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Teaching Conversation Strategies Through Pair-taping

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Introduction

When native speakers and non-native speakers hold conversations they must generally work together to avoid and overcome communication breakdowns. The strategies and tactics which they use include selecting salient topics, checking comprehension, requesting clarification, repeating utterances, stressing key words, and switching topics (Ellis, 1985). Research shows that the skills involved in negotiating to avoid and repair breakdowns are important for ESL/EFL learners to have. Pica states, "To engage in the kind of interaction believed to activate the acquisition process, classroom activities must be structured to provide a context whereby learners not only talk to their interlocutors, but negotiate meaning with them as well" (quoted by Browne, 1993, p. 40). Ellis points out that a one-to-one native speaker to non-native speaker linguistic environment is superior to the one-to-many environment of the classroom in providing opportunities for negotiated interaction.

Practically, however, few classrooms can provide individual learners with enough (or any) negotiated interaction with native speakers. For most classroom teachers, developing activities which promote negotiated interaction between learners is the most realistic and effective choice. At the Center for Language Research at the University of Aizu, we have developed a pair-taping program called "What's new?" which results in original conversations between false beginner/low intermediate learners. This program encourages learners to use strategies for avoiding and repairing breakdown and requires them to take initiative and accept responsibility (and credit) for their success. "What's new?" involves the taping of conversations held by pairs of learners in our language laboratory, but it could be transferred successfully to many classroom environments.

Overview

One of the challenges of teaching conversation strategies is to present learners with the authentic need to use them in the classroom. Another is to monitor and provide feedback to learners in large classes. We find that our pair taping technique meets these challenges. A third challenge is the reluctance of our learners to commit their imperfect conversations to audio tape. Initially, learners will pause the tape recorder whenever they run into problems and resolve the misunderstanding in Japanese, thus avoiding the need to

"spoil" their tape by negotiating in English. We found that we needed to give legitimacy to the negotiation process and to communicate our acceptance of the quality of English conversations which learners at their level are able to hold. We do this by presenting the conversation strategies via audio and video tapes of natural conversations held by sophomores and more advanced freshman. The videotaped conversations are planned in advance by the participants for the inclusion of certain strategies, but they are unscripted. The audio tapes are taken from those made in class by former and current students. These tapes are very efficient in communicating the task and in reassuring our learners that they can succeed in meeting expectations. Then the class, working in pairs or groups of three, hold original conversations and tape them. Learners make a lot of mistakes while having these conversations, creating an authentic need to use the strategies they have just studied. Teachers monitor the appropriate use of strategies by listening to the tapes and writing tape evaluations.

There is growing evidence that such conversations between learners can be productive. Clennell (1994), in his observations of classrooms, noticed "an extraordinary change in the learners' behavior . . . when the teacher moved away" from groups of students having a conversation. He saw a marked increase in fluency, improvisation, and creative use of words (p. 32). Schneider (1993, 1994) has found a higher level of achievement in terms of fluency and listening comprehension test scores among his students who have chosen to do pair-taping over attending traditional class sessions. Ernst (1994) has also found student-generated conversation in "Talking Circles" effective in teaching conversation strategies, grammar, and English sociolinguistic norms.

Skeptics of such a straightforward approach raise legitimate concerns. Students might give each other "faulty" input. Students might have the same conversation over and over again. Students might rely solely on communication strategies which they already know or which are inappropriate. Students might avoid ESP content in their conversations. With these concerns in mind, we have built in some safeguards against the pitfalls of student-generated communication. Moreover, our use of the students' own production to introduce conversation strategies give them a much-needed boost of self-confidence and lends legitimacy to the process of negotiating meaning with which learners must become comfortable.

