


1999

# Timed Conversation: One Routine for Engaging Large Classes of Non-Motivated Learners in Meaningful Oral Communication

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## **Timed Conversation:**

### **One Routine for Engaging Large Classes of Non-Motivated Learners in Meaningful Oral Communication**

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Master of Arts in Teaching degree at  
the School For International Training,  
Brattleboro, Vermont.

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This project by Brad Deacon is accepted in its present form.

Date

*October 1999*

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#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the following people for their valuable contributions to this project:

Jack Millett for his time, patience and thoughtful guidance.

Tim Murphey for his timely feedback, helpful comments and creative ideas.

Linda Donan, Tom Bauerle, Tom Kenny, Paul Doyon, Linda Woo, Rob Tafferter, Chris Mori, Ximena Allub, Brian Cullen and Duane Kindt for their helpful comments and discussions on Timed Conversation.

My students, past and present, who have taught and continue to teach me a great deal about teaching and learning together ever more effectively. I am tremendously grateful and privileged to learn with you all.

## **Abstract**

This paper will explore an activity called "Timed Conversation" that I use in large classes of relatively unmotivated first and second year non-language majors in a Japanese university setting. Timed Conversation is designed to help students to communicate in native-like and incrementally longer sustained dialogues in the target language. In the activity, the students interact with many partners and practice conversations while practicing various language expressions. In every lesson over the course of a semester they speak in conversations about a number of topics for a set limit of time. The goal is to be able to speak more fluently in a mostly English conversation in incrementally longer timed conversations each week. This paper looks at the entire routine of setting up, conducting and following up Timed Conversation. We will also examine the role of the teacher, teacher and student feedback and the many components within Timed Conversation.

## **ERIC Descriptors:**

Large Group Instruction  
Oral Language  
Verbal Communication  
Student Attitudes

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper will explore an activity called "Timed Conversation," that I use in large classes of relatively unmotivated first and second year non-language majors in a Japanese university setting. Timed Conversation is designed to help students communicate in meaningful and incrementally longer sustained dialogues in the target language. I will look at ways to set up, conduct and follow up the activity.

## **BACKGROUND**

The beginning of my exploration and development of Timed Conversation came after I had been working at a College for 2 years and had noted just how difficult it was to get these students actively involved in meaningful communication in the target language and at the same time provide a sense of accomplishment.

I moved to a University where I had groups of approximately 40 non-language majors who were also relatively unmotivated but at least more respectful to me and each other. They were also more often willing to occasionally try to communicate in English. I realized that I wanted to develop an activity for communication within a framework that



could stretch across a full semester while holding the students' interest, developing their oral English skills and giving us all a sense of fulfillment as learners. My efforts were rewarded when I started to implement what would become Timed Conversation.

At first, I simply asked students to talk in pairs about what they had done on the weekend, or what they had done in their week so far while I played background music and timed their conversations for two minutes. Student feedback was positive and they requested more conversations with other partners and asked for useful expressions and vocabulary. In response to their expressed needs I experimented with providing more structured language practice before their conversations and implemented short and repeated opportunities to practice skills such as conversation beginnings and endings. Then I gradually built in other expressions and ways to manage longer conversations in English and provided other topics to discuss. Between conversation rounds I gave students additional feedback so that they could improve their next conversation. I found many ways to practice the language and involve students so that they could suggest various topics and give other feedback to help improve the activity and to serve their needs even further. I carefully noted what was working, not working and suggestions of my own to improve the activity as a whole. Over time I have experimented and found many ways

to set up, conduct and consequently teach Timed Conversation more successfully.

I decided to focus on this activity in my IPP for a number of reasons. First, I wanted to understand and become more aware of Timed Conversation myself. Writing this paper gave me the chance to explore and refine the many components that are connected to Timed Conversation in greater detail. I have now become aware of many ways to engage and help my students to learn more effectively. Second, I wanted to improve certain aspects of Timed Conversation I use in my classes. One reward in exploring this activity has been the excitement that is connected to discovering what works in my classes and in my teaching. I also enjoy the challenge of continually refining this activity and going deeper to discover new insights over time. Finally, this paper is an opportunity to share my experience in working with Timed Conversation so that others in similar and different teaching environments might experiment with this activity or notice parts which are useful to try out in their own classes.

## **OVERVIEW**

In the first chapter of the paper I share in detail my teaching context and an example of a Timed Conversation followed by some activity rationale. In chapter two I include details of the components of the activity and some ways that they can be manipulated to increase student

engagement and learning. Chapter three looks at some specific activities within Timed Conversation that engage the learners in the form of focused language practice. I also include some teacher options, especially that of tuning in to the learning energy in the classroom, which I find are particularly useful in assessing what is happening in these classes and how I can then adjust to once again increase student participation and learning. In chapter four I share the role of feedback in developing the activity. Specifically, I include results from a student questionnaire on Timed Conversation and show how this feedback and my reflections have led to increased development of the activity. Finally, I review and examine some of the rewards and challenges within Timed Conversation and some suggestions for implementing the activity.

In the next chapter we will take a closer look at Timed Conversation and the learners who are participating in the activity.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **THE LEARNERS AND AN EXAMPLE OF TIMED CONVERSATION**

In this chapter I will share my current context to give the reader a picture of the kinds of learners who are participating in the Timed Conversation activity which follows. Next, we will look at the activity from an observer's perspective in the classroom and then examine some of the rationale behind Timed Conversation.

#### **TEACHING CONTEXT**

I mainly teach groups of approximately 25-40 first and second year (18-19 years old) non-language majors at a four year University in Nagoya, Japan. They are taking a required 2 semester (12 classes/semester) Integrated English course. There are required texts for reading and listening and the instructor is responsible for developing a syllabus for conversation activities. Overall, using the ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) chart their skill level is high beginner to low intermediate. Classes meet once a week for 90 minutes. Conversation practice usually occupies just over half of the class time and the

teacher is at liberty to teach this component in any way deemed appropriate.

I have found a significant lack of motivation in non-English major classes in Japan, and inspiring these students to learn presents one of my biggest challenges. In fact, not many in my classes seem to initially take very much responsibility for their learning. At times it can be incredibly painful in my experience to be present with these learners and there can, at times, be a tendency to want to disengage as some of the students have done. However, I have also found it to be professionally gratifying when those same learners begin to develop an interest in learning. At times I identify with Parker Palmer who, talking about his classes, says: "...at other moments, the classroom is so lifeless or painful or confused - and I am so powerless to do anything about it - that my claim to be a teacher seems a transparent sham." (Palmer 1998, p. 1) During other times I share again in Palmer's feelings: "...there are times in the classroom when I can hardly hold the joy." (Ibid.)

Thus, I am trying to find ways to keep all the students engaged by providing learning opportunities which promote more active involvement and self-initiated risk taking. I also aim to give students opportunities to activate and successfully use the wide store of passive knowledge they have already accumulated from their high school and junior high classes. I am hoping that finally having the chance to

"use" the language will motivate them to be more active in their language learning and to see that learning and speaking English can be practical and possibly even fun.

Needless to say reaching these students and engaging them to learn is quite challenging. One way of reaching them has been to frequently invite and use their feedback in the activity. I always use topics of their choice and provide numerous expressions and opportunities to interact with many other students. I feel that increasing the time incrementally and providing manageable amounts of language help to keep the activity challenging for their level. I try to keep the activity fresh by providing variety within Timed Conversation in the form of new topics, new and recycled language and different ways to practice language. I also attempt to get all the learners focused from the first class by providing clear and specific learning goals for Timed Conversation. Even though the activity is constantly evolving, as I am continually adjusting to the individual groups I teach, I have found the following objectives for supporting their use to remain consistent over time:

- Students will be able to maintain a conversation for a set period of time (starting with less than a minute then increasing incrementally to 4 minutes by the end of the year) speaking mostly in the target language while working primarily on fluency.
- Students will be able to appropriately use new conversational expressions (e.g., for negotiating meaning, "Do you mean \_\_\_\_\_?") to facilitate longer interactions and increase their conversation competence.

- Students will be able to generate their own topics of interest to increase their involvement and interest in speaking English.
- Students will be given a clear understanding of why and how I intend to use the activity in class (see syllabus in appendix C).
- Students will have the opportunity to give feedback on the activity which combined with my personal reflections will help me to continually rework and improve Timed Conversation to increase learner engagement and learning.

I keep the above objectives firmly in mind in teaching the activity and try to continually learn by reflecting on Timed Conversation and gathering student feedback to re-shape and refine the activity.

Consequently, it is quite rewarding for me as a teacher to find conversation pairs eagerly involved in using new language structures and actively engaged in Timed Conversation when at the beginning of the year they were passively glued to their seats. I am rewarded when students such as Kumiko become more active and say: "I can become to speak English better than before and I like English more." Thus, a significant challenge in teaching these learners is to provide them with stimulating and motivating experiences for learning. I believe Timed Conversation meets this purpose.

