

SMALL TALK: DEVELOPING THAI AIRWAYS CABIN CREW'S ENGLISH SPEAKING COMPETENCY

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Abstract

In the airline industry where effective communication is paramount, precise communication is needed for the flight deck crew in dealing with ground control in various countries around the world. A strict register in English is used for this form of communication, a kind of 'airspeak'. Less obvious, but equally vital, is the ability of the cabin and ground crew to communicate effectively with the passengers. Emergency procedures are generally fairly formulaic as are the announcements on departure and arrival. However, a major concern for airlines has become the ability of the cabin crew to communicate with more than just 'transactional' conversational competence. This article discusses the outcome of a small scale study, to introduce more interactional competence in the cabin crews, conversation with passengers.

Keywords: Communication, interactional competence, small talk, cabin crews, Thai Airways

Introduction

The present range of conversation used by cabin crew in the workplace tends to be limited and is basically focused on the need for what could be called transactional vocabulary when on duty during flights. Such as 'The choice of menu for today Sir is...' or 'Would you like coffee Madam?' These protocols can be relatively easy to establish as they are more automatic and do not demand the range of choices that would be involved in the 'interactional' conversation.

Thai Airways is currently at the stage that English speaking competence of its own cabin crew and staff is obviously inadequate for its growing business. Competitiveness, especially compared with the ever expanding Middle East airlines in terms of the use of adequate speaking skill

with passengers remains the problematic for Thai Airways. There is consequently, a need to improve this aspect of their service to the customer. One area of possible improvement would be the recognition of the more practical training of 'small talk'. This particular approach to facilitating a more interactional form of conversation would have potentially several benefits apart from greater social interaction with the customers and developing confidence in terms of language for the cabin crew

The focus of this article is to gauge, by sampling the cabin crew in a fairly random fashion their interest and developing an awareness of 'small talk' as part of their fluency in English. The present language requirements for cabin crew Thai Airways is to obtain a satisfactory score in the 'TOEIC' exam. This assessment does not include an oral component which may very well question the adequacy of the exam in terms of speaking skills.

The Importance of Small Talk

Malinowski introduced the concept of 'phatic communion' in 1923 (reprinted in 1972), and this is both the earliest and prototypical formulation of small talk as a communication mode – the establishment of human bonds or communion, 'merely' by talking. For Malinowski this is 'language used in free, aimless, social intercourse' (1972: 149).

Levin, et al. (1987) agree that the topic or content may be of little importance, but small talk itself, as a vehicle of human interaction, is extremely important.

'Small talk is very important in that it helps people decide if they want to get to know one another better. Also, it helps people become comfortable with each other, especially at the beginning of an interaction. Besides, it can be lead to conversations about more interesting, more serious and more important topics. Clearly then, there are tremendous social advantages to be gained in acquiring the skills required in making small talk', Wajasath (2005: 164).

What is core and what is marginal in communication is a matter of perspective. The assumption that small talk is a marginal mode of discourse seems to run counter to studies of language and human communication (Labov, 1972, Schegloff, 1986). In fact it can be argued that the distinctiveness of institutional talk will often be apparent only through an explicit or implicit contrast with everyday conversational norms (Drew and Heritage, 1992).

At the same time, it is too limiting to equate small talk with everyday conversation. For one thing, small talk has specific functions within 'specialist' or 'institutional' settings (see Coupland, 2000).

Objective

The purpose of this study was more to do with a rising of awareness than some direct pedagogical input. Such change would not be possible over the period of time available to this study. But research into these interactional conversations might be an indication of the small talk that Thai cabin crew use with passengers on board their flights. The argument being that the more English speaking fluency flight crews develop their English in this respect, would help them gain more self confidence while conversing with passengers and possibly improve their ability to serve the passengers during the flights. Such language facility becomes even more important on long flights where passenger boredom can set in.

Method of Data Collecting

All the data was collected by recording interviews, at the OPC (Operation Centre), on the plane, at the airport or in the hotel during the overnight stays. The data collecting was made on a random basis. Questions concerned the cabin crews' understanding of "Small Talk" and their experiences they have about it, their opinions on the development of their career, and the views they have on English Speaking Fluency. Each Thai crew talked with the interviewer for approximately 8-15 minutes on two separate occasions. After each interview, the interviewee listened to what had been said and discussed their English speaking competency' in terms of their 'Small Talk'. Any improvement felt by the participants in the recordings of their two oral conversations would hopefully raise Thai crew's awareness and the importance of using 'small talk'.

Description of the Research Population

The Research population was the air hostesses and air steward in: first class, business class or economy class. The participants totaled 20 crew, both male and female. Their Education background ranged from high school, to that of a Bachelor of Arts degree. Significantly, they all had to pass the TOEIC test as a basic qualification and be tested in an interview in English–Thai. TOEIC does not test speaking skill directly thus the need for an

interview carried out by Thai Airways itself.