The first objection above, that of students teaching students incorrectly, is based on the assumption that learning is simply the transfer of information from someone who is more knowledgeable to someone who is less knowledgeable; however, Glachan and Light state "interaction between inferior strategies can lead to superior strategies, or in other words, two wrongs can make a right" (1982, p. 258, as quoted in van Lier, 1994, p. 8). In

student correcting another student incorrectly, and he was not believed. We feel that the benefits for acquisition of two inferior strategies negotiating to find a superior one outweigh the possible drawbacks from learners conversing freely with each other. That learners might have the same conversation over and over again is a problem that is discouraged by the very name of the activity: "What's new?" This question begins every conversation and implicitly demands a "new" topic. Most important for originality, we have found that our first term freshmen become very interested in holding these conversations and use them as opportunities to get to know each other. Even learners who are reluctant to talk on any given day seem to treat "What's new?" as a meaningful question and in the course of the conversation warm up to giving a genuine response.

That learners may use strategies incorrectly or inappropriately is a concern which we meet by monitoring tapes and giving written feedback (examples below).

The "What's new?" Program

General considerations

Over the course of the semester, teachers introduce various conversation strategies to assist learners in holding their weekly conversations. Students are required to tape these conversations and to complete them within a time frame (3 to 15 minutes, at the discretion of the teacher). They are forbidden to stop the tape player before the time is up, so learners quickly discover their urgent need for the basic strategies, and motivation to use them is high. Learners are evaluated on the appropriate use of a strategy from the time it has been presented, losing points for leaving them out when they are needed. Before they make their tapes, we give them examples of strategies in use taken from unscripted video and audio tapes made of conversations by sophomores and freshmen from other classes. (Our students are at mixed levels and most of the strategies are already used by some of our freshmen.) These conversations are not perfect, and that is one advantage to using them with our particular learners, who value perfection over fluency. As they listen to these imperfect performances (corrected transcripts of these conversations can be handed out), it becomes clear that the teacher values the process which the speakers are engaged in: the questions, the repetitions, the fillers, and other behavior which the speakers use to communicate successfully. The speakers make mistakes, and a short tape will often contain more than one example of strategies used as life rafts, allowing them to remain within the conversational flow. "Let me think" is a popular example. We present students with these tapes as imperfect but successful conversations by their peers, made possible largely because of the use of basic strategies which we will expect them to begin to use. It quickly becomes apparent that we will not measure their efforts against native speakers, but that we expect them to begin to hold conversations immediately, at their present level of competence. Peer produced tapes are also useful for pointing out the cooperative nature

of conversation, something we reinforce by giving both pair members the same grade. Corrected transcripts of peer tapes are not used to point out errors, as this could add anxiety and lengthen pauses on tapes. Learners are required to make "What's new?" tapes, but they are free to choose the topics they talk about, the content and language. As strategies are added to their repertoire they are also added to the teacher's tape evaluation.

"Let's talk!"

Before we begin with "What's new?", students are shown video tapes of former students playing the game "Let's Talk!" from Helgeson, et al., (1991). This game introduces students to choosing their own conversation topics, the taping equipment in our Language Media Laboratory (LML), and teacher feedback methods. Learners are first asked to play the game as it is described by the sophomores on the video, i.e., players move their game pieces to questions (such as "What is a good movie you have seen recently?") which they then answer themselves in at least 3 sentences. Then the class makes their first tape. As more advanced learners will spontaneously use the first two strategies (turn-taking and follow up comments and questions), these first (ungraded) tapes help us decide how much time to spend on them.

Strategy 1: Follow-up questions/comments

The next class period, learners watch another video of sophomores playing "Let's Talk!", but this time after the sophomore answers a question, the partner must ask/make a follow-up question/comment. This is then used as an introduction to the first conversation strategy introduced in the semester (follow-up questions/comments). In introducing a conversation strategy, we follow a general plan similar to that described by Browne (1993) (excluding, perhaps, his information gap activity). First comes an advance organizer for the video we will show, which simply lets learners know what they will be seeing and looking for in the video (Herron, 1994). Students then watch the video, listen for the strategy (or lack thereof), write what they hear (listening practice), and finally provide original examples of the strategy that would be appropriate in the video conversation. Here is an example:

Sample conversation strategy activity:
Follow-up Questions and Comments

Explanation: A very good way to show that you are interested in what another person is saying is to ask questions or make comments. When you ask for more details about, or add your own ideas to what the speaker is saying, the speaker knows that you are really interested. The speaker then knows that you want him/her to keep talking.

