to convey small talk before the class?	2.44	2 (4.7)	17 (39.5)	14 (32.6)	6 (14.0)	4 (9.3)

Note:

a. The mean score reflects the average of the participants' responses (on a Likert-scale) to a particular statement.

b. 1: never, 2: rarely, 3: sometimes, 4: frequently, 5: always

TABLE 3 displays how small talk is preferred by teachers in Korean EFL classrooms through the descriptive statistics of teachers' responses in relation to each statement. Seven out of 50 high school EFL teachers mentioned they proceeded the lesson with little or no small talk. Teachers' unfamiliarity with small talk and class management for studious atmosphere were the main reasons. Still the majority of EFL teachers (84%) utilized small talk, more than half of the teachers (65.1%) used small talk for rapport-building with students. The EFL teachers tend to have small talk as a way to build rapport with students more than to see it as a strategy for activating schemata of students, which seemed to be under influence of CLT which emphasize affective factors of learners.

When it comes to length of small talk, less than 5 minutes was preferred. It corresponds to 10% of the whole lesson in Korean high schools. To initiate free talking (62%) was the most popular way of small talk, followed by using visual aids (18%) and preparing short questions for students (16%). Rather than an equal distribution of power found in daily small talk, it seemed teachers played a significant role in starting and maintaining small talk. The benefits of small talk they perceived was providing a smooth transition into the main lesson (22%) as well as building a good relationship with students (32%).

TABLE 3Detailed Information on Small Talk Use in the Classroom by Korean EFL Teachers ($n=50$)

Statement	N (%)
2. If you <u>never or rarely</u> start a conversation with small talk, why?	
a. limited class time	1 (14.3)
b. distracted atmosphere	2 (28.5)
c. not accustomed to small talk in class	3 (42.9)
d. small talk is not necessary	1 (14.3)
3. If you normally start with small talk, why?	
a. to enhance a studious atmosphere	2 (4.7)
b. to enhance schemata of the main lesson	12 (27.9)
c. to preview today's vocabulary or grammar point	1 (2.3)
d. to build rapport with students	28 (65.1)
4. How long do you think is appropriate for small talk in class?	
a. less than 3 min.	20 (40)
b. 3 min. – 5 min.	28 (56)
c. 5 min. – 10 min.	2 (4)
5. What is your favorite way to start small talk?	
a. to prepare short questions for students	8 (16)
b. to bring topics for free talk	31 (62)
c. to use visual aids (pictures or videos)	9 (18)
d. to elicit issues from students	1 (2)
6. What do you think the greatest benefit of small talk is?	
a. the natural flow of proceeding with the lesson	11 (22)
b. maintaining good relationship with students	16 (32)
c. making the lesson easier to understand	9 (18)
d. drawing students' attention	9 (18)
e. raising students' motivation of learning English	5 (10)
7. Have you ever learned or trained about how to use small talk in class?	
a. Yes	1 (2)
b. No	49 (98)

Note: Of 50 participants in total, those who did not provide information on the variables were excluded from each analysis.

Overall, it was found that small talk was frequently used in English classrooms of Korea. Nevertheless, only one EFL teacher out of 50 learned about how to use small talk in class, which means that small talk management has been left to the teachers without much guidance. Whether to use Korean or English in EFL classrooms is not a primary concern on this research. However, the percentage of general English use in the classroom will provide a glimpse of language use in small talk. A total of 60% EFL teachers use English less than 40%. It can be presumed that this research was fulfilled in high schools where reading ability for College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) is highly focused on. Changing English-only policies in Korea could be also attributable. According to recent studies (Jang-Ho Lee, 2012; Yao, 2011), many EFL learners tend not to be in favor of English-only approach and a teacher's code-switching is more often beneficial than English-only counterpart. Therefore, it is likely that EFL teachers employ both Korean and English according to the purposes of small talk, and their language preferences are as follows in

TABLE 4.