The following Table I.I is an overview of all ranking, genders and different ages of the participants:

Table I.I EY CI: Economy Class, C/CI: Business Class, F/CI: First Class, AS Air Steward, AH: Air Hostess

Rank	AS	AH	Total
EY CI. (22-25 yrs)	2	1	3
C/CI. (25-32 yrs)	4	5	9
F/CI. (33 +)	3	5	8
Total	9	11	20

Examples of Small Talk

The transcripts of the data were categorized into different contents which reflected the natural characters of the conversation used in 'small talk'. All the files from SI-S20 were scanned and samples from interviews in the following Table I.2 are extracts from conversations that took place in the first and second interviews.

Table I.2

Examples of Small Talk	Interview		Contents
1. A: ...What is your name, please ? 2. B: Err...my name is 'Akarawin' You can call me 'Win'	SI: 1 st int.		Greeting
5. A: Ok! Ahh..if you don't mind what..what's your name? 6. B: Umm my name is Akarawin you can call me Win.	SI: 2 nd int.		
13. A: 'Yong' yea...your personal number? 14. B: 39482 15. A: Uh-hum, how long have you been with Thai? 16. B: Umm almost 6 years	S2: 1 st int.		Information
5. A: I see, Then how many years you have been with Thai? 6. B: Five and a half years 7. A: Five and a half, with a rank of? 8. B: ASR	S2: 2 nd int.		

30. B: [Laugh] Ah.. Honestly, the the first answer that pop up in my mind is umm the.. 'TV show' [Laugh]	S2: 1 st int.		Opinion
61. A: I see, so it's a useful small talk. 62. B: And and I...I...I can feel that she she she was really appreciated that small talk with me.	S2: 2 nd int.		

Table I.3 'Word Count'

Participants	1 st Interview words /mins		2 nd Interview words /mins		words Increase/ mins	words Decrease/ mins
S1	870	9:15	338	6:29		-532/-2:46
S2	477	7:39	493	6:49	+16/-0:50	
S3	391	7:16	487	8:00	+96/+0:44	
S4	636	8:24	254	4:28		-382/-3:56
S5	1178	12:27	1285	13:19	+107/+0:52	
S6	721	10:40	1019	15:01	+298/+4:21	
S7	608	11:01	381	7:52		-227/-3:09
S8	698	10:51	463	8:09		-235/-1:42
S9	783	13:47	526	10:24		-257/-3:23
S10	550	10:26	392	6:27		-158/-3:59
S11	445	7:56	403	5:05		-42/-2:51
S12	521	8:11	599	8:35	+78/+0:24	
S13	587	10:42	526	9:28		-61/-1:14
S14	729	11:10	690	11:50		-39/+0:40
S15	702	11:58	499	9:05		-203/-2:53
S16	875	11:18	833	11:25		-42/+0:07
S17	2142	21:01	1607	17:37		-535/-3:24
S18	744	14:04	657	10:46		-87/-3:18
S19	891	12:16	693	8:51		-198/-3:25
S20	806	10:22	1262	15:56	+456/+5:34	
Total: 20 Participants	1 st Interview = 20		2 nd Interview = 20		+1051/+10:25 =+102.53/min	-2998/ -33:20 = -90/min
20=100%					6 = 30%	14 = 70%

Total 20 persons:

- 6 interviewees = 30%: words increased in the 2nd interview
- 14 interviewees = 70%: words decreased in the 2nd interview.

The data also looked at the content and counted the frequency and numbers of words used by the participants for both interviews.

As regards 'content' the following 'areas' were 'identified':

Introduction/ Information/ Opinion/ Confirmation/ Comment/
Hesitation/Acknowledgement & Responding/Agreement/
Disagreement/
Sharing/ Learning/ Explanation/ Asking/ Echo/ Open-Path/
Listening & Showing Interest/ Humorous/ Silence/ Vagueness/
Closing

From data, the analysis revealed all the participants agreed that after hearing the 1st conversation they all were more aware of their strengths and weaknesses in interactional conversation. It was noticed that after they had criticized themselves and tried to eliminate these problematic areas in their ability to converse more naturally in English from the 1st interview to their 2nd interview. Both of the interviews covered the same topics, so that the participants could easily compare their previous oral interactions.

An interesting factor is that 16 out of 20 reduced the number of utterances used, 3 out had an increase and 1 was more or less unchanged.

Several of the participants thought that after listening to their 2nd conversations that they were clearer and more concise in making replies and this reflected their English speaking competency. In the 2nd interview the participants were more aware of a diminishing numbers of occurrences in terms of:

- 1) Hesitation
- 2) Asking back questions
- 3) Silence
- 4) Vagueness

The participants also felt that they were gradually showing a sign of development in terms of 'speaking competency and skill' in 'small talk' and not sounding like 'slow learners'. In other words, they tried breaking up the silence with their own ideas and opening conversational paths that eliminated the vague language used in 1st conversation.

