

NUFS Workshop 2012

*Newsletter No. 9*Workshop in January

(Part 1)

Date: January 12, 2013, 10:30-14:30**Venue:** Nagoya NSC College**Instructor:** Tom Kenny (Nagoya University of Foreign Studies)**Title:** "Building Fluency with Conversation Strategies"**Abstract:** "Conversation strategies" are the words, phrases and behaviors we can teach students to improve their oral fluency.

After students have acquired basic grammatical structures and learned vocabulary, students need a chance to practice speaking English. For many, it's their first exposure to speaking without relying on memorized dialogs. Conversation strategies are what they need to build their confidence as English speakers, because practice and internalization of CS enhances a learner's affective fluency, which increases learner motivation. In this workshop, teachers will work with taxonomies of conversation strategies, learn the difference between CS and topic questions, and vocabulary. Teachers will also explore the effectiveness of different instructional approaches to teaching conversation strategies to learners at various levels.

**The number of participants: 24****1. Interesting activities you might want to use in your class. Why?**

- Actually I do many activities like this in my class already, but I learned some ways I could add more variety and focus on communication strategies more directly.
- I'd like to let the students do a pair-work using conversational strategies. This is because I have few opportunities to do so. Actually I had a very good time communicating with the partners today.
- There are many interesting activities I want to make use of in my classes. Especially the activity Tom used at the beginning of the workshop was impressive. Instantly my students will learn four new words: clap, snap, rub and tap.
- Mixing "Me, too," and "Me, neither" in the same activity – it's challenging for the students and allows them to share real information about themselves.
- The activities Tom showed us today for controlled practice are very would-be useful. Asking "How ya doin'?" five times; I've never done it before while having trouble with having students say something other than "Fine, thank you." "Me, neither": this is another phrase that students hardly learn. I definitely try the activity.
- Asking five times and the partner answers differently. One student reads a passage, while other uses fillers when he/she hears pauses. These are easy activities. Even junior high school students can try them.



2. What you learned from today's workshop.

- I found that evaluating conversational skills is challenging. Unless the teachers have clear points for evaluation and make sure that all the students know them well, speaking exam like this would likely to fail.
- At first my shyness prevented me from speaking English but gradually I came to communicate with the partners in English. I realized a pair-work is one of the useful ways of communicating with each other.
- Today's workshop was one of the best among this year's workshops. I've been trying to introduce CSs in my class but it was the first time to listen to the author of 'Nice Talking With You'. It was great!
- To internalize conversation strategies, we need some steps; for example, before free practice we need some controlled practice. It is important for us to teach how to use CS.
- JHS teachers hardly have the opportunity to teach students CS. Moreover students don't have necessity to use CS in the daily activities, so they have no chances to use CS. But through today's workshop, I realized that I should give or teach students chances to use CS and work out activities which enable students to use CS.
- I got the idea of how to make new pairs. Unless students use English words, they won't be able to speak them. To internalize conversation strategies, we should give students more chances to use them.
- It's not easy to teach CS. Students do not learn them soon. It takes time and many practices to use CS freely. So it is important that students use CS in every class every day. I'd like to introduce CS in every speaking activity.



3. Questions and Answers

Q (1): I wonder how we as instructors can guide students to a good understanding of "Communication".

A: We teachers are tough on students. And most of us have to "teach to the test." However, the TEST doesn't measure communicative competence, only grammatical/lexical knowledge. It's like this because grammar & vocabulary knowledge are much easier to measure than communicative ability. This is a point I was trying to make when I mentioned [Loewen's book](#) about how history is taught. It's all about memorization. Facts, dates, names and places are easy to teach, easy to test. But most of us would say that's not very effective, because we usually forget it all just as soon as the test is over. And most of us say we don't like history as a result, we say it's boring. History classes don't teach us how all the facts/names/dates go together to explain the "story" in *history*, which isn't boring, or at least doesn't have to be. The next step after memorization is explanation. First memorize all these facts about the Vietnam War, then explain to me why it happened. It's a necessary step. The facts have to be arranged and then communicated. But we almost never get to that step of explaining because there's more to memorize we haven't gotten to yet, and anyway,



essay tests are really difficult to read and grade. That's what's probably missing in our English teaching. Education in our culture requires memorization, but doesn't require us to apply it practically. That necessary next step isn't included. But we know it ought to be. The point of language study is to learn to communicate in that language, even if you make grammar or vocabulary mistakes. Mastering (or at least being good at) grammatical rules and vocabulary is a necessary step for communicating, but it's not the final step.