TABLE 4
Language Issue of Small Talk in the Classroom by Korean EFL Teachers (*n*=50)

Statement	N (%)
8. What proportion of your class is normally conducted in English?	
a. 0 – 10%	2 (4)
b. 10 – 40 %	28 (56)
c. 40 – 60%	17 (34)
d. 60 – 80%	3 (6)
e. 80 – 100%	0 (0)
9. What makes you use English for small talk in class?	
a. for communicative use of language	22 (44)
b. to build rapport	1 (2)
c. to practice words/phrases	12 (24)
d. to draw students' attention	4 (8)
e. to meet the government policy of Teaching English in English	0 (0)
f. to provide a role model through a teacher's fluency	10 (20)
10. What makes you use Korean for small talk in class?	
a. to provide background knowledge for the main lesson	8 (16)
b. due to a teacher's lack of English proficiency	4 (8)
c. due to students' lack of English proficiency	17 (34)
d. to build rapport	18 (36)
e. to draw students' attention	3 (6)

Small talk in English was mainly for linguistic aspects such as communicative language use (44%), practicing expressions (24%), or setting a role model of speaking English (20%). The reasons for small talk in Korean had something to do with affective factors, such as establishing rapport (36%) and supplementary to learners' inadequate language proficiency (34%).

2. Students' Perceptions and Preferences about Small Talk

TABLE 5 and TABLE 6 are designed to examine students' perceptions and preferences respectively. The result of a pilot survey showed that the students found choosing just one answer difficult. They also tended to choose certain obvious statements (e.g., rapport-building) without much reflection, so it was difficult to know the second or third preferred responses. It, therefore, was revised for students to choose up to two or three responses for some of the questions (See Note).

The majority of the students (95.8%) of this survey preferred starting a lesson with small talk. Positive classroom atmosphere came as the major benefit of small talk, followed by increased learning motivation and good relationship with the teacher. Although in small number (5 out of 118), there were negative comments due to distracting classroom atmosphere and uninteresting topics brought up by small talk. Similar to the survey on

teachers, less than 5 minutes was assumed appropriate, which fell on the length of introduction for most of the lesson plans.

TABLE 6 confirms that students also see linguistic benefits such as acquiring new expressions from small talk in English (e.g., guessing the meaning of the idioms from the conversation or understanding the new words through the teacher's explanation). The second preferred answer was different according to age. More than double number of 3rd grade students ($n=23$) than 1st grade students ($n=11$) felt small talk conducted in English enabled enjoyable learning. It can be cautiously inferred that, as their proficiency improved, students preferred communication in a target language, which is concurred with some of the recent studies (Auerbach, 1993; Sung-Ae Kim, 2002; Sung-Yeon Kim, 2002; Jin-Hwa Lee, 2007). On the other hand, small talk in Korean is beneficial for the affective reason of feeling solidarity with the teacher as well as the cognitive aspect of in-depth conversation. In sum, both EFL teachers and students see more linguistic value on English small talk, while feeling more affective and cognitive value on Korean small talk. In terms of topics for small talk, as they grew older, students preferred listening to teachers' personal experiences or learning cultural aspects rather than hearing jokes or humors.

TABLE 5

General Perceptions on Small Talk in the Classroom by High School Students ($n=118$)

Statement	1 st ($n=59$)	3 rd ($n=59$)	Sum ($n=118$)	%
1. Do you prefer to start a class with small talk?				
a. Yes	55	58	168	94.9
b. No	4	1	9	5.1
1-1 ^b . If you said yes, it is because small talk...				
a. enhances learning motivation.	17	24	58	21.0
b. enlivens the class atmosphere.	45	40	130	46.9
c. makes me feel closer to the teacher.	15	16	46	16.6
d. makes me to actively participate in the class.	4	12	20	7.2
e. eases the tension.	8	7	23	8.3
1-2 ^b . If you said no, it is because small talk...				
a. distracts the class atmosphere.	5	1	11	68.8
b. is about things I'm not interested in.	1	0	2	12.5
c. weakens teachers' authority	0	0	0	0
d. does not make any difference in class.	1	1	3	18.8
3. How long is appropriate for small talk in class?				
a. less than 3 min.	9	6	15	12.7
b. 3 min. – 5 min.	28	32	60	50.8
c. 5 min. – 10 min.	16	20	36	30.5
d. more than 10 min.	6	1	7	5.9

Note:

a. 1st: 1st grade students, 3rd: 3rd grade students

b. Students can choose up to two choices.

