

Talking on Tape

Fostering Fluency in the Conversation Classroom

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Summary

Persuading students to converse in English is theoretically desirable but difficult to achieve. An ideal conversation class would promote authentic conversation, encourage the use of English outside the classroom, and foster learner autonomy. Requiring students to regularly submit a taped conversation is one way to satisfy these parameters within the social context of the junior college.

Introduction - Problems and Perspectives

Another year has passed. My students and I have dutifully followed a highly recommended conversation text with its carefully chosen topics and phrases. I have given out the required quota of "A"s, "B"s, and "C"s and my students have said their goodbyes to take their place in Japan's uncertain job market. My teaching has followed the orthodox pedagogic model and as such is no worse, I hope, than the teaching that occurs in countless similar classrooms across the archipelago. The textbook was professionally written and visually appealing. The students have behaved as students are apt to do. As I file away my grade books and attendance sheets I am assailed with

the doubts that come at this time of the year. The problem is that I am unconvinced that my students have acquired much conversation at all. The more fluent students, who for the most part had learnt their English overseas, grew bored and restless at the repetition of previously studied conversational structure. The mute students remained determinedly mute while the great majority of students showed only sporadic enthusiasm. Despite the excellent textbook and the students' express desire to master spoken English, progress during the year was meager.

Much has been made of Japanese students' difficulty with spoken English. Some blame the examination oriented education system: by overemphasizing grammar and rote memorization it supposedly fills our campuses with "damaged language learners".¹ More adventurous explanations abound. They include the neurological: that the Japanese brain is structured in such a way as to make it impervious to English,² the sociological: a vertically structured authoritarian society precludes conversational prowess, and even the psychological: students' core identity, presumably Japanese, is threatened by encroaching English.³ As interesting as these theories are, they rapidly become insulting, especially when applied to individuals, many who manage to learn to speak English well.

My own explanation is more prosaic. English with its irregular grammar and complex phonetic structure is a difficult

language to learn. For historical reasons spoken English has been traditionally de-emphasized in the universities and even today “practical English” is considered a skill rather than an academic discipline. “Scholarship”, which entails knowing about English, is more highly regarded than “teaching” just as it is at virtually any university in the world.⁴ A moment’s perusal of the advertisements make it clear; *eikaiwa* is distinct from *eigo*.

Storming Babel - Conversation in an Ideal World

Explanations such as those that lie in the recesses of Tsunoda’s brain, even if true, are of little benefit to the teacher. More useful are those that look at the historical and social context of the university because that is the environment in which we operate. Most useful are those that look at the parameters directly affecting learning such as time and classroom dynamics. At this juncture it is useful to perform a thought experiment, forget about the limitations imposed by accreditation and tradition, and ask how conversation would be taught in an ideal world. Answers vary and, because teaching remains an art, reveal more about personality than underlying linguistic theory. Disciplined programs exist that march students lockstep across the bell curve of ability. My own preference however would be to liberate students from campus and place them in an English speaking country where they could make friends, perhaps work, and use English to learn rather than learning about English. Classroom instruction would focus

on areas students wished to study or else teach strategies for language learning.

Innovative programs such as the above do exist although they tend to lie outside of academia and fall into the realm of cultural exchange.⁵ Some universities give credit by bundling them with formal academic study. Even if not implemented literally this thought exercise does enable aspects of a successful conversation curriculum to be identified. I believe that it would contain the following:

- *Promote authentic English conversation.* A vernacular definition of conversation describes it as the interchange, through speech, of information and ideas. Prof. J.C. Richards (1990) summarizes six important dimensions inherent in conversation.⁶ They are: The purpose of the conversation, whether it is interactional or transactional; turn-taking and the successful management of the turn-taking system; the ability to introduce, develop, and change topics; repair; knowledge of conversational syntax; and the knowledge of appropriate speaking styles. From this list it can be seen that conversation, considered a simple activity, is complex. To complicate things further I would emphasize that the topic under discussion be of genuine interest to the participants. Making conversation is not conversational.

“Act with the end in mind” is a useful adage. Part of the

problem with conversation classes is that much of what goes on is not in fact conversation. Like high school juniors swinging imaginary racquets at imaginary balls our students require less practice and more play. Substitution drills, language games, and listening to the teacher have their place but they should not be confused with the real thing.

- *Encourage English to be spoken outside the classroom.* Whatever the speed of learning a language time spent studying and frequency of exposure are major constraints. Even for students majoring in English opportunities to listen to and speak English in the classroom may be surprisingly limited. Obviously anything a teacher can do to encourage exposure to English outside the classroom will enhance language learning. Here at Bunkyo University my colleague, Julian Bamford has established an “English Room” where students are free to go and converse and enjoy a wide variety of English related materials.⁷

- *Foster Learner Autonomy.* It has been argued that any attempt to foster independence is inappropriate because it represents an imposition of alien cultural values. It is beyond the scope of this paper to debate this argument. My concern as a teacher is that my students learn English to the best of their abilities and, should they care to do so, feel confident to continue studying after they graduate. In order for students to increase their exposure to English outside the classroom they must become independent to a certain extent.

