

# Explorations in Teacher Education

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## And Now a Word from...The Editor

Hello and welcome to the Summer edition of Explorations in Teacher Education (Volume 17, Issue 3), the newsletter of the Teacher Education Special Interest Group (TE SIG) of the Japan Association of Language Teachers (JALT).

Turning to the contents of the issue, this time we have four articles and one interview. There is an article about informal assessment by Andy McNulty, a practical article about "Keeping your students in English," by Michelle Segger, Task-Based Language Teaching is examined by Paul Wicking and the advantages and disadvantages of native and non-native language teachers are explained by Makiko Ebata. The interview is with Melissa Senga, the president of the Association of Foreign Wives of Japanese (AFWJ). Melissa and I are colleagues and have been for a few years now but I didn't know much about the AFWJ until we had a conversation about it a few months ago. It's an interesting organization in itself and also could be a useful resource for some of our membership so I thought that I'd include a version of our conversation, formalized as an interview.

Once again I must apologize for the late appearance of this issue. I was really pleased with myself in early August because I had finished. Then my computer failed while I was away in Hokkaido and I couldn't get anything done until I got back home. Sorry about that. You'll be pleased to hear that I have a new Asus S101 netbook now. I hope it lasts longer than my previous computer! That one failed after 11 months so I'm attempting to get it repaired under warranty. I don't hold out much hope though.

In other news I have been receiving more submissions recently so I am in a position to publish another issue before the conference. That means I may be able to publish four issues of Explorations in Teacher Education this year, which was one of my goals for 2009. Hope to see you at the conference.

Hope you enjoy the issue.

Simon Lees, Editor

## **Interview with the President of the AFWJ**

What's the name of your organisation?

It's the Association of Foreign Wives of Japanese, more usually shortened to AFWJ.

How long has it been in existence?

This year we are celebrating our 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. This first meeting was held at the Tokyo American Club in 1969. It was advertised in the Japan Times and the organisers expected a handful of women to turn up. There were over 40 at that first meeting.

What is its purpose?

The aim is to provide mutual support and friendship for foreign women in meaningful relationships with Japanese men. In today's world this also includes business networking and information exchange.

How does it go about accomplishing that purpose?

The main form of communication that all members have access to is a 120 page bi-monthly journal that they all receive. This is a combination of reports about each area, of which there are 8 including an overseas district, regular columns, fiction and articles on topics that are of interest to members. There are also reports from the executive board meetings and other administrative matters that it is essential that all members get.

To facilitate contact with other members there is a directory of members published every year which all members also receive.

Each area has their own executive board member who is also responsible for encouraging and assisting with meetings and events in their area. Any member can organise a get-together and can decide on the day, time, venue and nature of the event. Any member is welcome to attend any event. These range from coffee mornings, lunches, family picnics, ladies' nights out, craft mornings, business networking meetings and AFWJ business meetings, to weekends away.

Also for the last several years we have had an extensive set of email discussion groups. There are general groups, a political discussion group, a parenting group, several language groups for example for French speakers and German speakers, health groups, and a Japanese learners'

group.

For many, the highlight of the year is the annual convention when members from all over Japan and the world join together for a weekend of learning, friendship, and fun.

Tell us a little bit more about it.

The convention is held in a different area of Japan each year. Recently they have been in Aichi, Kagoshima, Chiba, and next year's will be in Hokkaido. The details of each convention are up to the organising committee but they generally start on Friday evening and go through to Sunday lunchtime. Workshops on various topics and sightseeing are usually part of the organised activities but there is also time for renewing old friendships and making new ones.

How often do you meet?

There is no set rule about how often districts meet or hold events. Obviously the larger districts such as Kanto organise more meetings and events than Shikoku. It is entirely up to each member whether they attend any meetings or events.

How many members are there?

447, including 37 who are overseas members.

Approximately what proportion of the membership are teachers?

While we don't keep statistics on this, a quick flip through the directory where most people list their occupation tells me that the majority are teachers in one form or another. This varies from full professors at university, through eikawa owners, part-time university teachers, private teachers, high school teachers, and kindergarten teachers. Also, while most teach English we also have teachers of Russian, Spanish, German and French to list just a few of the languages our members teach.

What do the others do?

Probably the second biggest group would be translators, proofreaders and re-writers. However while most people think that job opportunities are limited for foreigners in Japan to these areas, our members prove that this does not have to be so. We also have women who are currently architects, professional artists, bio-chemists, medical assistants, registered nurses, owners of import companies, floral designers, psychologists and photographers, to give some examples.

What is your position?

I am currently President of AFWJ.

How long have you held it?

I am serving my second term.