#### **TIMED CONVERSATION INTRODUCED**

I have fashioned Timed Conversation into a conversation activity framework which basically involves: students pairing

up for a pre-determined time, then speaking about a topic while practicing language strategies or gambits to facilitate smoother more effective communicative competence in English. Upon completion of a Timed Conversation the learners have a brief reflection period on their conversation where they note their partner's name, the amount of English they spoke as a percentage (e.g., 85%) and often a few other details such as noting new language or a question their partner asked. Finally, they receive various types of oral and written (on a blackboard) feedback from their teacher on their dialogues. Then they pair up with a new partner and follow the same or a slightly adjusted pattern for the next conversation. This is done many times (approximately 5-6 conversations per class) using new and recycled topics, conversation expressions and partners over the course of a semester. Again, Timed Conversation includes the entire routine of setting up, conducting, refining and providing feedback and opportunities for the students to continually improve their conversational ability.

To give the reader an initial feel for the activity let me share an experience of Timed Conversation through an observer's view of an example lesson.



## TIMED CONVERSATION FROM AN OBSERVER'S PERSPECTIVE

Imagine for a moment walking into a language classroom of about forty learners as an observer and growing curious about that day's lesson. The teacher claps loudly as a signal to gather the students' attention then circulates and gives each a number from 1-20 twice so that there are a pair of ones, twos and so on. Everyone rises, finds their partner of the same number and sits again. The teacher then writes "Today's target %" on the board and asks the students to write their speaking target percentages (e.g., 70%, 80%, 90%) for today's Timed Conversations in their journals. The teacher shares a student journal with you while they are writing their percentages and you notice that the journal also contains free writing on various topics (e.g., part-time jobs, school, family and others) from past weeks and a variety of questions on each topic as well. The teacher informs you that this represents the weekly preparation for the student's conversations.

Next, you hear background music, the teacher invites the students to begin a two minute warm up conversation on "their weekend" and you observe that the group is now engaged in conversations almost entirely in English. You overhear short dialogues such as the following:

Yuki: "Hi Toshi, how was your weekend?"

Toshi: "Good. How about you?"

Yuki: "OK. I went to a movie."

Toshi: "Oh. What did you see? ..."

This you note is a warm up stage in the lesson. Then, the music dies down, you hear a beeping noise from a timer and the students are writing down their partner's name and amount of English spoken in their journals.

Now, the teacher is writing the following expressions: "How about you?" "And you?" and "Tell me more about that." on the board under the heading "Today's Useful English." As the teacher points to each expression the learners are repeating them, followed by the teacher who models after them and the learners again repeat, this time sounding more natural. Afterwards, the teacher walks towards the learners and randomly selects a few to begin modeling the new language expressions in short verbal exchanges while the others listen in. One exchange is as follows:

Teacher: "How are you today Hiroyuki?"

Student: "Great, and how about you?"

Teacher: "Pretty good. How was your weekend?"

Student: "Good. I went to a movie."

Teacher: "Oh, tell me more about that."

Student: "It was an adventure movie... ."

Following this exchange, the teacher models with a few more learners and then the students quickly practice this language with their partners. Then the activity shifts to the topic

of the day. The topic, which had been announced in the previous lesson, is: "Your life at XYZ university." The teacher hands out chalk to some of the learners and asks them to write a few of their previously prepared questions relating to the topic of the day. The teacher provides hints to correct the mistakes with indicators including: arrows, underlined markings and squiggles on the board. The learners correct the mistakes and the teacher quickly reminds the students to use the new expressions and those from past classes in today's Timed Conversation. Next, the class is bustling once again in English as students are actively engaged in peer conversations on the topic of the day using their new expressions and some from previous lessons. Over time, you would notice a variety of topics being used, students using many new expressions to facilitate greater communication and longer conversations all in a mostly English environment. For now, you observe the music dying down and the beeper sounding the end of this conversation. The learners are then writing their percentage of English spoken and partner's name in their journals. The teacher once again begins modeling various expressions one-to-one around the classroom. This time you see the teacher inviting the students to take more initiative by waiting for them to offer questions such as: "What do you like about XYZ university?" The teacher answers and the student says, "Tell me more about that." In another short one-to-one

conversation, you notice the teacher working with the pronunciation and intonation of one expression. Then students begin a new conversation with a different partner followed by more mini-feedback this time on another common error that you too had noticed as you listened in on pairs close to where you are sitting. Timed Conversation continues for another five rounds each time followed by mini-feedback from the teacher and students reflecting in their journals. Finally, the students write the amount of English they spoke (\_\_\_ %), the topic for next week is assigned and the group departs.

The following are some of the points which remain with you as you too leave the room: the students were speaking mainly in English and they were using a variety of native-like expressions to sustain their conversations. In addition, they seemed to be enjoying their dialogues with their partners and you assume that a few made new friends in the process. You then sit down with the teacher to discuss the lesson.

#### **WHY TIMED CONVERSATION?: THE RATIONALE**

There are a number of reasons I teach Timed Conversation. It is an activity which promotes meaningful and engaging oral communication for unmotivated learners. It also is a streamlined framework for teachers and students. For the students I feel that Timed Conversation gives

opportunities to practice authentic conversations while using manageable amounts of new language. Furthermore, the activity provides language and timed practice that are increased gradually and are appropriate to their level. For the students and my teaching, I also aim to make the activity framework as compact as possible to allow more time for language practice and conversation opportunities. Now I would like to expand on some of the concepts involved in Timed Conversation and share why they may be useful.

### **Authentic Conversations**

In Timed Conversation, the students practice and learn practical language gambits in order to better communicate during actual freer conversation practice. I also work on improving their conversations through feedback between conversation rounds to give the learners looped input and access to more native-like conversations. Many students have studied "about" language before practicing Timed Conversation, but few have actually spoken in a real conversation and lack the skills to speak smoothly. Although they have studied English for six years in high school and junior high some seem to freeze when asked a simple question such as, "How are you today?" Others when responding tend to provide the formulaic response, "Fine thank you, and you?" no matter how they are really feeling. Thus, I aim to teach language that is conversational, natural and includes: "the

greeting and the opening, the discussion of the topic, and the closing and farewell." (Levine and Adelman 1993, p. 70) At first, students rehearse simple greetings and endings followed by other language gambits. Timed Conversation involves constantly developing conversation skills and providing frequent opportunities for students to speak and to eventually maintain mostly English conversations of approximately 4 minutes.

### **Incremental Learning Chunks**

I increase the length of the conversations incrementally to coincide with the student's ability and desire to communicate for longer periods over the course of a school year. In other words, I work to stretch their "zones of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1934, 1962) over the semester by giving students frequent opportunities to collaborate meaningfully in English with many partners. My goal is to find the right tension between increasing the time while maintaining the engagement of the students and their ability to stay mostly in English. Where others before including Maurice (1983) and Nation (1989) employed time in a decreasing manner in order to increase fluency and rates of speaking speed, I am trying to increase the time as a way to then increase the overall amount of speaking and consequently improve fluency.

## **Streamlined Framework**

In my practice, getting these students used to any routine can potentially take as much time as the planned activity, thus there is a premium on streamlining activities and developing consistency. Efficiency for processing then has helped me to create greater time for actual learning as in Sperber and Wilson (1986). Timed Conversation is increasingly streamlined throughout the year because we do them every class. The overall structure is relatively consistent although I work with the language and skills within the activity in many different ways so it remains fresh and alive. I have also found that other components including music, a timer and other consistent procedures also serve as an anchor (Bandler and Grinder, 1979) which tend to bring students back into a successful state for learning. By continually refining Timed Conversation I have found that the amount of time available for conversation practice is increased as students become rapidly used to the routine, know exactly what to do and as a result become more attentive more quickly.

In this chapter I have looked at my learners and an example of the Timed Conversation activity from the perspective of an observer in a hypothetical class. I also included some of the rationale behind the activity. In the

next chapter I will share a detailed exploration of some of the components and many ways to set up, carry out, follow up and work with Timed Conversation.



## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **SETTING UP AND CONDUCTING TIMED CONVERSATION: THE COMPONENTS**

Now let us take a closer look at the example lesson in chapter one by examining the components of Timed Conversation in more detail. In any Timed Conversation lesson, including the example in chapter one, the following components: pre-activities, the main activity and post-activities and parts within each are present. I will share these steps to follow when using Timed Conversation and then some ways to set up the learning environment.

In addition, you will notice percentages in brackets following some components in this section and in later chapters. These relate to an end of semester questionnaire that I conducted with 177 learners in July, 1999 to gather their feedback to improve the activity. As student feedback is an integral part of Timed Conversation, I am including some questionnaire results now and then more thoroughly in chapter four in order to give you another perspective on the activity and its components in general. The complete questionnaire including questions and student answers is in appendix D and E.

## **PRE-ACTIVITIES/SET UP**

Of course, a great deal can be done to prepare the learners for Timed Conversation. The following are some ideas that I incorporate into the activity to prepare and get them to be more responsible for each other's learning during the actual conversing phase of the lesson.

### **New Partners**

Upon arriving to the class I count the number of students and then divide the total in half and assign each student a number out loud. For example, if there are 40 then I count from 1-20 twice. Then I number the rows 1-5, 6-10, 11-15 and 16-20. The students then sit down with their new partner. They like this because they have the opportunity to make a new friend each class (83.05% agreed). Many share Kaori's view when she says: "Today's communication partner's choosing way is very good because I have some people I have never talked with."

