

Developing Fluency with Pair Taping

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Students in their second year of a large, weekly English conversation course in Shiga University of Medical Science were given the option of recording their free conversations in pairs four times a week. They were to do this during the day in the language laboratory, to log in there, and to pass in their tapes. Those who subsequently chose to do pair taping had a significant improvement in fluency ($p < 0.001$) over the year that was more than double ($p < 0.01$) that of the control group of those using a pair work text in the regular class. The pair taping students also had a listening comprehension improvement similar to the regular students, but a significantly higher increase in enjoyment and ease in speaking. The success with this technique may be due to the efficacy of learning something often in multiple short periods, and to students being relaxed, confident and motivated when studying on their own. Foreign language teachers anywhere could feasibly use pair taping to help students improve their speaking.

録音テープを利用した英会話力向上の自主的練習 (pair taping)

滋賀医科大学で週一回の割で実施される多人数クラスの英会話の授業では二年生になると、従来の教室授業の代替として自主的な英会話練習を選択できるようなした。その場合、週四回二人一組で話題を自由に選びながら英語で意図疎通を試み、毎回23分間テープに録音するのである。この pair taping グループはL1教室において練習を録音した上で、その実践について所定の用紙に記録してテープを提出するよう義務づけられた。pair taping を選択した者は一年後表現力にかなりの進歩がみとめられた ($p < 0.001$)。教師の指導のもとで指定された教科書で学習する通常のグループと比較して実に2.5倍の進歩度 ($p < 0.01$)である。もう一点注目すべきことは、pair taping グループは聴解力の点で通常学習グループに引けを取らないほど向上していた。また、英語をしゃべることが楽しいと思うようになった変化の度合いが通常学習グループと比較し、より一層顕著であった。この教育方法が効を奏した理由として、短時間の練習を何度も行なって練習効果をあげたこと、自主的に学んでいるという気持ちでいるため学生がリラックスでき、自信をもって、さらにやる気を起こせたことがあげられる。中級程度の外国語としての英語を担当する教師はこの pair taping 方式を学生の英会話力向上に役立てることができよう。

1. Introduction

An obvious problem in college English conversation courses in Japan is large classes (Caprio, 1990; Helgesen, 1987). The average number of students

is 38, and 50 is not uncommon (LoCastro, 1988). Such students would communicate very little in English if it weren't for group and pair work giving them ample opportunities to speak, and allowing them to focus on meaning and feel more at ease (Long & Porter, 1985).

A second problem is that a single period a week (Caprio, 1990; Helgesen, 1987) is the norm. Students who have seldom if ever practiced speaking English in their previous six years of studying it will do so only about fifty times in college. Experience shows that while students can attain reasonable levels of comprehension and speak at least haltingly when leaving a two-year course, they will soon be claiming to be unable to do either. English conversation seems to have become for them merely something they once studied.

2. Pair Taping Technique

One hundred sophomores in two classes of fifty at Shiga University of Medical Science in 1990 were asked at the beginning of the first day of English Conversation if they would like to make frequent recordings in pairs in the language laboratory instead of coming to their weekly 90- to 100-minute class. They were told that their speaking ability might be increased more by doing so. The taping would be done on two 46-minute cassettes a week, one side a day, at any time during the day, for four days of the six-day school week, or the equivalent ($23 \times 4 = 92$) of their weekly period. Anything could be talked about with any partner. The regular class would use the second volume of the pair-oriented text they had studied in their freshman year and continue to have weekly quizzes and finals on the dialogs it contained. Students could change from the regular class to the pair taping or the reverse for the second semester. Those who decided then to do pair taping left class that first day after a time was arranged for them to come to the language laboratory a day later. At that meeting the procedure to be followed was explained.