How long is a stint?

Each term is one year and a person can hold the position for 2 terms.

What does it involve?

Depending on the situation of the club, the role of president can vary. In years when the club has seen lean times, then presidents have worked hard to improve finances and build membership. Currently, we are in a healthy position membership and finance wise, so my job is more one of general overseeing and mediation when difficulties arise.

What other committee positions are there?

Other elected positions are vice-president, treasurer, membership–secretary, secretary, journal editor and district representatives for each of the 8 districts. There are also 4 non-elected positions which are public-relations, historian, website co-ordinator, and membership services.

Which ones have you done?

I've never been one to worry about the details too much so I jumped straight to the top.

What do you get out of your role?

I get a great deal of satisfaction seeing over 400 women from vastly different backgrounds and situations joining together to help and support each other. Knowing that I am assisting in this is a tremendous reward.

Does it have any effect on you as a teacher?

As well as giving me easy access to an enormous amount of knowledge and experience in many areas of teaching it also makes me keener to attend conferences as I often know, through AFWJ, many of the other women attending and presenting. It is also used extensively as a networking forum for jobs and information about employment.

If someone reading this is interested, how can they find out more?

Our website is [www.afwj.org](http://www.afwj.org) and on there prospective members can find out information about the club and how to join.

Tell us a little about yourself.

I'm Australian and it seems like I have always been a teacher in one form or another. I started off as a secondary school English literature and history teacher, which I did for several years in Australia and the UK. While in the UK I taught at a secondary school that was nearly all new immigrants and that got me interested in the field of intensive language teaching to overseas students, which was a field that was just starting in Australia.

When I returned to Australia I worked in one of these "new" language schools which catered mainly to young adults who predominantly came from Asia. I worked mainly in Brisbane, where I met my husband who had come to Australia for one year to study English, but did spend one year in Cairns as Director of Studies of a new school the company I worked for was opening.

After several years of marriage my husband wanted to return to Japan and although my knowledge of Japan and of the teaching situation here was very sketchy, I knew that I would be able to teach English in some way. As often happens, soon after arriving, I "inherited" some private classes from a friend of a friend, and then someone I met through AFWJ, which I joined as soon as I arrived in Japan, pointed me in the direction of some university classes she knew were becoming available.

Since then I've enjoyed the balance I've been able to achieve with child-rearing, private classes, and part-time university teaching. Eventually we would like to return to Australia. It probably won't be in the near future, as it would be impossible to achieve the same income in Australia for the same hours I work here.

Is there anything you would like to say?

Think I'm all out of inspiration.

## Why do TBLT?

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### Abstract

There has recently been a flood of articles and research papers in praise of task-based language teaching (or TBLT). The English teaching profession has been awash with textbooks, courses, and seminars extolling the virtues of TBLT, making this the new language teaching orthodoxy. So why exactly is everyone so excited about this methodology, and how does it relate to the unique socio-cultural context of Japan? This paper will look at the reasons for the decline of the old teaching praxis, examine the research behind the TBLT hype, and then proceed to suggest a working definition of 'task' which can inform classroom practice.

### **Introduction: The history of communicative language teaching and the shift towards a task-based pedagogy**

Task-based instruction was birthed from the field of communicative language teaching (CLT), which in itself began as a reaction against the behaviorist teaching methods of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. According to the behaviorist view, language learning was primarily a process of habit formation. It was thought that language patterns had to be memorized and practiced repeatedly, in order for learners to assimilate them and use them accurately outside the classroom. The primary emphasis within the behaviorist classroom was on the accurate production of grammatical forms, rather than the communication of meaning.

As in other countries, language teaching policy in Japan from the 1940s followed the behaviourist approach. The Ministry of Education adopted teaching practices and created English educational materials based on the Oral Approach, first developed by C.C. Fries. According to Fries, the psychology of learning disregarded learner intentions, conscious planning, and cognitive processes. Rather, language learning was simply a process of mechanical habit formation.

Gradually, the language teaching community woke up to the fact that language learning consists in much more than memorizing grammatical rules and lexis. Creativity in the production and reception of meaning is a very large and crucial part of language proficiency. (For important research

pushing the drive towards CLT, see Chomsky, 1959; Corder, 1967 and Hymes, 1972: cited in Willis, 2004). Thus, educators began to spend more and more time on developing the communicative competence of students. Once the forms had been taught, analyzed and drilled, more time was spent on 'free' production. At this 'free' stage, students were encouraged to focus primarily on meaning, and there was more tolerance of mistakes and errors. This new method of language teaching came to be known as "presentation, practice, production", or PPP.