I noticed that many either don't readily form new partners soon when left to their own resources or that they will engage only with the same small cliques and don't seem to venture outside of this comfort group. This may be because they already have a role (speaking Japanese) in their clique, thus breaking them up and introducing them to a new partner may then redefine their role (speaking English) and

this in turn is believed to lead to more engagement in the target language (Paul Doyon, personal correspondence). I work with providing a structured system of partners which both helps to keep them focused on the activity and maximizes our use of class time. Getting students to work with a variety of partners is an essential part of Timed Conversation. They too enjoy meeting others and find the variety of partners to be a useful component in learning to communicate effectively as Maki expresses: "Communication among many students is important for learning." Many of my students have commented that they like speaking in pairs instead of groups. They also like to speak when everyone else is too. This satisfaction with Timed Conversation concurs with Oxford who says: "The affective side of the learner is probably one of the most important influences on language learning success or failure." (1990, p. 140)

Within a single lesson they speak with more than their numeric partner. First they speak with the assigned partner, then a partner sitting behind, next a partner across from them who is sitting behind, a partner some distance across the room and other variations. Sometimes they stand and conduct Timed Conversation in lines. They appreciate the opportunity to mix with many others, learn from each other and often form friendships which is, admittedly one of their primary goals. "After class I can now speak to new friends," says Akiko.

### **Student Preparation for Timed Conversation**

To get ready for future Timed Conversations, at the end of a lesson I choose the topic from a list generated by the students early in the year and ask students to write freely on the topic. I also ask them to develop a list of questions that they are interested in asking their classmates before next class. Alternatively, I ask them to do a timed writing in class on the topic for approximately 10 minutes where they freely write on the topic of the day and formulate a few additional questions they would like to ask their peers. I freely circulate to help out with any language questions, but mostly allow them to reflect and write silently in preparation for the conversations which follow. This homework over a week or 10 minutes in class is also a chance to use dictionaries and other resources to encourage students to take an active role in preparing for their conversations. Although I can't work with all the language which they've prepared, due to sheer numbers, I do encourage students to write some language they've generated in the homework or timed writing on the board. We then check the language as a group before the next timed conversation begins. Often, since the students tend to make similar errors they can then compare some of the corrections from the board with their own writing. I am also available to some of the braver ones who ask for help directly.

## Target Percentage

In their Timed Conversation journal, students write down what percent of English they would like to speak in each day's Timed Conversation as a way to get them to be more responsible for their learning and that of their classmates by staying in English as much as possible (Tim Murphey, personal correspondence). It is also a way for them to see their progress over time as many notice their English usage increasing throughout the semester. Certainly, there are off days and one's partner can greatly influence the amount of the target language spoken, but a lot is under the students' control to work towards a positive upwards trend and notice progress in their own ability to maintain a mostly English conversation. Students too recognize the importance of maintaining a mostly English environment: "Timed conversation would be better if only English is spoken by all classmates." (Hiro) I notice, for the most part, that in each class the students' percentages increase over the course of conversation rounds. It's a point that I often share with the students as a group as I encourage them to stay mostly in English and to challenge themselves to stay in a mostly English environment for the learning benefit of themselves and their partners.

## **Warm-up Conversations**

Next, I invite them to have a short 2 minute warm up conversation in English with their new partner. Student feedback in this area suggests that many (84.18%) want to start the activity/class with a simple warm up conversation. A simple topic such as: "What did you do on the weekend?" or a review of last week's topic tends to work well to create a low stress environment where students can slowly get back into using the language as many have probably had no oral or auditory contact with English since the last lesson. I use a timer and put on background music as a signal for starting and ending the activity. Sometimes I give them an additional warm up conversation with the partner behind them or even a distance partner (rows 1/3 and 2/4). This is a good chance for me to circulate to check in as a first step to see how much language they may have retained from previous lessons, to note where they are still struggling and then plan lessons and offer feedback to help them improve. I find that noticing where they are at the beginning of class can be a useful first step to then build in additional pieces that will help them to advance their language output later.

## **"Today's Useful English": Expressions and Language Practice**

After the warm up conversation I introduce the new language expressions we'll be focusing on this day and I work

with these in a variety of ways. First, as a class we practice pronunciation and intonation. I write the expressions on the board and occasionally ask them to repeat in a choral repetition type manner; but more often I try to silently elicit their reading it aloud with subtle hints after providing a native model. Next I move towards one-to-one practice with various members of the group while the others listen in. Then I ask them to quickly practice the expressions with their partners in a more controlled manner while I circulate and listen in to determine what extra practice needs to be done before conducting the conversations. We return to these expressions and add others throughout the lesson between each Timed Conversation.

I give students numerous opportunities to recycle their new language in order to increase the chance that the input (Today's Useful English) will become intake (Williams and Burden, 1997). I also feel that repeated practice in this safe environment increases risk taking and confidence. Overall, I work towards giving students many opportunities to practice the new language, to release their internal resources and to that end work more often towards skill using versus skill getting (Rivers, 1987).

#### **TIMED CONVERSATION (5-6 ROUNDS)**

I often begin by asking the students to stand in four lines, thus two pairs of partners are facing each other. I

say "ready, go!" and begin the timer along with the background music for the set time for that day. They have the conversation while I circulate, take notes on the language, encourage and participate with various pairs. I lower the music and the beeper signals the end of the Timed Conversation and they finish that "round". The last person in two of the four rows comes to the front and they start over again. They continue for approximately six rounds and then sit down.

During the actual conversation phase of the lesson students might either sit or stand or both depending on their preference or my sense of the energy in the classroom on that day. There are many options to work with when they are sitting as well such as working with distance partners, close partners, diagonal partners and others. It helps to create a mental map of the class seating before assigning partners and to be available as a substitute or consider alternative pairings for odd number students in classes. (79.10% of students said they prefer to sit.) We will visit ways to adjust the dynamics as a way to increase student participation after tuning to the energy later in the paper. However, for now you could begin to notice that there are myriad ways to work within any one activity, including this one, on the level of dynamics.



## Short Reflection

Immediately following each Timed Conversation is a pleasant hush as the students then begin writing their partner's name and percent of English spoken in their journals. I often provide the following sentence on the board: "I spoke with (name) in \_\_\_ % English about (topic). Monitoring their own growth can help to promote greater learner responsibility. It can indicate progress as students notice that they can converse for longer periods of time in the target language.

Students also write corrected English from the board and any new words or expressions learned from their partners or the teacher. Over time this journal becomes like a text that students have created on their own. Some even include pictures and color to personalize it further. It's a good opportunity to make the learners aware of the English they have used and to focus their attention for the feedback that follows. This latter point is a major advantage in these large classes because it is much easier to focus the energy of quiet, attentive learners who are just completing a private written task than those coming out of a noisy, social activity.

## Feedback between Rounds

Let's take a closer look now at some ways to work with feedback between the Timed Conversation rounds. It is important in Timed Conversation to provide students with frequent opportunities to practice conversation and it is equally important to give input and assist them in improving their conversation skills. Pre-activities and practicing the target language expressions provide one such opportunity and mini-feedback between the conversation rounds provides yet another. There are many ways to provide feedback between the rounds. For example, I often simply remind the students of the expressions doing rapid one-to-one drills or as a group. Or I might do mini demonstrations to review how I as a native am using the language and to give them a "yardstick" with which to compare their usage. In fact, many admire their peers for participating in a Timed Conversation with the teacher although it takes a lot of sensitivity on my part to choose a willing participant as a mere 24.29% voluntarily want to speak in front of the class. However, almost half of the students (48.59%) admire their peers for conducting a conversation in front of the class and I notice that most tune in to peer/teacher conversations. This leads to greater student involvement and more productive work afterwards as students want to be "like their peers." I also give feedback based on the notes I have taken during their practice rounds. Sometimes I write incorrect sentences on the board (i.e.,

"Yesterday I go to Sakae."), invite them to verbally correct the sentences with their partners and then I give my correction ("Yesterday I went to Sakae.") Quite often this feedback is focused on various specific errors such as: verb tense, article misuse and pronunciation.

Other feedback I give includes reminding students to work at varying their questions and not just following what I wrote on the board, but using their own and partners questions in further rounds. Over time many seem to assume more responsibility for their learning and prepare many questions on Timed Conversation topics for their partners in their writing journals.

It is necessary to provide feedback in whatever form between rounds so that students can have the opportunity to practice something new immediately and understand how they might re-say what they can do in a better way. I find it is also important to gather the error-filled English for this feedback in order to then reshape activities for more productive language learning.

#### **FOLLOW UP ACTIVITIES**

I state the topic for the next class and ask students to free-write a journal entry sharing their thoughts, feelings and any personal reactions to that topic. I also ask students to prepare questions on the topic for their peers for next weeks' Timed Conversation.