As for styles to deliver small talk, the students preferred free conversation and the

teacher's narrative most. Students chose the combination of students' questioning and a teacher's answering as the least favorite. It seemed students were afraid of initiating conversation since students in Korea have been accustomed to being passive in class, while teachers have always initiated talk. We suggest that the role of questioning and answering can be negotiated between teacher and students. Traditionally, the IRF communication model led by the teacher has been taken for granted in the L2 classroom. Nevertheless, we have found some cases where students find responding to teacher's questions particularly challenging due to limited L2 proficiency. In such cases, teachers could encourage students to initiate the conversation by mobilizing prefabricated and easy questions. As a good role model of communicative language use, teachers' response in place of initiation and evaluation would allow students to have meaningful L2 communication experiences. It could be also a good opportunity for teachers to prepare small talk in advance, which subsequently makes classroom small talk less-routinized.

TABLE 6

Language Issues of Small Talk in the Classroom by High School Students (n=118)

Statement	1 st (n=59)	3 rd (n=59)	Sum (n=118)	%
4 ^b . What is the benefit of small talk in English?				
a. It makes learning more enjoyable.	11	23	34	18.1
b. I acquire new expressions.	44	42	86	45.7
c. I feel closer to the teacher.	10	7	17	9.0
d. It is an effective way of reviewing words/phrases.	27	24	51	27.1
5 ^b . What is the benefit of small talk in Korean?				
a. It improves understanding of the main lesson.	9	20	29	16.8
b. It makes learning more enjoyable.	39	32	71	41.0
c. I feel closer to the teacher.	33	33	66	38.2
d. It eases the tension.	5	2	7	4.0
6 ^b . What is your preferred way of small talk in English?				
a. storytelling by a teacher	17	41	58	28.9
b. teacher' questioning – students' answer	17	29	46	22.9
c. students' questioning – teacher's answer	3	5	8	4.0
d. free talking between a teacher and students	46	43	89	44.3
7 ^b . What is your preferred way of small talk in Korean?				
a. storytelling by a teacher	20	37	57	28.4
b. teacher' questioning – students' answer	13	22	35	17.4
c. students' questioning – teacher's answer	7	10	17	8.5
d. free talking between a teacher and students	48	44	92	45.8
8 ^c . What do you prefer as a subject of small talk in English class?				
a. praise	1	2	3	0.9
b. joke/ humor	35	27	62	19.4
c. reviewing the previous lesson	6	7	13	4.1
d. cultural aspects	25	37	62	19.4
e. personal experience of the teacher	33	42	75	23.5
f. background knowledge about the main lesson	20	25	45	14.1
g. daily issues	23	36	59	18.5

Note:

- a. 1st: 1st grade students, 3rd: 3rd grade students
- b. Students can choose up to two choices.
- c. Students can choose up to three choices.

On the interview with 12 students, they responded that many of best teachers utilized small talk ‘in a subtle and amusing way’. It means at first, students have an impression that the teacher talks about trivial things or plays with them. Later on, it turned out the teacher actually activated students’ existing knowledge about what is going to learn. Interestingly, students also agreed starting with small talk was not the only factor to draw their attention. A teacher’s personal charisma and class topics that reflected students’ interest (e.g., sexual education, marriage and life) were the other factors that evoked students’ concentration to the lesson. However, personal trait such as charisma is a kind of innate factor, and teachers cannot always deal with interesting topics in that there is a set curriculum to cover. While teachers can have control in improving their teaching strategy such as small talk use, these two factors (charisma and curriculum) are usually beyond teachers’ control.

3. Types of Small Talk Strategies Teachers Use

From the non-participant class observation and interview of twelve English teachers and three other subjects’ teachers, four different types of small talk techniques were found. We also included analyzing other subjects’ classes, hoping to find out different types of small talk usage to get ideas that can be applied to EFL classrooms with modification. Their methods varied, however they have something in common; through small talk, they relate lesson goals with students’ interest and daily life. Some teachers maintained the same small talk style through the semester, while others changed it depending on topics and class atmosphere. These small talk techniques showed “prefatory, interactional, seemingly-improvisatory” traits of small talk. However, small talk in the classroom was not completely “aimless” in that it was adroitly related to the main topic or learning point. Two or more types of small talk techniques can be mixed to enhance classroom interaction.

1) Personal Stories

People like stories. When we hear them, we tend to connect them to our existing experiences by activating our brain (Widrich, 2012). Telling personal stories can be a powerful technique to attract students’ attention, to give them secondhand experience, therefore to get the gist quickly and effectively.