The PPP system, or variations on it, still persists as the main method taught in teacher training courses, such as CELTA and TEFL courses, and is thus the main method used in Japanese EFL classrooms. Nova, the biggest EFL franchise school in Japan until it went bankrupt in 2007, trained all its teachers in PPP; Berlitz, one of the most expensive language schools in Japan which prides itself on the quality of its teachers and teaching practices, promotes the 'Berlitz Method'. Although the 'Berlitz Method' began as a variation of audio-lingualism, in contemporary practice it has evolved into another version of PPP.

There are a number of reasons for the persistence of PPP. Firstly, it has had an excellent relationship with teacher training and teachers' feelings of professionalism. This method places the teacher firmly in control, and makes for a neat and well-organized classroom. Secondly, this approach generates clear goals and a precise syllabus, therefore lending itself well to accountability and testing. Syllabus planning is relatively straightforward and convenient, and is seen as unrestrained by learner factors. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, there has been a lack of an alternative pedagogy. While SLA researchers and theorists have been very excited by TBLT, it has largely failed to outwork itself practically in terms of classroom organization, teacher training, accountability, and assessment (Skehan, 1998).

Recent research, however, suggests that PPP is not the most effective way to learn languages. The PPP method assumes that learners acquire language sequentially, as a series of isolated 'products'. Students are expected to be exposed to a language point, practice with a few exercises, and then this language point will become an established part of the learner's repertoire without any lapse of time. However, as any language practitioner will attest, language learning is not as neatly packaged as this. Learners need to have multiple exposure to target language before they can gain fluency and mastery of that language. This occurs primarily because learning is a developmental process, which is not subject to the learner's conscious control. Teaching does not determine the way in which a learner's language will develop. Willis argues:



They (students) may be able to reproduce the new items when their attention is on form in a monitored situation, but there is no guarantee that they will be able to use them in meaning focused communication, or that they have stored them for future use. In other words there is no guarantee that what is taught and practiced will be learned; rather this will depend on the developmental stage of the learner's interlanguage, which is internal to the learner. (Willis, J. 2004: 7)

Thus, dissatisfaction with the PPP approach has been growing for a number of years. Teaching practitioners have noticed that students do not immediately grasp language points and seamlessly incorporate them into spontaneous language as neatly as they were taught on their teaching training courses, and now there is the research to explain why.

There are practical problems associated with PPP as well, as argued by Ellis (2003: 29). It is extremely difficult to design free practice tasks (the third stage of PPP) that require the learners to use the target language, as they can always fall back on their strategic competence to avoid it. On the other hand, if the learners are instructed to make use of the target language, the 'free practice' ceases to be a meaning-based task and instead becomes purely another practice exercise.

Thus, the standard teaching praxis up until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century came to be regarded as having marked theoretical and practical limitations. It was in this atmosphere of dissatisfaction that TBLT emerged as a new alternative in language teaching.

## **2. Research into TBLT**

Historically, the two theories that have had the biggest impact on TBLT are perhaps the Input Hypothesis and the Interaction Hypothesis. The Input Hypothesis was introduced by Krashen (1981, 1982). This stated that language is acquired when the learner is exposed to input just a little more advanced than the current level of understanding. Thus, reception precedes production, and so learners should be exposed to extensive opportunities for listening and reading, before speaking and writing. Largely in reaction against Krashen's ideas, the Output Hypothesis was formulated by Swain (1985). This stressed the importance of production, declaring that input was a necessary but not sufficient condition for L2 acquisition.

It is against this backdrop of research that the conceptual and practical development of 'tasks' as the foundational building blocks of language teaching took place.

Drawing on research findings, Willis (2004) asserts that TBI rests on three basic premises:

1) Language learning is not a linear process, but is complex and organic. Learners acquire language according to their own inbuilt syllabuses, and so will not master an item unless they are developmentally ready for it. (Ellis, 1997; Pawley & Syder, 1983; Widdowson, 1983; Hunston & Francis, 2000.)

2) Language forms are most effectively learned when the learners' attention is not focused on form, but rather is focused on meaning. The struggle to understand meaning aids the subconscious acquisition of form. Otherwise known as the Input Hypothesis. (Krashen, 1985; Harley & Swain, 1984.)

3) Learners need to use the target language for a real purpose in order to learn it. Otherwise known as the Output Hypothesis. (Montgomery & Eisenstein, 1985; Long, 1996; Gass & Varonis, 1994; Makey, 1999.)