## **OTHER COMPONENTS**

In the above I showed how to conduct the pre-activities, conversation practice and post-activities within Timed Conversation. These are all essential components to include when conducting the activity. At the same time, there are other elements that are necessary in order to conduct the activity successfully including tools such as: background music and a timer, time limits, topics and of course language.

### **Timer and Background Music**

I use a timer such as a simple stop watch as a signal to let the students know when to stop their conversations. Done consistently I find that the learners quickly become aware of when to stop speaking and then they become focused on me or the board for the language feedback which is always interjected between Timed Conversation rounds; so that they have a chance to perform even more effectively in their next Timed Conversation. Alternatively, background music signals the beginning and can also be used as a signal to conclude conversations. Clapping loudly provides yet another alternative. By having a consistent signal it helps students to become quickly aware of when to start and end conversations smoothly and thus greatly increases the amount

of time for later conversations and language work between rounds.

I use background music during Timed Conversation so that students won't feel their voices are "sticking out too much" in their dialogues with others. I believe music helps to create a relaxed atmosphere that is conducive to lowering the affective filter (Krashen, 1985) which in turn may lead to more productive language work.

### **Time Limits**

Initially, Timed Conversation is held for one minute while working with simple conversation beginnings and endings (we will see an example in the next chapter) and upwards to four or five minutes by the end of the school year as students become more interested, able and comfortable using English. Time limits add a sense of urgency to the conversation and perhaps create a state of heightened awareness as partners are more fully concentrated on each other. Everyone knows clearly when to begin and finish. Students, I think, want to know the time constraints for activities and the time can be negotiated (72.88% liked having a time limit.) Altering the time limits in each Timed Conversation is also possible. Putting my attention outside myself and tuning into the learners and their engagement in the activity is crucial, I find, to then be flexible with time. When noticing that the energy is higher it is then

possible to lengthen the conversation time - sometimes beyond the stated goal of the day. Vice versa, when energy is falling off, one choice is to temporarily terminate the conversation early and shift to another activity within Timed Conversation to re-focus the group and then resume freer practice afterwards. This could involve more practice with the target expressions of the day or sharing a few more questions about the topic. I believe the teacher and students are partners and can work together to negotiate many areas such as time in the classroom to provide themselves with a more productive learning environment.

### **Topics**

Most Timed Conversations have a previously determined topic, but sometimes we have open topics which also provide for more natural and spontaneous conversations. I find that selecting motivating, current topics can help to keep students engaged in a variety of activities. One way to ensure positive energy is by frequently tuning into the learners' interests via written or verbal feedback. By finding out what they want to do and discuss I can plan lessons that are more focused around their needs and thus ensure a greater chance that they will be actively engaged in a lesson. Therefore, finding out which topics learners are interested in and giving them time to prepare their own questions are useful ways to get them to participate more

actively in Timed Conversation. Students such as Shihoko tend to appreciate it when I invite their input as she says: "It is best that you ask us what we want to do and talk about. That's very nice and I felt that we are all studying together." (77.4% preferred that I choose the topics and 56.49% liked to decide their own topic when asked in separate questions.) First soliciting their suggestions for topics and then choosing from their ideas is one way to both choose and give the learners a choice. In fact, in my experience the students then become more actively involved in suggesting future topics and providing other feedback for making Timed Conversation more effective because they notice that their input counts.

### **Conversation Expressions**

Every lesson includes a particular language function and relevant expressions. One function we practice early in the semester is following up and showing interest in a conversation. "Tell me more about \_\_\_\_." and "What else do/did you do?" are examples of useful expressions which fit this function and get partners into a more rhythmic and native-like conversation exchange. I find that by working with small pieces the students can really make the language their own. Recycling the expressions is important and even providing visual reminders as in dictations left on the board can give students something to refer to when necessary.

Often I notice students referring to their own notebooks during conversations. Over time, many of the expressions tend to stick, especially the beginning and ending of conversations because those are what are recycled the most. Yoshihiro agrees and says, "I can remember today's useful English and I can use it. I think it is very useful." Students too notice the importance of learning useful expressions for conversation like Shiori who says: "To learn about useful expressions in everyday conversation is most useful for me. I'd rather use many of them actively than worry about my grammar."

Of course, we also spiral backwards as well in order to review and recycle expressions from past lessons. I often insert new expressions and other language such as new vocabulary and grammar practice under the heading: "Today's Useful English" on the blackboard. Students get accustomed to this consistent procedure and know where to quickly find visual language reminders when they struggle. I tend to gradually erase these reminders so that they then become more focused on their partners during Timed Conversation.

A challenge is to work towards giving students enough opportunities at acquiring various skills and language since they meet for a mere 12 ninety minute lessons per semester. As time is limited I find it helpful to emphasize short gambits and expressions during Timed Conversation because as Sperber and Wilson (1986, p. 49) found: "human beings aim at



the most efficient information processing available." Thus, I teach and provide frequent opportunities to practice short expressions and phrases in the Timed Conversation over the course of a semester.

The language practiced is natural and I often loop it into the lessons after noticing what students need either at the moment or for later in response to their needs. In particular, I work on providing opportunities to increase their strategic competence (Swain, 1995) and improve on their ability to manage communication breakdowns. This includes showing students how to take turns in speaking, maintain the conversation, end the conversation and among others make their message clear.

#### **Working with "Today's Useful English"**

The expressions and language can be worked with in a variety of ways too. I find it is important to be open to the learning of the moment in order to determine how the expressions might be practiced. For instance, sometimes I work on correct intonation and pronunciation after meaning has been established. Modeling works well in this area. Sometimes the students need other expressions at the moment to maintain a native-like conversation which I may spontaneously introduce between Timed Conversation rounds. Other times I might plan a lesson around sounding more native-like such as saying: "How ya doin'" or some other

natural expression which students can't quite produce yet. In this area, having both the language and ways to work with the language in the form of a lesson plan is helpful. At the same time being flexible about working with and including new and unprepared language examples is also crucial. Experience helps in increasing my bag of tricks and ways of working with the language either in a prepared or spontaneous manner in this activity.

In this chapter, we have looked at some of the various activities and components within Timed Conversation. These components are present in each lesson. Also, new language introduced, topics and increased time limits are provided each lesson to challenge the learners to increase their ability to communicate effectively in English. In the next chapter, we will look at some activities within Timed Conversation that help to focus the students' attention on their learning and some variations concerning the teacher's role.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **ACTIVITIES WITHIN THE ACTIVITY AND TEACHER OPTIONS**

In the previous section I examined some of the specific ways to prepare for, conduct and follow up Timed Conversation. In this section I will share some examples of more specific activities that engage students within the larger Timed Conversation main activity. In particular, I will share one mini-lesson on teaching a set of conversation expressions. I also take a more thorough look at various ways to work with the activity as a teacher. One teacher option, tuning to the learning energy, is helping me to become more aware of which smaller activities such as the following are maintaining student interest, and increasing their engagement. Also, I will discuss ways to adjust Timed Conversation to involve more learners.

#### **DEMONSTRATION LESSON: "SIMPLE BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS"**

The following is a first day class and one activity with its different variations that I have found to engage my learners. In this lesson students are learning one pattern for beginning and ending a conversation which they will

practice first as a group and then in their conversations. I believe it is important to teach beginnings and endings early on as they provide a structure and are present in every conversation. After the lesson we will analyze some of the elements within it as they relate to this lesson and more generally as they apply to the activity as a whole.

After briefly saying we will be doing a conversation activity, partners pair up, take out a pen and paper, and I ask them to face each other so that only one partner can see the board where there are some target sentences written. I quickly model one partner dictating the "A" parts while the second partner writes. The pairs then dictate all "A" lines, switch roles and seats and then complete all "B" lines. The following is the dictation material:

Today's Useful English

A: "Hi how are you doin'?"

B: "\_\_\_\_\_, and you?"

[The Conversation "Meat" (main topic) with questions and expressions.]

B: "Oh I have to go."

A: "Me too."

B: "Nice talkin' with you."

A: "You too."

B: "See ya."

A: "OK, bye."

After they have checked their answers, I model the above with a few students by walking around and randomly doing it in a rapid fire manner. Then I tell them they are going to have a

"test." When the music starts they need to greet their partner with the above "Hi... ." Conversely, when the music stops they say, "Oh... ." I do this three times very quickly while gradually erasing lines from the board and they work with the same partner. Then they switch and work with the person behind them, a distance partner, a super distance partner and stop. This provides the structure, which we alter with various greetings throughout the year such as: "What's new?, How's it going?" and "What's up?" In other words, this is how they know how to start and stop their conversations, work with many different partners and stay mostly in English. The topic of the day then provides the "meat" for their conversations. This day we are doing simple conversations on the topic: "Tell me about something you like." In conjunction with this topic, students are learning and practicing expressions for showing interest ("Oh yeah. I see. Interesting.") For now, they will practice a Timed Conversation and after one or two minutes receive some in between rounds simple intonation practice and error correction from notes I have taken after listening in on their conversations. Then they will engage in another conversation with a new partner followed by additional feedback on their language output. In future classes they will practice numerous conversations on different topics, along with learning many new expressions to facilitate those conversations all within this conversation framework. This is

a simple introduction to one specific example of Timed Conversation language which we build on extensively throughout the semester.

