

# TEACHING CONVERSATION THROUGH STUDENT INSTRUCTION

*By Kenyon Moss*

A major problem in teaching conversation is that of maintaining student interest. This is especially true when the class is made up of advanced ESL students. Interest wanes when the topic is not situational. Pattern practice and most other drills do not provide the students with the necessary stimulation to converse with each other.

In an effort to overcome this problem, I assigned my conversation class to prepare to teach the rest of the class an outside game or activity.

There were four students from Korea, four from Tonga, four from Hong Kong, two from Japan, and one each from Tahiti and Taiwan in the class.

The first day one of the Tongan boys came to class with a large kitchen knife. Since he seemed to be prepared, I asked him to be first. As we walked outside, he cut coconut fronds and gave each of us a leaf, explaining we were going to make horns. He then had us stand in a circle and "told" as he demonstrated how to take the rib out of the leaf. When this was done, he used the knife to shorten the leaves and make them straight on the ends. He then told us how to roll what remained of the leaf into a horn. Several of the students made horns of varying lengths, resulting in varying tones. Some of us could get nothing but air from ours. The students were asking questions on how to fold it, how to hold it, and many other details. Those who were successful in making and blowing their

horns were telling the rest of us how we, too, could accomplish such a task.

A Korean girl was next. She divided the class into two teams. One member from a team would go forward and stand face-to-face with a member from the other team. The object was to make the other person laugh first. The rule was that you could only talk. There was to be no touching or play acting. The first one to laugh lost and was replaced by another member of his team. The first team to lose all of its players lost the game. It was interesting to see a ninety pound girl from Hong Kong try to make a two hundred pound Tongan boy laugh.

A Japanese girl taught us how to play her version of "Drop the Hankie."

Another Tongan student told us how to make toy windmills out of the leaves of the plam fronds.

Every student in the class had his turn and demonstrated various other activities and games during the next two class periods. Some elicited more conversation than others, but all were situational and interesting to the students. New words, phrases, and sentences were learned in context and high student rapport was established. Students also enjoyed "teaching the teacher."

If writing had been part of the class, the students could have also written the directions to the activity. Then other students could take the written directions and try to follow them.