Recent studies, however, have been drawing increasingly upon sociocultural theory and Vygotskian paradigms of language learning (Lantolf, 2006). Vygotsky wrote: "Developmental processes do not coincide with learning processes. Rather, the developmental process lags behind the learning process; this sequence then results in zones of proximal development." (Vygotsky, 1978: 90). An understanding of this *zone of proximal development* (ZPD) is instructive for analyzing language learning in general, but especially for understanding TBLT and classroom interaction. Vygotsky defines the ZPD thus: "It is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers." (Vygotsky, 1986: 86).

It is within the ZPD that language is acquired and proficiency developed. According to such social-constructivist views, language learning is both an 'active' and 'interactive' process. It is active in that the student must invest intensive mental energy in task performance, and interactive in that this learning will be enhanced by interaction with fellow students and/or the teacher (Branden,

2006: 10). Thus, when learners interact with each other and the teacher, they are able to perform functions that they cannot perform on their own. Therefore, the only 'good learning' is that which is in advance of development.

TBLT has eventually come to be the buzzword amongst educators who are concerned that language learned in the classroom is able to be transferred to 'real-world' situations. This involves bringing those 'real-world' activities into the classroom. In other words, the knowledge, skills and proficiency of language use are not located in a physical space (the classroom), but rather in an activity (the task).

### **3. Task: a definition**

As just noted, there has been a consensual shift within the field of SLA away from linear, deterministic accounts of language acquisition, towards a focus on social interaction and the construction of meaning as the most crucial elements of L2 learning. Language 'exercises' have fallen out of favour, and language 'tasks' have come to the fore. However, while there is broad agreement as to the general characteristics of 'tasks', there remain numerous definitions about the specific features of a task. Long (1985) takes a broad definition that sees a task as any kind of activity, something that is 'done'; Kumaravadivelu (1993) views tasks as curricular content rather than methodological construct; while Nunan (2004) sees focus on meaning as paramount. There are so many and varied definitions of tasks that it has almost come to the point where any and every educational activity can be classified as a 'task'.

The most oft-cited and accepted definition of task, however, comes from Ellis:

A task is a workplan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed. To this end, it requires them to give primary attention to meaning and to make use of their own linguistic resources, although the design of the task may predispose them to choose particular forms. A task is intended to result in language use that bears a resemblance, direct or indirect, to the way language is used in the real world. Like other language activities, a task can engage productive or receptive, and oral or written skills, and also various cognitive processes. (Ellis, 2003: 16).

This definition is arguably the most comprehensive and draws together all the main points agreed upon by the various SLA scholars. However, a definition is also valuable for the way in which it can be implemented. The above definition is useful for research, but perhaps not as useful for informing classroom practice. Teachers in Japan who need a practical working definition of a task, that helps them plan and organize classroom activities, would be better served by Skehan (1998: 95), who defines 'task' as an activity in which:

- 1) meaning is primary;
- 2) there is some communication problem to solve;
- 3) there is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities;
- 4) task completion has some priority; and
- 5) the assessment of the task is in terms of outcome.

To Skehan's five criteria just mentioned, I would add one more:

- 6) a task is a workplan.

According to this definition, meaning is primary. Although (as will be argued later) form focused activities have an important role to play in language instruction, the learners' focus must primarily be upon the communication of meaning. In other words, learners need to use the language pragmatically, rather than just to display the language to the teacher.

This will be facilitated by an activity in which there is a communication problem to solve, often in the form of a 'gap' (eg. information, opinion or reasoning gap). The language form in which communication occurs is not prescribed by the teacher, so the learners are free to use whatever linguistic means is at their disposal to achieve the outcome. However, the task should be designed in such a way as to constrain language use, so that the linguistic options are limited.

This problem that needs solving should be in some way related to comparable real-world activities. This problem may represent an actual real-world activity (eg. writing a job application letter), or it may be more artificial (eg. drawing a picture of your partner's family). However, the processes of language use that result from performing the task will closely relate to those in the real world. In an ideal situation, tasks will be designed upon consideration of a needs-analysis survey, so that the real-world activities represented by the tasks relate closely to students' language goals. The

completion of the task must have some priority, so that students remain focused and motivated to finish; and the assessment of students' performance must be in terms of outcome. This outcome is non-linguistic and therefore irrespective of language forms used by the learners. One must also be aware of the difference between an 'outcome', which is what the learners are working to achieve, and an 'aim', which is the pedagogical purpose of the task. For example, an outcome might be a list of cities that your partner has visited this year, while the aim is to use the present perfect tense to ask questions and describe experiences.

However, it must be recognized that the conceptualization and planning of a task may be quite different from how the task is actually performed by the students in the real classroom setting. Thus, a final important characteristic of a task is that it is a 'workplan'. This takes into account the fact that tasks do not always proceed as planned, and that they are dynamic and can be modified and adapted as they are being implemented.