Instructions: Watch the video-taped "What's new?" conversations. During the first conversation, listen for the statements written below. Write the follow-up questions/comments that you hear after each one of these statements.

First Conversation:

A: We practiced with the new members.

B: (students write: How many new members?)

A: Two new members.

B: (students write: That's great!)

A: Our instructor is Professor Lambacher.

B: (students write: Is he strong?)

Instructions: Now, during the next conversation, the students didn't ask as many follow-up questions. Listen for the statements below. Write a possible follow-up question/comment after each one.

Second Conversation Video:

A: I went there to cheer for our team, but we lost the final game.

B: That's too bad. _____

A: We went to Shinjukyu and Shibuya to go shopping and sightseeing.

B: _____

A: I bought party goods (supplies), for example firecrackers and masks.

B: _____

_____

After this activity is completed, students have 10 to 20 minutes (depending on the level of the learners) for pair-taping "Let's Talk!", with the new twist in the rules.

Strategy 2: Turn-taking

From this point on, students tape "What's new?" conversations. These are introduced with a short demonstration in class of how difficult it can be to begin a conversation. We then give students a formulaic but natural exchange with which to begin a conversation:

A: Hi (first name)! What's new?

B: Not much. How about you?

A: Well, . . .

This informal beginning is appropriate for peer interactions, and it also displays the conversation strategy of turn-taking (cf. Maynard, 1986), i.e., "Not much. How about you?" Learners then continue practicing turn-taking, making statements and asking, "How/What about you/yours?" (e.g., "My room is very small and dirty. How about yours?"). A video tape of sophomores holding a "What's new?" conversation is shown, then pairs are asked to record their first conversation, using the "What's new?" opening and paying attention to the use of turn-taking strategies when they help to keep the

conversation flowing. Turn-taking is then added to the teacher's evaluation sheet, along with follow-up questions/comments and general comments.

Strategy 3: Back-channel cues

The next conversational strategy is giving back-channel cues to show comprehension and/or agreement. These are introduced as "English aizuchi," borrowing a term from Japanese (LoCastro, 1987). These are introduced in contrast to the aizuchi of Japanese, and then students watch video-taped conversations or listen to some of their own audio-taped conversations that display good examples of "English aizuchi." These include, O.K., yes, oh, I see, That's great!, Hmm, Uh-huh, etc. (Maynard, 1986; Tabuki et al., 1990). Again, "English aizuchi" is added to teacher evaluation sheets.

Strategy 4: Requesting and giving clarification

The next conversation strategy is requesting and giving clarification. This is a conversation strategy which has been widely studied and written about (Kebir, 1994; Pearson, 1990; Brinton, et al., 1986; Maynard, 1986; Loveday, 1982). We introduce the strategy simply with the questions, "What can you do if you don't understand?" (asking for clarification) and "What can you do if the other person doesn't understand you?" (giving clarification). First, students watch another video of former students negotiating meaning, and they are asked to make notes of 1) what the words/sentences are that are not understood, and 2) what the students in the video say to make the meaning clear. After this warm-up, and the following discussion of what they saw, we introduce four strategies for asking for clarification and a simple mnemonic, RASS:

*Repeat the word or phrase as a question (ex. "Martial arts?").
*Ask the other person to explain (ex. "What is martial arts?").
*Show that you don't understand (ex. "What?" or "Huh?").
*Suggest another word which you THINK has a similar meaning (ex. "Martial arts? Like karate?").

For giving clarification, we introduce these strategies, and the mnemonic DUG:

*Define the word(s) (ex. "Martial arts are traditional fighting styles.").
*Use another word(s) (ex. "Ways of fighting.").
*Give examples (ex. "Martial arts, for example karate, judo, and aikido.").

Next, examples of these strategies taken from "What's new?" peer tapes are played, and students are asked to listen, fill in the blanks, and identify the strategies in activities such as the one below (lines left blank in the actual activity are given here in italics):

Sample conversation strategy activity: Asking for and giving clarification

Instructions: You will listen to (n) conversations. In each conversation, one of the speaker's lines are blank. Write what you hear in the blanks. After you have listened to the conversations, decide which strategies were used.