For instance, instead of saying “Today’s learning point is how important suprasegmental features are in English,” a teacher started with saying, “What comes to your mind when

you think of college life?”. There had been some casual interaction between the teacher and the students, which ended up with sharing her personal story. “I had a roommate named Sara, and my friends asked me what kind of person she was. I said like...she is ‘MA-ture’ instead of ‘ma-TURE.’ Everyone thought my roommate was ‘macho’, not ‘mature’. Can you guess why? I mistakenly thought the accent fell on the first syllable.” This real-life story made the whole class laugh and some students seemed to actively guess what brought the misunderstanding. Through the story, the teacher made a strong impression on the reason why they should be careful about suprasegmental features of English.

2) Using Video Clips

Short clips from dramas, movies, or sitcoms can brighten up class atmosphere and provide natural transition. One English teacher showed a Thanksgiving scene from Friends (American sitcom), freely talked about the funny scene and the gossips about the actor and the actress with the students. Then she smoothly moved the focus to what they eat and why they celebrate Thanksgiving Day in the scene. The other English teacher presented the short video clip about a garage sale and discussed how the students felt about it, what characteristics of the society could be inferred from this culture, etc.

A history teacher made a good point of using video clips as an effective small talk technique mentioning that, “After all, knowledge from the textbook is either of the past or something far from students’ daily lives. However, through dramas and movies, it easily comes alive. For example, yesterday I showed students a scene from Sungkyunkwan Scandal (the Korean Drama). They were crazy about seeing those heartthrobs on drama. I asked if students knew why two men in the drama could not be friends although they had known each other for so long, and naturally explained political faction (Bung Dang Jeong Chi in Korean) in Chosun Dynasty.” She used small talk as a relaxing and entertaining warming-up technique to relate the students’ personal experience to the textbook knowledge.

3) Using Key Words

Teachers often have key words, or the main concepts, that they plan to cover in the lesson. A teacher brought the concept in mind and encouraged students to talk about anything that is related to it. Just as brainstorming, students’ responses were open, creative and sometimes unexpected, while the whole process made the students think about the certain concept that the teacher was supposed to teach. In this way, the students seemed to efficiently activate their background knowledge.

4) Students-Initiated Small Talk

Students can initiate both conversation and topic in small talk. Regarding the linguistic aspect, it may be more difficult to answer than to ask questions. Teachers usually initiate the conversation by taking the role of questioning (Luk, 2004). By exchanging the roles, students would acquire better communicative skills while teachers can show them as role models to keep conversation going.

With regard to initiating the topic, a Law & Politics teacher gave a good example. In the previous lesson, he asked three students to bring whatever attracted their attention in the last week that was related to law or politics from SNS, newspapers, and so on. Through the issues that students brought up, the teacher could review or sometimes preview the textbook. If he needed to redirect the topic, he could say, "What attracted my attention is this...". It can be applied to English writing or speaking lessons to reflect students' interests.

V. DISCUSSION

Just as we warm up our bodies before jumping into water, many highly effective teachers used small talk as a technique that prepared students to get involved in learning. As to the first research question on Korean EFL teachers' perceptions and use about small talk, most teachers (84%) started with small talk while they had rarely prepared for or learned about it. In spite of wide use of small talk in EFL classrooms, we have not had a considered and comprehensive account of its ubiquity, nor any systematic research for a feasible way of its application. What is encouraging is the majority of Korean EFL teachers in this survey valued starting with small talk conversation as an effective warming-up strategy. They seemed to have full intention to learn effective ways of using it, although they have not yet had any opportunity to learn tactics for small talk use in the classroom.

Unlike improvisational daily small talk, classroom small talk can be prepared in terms of its topic and expressions, which is a great asset to compensate oral proficiency of EFL teachers. Frequently, one of the major problems of implementing TETE is teachers' lack of oral proficiency (Butler, 2004; Duk-Ki Kim, 2001; Jin-Hwa Lee, 2007). Classroom small talk in English can be well managed since it is short and predictable, enabling free conversation and setting a good role model of communicative language use.