## **Conclusion**

There can be little doubt that TBLT has emerged in recent years as the method favoured by materials writers, educationalists and SLA theorists. The theory of task-based instruction is better able to account for the complex ways in which learners acquire language items and incorporate them into their language repertoire. The research to date seems to show that the use of tasks in the classroom not only increases the chance of language acquisition, but is also intrinsically motivating. However, when it comes to actual classroom practice, it is possible that linear, deterministic views of second language acquisition are still quite persuasive. It is hoped that a better understanding of the theory and research behind TBLT, together with a practicable, working definition of 'task', will guide teachers in the implementation of tasks and thus take advantage of the great benefits that they offer the learner.

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## **Advantages and Disadvantages of Systematic Informal Assessment**

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While assessing validity, reliability, and accountability with regard to educational testing, a presumptuous misnomer often comes to light. This misrepresentation is quite often the general belief of educators who, when hearing the word assessment, immediately recall their experience of testing during secondary education, which probably consisted of discrete items in norm referenced indirect tests. These tests lie at one end of the assessment continuum, that of formally planned, summative test procedures. However, at the other end of the continuum, a more informal kind of assessment has naturally been occurring (although usually an unconscious one), yet highly informative and closely related to the goals and objectives of the curriculum in question. However, informal testing carries a notion of unplanned monitoring, one, which happens merely when the teacher actually remembers to do so. This short paper would like to demonstrate that the advantages of systematic informal assessment, based on carefully organized methods, clearly outweigh the disadvantages of the procedure.

A major paradigm shift has occurred in ESL, as the teacher is increasingly becoming a major player in the assessment process. As the learning cycle is recursive in nature, so should the assessment and monitoring cycle, and the classroom teacher is in the best position to carry out these responsibilities. As the course planner and the objectives initiator, the teacher is in a position to understand what learning and teaching is going on, and how and why it is not. Observation is the basis for decision making about a learner's progress and so provides the rationale for specific programming (McDonell, 1992, p.167). As will be mentioned later, however, only a truly informed teacher can fully take advantage of this. The paradigm has also seemingly shifted in the description of language skills. Language, it has been argued is not a series of superficial, discrete features, and so students should not be assessed using these kinds of criteria. Language is complex and multidimensional and underpins the wider curriculum, so assessment also needs to reflect this complexity. Systematic assessment over time needs larger and wider samples, from a variety of activities and in a broader number of situations (Underhill, 1987, p.27).

An important part of systematic assessment is undoubtedly the monitoring process. If this process is carefully planned, it provides both immediate and cumulative information, which informs both learning and teaching strategies. Monitoring occurs at any time within the teaching context but as

mentioned, it is usually subconscious in nature. If, however, an aware teacher carefully plans time for monitoring, general assessment can occur alongside more specific skills assessment. Thus a more integrated profile of the learner can be established in which the teacher can really find out what the learner brings to and takes from the learning experience. In this way, the teacher is placed in the confident position of being able to reflect and intervene in supportive ways. Monitoring also provides the rationale for specific programming, in which the learners, having participated in the learning process, can become involved in the selection of appropriate strategies to deal with their perceived learning difficulties (Wenden, 1991, p.106).

Learner involvement in the assessment process is a factor of significant importance and a major benefit to the informal assessment process. Learners know their problems fairly well and so by participating in the process, their autonomy and motivation should increase. Systematic informal assessment also enables the learner to take charge, to rethink their objectives and to adjust their learner goals. It also highlights the how's, when's, why's and if's of learning, supporting the notion of metacognition (Anstey and Bull, 1996, p.250).

Systematic informal assessment enables a detailed profile of a learner to be drawn up, one which a discrete item summative test could never achieve. In order to be detailed, this profile relies on some general criteria, which align with and support the notion of a need for informal assessment. First of all, in order to increase reliability and validity, informal assessment needs time. The fact that this procedure is ongoing, supporting the recursive cycle of learning and the basic fact that no two learners are at the same stage of learning, gives the learners the flexibility to develop naturally and reflect frequently. This supports Underhill's impression that a teacher's judgment is formed as a gradual process (1987, p.27). Secondly, this kind of assessment enables the teacher to reflect at very close quarters, providing an extremely learner-centred environment where immediate feedback can be conveyed. Thirdly, informal assessment can be used at any time and so can cover a wide range of contexts over a great number of activities. These two factors greatly enhance the validity and reliability of systematic informal assessment in both general and more specific student profiles.