Let's now take a closer look at some of the activities within the above example. The following represent a few of the activities in Timed Conversation that engage students and provide opportunities to practice the language in a variety of ways.

### **Dictation**

I find dictation, as in the above example, to be one helpful way to get students interacting with their partners and negotiating meaning with the language, including expressions and questions around the topic of the day, even before commencing a conversation. It is also a chance for students to become familiar with some of the language we will be working with during that days' Timed Conversation. The routine is as follows: students sit face to face with a partner and dictate language expressions, or alternatively 2 or 3 questions from what I have written on the board about a topic for that day. I also include some of the target expressions which students later practice in a controlled manner and then freely in a Timed Conversation and once again in the feedback that follows each conversation.

Other times I might give a dictation to the students with scrambled sentences, whereby they collaborate with a

partner to unscramble various sentences (e.g., "are going to do what you to this ? weekend" - "What are you going to do this weekend?"). Dictation, in my experience, is an effective way to focus their attention and this leads to greater participation in the lesson. Unscrambling gives them either a closer look at grammatical structures or a chance to see there are alternative ways of correctly arranging words.

### **Modeling**

Next, I often model the conversation questions and expressions taken from the dictation exercise and demonstrate rapidly in front of the class one-to-one with a brave student or with many students as I quickly move around to different students. The rest of the class is also engaged in various tasks during this phase of the activity. Sometimes they are using a strategy such as shadowing (silently repeating in their heads) the language and then repeating the content with their partners. Circulating allows me to quickly notice how much they are able to comprehend and helps to show where many may be struggling. This allows me to either re-model the conversation or provide alternative activities.

### **Transcribing during Modeling**

Another activity students find useful is transcribing during the model conversations. One partner writes down what I say and the other writes down my partner's language.

Students can either strive to write down as much as possible or, more specifically, three or four sentences which they recall afterwards. There are many ways to exploit what they have written. Initially they might simply compare their writing with another partner behind them to notice where they have written similar language. Then students collaborate to adjust what they have written so as to more closely approximate what actually was said in the conversation. Next they practice the conversation by assuming the role of the person whose words they dictated and repeat what they recorded with a partner. Sometimes I collect their papers, or ask them to read their answers as I write a few of their sentences on the board. Afterwards I invite the class to alter their sentences in ways that are either more grammatical or somehow more appropriate. Other times the class writes down the content or counts the number of times we use the strategies of the day. I can then collect their work and use it to focus on specific difficulties they are having with grammar or other language areas. There are many ways to engage the audience during model conversation work and many more still when working with what they have recalled.

It is helpful to have planned ways to conduct Timed Conversation and the language practice in the activity. I also find that carefully planning these activities beforehand



then provides greater time for me to circulate and assess the learning in the class. Next, I will share some of the ways I have found useful as a facilitator to involve myself in the students' learning in Timed Conversation, including keeping them focused on the learning.

#### **TEACHER OPTIONS DURING TIMED CONVERSATION**

While the learners are engaged in speaking I can be "free" to participate in a variety of ways including: as a participant dropping in on various pairs, as an extra for an odd numbered class, setting up additional work, taking notes during the lesson, adjusting the music and other components and planning the next step. Having the teacher join student conversations is one option in particular that many seem to want (67.23% openly agree) as Kenichi supports: "I want Brad to join our conversations more." A very effective way to help them to gain access to more native-like fluency is to counsel or reformulate in correct language what they say as I circulate around the class or during modeling in front of the class. Thus if a student says: "This weekend I do part-time job." I will respond: "So this weekend you will do your part-time job." In many cases, I observe, especially when leaving ample pause time, that students pick up on their mistake(s) and may even then respond with an "Ah yes, I will ...," thus some re-reformulate their sentence appropriately. In my experience, students often make similar mistakes and

the difficulties I notice them having during conversations can be practiced and corrected anonymously in the larger group during mini-feedback sessions.

One challenge for me has been how best to use the freedom that Timed Conversation affords to help the learners. Admittedly, it is impossible to tune into 20 pairs of learners all at once and rather than focusing on everyone talking at the same time, although I do scan to ensure that all are on task, I often do a variety of "check ins." A check-in involves rapid one-to-one interactions with many pairs. These are small tests that allow me to notice what students are able to produce, where they are struggling and what I might do to help in the mini-feedback sessions or in future lessons. For instance, if the learners are focusing on a particular gambit in their conversations for that day and I notice another that might be useful I may introduce it by modeling with a few students in the time before the next conversation. This could be as simple as saying: "How do you say \_\_\_\_\_ in English?" It helps to have a plan for how to give the learners helpful feedback and to be open to adjusting to the moment. Experience helps in this area and gives me more tools and options to teach more effectively in each lesson.

#### **TUNING TO THE LEARNING ENERGY**

In using this activity I find that becoming more and more aware of student learning energy has helped me become

more effective in adjusting the components of the lesson to get more out of Timed Conversation. In this section I will focus on what it means to tune into the learning energy, how I prepare and gather information in Timed Conversation to allow me to assess the learning energy and some ways that I adjust the activity depending on my assessment of learning energy.

### **Preparing Myself to Tune into Energy**

To become more aware of my student's learning energy I find I need to have a conscious plan to notice that students are engaged, on task and involved in the lesson. I have to be open to all cues including facial expressions and other body language, students chatting in their native language and other signs that give me information about the learning and engagement level of my learners. The student's energy isn't always predictable and how students are learning isn't either. This requires me to be both open and ready for the unexpected, for whatever comes.

In order to focus myself on the learning it helps to be well-prepared in my lesson plan. Carefully planning each component of Timed Conversation including: topics, language to be practiced, ways to work with the language and feedback between rounds, partner dynamics and other components helps to free my attention to be more aware of the learning atmosphere.

Having accumulated from experience a variety of ways to practice and implement Timed Conversation, I find that even more attention is then available to notice the learning energy in each class. In other words, careful and conscious planning and additional choices of adjustment gained from experience are giving me a variety of ways to work with the activity and to shift its focus especially when unplanned for moments of crisis or opportunity arise.

I have also found it useful to be physically available during the activity to have more attention available to notice and observe student energy and learning. In most Timed Conversations I am physically free to circulate and tune in to their learning since the students are engaged in conversations with their peers. I also have found it useful to be mentally free as well in order to more accurately assess my learners. As mentioned, I find it is necessary to be well-prepared in my lesson plan and also flexible in adjusting my plan when necessary. If I remain rigidly attached to the original plan and focus on driving from one direction to the next, this limits my flexibility. Instead I try to be open to the learning of the group by both assessing their production of the language in Timed Conversation I observe and noting how I might add to the lesson. In this way I can notice expressions or other language that might help them to speak more effectively. I am also monitoring their engagement and by remaining mentally flexible I can

adjust the activity to increase the chance that most will stay tuned in to the lesson.

While observing students, sometimes I sense from their rather lethargic movements, students looking around the class seemingly aimlessly, chatting in Japanese or perhaps tired appearance that they are disengaged. I notice their engagement through visual, auditory and kinesthetic cues. Lively gesturing, pairs engaged in lively dialogues and smiling faces often signal that they are participating actively. Lack of movement, silence or idle chattering and blank faces or staring at the floor indicate to me the need to adjust the lesson. I consciously work to notice these kinds of cues so that I gather more information about what is happening with learning to then help shape the activities for more effective learning.

### **Adjusting the Activity**

Now I will look at one of the ways I adjust Timed Conversation when I notice through tuning to student cues that some or all are not focused on learning. I find it is sometimes helpful to check in with them to let them know what I am observing. Then they can become more aware of their own energy and let me know what is happening inside. Often I have found that they are not so much resistant to learning; rather they often admit to being in a bad state on that day from lack of sleep or something else completely unrelated to

the class. Probing further, when appropriate, has often revealed the cause of student's feelings which, again, are often unrelated to the class or lesson. Checking interpretations of student energy is a valuable practice in my experience.

In one class I sensed a lack of involvement in speaking during Timed Conversation and I stopped the activity and asked each student to write on a piece of paper and finish the following sentences: "I like speaking English because \_\_\_\_\_. I don't like speaking English because \_\_\_\_\_." The results showed that some liked speaking English because, for instance, they wanted to converse with foreigners and speak with many others. Others didn't because they felt shy or disappointed that they couldn't maintain a conversation with a non-participatory partner. It was useful information for why they weren't engaged in the activity and when I shared the results with the class it also showed the students why their partners were or weren't as actively engaged in speaking. Admittedly, it was difficult to stop the class in the middle of the activity when I asked for the feedback, but I was rewarded and I carried that experience as a reminder that checking in with my learners can help to show why their learning energy is off.

## **Environmental Adjustments**

Another adjustment I have sometimes found useful is to simply alter the learning environment of Timed Conversation as a way to increase student involvement. For instance, when the students are inattentive or otherwise not present in the activity I might put them in distance pairs which gets students speaking more loudly and then often leads to more active participation. Using upbeat background music is another way to help change the environment and elevate the tempo of the activity. Shortening or increasing the time for the conversation is another option I have used depending on my sense of the involvement of the learners. There are many ways to adjust the learning environment in Timed Conversation and experience is continually helping to increase my bag of tricks.