T: What's new?
D: Not so much. How about you?
T: I slept until, ah, 15 yesterday.
D: *Huh? 15?*
T: *15 is 3 p.m.*
D: *Pardon?*
T: Yeah, uh, I slept until . . .
D: until
T: 15 o'clock.
D: *15 o'clock?*
T: Yes. My body is . . .
D: *15?*
T: *Yes, it's afternoon.*
D: Oh, I see, I see. Why?
T: I don't know.
(Both laugh)

Check the strategies that D used to show T that he didn't understand. Then write examples.

_____ Repeat _____Ask for an explanation
_____ Show that you don't understand
_____ Suggest another word

Ex.:
Ex.:
Ex.:

Check the strategies that T used to help D understand. Then write examples.

_____ Define _____ Use another word _____ Give examples
Ex.:
Ex.:

Strategy 5: Changing the subject

The next conversational strátegy we present is changing the subject. The same general presentation plan is followed, again using student audio and video tapes, along

with some expressions which are new for our students, including 'I'd rather not talk about it (that)." And changing the subject is also added to the teacher evaluation sheet.

Encouraging breakdowns in communication

Because they can control the topics and the vocabulary of their own conversations, communicating meaning becomes easier for learners as their confidence grows. Consequently, it becomes more difficult to assure that they have enough experience using the strategies for repairing breakdowns. As Schweers (1995) mentions, conversations between learners of different levels are more likely to produce the need for negotiation. Such efficacious pairing can not be assured, however, and it becomes necessary to use techniques which encourage breakdowns.

Simply changing taping partners adds to the potential need for negotiation. More challenging, is the creation of "telephone" conversations, achieved by placing partners so that they cannot see each other.

An activity called "Fluency Practice" represents a further escalation in difficulty. Using this technique to practice avoiding and repairing breakdowns represents a minor variation on the one created by Dr. Noel Houck, Temple University, Japan (personal communication). Pairs are assigned a topic and are required to begin talking (and taping) before they can think about what to say. They must talk for x minutes (1 to 3) without allowing any pauses over x seconds (5 to 10) in length, at the teacher's discretion. They must avoid or repair breakdowns. After they have begun to use the strategies successfully, the additional and quite realistic pressure of having to maintain a conversation without pauses on a topic not of one's choosing invites breakdowns which learners are able to repair or avoid. Most learners have found this an enjoyable challenge.

"Magic Word" is another activity which encourages communication breakdowns and the use of further, more subtle strategies to repair them. In the first stage of this activity, each member of a pair is given one or more secret words which they must try to incorporate into a one to three-minute conversation. This challenge requires skill at circumlocution and changing the subject. At the second stage, learners are given one or more secret words which they must try to get their partners to say within one to three minutes. This stage encourages the use of paraphrases like "What's another word for xxxx?"

Evaluation

Tape evaluation is the most challenging aspect of pair-taping. It can be very time-consuming, particularly in the first term, if the teacher is listening for good examples to present to the class. In our experience, the continued use of this system rests upon the development of a method of evaluation which is sustainable over the 14 weeks of our

semester. In the interest of efficient evaluation, several elements of the entire taping system can be changed. For example, the number of tapes made in a semester, the length of the tapes, the form and content of the evaluation sheet, and the frequency of evaluation, are all elements of the system which can be changed to respect the time constraints of the class and the teacher. Giving pairs the same grade and copies of the same evaluation saves time because it eliminates the need to recognize voices. Schneider (1993, 1994) does little formal evaluation beyond fast-forwarding through the first two or so conversation tapes and giving global feedback such as reminding students to speak only English on their tapes.

We collect one tape a week from each pair of learners. The tapes vary in length (from 3-15 minutes) at the discretion of the teacher. We have developed two types of evaluation forms to meet our different needs (below). The first two examples, one from early in the semester, and one from late in the semester, illustrate a comment style of evaluation. With only two examples, this trend is not readily apparent, but our experience has been that comments such as "Speak only English," "Don't pause the tape," and "Avoid long pauses!" are not necessary after the first few weeks, which is consistent with Schneider's experience as well. Teachers may respond to individual sentences in which students have grammatical difficulties, writing corrected versions of words or phrases on the evaluation sheets in ALL CAPS.