Nevertheless, despite all these advantages, there are a potential number of problems to be aware of. The first and very relevant to my own situation is the cultural uncertainty that this procedure might unleash on to its unsuspecting learners. On entering tertiary education here in Japan, informal assessment has definitely not been the norm and in fact its entire notion seems bizarre.



Therefore, on attempting to introduce it, unless the students are informed about how and why they are using it and are gently eased into it, anxiety and extreme negative backwash will result. In this situation, the teacher may have to meet the students halfway. Anstey and Bull refer to another potential problem that was briefly touched upon in the introduction. As much as the general public can be uninformed about the positive and negative effects of assessment, teachers themselves can also very much find themselves in that position. If so, a bias may creep into their judgement about what good assessment is, and if contemplating its use, what sources to draw on. Their own learning history and their knowledge of language learning, or lack of it are factors that could severely impinge upon the process (1996, p. 246). If carefully planned informal assessment is to be carried out properly with the appropriate face validity it deserves, teacher training is an absolute must. Teachers need to know what they are looking for, how to systematically monitor and collect and process data, and how to inform and present feedback in a sensitive manner that accentuates motivation.

A portion of the training in this sort of procedure should include instruction in the organization and gathering of information. The nature of systematic informal assessment suggests that a wealth of data is quickly accumulated, especially since the procedure supports a sampling in as many different contexts as possible, using a wide variety of assessment techniques. This means that the teacher needs superb organisational skills, as well as being able to log the data in a way in which it can be accessed efficiently and easily by the stakeholders in question. However, Gardner and Miller contend the notion of easy access, stating that if the purpose of this procedure, "is to encourage learner reflection and development then the nature of the access should be non-threatening and the results should remain private unless the learners wish to share them" (1999, p. 223). This is a worthy point and potential difficulties like competition within the classroom will certainly affect motivation. Therefore, through training, a teacher can use his/her sensitive judgements to make the correct decisions.

In considering the demerits of informal systematic assessment there are other problems that exist like teacher/learner relationships and the natural comparison between students that may occur during rating that can grossly affect judgment. However, what I would like to stress is that most of the disadvantages can be turned into advantages simply by making the teachers aware of their potential. Awareness will increase uniformity in the procedure and in the field, creating increased teacher reliability and a positive washback effect. A constant and consistent, carefully planned student centred informal assessment procedure will promote learning and provide the learner with

evidence of progression.

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# Can Nonnative Instructors Teach English As Effectively As Native Instructors?

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## Abstract

Having taught ESL/EFL for seven years has led me to believe that non-native instructors can teach English effectively since we are ESL/EFL learners ourselves. We can relate to our students through our shared difficulties and insecurities. However, a number of us face the insecurity of not being “fluent enough” to teach a language other than our native tongue. In order to familiarize both myself as well as other nonnative instructors and around the world teacher trainees, I conducted a research on nonnativeness. This paper explores the background of nonnativeness through qualitative research and non-native English speaking teachers. Finally, I sought to ask students about their reactions towards non-native English instructors.

## Background

In second language education, teachers come from a myriad of backgrounds. “Native English speaking teachers (NEST)” and “non native English teachers (NNEST)” are one of the efficient ways to divide them. These types of instructors surely obtain different advantages in teaching English as a second language. Needless to say, NESTs can teach not only their native tongue but also their cultures, values, and histories related to the target language. Students are thereby able to learn the intangibles of language from a NEST.

Despite the perceived disadvantages of learning English from NNESTs, there are a number of merits of studying English in their classes. In having experienced all the hardship in learning a new language, NNESTs can understand their students’ difficulties, goals, purposes, and feelings. Filho (2002) states that, “a big strength NNSs have is being able to not only predict their students’ difficulties, but also to estimate their potential”. He also argues that, “only NNSs can serve as models of what a successful learner should be”.

There is an interesting finding by Moussu (2006).

The changes in attitudes towards NNESTs that took place during the semester were in general more significant than the changes in attitudes towards their NESTs. That is, students taught by NESTs held an overall positive attitude towards their NESTs at the beginning of the semester, and time and exposure to these NESTs did not change very much overtime. Responses to the two last Likert-scale statements reflected particularly well this strong

influence of time on students' attitudes towards NNESTs. Responses to *I can learn English just as well from a NONNATIVE English teacher as from a NATIVE English teacher* (Q25) show that at the beginning of the semester, 14.76% of the students taught by NESTs strongly agreed, which had increased to 17.86% by the end of the semester, an increase of 3.1%; at the same time, 29.06% of the students taught by NNESTs strongly agreed to the same statement (Q25) at the beginning of the semester, and by the end of the semester, this number had increased to 42.02% (an increase of 12.96%).