## **Language and Language Skills Adjustments**

I also work with shifting to variations within the four language skills to refocus my learner's energy. In every lesson I plan to shift between the skills to keep the energy alive. When first using Timed Conversation I just repeatedly put the students in new pairs and asked them to converse and consequently noticed that they became tired and unresponsive after time. Therefore, shifting between the four skills and introducing new language and providing additional

opportunities to practice language in a controlled and freer manner are now options in every lesson. Again, I plan to shift between the skills in each lesson plan but also remain open to altering the lesson in the moment depending on my sense of overall classroom energy. One way I have found useful to refocus learner energy is to switch from oral practice to writing practice. Students reflect on their dialogues by noting some questions that they asked their partners, for instance, and the class becomes a pleasantly quiet environment. I can then collect some example sentences, write them on the board and we can experiment with looking at alternative ways to say the same thing, practice intonation, stress and others. Usually I can maintain the flow of target language or activity when I change to a different skill. For example, instead of students practicing orally I ask them to write down some questions based on the topic of the day. Then I provide time for them to check their language in pairs and then write their sentences on the board. I can then provide hints for them to self correct in pairs which tends to engage most of the learners. We might then practice the sentences in other ways and finally restart a conversation practice this time with more actively involved students.

Setting up tasks to get learners to sort out language is another way I have found useful to adjust the learning. In particular, I often write sentence scrambles on the board and



invite the students to unscramble these sentences in pairs. This type of exercise works well when students are completely tuned out to the oral learning activity.

In this chapter we looked at some examples of how to work with various activities that I have found within Timed Conversation to engage students in learning more actively. I also offered some ways for the teacher to become involved in the activity and to contribute more effectively to the learning. In particular, tuning in to the learning energy has helped me to notice when the students are understanding and engaged, and this tool helps me to adjust the activity when the opposite is true. Admittedly, there are many ways to work with the activity which is an advantage as Timed Conversation becomes more refined and richer the longer I use it in my classes. In the next chapter I will explore some of the students' feedback related to Timed Conversation as we go inside and visit the activity from the learners' perspective.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **STUDENT FEEDBACK AND CHANGES**

In this chapter I will explore how my students are helping to develop Timed Conversation through their feedback. We have already looked at some of the ways that I give feedback and throughout the paper I have included student comments to show their thoughts and feelings in connection to various aspects related to Timed Conversation. Now I will share in detail some of the ways I gather student feedback, the results of this feedback, and some interpretations and changes that have resulted in my teaching.

#### **THE NEED FOR FEEDBACK**

Feedback is an integral element of Timed Conversation and is a must both for my benefit and the students'. They need to know how to work with the language to improve and I need to know what they need to do it better. To illustrate this point, I often think of the person who goes to a travel agent and when the latter says "Where do you want to go?" the former responds "I don't know!" Furthermore the traveler shows up at the airport without a suitcase, passport or

money. As this story shows, we both need to do our part in order to help each other to work towards our goals.

One challenge I have already mentioned is that of working at sustaining student interest or getting them "on board" since motivation for learning in these classes is generally low. Timed Conversation is an activity I developed to help to get these learners engaged in meaningful communication. To that end, I try to include many of their ideas and choices for learning in the class. For instance, surveys I take at the beginning of the year let me know what topics to use in Timed Conversation. I also solicit various forms of student feedback throughout the year and then re-work the activity with their reported needs and interests in mind. As Ernst (1994) discovered too, the content of the lesson is important and when most of it comes from the students, it is then directly related to their interests which may increase their ability to communicate in L2 despite their limited ability to do so. I find that by tuning into my student's interests they become more involved in learning.

#### **HOW TO GATHER FEEDBACK?**

I gather structured student feedback in a number of ways. Sometimes at the end of a class or between conversation rounds I ask students to write and reflect on their conversations by responding to questions such as: "What percent of English did you use today?," "What new expressions

or words did you learn?" or I ask students to comment on the length of the conversation "Was 3 minutes too long, just right or too short for today's conversation?" All of my students are capable of responding to short questions such as these and the feedback quickly allows me to see where most students think they are in terms of their ability to do the activity.

### **Feedback Letters**

Another way that I use to gather student feedback, usually two or three times per semester, is to invite them to finish the following sentences anonymously: "Timed conversation is useful and interesting because \_\_\_\_\_. Timed conversation would be better if \_\_\_\_\_." and "Other." I collect the students' comments and make a summary letter which includes their most common responses and also some of my feedback in general including reactions to some of their comments (see appendix C). I then distribute these handouts to the students so that they can learn from their peers and notice where they are having similar and different experiences related to the activity. In this manner we both learn from each other's feedback. I also believe that when learners are given opportunities to get in touch with each other's thoughts and feelings as they are connected to learning, it then helps them to become more responsible to each other as they become more fully aware of each other's

needs. For example, sometimes feedback is contradictory:

"The time is too short" versus "The time is too long."

Students can then see that there are differing opinions about the same activity or components within the activity. In another case one learner said:

Timed conversation would be better if we are more active. Sometimes we are ashamed of speaking English (I'm not so maybe). I want everyone to speak English with more relax. I make a lot of mistakes but it doesn't matter I think. The important thing is to try, not to carry out perfectly I think. I want to speak English with joy!

Many learners said they agreed with this learners' comments. When the students recognized that they had a chance to openly share these feelings and learn from each other I noticed a consequent increase in participation in this class during subsequent Timed Conversations. As these cases illustrate, sharing learners' feedback with each other helps them to then become more fully aware of each other's feelings which I believe makes them more responsible to each other in future lessons.

### **End of Year Questionnaire**

On a larger scale I gather full course feedback such as in the 1999 activity feedback questionnaire (see appendix D, E). 177 students were asked to answer the 28 questions in the questionnaire anonymously as I felt this would encourage them to be more honest. I also provided a clear example so that they wouldn't mistake the four categories (strongly disagree,

disagree, agree, strongly agree). I found the student answers to be invaluable as feedback to understand their thoughts about Timed Conversation and for suggestions to adjust the activity for future groups. Although I have already included many of the results of this questionnaire in the paper, I would like to visit a few areas to show what I am learning and consequently how I intend to adjust Timed Conversation.

#### **WHAT DO STUDENTS THINK OF TIMED CONVERSATION?**

There was an upwards trend in the students' enjoyment of Timed Conversation as 71.19% admitted to liking them at the beginning of the year whereas 83.05% said they liked them better by the end of the year. A further 82.48% wanted to continue Timed Conversation which suggests that they are finding the activity to be a useful and interesting way to help in their goals to learn English and interact with others. A further 70.62% said they had done their best to speak mostly English during Timed Conversation. The majority (92.09%) stated that Timed Conversation are useful for learning English and 83.05% also admitted that the activity provided them with opportunities to meet new friends. Thus, from the results I feel that overall Timed Conversation is an effective activity to help the students to meet their goals to make new friends and for all to learn oral English. My challenge will be to continue to provide opportunities that

engage students and help them to learn in ways that meet their needs.

### **What Kinds of Language Practice Do Students Want and What Can I Do to Provide Opportunities for Language Learning?**

Overall, student feedback suggests that they prefer even more language work as students want more of each in the following order: expressions (95.48%), vocabulary (89.83%), pronunciation practice (84.18%) and grammar (56.5%). Clearly, the students want more work in all areas (74.57% also want more corrections from the teacher), but especially opportunities to increase their vocabulary and conversation expressions. Therefore, I will work towards developing more pre-activities and mini-feedback sessions that provide these opportunities. I will also check in with learners more frequently to determine how much more time they prefer for working with the language in-between or before rounds. One area I may experiment with to give more language work is in the initial warm up conversation which many (84.18%) say they enjoy. I plan to experiment with soliciting expressions as a review and then providing some additional ways of saying the same thing during the warm up phase of the lesson. On the whole, 90.39% said the conversation expressions they learned helped to improve their Timed Conversation. This is very positive and coupled with their desire to do even more work

with the language, it will be a challenge for me to continue to provide motivating and meaningful opportunities to learn.

In this section of the paper I have analyzed the students' feedback and how it is contributing to the improvement of Timed Conversation. Each of these ways of gathering feedback is providing me with useful information to improve the activity. Ultimately, this feedback will serve to fine-tune Timed Conversation even further for future lessons and classes. In the final chapter I will visit some of the challenges and rewards in using Timed Conversation. I will also include some suggestions for using the activity and share my present and ideas for future work in this area.



## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, I will review some of the many rewards and challenges I have found in working with Timed Conversation. Then I will synthesize and highlight a list of suggestions for its use. Finally, I will make suggestions for further research.

#### **REWARDS**

There are many teacher rewards that I have discovered in using Timed Conversation in terms of developing the activity itself and, more deeply, furthering my learner's growth and my teaching. Let's look at some of those rewards more closely.