The next school day, these students began taping, and aside from attending part of the second class, weren't formally met with again until the last class of the year. Each week the teacher collected the tapes. Two tapes for different times were removed from each set of four, fast-forwarded, and listened to for a few moments, first on one side and then the other, and then in another place. Pairs had recorded with microphones facing each other, and only if all or part of a tape was blank—inevitably the result of carelessness—was the backup tape for the same day checked. However, students had to re-record if there was such a problem with both of their tapes. Notes were attached to tapes to this effect, or to tapes that had long silent spaces, students reading on them, more than two voices,¹ or Japanese other than in short phrases like "How do you say. . . ?" Notes were also left on a bulletin board asking students who were falling behind to come and see the teacher. They were told that they had to catch up

Developing Fluency with Pair Taping

and to tape daily, or in special circumstances, twice a day, which everyone did. To show that tapes were being listened to, I would occasionally talk, in passing, to particular students about things I had heard said.

3. Experimental Methods

Throughout the year the students remaining in the regular classes did the prescribed tasks in *Person To Person* (Richards & Bycina, 1985), interspersed with “breaks” for open-ended pair conversations, and so were also working in pairs, except for when taking quizzes, hearing brief explanations, repeating dialogs, or having biweekly listening practice; they served as control, albeit not strictly so in that the groups had not been randomly selected. The teacher didn’t have the authority or the desire to decree that classwork be done outside of classtime.

At the beginning of the second class, the taping and regular students went to the language laboratory together and took a test consisting of item-analyzed questions from a TOEFL examination. Students of both groups then recorded a conversation with someone in the same group for 23 minutes. At the end of the year, the listening comprehension test was taken again and students recorded with the same partner as in the second class. They also filled out a questionnaire in which they were asked if, and to what extent, they enjoyed English more, found English easier to speak, and thought their English had improved.

The pair taping students also evaluated the efficacy of taping conversations and of speaking frequently. All students also indicated as well which class they were in, “taping” or “regular,” or if they had changed from one to the other, or had listened to or spoken English during the school year somewhere other than in their courses. The tapes of 57 students remained after the removal of those tapes that were poorly recorded, or those from students who had changed from one group to the other, gone to a language school, been active in the English Speaking Society, or had any other significant separate exposure to English.

Word count is an accepted measure of fluency (Higgs & Clifford, 1982), and the first fifteen minutes of words from the second and last classes on these eligible tapes were counted with a timer and clicker-style hand counter to determine if the change in fluency of the taping and regular students differed. Obviously needless repetitions, however, were not counted. The idea was that counting just significant novel output would be better than a mass word count for measuring actual change in speaking ability.

4. Results

The word count of the 26 pair taping students of 387.6 (± 96) (mean \pm standard deviation) at the end of the year was shown by the *t*-test to be sig-

nificantly higher than their $284.5 (\pm 111)^2$ at the beginning ($p < 0.001$). That of the 31 students in the regular class went from $255.3 (\pm 74.0)$ at the beginning to $292.5 (\pm 81.5)$ at the end (n.s.). The taping students individually improved by 48% ($1.48 [\pm 0.47]$), which was more than twice as much as, and significantly greater ($p < 0.01$), than the 20% ($1.20 [\pm 0.32]$) of the regular students. This difference is shown in Figure 1.