The impression of NNESTs on the other hand, is not always positive before they teach classes. Filho (2002) asserts that, "NNSs seem to face more challenges in the ESL classroom by virtue of being identified as a nonnative speaker of English." He also suggests that "having an accent associated with First World nations such as Britain, the United States, and Canada renders speakers a higher status. Some students demonstrated preference for white teachers, assuming only those teachers could be native speakers of English."

How does the negative attitude towards NNEST alter? According to Moussu (2006), "students taught by NNESTs seemed less prejudiced against NNESTs in general than students not taught by NNESTs. Negative attitudes towards teachers did not necessarily show a relationship with nativeness." This suggests that actual contact with NNEST provides ESL/EFL students with affirmative reactions. NNESTs, in other words, are able to prove that they are as capable of teaching as NESTs, and are able to alter the students' behaviors toward them. In addition, there is an interesting finding by Donald (1995) who states that, "undergraduate judgments of NNSI teaching ability seem based on *perceptions* of the instructors' linguistic nonstandardness, rather than on actual (or manipulated) language patterns." He also maintains that, "instructors judged to be more physically attractive were judged to speak in a more standard accent and to be more Caucasian. Perceived physical attractiveness of NNSIs was the sole factor affecting judgments of interpersonal attractiveness and of teaching skill" (1995).

### **Voices of Non-native English Speaking Teachers**

It is confirmed by some research that NNESTs obtain as much approval as NESTs from students, especially from those who are taught by NNESTs. This is believed to ease a number of the anxieties which bother NNESTs most of all; no matter how professional and educated we are, 'nonnativeness' interferes with our confidence stability. In this section, I will examine NNEST's confidence level as English instructors.

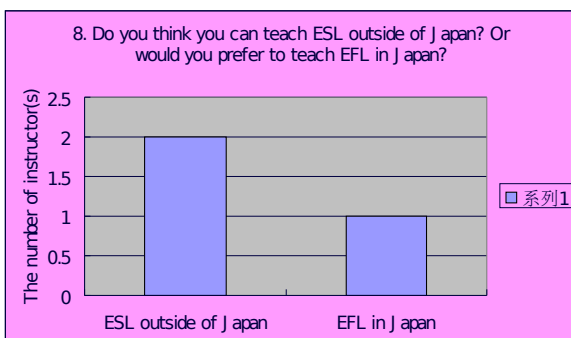
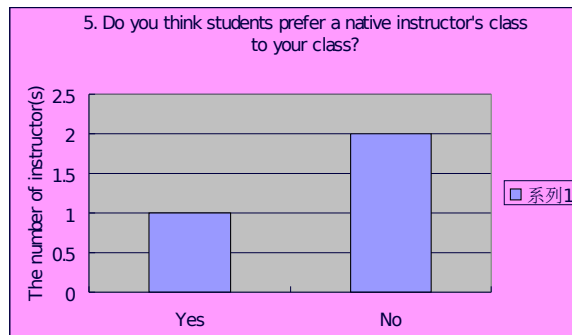
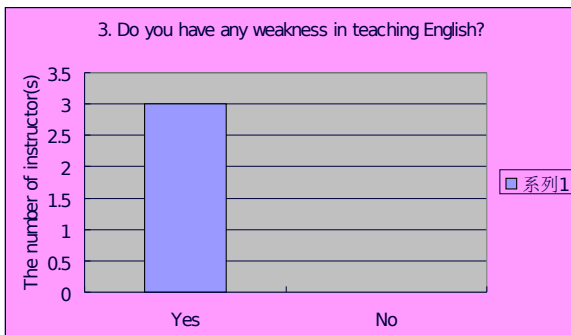
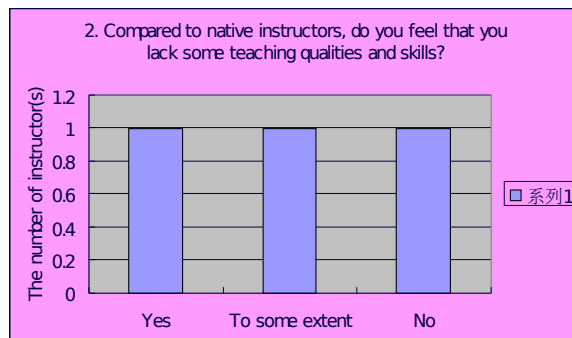
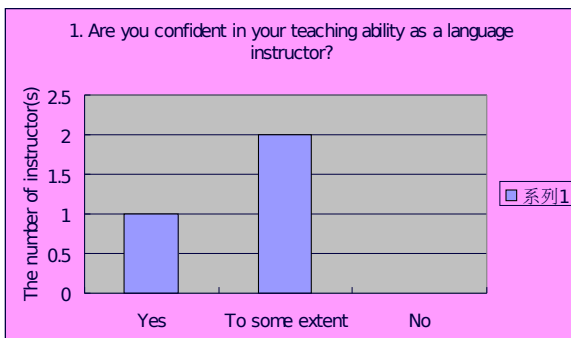
The questions posed to NNESTs are demonstrated below. The nine prepared questions aimed to make them reflect on themselves as language instructors, compare themselves with NESTs, and speculate upon their students' opinions. This research is aimed not only at measuring NNEST's confidence levels, but also at demonstrating to new instructors and students that even professional NNEST instructors, with a variety of experiences, have to some extent, insecurity through being nonnatives teaching a language. Through this research, I endeavor to encourage non-native English instructors in the world who keep struggling to produce more advantageous classes for students.