One reward of teaching Timed Conversation is that the activity is rich and complex and allows for refinement. As I learn more as an educator I am better able to use new knowledge, skills and student feedback to further improve the activity. Instead of starting at ground zero each year I can build on the experience of previous years and add new insights and ways of working with the activity. Thus, Timed

Conversation is constantly evolving and being reshaped in connection with my teaching and my students' learning.

Working with Timed Conversation has helped me to develop a more positive attitude towards these more challenging classes of questionably motivated students. Where I once wondered if my learners would participate actively over the course of a semester, I am now more optimistic and curious about getting the most out of the activity to maximize our learning. The learners are now more frequently engaged, speaking and learning more language and I feel I am having a greater impact on their learning. One personal reward that makes these classes more enjoyable and professionally gratifying is that going to class is more exciting.

Since students are clear about what to do each class there is less hesitation and they begin interacting in English with their peers immediately. In fact, students become more actively engaged in Timed Conversation over the course of each semester and demonstrate the ability to sound increasingly more native-like as they acquire more strategies and language each week. This is a reward for us both. For the students they recognize their own learning progress; for me I can see that our efforts are producing results. Furthermore, I see that I am having an effect on my learners' progress by providing engaging and meaningful opportunities to learn.

Also, I am free to participate in a number of roles, such as observing and gathering feedback or even participating as a conversation partner. Therefore more time is available to give individual attention or gather useful feedback or otherwise help the students to improve. Over time I notice an upward spiraling trend in which progress leads to a more pleasant classroom atmosphere where more learning can potentially take place.

Another reward stems from the feedback I am gathering in order to tap into my students' learning needs more deeply. In their feedback the students are showing that they are meeting one of their broad goals to make new friends. I consciously work towards providing a classroom atmosphere with frequent opportunities for them to interact with a variety of other students. Sometimes the learners share reasons why they are unable to meet their goals and even offer helpful ideas for me to consider in adjusting the activity. For example, when first using Timed Conversation some students requested that I use the board more frequently. Now, I am using it as a tool every class and consistently provide space for "Today's Useful English" which includes helpful language for each weekly conversation.

By inviting student feedback often and helping them to become more aware that the activity develops as a result of their suggestions, I believe that students are then more willing and mindful of giving honest, helpful feedback

throughout our course. The changes in my teaching also help to show the students that their needs and wants are being addressed. Consequently, I believe they are then more present in class and actively involved in learning. Thus, feedback on the activity enables more adjustment and learning on both sides and I sometimes wonder who is "the teacher" and who is "the learner".

### CHALLENGES

There are also some challenges, or problems, in using Timed Conversation with my learners. A few challenges I have found answers for and others continue to pose opportunities to work on both my teaching and in refining the activity. In general it is useful, I find, to view the following with an attitude of curiosity which then helps me to find alternative ways to more effectively adjust the activity.

Unfortunately, there are still a few learners in every class who continue to use mostly L1 during Timed Conversation. This, of course, limits the opportunities for their partners to carry out a satisfying conversation in L2 and can even influence that partner, the next ones and others around them to revert to L1. In an effort to meet this challenge I have asked learners why they speak L1 during the activity and have discovered the following reasons: not knowing a word or expression in L2, getting so excited that just expressing oneself takes over instead of sticking to the

L2 and not liking English and therefore not wanting to participate. Of course I try to influence students to remain in English by: inviting them to write a target L2 speaking percentage for their conversations; teaching useful expressions including ways to stay in English such as, "How do you say \_\_\_\_\_ in English?, What does \_\_\_\_\_ mean?"; joking with the learners by saying, "I didn't realize this was the French class!"; and sharing peer feedback with the class through feedback letters on their feelings about others who are "robbing" them of their chance to speak and use English. Continuing to shape Timed Conversation to maximize the chance for all to stay in English during Timed Conversation remains one of my greatest challenges.

Sometimes there are an odd number of learners which takes away from my attention to the group as a whole since I need to create and spend time explaining an extra task for a group of three. Numbering off students at the beginning of the class quickly allows me to see when each class will face this challenge. In dealing with this situation, I often become an extra partner or just invite the odd group to have a three-way conversation. Although I consider this a minor challenge, it nonetheless potentially demands extra attention and needs addressing in a way that maintains a smooth overall flow to the activity in general.

Of course, Timed Conversation would lose it's freshness if it were conducted in exactly the same manner each class

and students would quickly lose interest. I use the activity in most lessons with my non-language major classes and over two semesters of 12 lessons each. Thus, it is imperative to vary the components, activities and ways of using language within the overall structure of the activity to sustain student interest and active participation. This as an exciting challenge and I tend to think of myself as an explorer in the class in search of mini "treasures" or ways to work with the activity. So far this includes varying the topic and the language focus, providing different ways of practicing language, using feedback regularly and managing the learning. I am excited about the potential for new insights in this area that I am optimistic will come from future lessons, reflecting on the lessons, learner feedback and other sources over time.

#### **SUGGESTIONS FOR USING TIMED CONVERSATION**

For those who are ready to implement Timed Conversation in their classes in whole or in part, I would like to highlight a few suggestions that I have found beneficial in my experience. These are not quick fixes for success, but rather lessons learned over time that allow the activity to run more smoothly and effectively. The following suggestions are posited with learners similar to the one's I have been teaching in mind, although I believe many are suitable for other learners and contexts respectively.

A number of practical considerations can help to make the activity more manageable from day one. Before teaching Timed Conversation, find a simple timer with a beeping device and consider if you want to use background music during the conversations. Students can suggest music and often bring their own tapes. I also find that numbering the students off at the beginning of each class and asking them to write speaking target percentages helps them to quickly get ready for Timed Conversation. In the first class, I suggest working on simple beginnings and endings initially to give the activity a structure and then provide variations within.

In addition, I find that keeping a general log of Timed Conversation topics, language, activities within the main activity that engage the learners, and other aspects such as partner arrangements helps in successfully teaching future classes and groups. This helps me to be more flexible in later classes as I can pull from the activities that seem to work best and to experiment more freely with partner arrangements and other components of Timed Conversation. One way I have found useful in organizing the topics and the language is to plug them into a list from 1-12 (representing the weeks in the semester) after collecting the student generated list. After 12 weeks I have a clear list of all the language and topics that we have used over the course of the semester.

Carefully planning all aspects of the activity including partner arrangements, the language to be practiced and ways to work with the language helps to let me then free my attention so that I can then circulate and participate in the learning in a variety of roles. While circulating and often immediately afterwards I find it helpful to make notes on the learning. In fact, this paper was largely fueled by many of my reflections and notes taken both during and after my classes.

It is also helpful in my experience to practice language in small and frequent chunks before students begin conversations, in mini feedback sessions and as a wrap up. This is one insight that I discovered while tuning to the learning energy and I found that more students stayed on board when I practiced with fewer chunks of language more frequently during the lesson.

I believe that the time should be incrementally increased and that students should be reminded that they are working towards a set time goal for their conversations. I let them know that they are increasing both their ability to sound more fluent and that they are able to carry on longer sustained conversations. Often they notice their own progress in their journals, but I have found it helpful to also point it out.

I hope these suggestions will help those who are interested in adopting Timed Conversation to similar and



other contexts.

In closing, while the above represent some of the rewards, challenges and suggestions I have found useful to consider in using Timed Conversation thus far, there is still much room to grow. Keeping Timed Conversation fresh will also involve reworking the activity for different classes of more motivated learners, higher level classes and smaller classes respectively. Therefore, finding ways to implement the activity with other learners and classes while maintaining student interest, engagement and growth is and will be a challenge in future classes.

## APPENDIX

### Appendix A

#### Beginning of the Year Class Surveys:

Integrated English 1 Survey (Wednesday Class) 32 Responses, / = repeated response April 1998 Feedback
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In this class I want to:

know Brad/  
make a lot of friends/////////  
communicate/////////////////  
listen to native English  
have fun when speaking/  
play soccer  
watch movies  
listen to music  
learn about culture  
games  
pronunciation

Topics I am interested in are:

racing horses  
sports/////////  
personal computers  
Japan/  
foreign countries/////////  
part-time job/  
funny stories/  
movies/  
music///  
science fiction  
girls/  
TV programs

Integrated English 2 (Wednesday Class) 30 Responses October 1998 Feedback
---

Why are you studying English?

like it/  
useful for future///

to watch CNN  
to go abroad/////

fun

to talk with foreigners////

have to//

to read

to watch movies

to speak English////

to become an international person

**What do you want to do in this class?**

don' t know/  
watch movies  
make friends////  
pronunciation  
use English/  
conversation/speak English//////////////////  
play games/  
listen to music

**What topics do you want to talk about in conversation?**

part time job/////

music/////

economics//

car/

sports////////

dreams

Japan

school life///

private time

vacation

hobbies////////

culture

family

clubs/

novels

movies////

future

hometown

foods

TV/

## Appendix B

### Feedback Letters

<b>Timed Conversation Feedback</b> <b>5/99</b>
---

The following are some of the most common and a few of the unique answers in your feedback on what you are finding useful and interesting, including ideas for improving TCs. Notice the comments you agree with and which ideas will help you to learn even more during TCs!