Along with cognitive (e.g., activating background knowledge) and affective (e.g., solidarity) aspects of small talk, EFL teachers have linguistic benefits from classroom small talk in English. Likewise, many Korean high school EFL teachers (88%) on this survey also saw linguistic value of small talk in English. This is concurred with the finding

of Jin-Hwa Lee's (2007) study that EFL teachers generally perceived that small talk in English is beneficial for students. As aforementioned Luk's (2004) research of small talk between a native teacher and their students showed, students can practice turn-taking, initiating conversation, and using a target language in a meaningful and communicative way, since small talk is different from IRF patterns of institutional talk.

This study also examined whether students as well as teachers perceive small talk as a positive classroom technique. The results showed that majority of students (95.8%) preferred starting with small talk rather than going straight to the lesson. They, especially, felt thrilled when they found the linkage between their little chatting with the teacher and what they were about to learn. This makes small talk in the classroom differ from purposeless small talk in daily life. The topics of small talk are usually about daily routines, what is around us, the news, TV dramas or anything that happens in this contemporary world. Knowledge on the textbook often seems unpractical. When they saw what they were going to learn was related to what they already knew or what was happening around them, they got more motivated and interested to learn.

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Teachers do not exactly follow what Teachers' Guide of the textbook says, but at least it gives hint and inspiration to teachers to make their teaching more efficient. Likewise, even though using small talk in a class may be a personal choice and a part of a person's characteristics, teachers are likely to incorporate small talk into their lesson effectively if appropriate guidance and support is provided.

VI. CONCLUSION

There is a saying "well begun is half done." How to start a lesson has a strong impact on the whole lesson and how the students feel about it. Although small talk may last only about 10% of the class, it is crucial to do research and developing efficient small talk strategies in that every single moment in class is important for learning. Starting an English class with friendly talk is very important, especially in Korea where a society with face-saving is a major affective value, since "teens are ultrasensitive to how others perceive their changing physical and emotional selves along with their mental capabilities" (Brown, 2007, p.106). It also brings free interaction between a teacher and students that rarely

happens in institutional classroom talk, which has a positive effect on learning and motivation. Based upon this idea, this study investigated Korean EFL teachers' and students' perceptions of small talk to see if it can be used as a teaching strategy to benefit learning and if it is worth studying and developing in a pedagogical way. By conducting surveys, interviews and class observations, this study showed its potential to be used as a teaching strategy for enhancing interaction and teaching quality. As four small talk techniques in this study suggested, teachers use different types of small talk according to the topics, classroom atmosphere, and language proficiency. Once further studies are fulfilled, there would be various and inspirational small talk techniques to share and learn from.

The findings of this study also suggest several things to consider for further studies on small talk in EFL classes. A small number of teachers (7 out of 50) and students (5 out of 118) were negative about small talk in class and there were differences in preference according to age, gender, language proficiency level, and learning styles (see TABLE 5 and 6). Likewise, it can be inferred that there are inter- and intra-teacher variability as well as variability relying on class content, class size and learner diversity.

Moreover, when small talk in the language classroom is used as a teaching strategy, it differs from small talk in real life in three major aspects: 1) the content of small talk is relevant to the topic of the lesson unlike purposeless chitchat; 2) a certain degree of preparation for what and how to manage small talk may be required rather than improvisation; 3) therefore, the teacher's initiation is frequently observed rather than equal distribution of power in starting a conversation. A teacher can sometimes include short audio-visual aids such as a video clip, pictures, or prompts, which help to run small talk smoothly and are recommended as compensation since many non-native teachers in Korea feel lack of confidence in their spoken English proficiency (Sung-Ae Kim, 2002; Sung-Yeon Kim, 2002; Jin-Hwa Lee, 2007).

It will be interesting to develop small talk designs according to language choices (i.e. Korean or English). Although TETE or English-only approach has been favored by a number of EFL teaching practitioners or parents of EFL learners (Jang-Ho Lee, 2012; Unkyoung Maeng, 2009), the result on TABLE 4 showed that EFL teachers used both languages depending on the purpose of small talk.

Small talk in EFL classrooms is apparently different from small talk between natives or with a native teacher in light of the teacher and the students sharing the same mother language. Small talk techniques that are applicable in EFL classrooms should be explored to benefit both EFL teaching practitioners and learners. We hope that there would be various hands-on classroom techniques for small talk as a result of this research.

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Examples in: English

Applicable Languages: English

Applicable Levels: Secondary

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