Do you remember that video of Haruna and Rie that I showed at the beginning of the workshop? What if we showed them that video on the first day of class and told them "Here are two students like you who are using English for communication. It's completely possible for you to communicate like this one day." Do you think that would motivate them?

Q (2): I would still like to know a little more about ways of assessing conversation strategies.

A: Two things come to mind, to add to what I said earlier about assessment. First, we can't insist that a student has failed to use a conversation strategy if there was no *opportunity* to use it. For example, student A can't be punished for failing to say "Me neither" if student B never says something like "I don't like green peas" for student A to agree with. The same is true with a conversation strategy like, "What does that mean?" A well-prepared student A will be ready to use a word that will make a student B say that, but if student A doesn't use a word that B doesn't understand, you can't penalize B for that...you penalize A! If a student says, "えーと" rather than "Well, let me see," that's a *missed opportunity*... PENALTY! If there's silence in a conversation, someone needs to say "What else?" or "Like what" to keep the convo going. Absence of these phrases would count as PENALTY. A second point to consider in assessment might be, is the CS being used *naturally* and/or *automatically*? By naturally I mean is the pronunciation and intonation natural? Is the student saying "Do you KNOW what I MEAN? (correct emphasis) or is each word given even emphasis? By automatically, is it said quickly or is it, like, "um..chotto matte...Do you...know what...I mean," as if the student is saying it for the first time.

Q (3) Have you seen the emphasis on communication strategies in Japan change since the introduction of English in elementary school?

A: I teach university-level students, so for me, it's too early to say.

Q (4) Dr. Kenny said that it is very important to internalize conversation strategies in students mind. I wonder how the teachers know how successfully the strategies are internalized.

A: One of the great things about conversation strategy training is the difference it makes in how students speak! After you've taught them "Well, let me see..." or "uh-huh" you begin to hear those phrases when you walk around the room during students' practice. In fact, these phrases LEAP out at us! Students quickly pick up on how powerful they are. Using conversation strategies has an emotional payoff that's different from using learned vocabulary items or grammatical structures because students recognize that they're saying something new and useful, and they can hear themselves acquiring them. The big question is, how many times must a learner use an item before we can say it's internalized? I've heard the number "seven" attached to the answer, but my feeling is it's probably lower-- if they've used it a few times, that's enough.



Two ways we can capture students' conversations is by audio or video recording their talk. I've been videotaping my students for years, watching the conversations and keeping track of conversation strategy use over the course of a semester. Assessment at the end of a term is easy if you've been keeping score all along! To see how videotaping works, you can check out [this video I made](#) several years and a [more recent one here](#).

Lately, most students have a smartphone that includes an audio recorder. This is a convenient way to get students practicing English out of the classroom: Tell them to record a conversation and email it to you! When you get the file, you can hear if they've used the conversation strategies they've learned. Some apps record very high-quality files and file size can be a problem...a 5 minute conversation could be 10 MB. In that case, I set up a folder online (using [DropBox](#)) for students to deliver their file to. Works great! You can visit [my YouTube page](#) to see more videos about how to set up DropBox and see a video demonstration on how to use my [favorite audio recording app](#).

Q (5): I have learned a 'communicative competence', 'sociolinguistic competence', 'grammatical competence', 'discourse competence' and 'strategic competence'. What is the relation to the conversational strategies? It must be the field of a new research?

A: Frankly, I don't know the difference between all of the "competences" you mentioned. I'll bet that some of them mean the same thing. Researchers have their preferred terms. To me, competence means ability: communicative competence means the ability to communicate effectively. Grammatical competence means ability to use grammar with a high degree of accuracy.