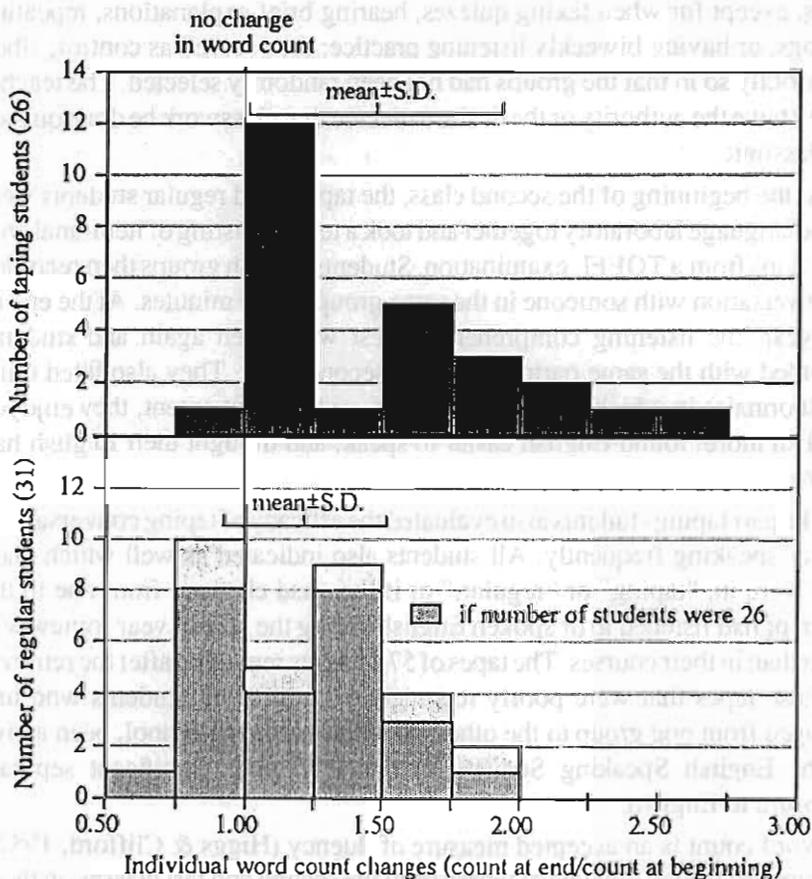


Figure 1.

Individual Word Count Changes of Taping and Regular Students

The changes in word count are expressed as the number of words of each student at the end of the year divided by that at the beginning; thus the value at which there was no change is 1.00. The darker shading in the regular group was added to give the results a balanced appearance by showing how they would look if the regular group were the same size as the pair taping group.

Developing Fluency with Pair Taping

The results of the listening comprehension test were also interesting. At the beginning the taping students correctly answered an average of 9.46 (± 2.58) of the 23 questions, and the regular students a similar 9.58 (± 2.44). The mean answered by the taping students at the end was 13.19 (± 2.79), a statistically significant increase ($p < 0.001$). The regular students' increase to 12.35 (± 2.60) was also a significant one ($p < 0.001$).³ Thus the increase of the taping students was equal to that of the others and not negatively affected by doing only pair taping.

The answers to the questionnaire were in accord with the word count results. Twenty-five taping students responded to "Do you enjoy English more now?"—significantly more positively ($p < 0.005$) than did the 31 regular students (1.68 [± 0.69] vs. 1.12 [± 0.73]). The same was true with "Is it easier for you to speak English now?" (1.40 [± 0.65] vs. 1.07 [± 0.58]; $p < 0.05$). The response to "Has your English speaking improved?" of the taping students was also more affirmative, but not significantly so (1.00 [± 0.50] vs. 0.77 [± 0.75]).

What these students were unequivocal about was the usefulness of the technique. Their most enthusiastic responses were to "Do you think taping conversations in English is useful?" (2.76 [± 0.75]), and to "Do you think it is more useful to speak English in many short periods a week than in a usual class?" (2.38 [± 0.75]).

5. Discussion

As can be seen in Figure 1, there was a rather wide variation in the word count results. But this was a predictable one, as foreign language improvement is seldom uniform. The data gathered here also does not reveal such things as smoother delivery, or the possibility that someone's chances to speak on the final tape were limited by a talkative partner. While the greater word count increase of the taping students might be partially attributable to their having spoken with close friends, this is an argument for pair taping rather than against it, since it is preferable that students be in a friendly environment. The success with pair taping may have something to do with the fact that learner participation in decision making leads to increased productivity (Bachman, 1964). Aside from where to tape and how long and how often, the students made all the decisions with respect to pair taping. First they determined to do it, and from then on decided the topics to talk about and the time to tape. When those who had chosen to tape the following year were asked why they had done so, almost half answered that it was to improve their speaking, but just as many said they wanted to set their own class time.