Pitfalls of the Communicative Approach

Having defined several aspects of a successful conversation class it becomes possible to try to design a course of instruction that emphasizes them. At first it would seem that all that is required is to provide time during the lesson for students to talk to each other in English and indeed this is provided for in many contemporary texts. It is presumed that over a period of time students' English will gradually incorporate new vocabulary and more complex grammatical structures. This idea is not new and together with activities such as role-play and language learning games forms the basis of the communicative approach.

The communicative approach has its roots, not in classroom observation, but in the limitations of behaviorist theory to explain first language acquisition. Motivated students, given a supportive environment, can carry out highly expressive conversations in English but in practice, however theoretically desirable it is to have students speak in English, giving them time to do so during lessons results any conversation degenerating into a "torrent of Japanese". Frustrated teachers tend to pay lip service to communication while retreating to more controlled exercises such as chorus reading, listening or watching videos. Privately they might tend to agree with Chomsky who doubted "whether either psychology or linguistics have achieved sufficient understanding to support a 'technology of language teaching'".⁸

Talking on Tape

Teachers can act as police officers and against tremendous resistance force students to speak English or we can try to refine our system so that English will be produced naturally driven by the system's inherent constraints. Asking students to submit taped conversations which contribute towards their final grade is one method. It works like this. At the beginning of the year students are asked to submit four or five topics that they might like to talk about. The teacher collects these and after grouping similar topics presents a master list to the class. Students are then asked to form groups of three, choose a topic, and talk on it for a discrete time interval. After practicing they record their conversation on tape and submit it for grading. This process is repeated regularly throughout the year. Ten minutes of conversation every fortnight will result in over an hour and half of recorded conversation by the end of the academic year.⁹

Grading is essential for this process. Students expect to be assessed and by grading them on their conversations we send a clear signal that talking is important. Depending on the students or the teacher the method of giving grades may vary. For students lacking confidence grading according by length encourages fluency and causes them to become less concerned with error. Subject matter, complexity, and overall accuracy are all aspects that could be considered. The important thing is not the grades but the behavior they encourage.

It is also essential that the students are free to practice as often as they like. The goal, a taped English conversation, is defined by the teacher; each group is free to reach this goal by any means they feel fit. During practice they may use notes, consult dictionaries, and use Japanese to clarify language points. The only requirement is that the final tape be unscripted and free from Japanese. With practice even low level students can carry out a 10 minute conversation although in order to do so they must use vocabulary and grammar structures that are far simpler than those they are accustomed to reading or writing.

This method may seem a little brutal to some teachers but I believe it emphasizes the aspects of the successful conversation class mentioned while dovetailing with the demands of the university that students be graded. The tapes give valuable information about the students linguistic ability that can be incorporate into lessons and by providing a record of progress act as an additional motivating factor.

Real and Imaginary Problems with talking on tape

One of the perceived problems with the communicative approach is that student errors become fossilized as students learn to “talk around their mistakes”. Prof. J.C. Richards¹⁰ has commented that Hong Kong speakers of English, exposed to English from an early age, develop “flawed fluency”. Their Eng-

lish contains a high degree of errors when compared with the British norm. When Japanese students are taped however their errors do not fossilize but rather there is a gradual improvement in their ability to use increasingly complex vocabulary and syntax. It may be that the longest taped examples (two years) are simply not long enough for students to plateau. A more reasonable explanation is that Japanese students, after years of testing, are exquisitely sensitive to error. Also they are not producing their tapes in a vacuum. Conversation classes do not consist solely of making tapes and also as college students they are attending other classes which emphasize different language skills.

Recently considerable interest has been shown towards different students learning styles.¹¹ Students, it can be argued, who find articulation difficult will of necessity be discriminated against. Class members vary enormously in their conversational skills. Problems caused by this can be minimized by giving students ample time to practice and also by allowing them to form groups so stronger speakers can provide support. This method has the advantage in that it allows stronger and weaker students to work at their own pace.

Japanese students have commented on the unnaturalness of talking to other Japanese students in English. With practice this feeling of unnaturalness diminishes although how much practice is required is debatable. A motivated student using the En-

glish Room comments “[At first] I was really nervous because I didn’t know.....the guys [Japanese students] hanging around and how I say the words which I wanted to say..... however I’ve gradually gotten used to hung around here. Now I’m not afraid of speaking English with Japanese people. I might be more nervous when I talk to [native] English speakers.”

A problem for teachers is the increase in their work load that listening and responding to students’ tapes entails. For the pilot project I wrote comments on each groups’ conversation and pointed out errors that could be improved. Little research been done into the effects of correcting spoken errors but research into writing - a medium over which the students exert far greater conscious control - shows that overzealous correction brings little benefit.¹² The primary benefit of correction seems to be that it demonstrates teachers concern. This semester, with more tapes to listen to, I will confine myself to commenting on the contents and mentioning the grossest errors. It is more important to encourage the students to talk more (make more tapes) than to worry about correcting mistakes that will diminish over time.

Conclusion

In theory requiring students to record English conversations should lead them to become more proficient at speaking English. It is a technique what may not suit all students and

furthermore requires considerable commitment of the teachers time. Further experimentation will reveal more fully the advantages and disadvantages of talking on tape.

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