Conversation strategies aren't a field of research that I'm aware of. They're a pedagogical tool. They're simply a set of lexical phrases that students can use to improve their fluency. I would say when students use them, they "outperform their competence" in that their spoken output sounds more natural and fluent than they really are. I recall a student, Miyabi, many years ago who had absolutely mastered the art of reacting in English. She sounded like a native speaker. Not until careful examination of her conversations did I realize that her turns had almost no content and her grammar was poor. By being so engaging, she'd tricked me! But she was using that talent of being engaging with her partners as a strategy at that time in her development, and eventually improved her grammatical competence. It was a classic case of "Fake it, 'til you make it." That's not to say that we're teaching students to "fake" their way through English. Conversation strategy instruction provides learners with valuable phrases, which, when internalized, frees their brain to think more about the content of what they say, since they no longer have to think about every word they say. In that respect, conversation strategies help learners improve their communicative competence.



Q (6): How do you assess speaking? Do you have/use any rubric?

A: I have, over the last 15 years, used a variety of rubrics to assess speaking. At first they were very detailed, but I found that in trying to attend to each point, my brain would get tired pretty quickly! Another problem with very detailed rubrics is that in order for them to generate a grade of some sort, each point has to weigh properly. If communicative competence is what we're striving for, it's not appropriate to weigh (for example) a student's pronunciation equally with, say, how many words per minute they say. Does a pronunciation error count the same as a grammatical error?

Another point: When we "ASSESS" are we trying to give them a grade or give them advice? :-) And how much time can you afford to focus on each student?

Here's some criteria I used to use to assess my 1st year students who were in my "conversation strategy training" class. While I watched their conversation, I'd ask:

1. Is the student "on task"?

If the topic is part-time jobs, are they talking about part-time jobs, or are they talking about what they did over the weekend, or just about how they're feeling at that moment?

2. Is the student prepared?

If the topic is sports, can the student say easily "What kind of sports do you like?" (a question they memorized from the unit). If the student struggles, takes time to ask the question, they're not prepared. If they say "What's kind of.." or "what do you like sports?" they're not prepared. Did the student miss an opportunity to use a conversation strategy they could have used? I don't expect my students to be great at English, but I do expect them to be prepared!

3. Is the student interactive?

Is the student showing interest with eye contact, reactions and back-channeling phrases (uh-huh, yeah? really?)? Is he/she making an effort to be an equal participant in the conversation, or is one letting the other speaker do the work of keeping the conversation going?



At first, I'd score students on a scale of 1-2-3-4-5 for each of the above, but I found that pretty taxing. Ultimately, I settled on a 3-point scale: YES-Kind of-No. I know, really scientific, right? But it worked for me.

More important than "assessing" to me is *advising*. Every student wants to know how they can be better. We hear, "Can you give me some advice?" In the case of Kazuma and Ayana (the last video I showed) here's the FEEDBACK I gave them:

Kazuma:

PRAISE: Great topic choice. Great vocabulary use! Good job trying to fix your grammar mistakes while talking.

CRITICISM: You don't have to talk so much. You're good, and I know it. Quit showing off.

Ayana:

PRAISE: Your pronunciation is excellent, and your summary comment showed that you'd been listening carefully to what your partner said.

CRITICISM: Show a little effort. You chose a pretty mundane topic and said as little about it as you possibly could.

Assessment is tricky. Our education system requires we give students grades. I don't like grading--I'd rather give them feedback.

Thank you for your questions. I realize that there were some points in the workshop that I failed to make clear, so I appreciate this opportunity to revise and extend my remarks! I must say that you were the most enthusiastic workshop group I've had in quite some time.

Thank you!!

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Please visit www.nicetalkingwithyou.com and "join" to get email updates when I release a new video, free teaching materials or make a blog post!

(Part 2)

Date: January 12, 2013, 14:30-17:00

Venue: Nagoya NSC College

Advisors: Nancy Mutoh (NUFS), Robert Croker (Nanzan University)

Abstract: Monthly report on action research

The number of participants: 16



Workshop in February (Scheduled)

Date: February 23, 2013, 10:30-14:30 (Part 1), 14:30-17:00 (Part 2)

Venue: Nagoya NSC College

Instructor: Curtis Kelly (Kansai University)

Title: "Brain Studies and Brain-Friendly Materials"

Please send an email to Chihaya ([chiha143\(at-mark\)nufs.ac.jp](mailto:chiha143(at-mark)nufs.ac.jp)) to attend this workshop.