Sample teacher evaluation sheets

(early in the semester)

WHAT'S NEW? #1, 5-30-94

--In English, you should call your classmates by their FIRST names. Otherwise, it was a good beginning!
--"Yesterday, I practicED. . . .I HAD a good time."
--"I SPRAINED MY LEFT FOOT."
--Don't cover up your microphones to speak Japanese. English ONLY!
--I began my PART-TIME JOB." (not 'arubaito')
--It was very good that you asked your partner to repeat "sprained right foot"! This is very important in understanding one another. Good!!!
--Some long pauses. These are good times to ask follow-up questions!

English "aizuchi": Oh; I see; Yes; Uh-huh; That's too bad;--GOOD!!!

Turn-taking: Very good!! (How about you?)

Grade: 8/10 Good! (But some long pauses)

(late in the semester)

WHAT'S NEW? #6, 7-11-94
--"I'm not good at sports, and I don't like watching sports EITHER."

--"Recently, I HAVEN'T watched TV because I HAVE BEEN listenING to music."
--"WHAT COUNTRY ARE THEY FROM?"
--Very natural and smooth conversation! Very few pauses!
--"What class WILL we HAVE tomorrow?"

Changing the subject: You are right. Don't begin with "By the way, . . ." It sounds strange to begin a conversation like this (it's NOT the same as 'tokorode' in Japanese!).

Turn-taking: "How about you?" Good!

English aizuchi: Oh; Really?; Yes

Follow-up questions/Comments: "Why?" "What kind of music?" Good!

Repairing misunderstandings: "Pardon?"; "Device?"; "What's that?"--> "It's a. . ." Very Good!!

Grade: 10/10 Excellent!

The second style of evaluation is a check list from late in the semester, which also contains the directions given to the class prior to taping.

SCORE SHEET
Names: Maki Yamada, Hiroko Yoshida Score 5

You and your partner will receive the same grade for this tape. Please help each other. Don't worry about grammar and don't stop to use a dictionary. Just do your best. Please be ready to hand in your tape in 10 minutes. You can earn 5 points on this tape. If you lost points, this list will tell you why.
-1 point: Used Japanese.
-1 point: Conversation too short. (less than 3 minutes long)
-1 point: Didn't ask "take turns" question when needed.
-1 point: Didn't make a comment or ask a question to show interest in the conversation.
-1 point: Didn't try to repair breakdowns.

COMMENTS:

When your partner said, "I will nothing to do." you asked, "You won't do anything?" and he said, "yes." That was an excellent repair! Sometimes we can guess what people are trying to say and ask a question, as you did, to find out if we guessed correctly. Can we use this tape (without giving your names) to help another class?

Results and Conclusions

To borrow an analogy from Christopher Ely of Ball State University (personal communication), learning a foreign language is like learning to play tennis. In neither case

is simple knowledge of the rules enough to perform. One must have experience "on the court" along with knowledge of the rules. Those who have learned to play tennis know the frustration of beginners when one serve after another is drilled past them, and they are unable to return. This is the feeling one often gets when speaking a foreign language with a native speaker. In pair-taping however, learners play with learners; using conversation strategies, they are able to return serves and control the tempo of the game. In this way, they build up confidence to play with those on the next level. In addition, requiring learners to make tapes creates a genuine need for the strategies which we show them, and allows us to monitor their use. These self-generated and self-directed conversations give students a rare opportunity to experience themselves as successful English speakers, even though they are imperfect speakers. Since the inception of the "What's new?" pair-taping program, we have noticed a marked increase in the willingness of students to interact in English with faculty members from around the world. Furthermore, by using their own production as examples of successful English conversation strategies, learners are encouraged to learn from each other and from themselves. The end result is students who are empowered to take responsibility and control of their own English study and use.

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