The actual apparent decrease in the number of words used seemed to

indicate to them a greater degree of clarity and preciseness whereas previously there was more vagueness and silence. This has been described by Wajasath in the following terms:

A lot of people have the idea that to be good at conversation you have to speak most of the time. Language learners whose English is good or even native speakers of English themselves, may have the same notion: they are convinced that speaking a lot is a clever thing to do, so most of the time they are unable to listen. Actually, this is not true. In contrast, all the major authorities agree that a good conversationalist is not one who talks a lot but one who shows interest by listening ... as well at the same time.

Wajasath (2005:169).

Consequently, the decreasing number of occurrences could be explained by the fact these participants might have felt more confident about their explanations and answers with more accurate and concise ‘wordings’.

This seemed to be backed up with what appeared in the table of ‘Word Count’ that showed 14 participants (70%) of the population reduced were more precise in their answers to questions asked in the 2nd interviews. In addition, the time spent on each 2nd interview seemed to be less, perhaps corresponding to the ‘decreasing word count’.

With reference to the 6 participants who increased their word count in the 2nd interview, a possible factor here was their own self-esteem in their use of English. The data could also have been skewed as one was a doctoral candidate at a local university, another had studied in the United States and a third was a strong advocate of ‘practice makes perfect’.

Thornbury and Slade (2006: 270), quoted Sweet, the phonetician who became the inspiration for Shaw’s *Pygmalion/ My Fair Lady*) to the effect that ‘conversation is really not a mean of learning new words and expressions, but only of practice in hearing and reproducing what we have already learnt’ (1899, 1964: 75). It is therefore interesting to look at the participants own self-assessment.

Table I.4 Self-Assessment’

I st &2 nd Interview	Awareness	Comfortable	Better/ Fluent	Vocab./Grammar Concern	Accent
20 Interviewees	19	12	18	17	2
100%	95%	60%	90%	85%	10%

19 out of 20 (95%) mentioned that discussing their ability to use 'small talk' could help raise their self-awareness to motivate themselves in terms of a better ability in speaking English covering not just accent but also of grammar, structures, vocabulary and so on. 12 out of 20 mentioned, they felt more comfortable in the 2nd interview.

Sims has indicated that

The main goal in speaking is to maximize students' opportunities to speak English in class. This is done through, but not limited to, the use of pair work, group work, ... about everyday life, school, family, feelings, and any other topics the classroom teachers feel appropriate. Through the use of these activities in class, it is expected that the students will feel more comfortable using English outside the classroom.

(Sims, 2005: 244)

Such elements of 'small talk' in conversation seem to be support by the findings from the interviews with the cabin crews.

85% of the interviewees still commented that correct grammar and structures were important in conversation with the passengers. As English was the international language used, certain 'ungrammaticalities' from standard English were commonly used. However, there was also a recognition that in the 2nd interview, the participants could learn from their previous mistakes and were motivated to raise their own awareness and attention to eliminate grammatical errors that could cause confusion whether speaking to native or non-native users of English.

On the other the other hand there were two interviewees (SI5 and SI9) who believed that too much correction could cause a certain degree of 'disfluency'. As long as what said was understandable they felt their English was acceptable. They also indicated that the more they spoke with passengers the more fluent they would be. SI9 said that passengers, corrected her mistakes when talking with them.

Some thought that a 'better accent' would improve their accent because it sounded very 'Thailish'. Others thought that by both listening and speaking they could become accustomed to various accents from passengers on flights.

Overall, all the findings from the 'Self-Assessment Table' seem to

support van Lier (1996: 171) that 'In a conversation, we must continually make decisions on the basis of what other people mean. We therefore have to listen very carefully.....and we also have to take great care in constructing our contributions so that we can be understood'.

Conclusion.

Frequently Thai cabin crew fail to interact and avoid conversation with passengers when the topic requires more fluency in English and rely more on those repeated transactional chunking during conversations. An ability to hold a conversation during flights in English is just as important as listening skills as well as service functions in the role of cabin crew. The speaking skill that seems to dominate in the training programs is more transactional than interactional. Perhaps, more emphasis on 'small talk' being taught to Thai cabin crew could be incorporated into Thai Airways pedagogy and training courses.

This focus on 'small talk' as well as the need for the usual transactional conversation could integrate and benefit Thai cabin crew's English speaking competency. The practice of using 'small talk' as part of the English 'brush-up courses' and promotion would help to motivate the cabin crews to take steps to enhance their fluency and mark out Thai Airways as a truly international airline.

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