- I didn't talk many times in high school, but I wanted to enjoy talking. Now I like it and I have many friends.
- It's a good chance to talk with someone I didn't know.
- I can know other things about other people.
- I want to keep TC.
- It is a very good time to speak English and I do my best to speak 100% English. I don't know much English, but to speak English is very fun. Besides through this conversation I can know many people in this class. TC is also a good opportunity to make new friends.
- I want to continue TC.
- I think TC are useful and interesting because when I went to America I couldn't speak to American people in English, I was shocked. I want to talk with others so I want to speak English fluently. In the future I want to live abroad so I think this time is useful.
- I'm ashamed of speaking with other people but I will never surrender!
- I like speaking English. Even if we don't speak 100% English, we can learn something each time. And we get used to talking each time!
- I still speak Japanese a little in TC but I want to be a good speaker in English.
- I get to be able to speak English gradually because I make effort to learn what I want to say.
- Sometimes I am shy and can't speak English.
- I can be used to speaking in English and talk with many people.
- I can hear many people's stories and use English many times.
- I can talk about many topics.

- I can remember today's useful English and I can use it. I think it is very useful. At first I was a little shy, but recently I can speak about many topics with my partners.
  - I want to study English, but I don't have many chances to talk to many people so TC is very useful for me.
  - I can speak English quickly.
  - I become used to speaking English with gestures.
  - I want to know a lot of useful English expressions.
  - We need to speak about many topics.
  - Now I think TC are good.
  - TC would be better if we study a lot of English.
  - I want to speak with Brad.
  - TC would be better if we all try to improve our ability and don't be shy to use English.
  - I want to learn even more useful English expressions.
  - Sometimes games.
  - TC time is long.
  - TC time is short.
  - We can talk with many people in English and about various topics so we make progress in our English.
  - If I see a foreign person I can now speak easy conversation. It is very interesting. I want to talk to many people.
  - I can talk with many friends who I didn't talk with before and I can also know their thinking or personality.
- Moreover, we try to keep speaking in English so we will be able to speak more comfortably. That's why I like TC

#### **Brad's Comments:**

It's great that so many of you are making new friends and meeting others through TCs. I believe that when you interact with many others you can learn a lot together when you speak in English and the friendships you make will hopefully last a long time. Continue to make new friends every class.

Some people admitted to being a little shy during TCs. Recently, a 4th year student thanked me for teaching him TCs because he said it was good to get used to this feeling when he went to Canada and during job hunting. He said because of TCs it was easier to speak with others abroad and in interviews. Many students are learning to relax and feel comfortable and enjoy using English more each class.

Be sure to use your new "Today's Useful English" each class and review and recycle your old expressions too. Soon you will be surprised with your progress. Many of you are already speaking over 80% and 90% in every conversation. That's great!!

I hope you'll continue to share your suggestions for making TCs a useful and interesting activity in our class. Be sure to talk with me during TC too!!

Cheers,

Brad

## Appendix C

### Beginning of the Year Course Handout:

#### 1. Class Goals

In general, I will do my best to provide you with many useful and interesting opportunities in and out of class to improve your ability to communicate in English and learn about North American culture.

A 4 minute "Timed Conversation" where you will speak mostly English is one goal you will have for this year. In most classes we will be having Timed Conversations where you will be using new English, English you already know, lots of learning strategies and you will be meeting many new partners. One student, Kaoru, last year said: *"I like timed conversations because I can meet many new friends."*

Another goal is to **help each other to learn**. Sometimes I will give you feedback about your English, but please relax because it is OK to make mistakes. In fact, I hope you will **MAKE LOTS OF MISTAKES**. Mistakes show that you are learning. I will also be asking you for your feedback and ideas about how to make our class better. Don't be shy! Let me know how I can help you. Also let your learning partners know how they can help you too.

#### 2. Journal (notebook) Writing

You will need a B5 size notebook for this class. 3 times every week you will be writing in this notebook for homework. You can write about various topics which we'll decide together such as: (hobbies, part-time job, a movie you saw, future plans, etc.) My student, Sayuri, last year said: *"Writing was fun and useful. I could write many things and I sometimes learned new words and it helps my conversation."* Please write at least 1/2 page, single-spaced each time.

While writing: only use a pen (no pencils), don't erase mistakes (just cross them out and write above), write a word in Japanese when you don't know the English and remember to do it 3 times each week. I will collect it and write comments in it 3 times each semester. I won't be checking grammar and spelling, but I will be checking that you are writing consistently. It is also a great way for me to learn more about you and for you to ask questions to get to know me better.

### 3. Understandings and Responsibilities

I strongly believe that a class is a place for us both to learn and so I have found the following ideas to be useful in learning together:

- Tell me when something is fun, boring, interesting ...
- Do your homework and bring your books to every class.
- Pay attention.
- Give each other honest, useful feedback so we can improve.
- Speak mostly English during Timed Conversations.
- If you are late, sit beside a partner, don't sit alone.
- If you are absent, call your homework partner to find out what we did in class and for homework (name: number: ).
- Mistakes are OK.
- It is OK to have FUN as we learn.
- Food and drinks and going to the bathroom anytime are OK.

\*\*\* I can teach but only you can learn, thus everyone is responsible for their own learning

\*\*\* Most important for learning and getting a good grade is your positive learning attitude and effort. Please do your best and help each other to learn as much as possible every class.



## Appendix D

### Timed Conversations (TC) Feedback Questions

Please read the questions carefully and after understanding each question please write your answer as honestly as possible. You don't have to write your name. Please don't write on this paper. Your answers to these questions are very useful to help me so that I can improve Timed Conversations and teach you even better. Thank you for your time and honest answers.

#### On your computer card:

- 1 = strongly disagree
- 2 = disagree
- 3 = agree
- 4 = strongly agree

#### Questions:

1. I liked TC when I first did them at the beginning of the year.
2. I like TC now.
3. I helped my partner to speak English.
4. My partners helped me to speak English.
5. TC are useful to learn English.
6. The conversation expressions I learned helped me to speak better in TC.
7. The writing journal helped me to speak better in TC.
8. I want to continue TC.
9. I like background music during TC.
10. TC helped me to make new friends in this class.
11. The time in TC was too long.
12. The time in TC was too short.
13. I want to do a TC with the teacher in front of the class.
14. I admire my classmates for doing a TC in front of the class.
15. I want to learn more grammar during TC.
16. I want to learn more vocabulary in TC.
17. I want more pronunciation practice in TC.
18. I want to learn even more useful expressions in TC.
19. I like to decide my own topic in TC.
20. I like the teacher to decide the topics in TC.
21. I did my best to speak mostly English in TC.
22. I want the teacher to correct my mistakes more often.
23. I like speaking with many different partners.
24. I like it when the teacher speaks with me during TC.
25. I like to stand during TC.
26. I like to sit during TC.

27. I like having a time limit in TC.
28. I like to have a warm up conversation at the beginning of the class.

## Appendix E

### Questionnaire Results in Six 1999 Classes:

**Table:**

Q = Question number corresponding to the questionnaire  
 An. = Answer in %  
 SA = Strongly Agree  
 A = Agree  
 D = Disagree  
 SD = Strongly Disagree  
 Ab. = Abstained

**Responses from:**

Class 1: 26 Second year non-majors  
 Class 2: 33 Second year non-majors  
 Class 3: 39 First year non-majors  
 Class 4: 25 Second year non-majors  
 Class 5: 27 Second year non-majors  
Class 6: 27 Second year non-majors  
 Total: 177 Students

#### Total (All Classes)

Q/An.	SA	A	D	SD	Ab.
1	12.43	58.76	24.29	4.52	0.00
2	25.42	57.63	15.25	1.69	0.00
3	8.47	48.59	37.85	5.08	0.00
4	20.90	59.32	14.69	5.08	0.00
5	52.54	39.55	6.21	1.69	0.00
6	33.33	57.06	8.47	1.13	0.00
7	12.43	38.42	45.20	3.95	0.00
8	26.55	55.93	14.12	3.39	0.00
9	41.81	44.07	12.43	1.69	0.00
10	42.94	40.11	14.69	1.69	0.56
11	3.39	25.42	58.19	12.99	0.00
12	4.52	23.16	64.97	7.34	0.00
13	3.95	20.34	41.81	33.33	0.56
14	9.04	39.55	36.72	14.12	0.56
15	15.82	40.68	35.03	8.47	0.00
16	35.03	54.80	9.04	1.13	0.00

17	32.20	51.98	15.25	0.56	0.00
18	49.72	45.76	4.52	0.00	0.00
19	14.12	42.37	41.24	2.26	0.00
20	10.17	67.23	20.90	1.69	0.00
21	21.47	49.15	28.25	1.13	0.00
22	18.64	55.93	23.73	1.69	0.00
23	23.16	49.72	23.16	3.95	0.00
24	15.25	51.98	27.12	5.08	0.56
25	7.34	31.64	48.02	12.43	0.56
26	19.21	59.89	18.64	1.13	1.13
27	7.91	64.97	24.86	1.69	0.56
28	23.16	61.02	11.86	2.26	0.56

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