Students involved in self-instruction like this, Dickinson (1987, pp. 24-25) states, tend to be more confident and less inhibited, do better, live up to the faith shown in them by being allowed to take charge of their own learning, and feel closer to the teacher. These characteristics were confirmed here. The pair taping students became perceptibly more open and confident about speaking, as their greater reported pleasure and ease in it would suggest. The students also appeared to be trying harder. However, making the time to do the frequent pair taping took some effort, and the effect was that the taping received high priority in their daily schedules. In a sense, pair taping belonged to them, for unlike in their other classes, they were in charge. Many pairs working in the language laboratory at the same time seemed to make the room theirs and to create a certain *esprit de corps*.

An interesting change in rapport also took place: The taping students became friendlier toward me. The former feeling between us—that I was attempting to get them to learn despite their moderate resistance—appeared to be replaced by one of mutual endeavor. Many seemed to take my listening to the tapes as a kind of personal attention and to look at the taping as an act of creating something for me. This appeared to give the taping a certain added importance to them. Worry was even expressed about all the homework I supposedly had given myself. On my part there was a greater awareness of individuals. There had been much less chance for such awareness when having to keep track of everyone at once. Ironically, I got to know students much better as a result of not seeing them in class.

While the above suggests that the students will do better when motivated by taking charge of their own study, the greater fluency improvement with pair taping cannot be wholly accredited to the benefits of autonomous learning. Another important element must have been the multiple times per week that pairs spoke. It has been shown that “distributed” memorizing is more effective than “massed,” in other words, that greater learning takes place when done at intervals rather than all at once (Stevick, 1976, p. 28). Speaking English many times a week could also help in accessing the latent grammar and vocabulary accumulated over the years of schooling. Certainly speaking English on a regular basis should cause the act of communicating in it to lose some of its exoticism and literally to result in its becoming more of an everyday thing.

Those doing pair taping might be expected to need some monitoring. But little was actually required, apart from that of the infrequent “past offender,” once it was ascertained that the pair taping form was understood and being followed. The checking that was done was as much for the students themselves,

Developing Fluency with Pair Taping

who could even have felt betrayed if they thought their tapes were never being listened to, as it was for the purposes of evaluation. There were also more instances of taping being put off or too much of it being done at one time than there were of suspect tapes. Anyone would have been reluctant to leave a “record” of silence or of speaking Japanese. The pair taping technique was self-monitoring in a sense, then, and this was the case because of the invisible presence of the teacher.

As would be expected among students who haven't had years of talking together, no special way of speaking that might constitute a pidgin was heard on tapes. The question of whether pidginization or, for that matter, fossilization occurs may be academic, though, with students like these, with whom the condition that grammar come first has already been satisfied. It should be hard to disagree with letting fluency be focused on in the final year of their formal education in English. Speech as fluent as possible, even flawed speech, must be preferable at this point to more hesitant speech which is almost if not equally imperfect. Furthermore, possible chronic errors were dealt with by having the students take end-of-term examinations based on a bilingual book with advice about specific English that poses problems for Japanese (Schneider, 1989).

6. Conclusion

The technique of pair taping allowed students to achieve a significant increase in fluency in English when compared with students in a regular class. Those sophomores who used it found speaking significantly easier and more enjoyable than their classmates did, and had equal listening comprehension improvement. They also evaluated the technique quite favorably.

While this is a preliminary report, and the procedure has yet to be tried on a large number or wide range of students, nor has the method of counting been sufficiently described, frequent pair taping appears to have great potential for developing latent conversational skills. It utilizes self-directed learning with its power to motivate, and helps to activate passively learned knowledge by giving increased chances to speak. The better results with pair taping than with ordinary pair work suggest that it would be an even more viable alternative for students who have never had pair work. Foreign language teachers, particularly those with restrictive classroom situations, could have, in pair taping, an effective way to get intermediate students speaking.

Notes

¹ Monologues were acceptable, but not “trilogues,” which leave less time for each student to speak. “Three’s a crowd” also seems to be a truism in free conversations, for one of the three often seems to get lost in it and does not join in.

² The *t*-test was used throughout; the number of subjects remained the same unless shown otherwise; normal distribution was assumed.

³ These very large improvements in listening comprehension may reflect that students had taken the test one other time within the school year (data not given), ten weeks before it ended.

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