I asked three non-native English instructors who are all Japanese. Their first language is Japanese, they all have a master's degree in TESOL; and one of them is a PH.D student. Two of them are in their mid forties; the other is his thirties. They have more than ten years' experience teaching English and are enthusiastic about teaching. Instructor A is outgoing, friendly, talkative, and is good at teaching output skills with high oral skills. Instructor B is serious, organized, industrious, and is good at teaching input skills with both oral and writing skills. Both A and B have lived in the U.S. for several years. Instructor C is organized, serious, friendly, and is good at teaching grammar with high aptitude in grammar. He has not lived outside Japan.

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| 1. Are you confident in your teaching ability as a language instructor?                          | Yes / to some extent / No                  |
| 2. Compared to native instructors, do you feel that you lack some teaching qualities and skills? | Yes / to some extent / No                  |
| 3. Do you have any weakness in teaching English?   | Yes / No<br>→Please describe your weakness |
| 4. Which subject do you prefer to teach?   |  |
| 5. Do you think the students prefer a native instructor's class to your class?                   | Yes / No                                   |
| 6. Which subjects do you believe that nonnative instructors are good at teaching?                |  |
| 7. What elements do you think native instructors do not possess compared to you?                 |  |

8. Do you think you can teach ESL students outside of Japan? Or would you prefer to teach EFL students in Japan?  
 ESL outside of Japan / EFL in Japan
9. What do you think makes your students enjoy your class?
10. Write some comments on yourself as a nonnative instructor.

## Result and Analysis



3. Do you have any weakness in teaching English? Please describe your weakness.

Instructor A	colloquial use of words, preposition, articles, plural/singular
Instructor	I do (can) not entertain students

B	
Instructor C	I can never be a native speaker of English. Especially, I am bad at output skills compared to input skills.

4. Which subject do you prefer to teach?

Instructor A	reading, listening, speaking
Instructor B	writing
Instructor C	Grammar

6. Which subjects do you believe that nonnative instructors are good at teaching?

Instructor A	In all subjects (depending on the students' levels)
Instructor B	reading
Instructor C	grammar

7. What elements do you think native instructors do not possess compared to you?

Instructor A	They may not be able to relate to students' weakness.
Instructor B	Many, if not all, native instructors are not familiar with "why" Japanese learners have difficulty learning English. Some native teachers do not have enough knowledge of prescriptive grammar.
Instructor C	They might not know how difficult (yet enjoyable) it is to learn English.

9. What do you think makes your students enjoy your class?

Instructor A	casual atmosphere, balance (play/study)
Instructor B	I think they enjoy my class when they know that they are "learning."
Instructor C	If students can feel that their English is actually improving, I think it will give them high motivation.

10. Write some comments on yourself as a nonnative instructor.

Instructor A	If well planned out, even a nonnative instructor could lead effective classes.
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Instructor B	I love learning English myself, and that is something I can communicate to whomever I teach.
Instructor C	I think both nonnative and native instructors can complement each other. Therefore, as a nonnative instructors myself, I would like to believe I have some roles to play.

The ten questions are categorized into three themes: 1) self analysis of teaching ability 2) preferred and skilled subjects and reasons, and 3) self comparison with native instructors.

### 1) Self analysis of teaching ability

The 1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup> items are to determine the nonnative instructors' self-analysis of their teaching ability. All three of the participants reported that they had weakness in teaching. However, they have, at any rate, confidence in their teaching abilities. Since they have more than ten years teaching experience, they know their strong teaching points, which strongly relates to their confidence level. Two of them are willing to teach ESL classes outside of Japan, and this suggests that they are certain about not only their English proficiency but also their pedagogies. As for the 9<sup>th</sup> item, their comments demonstrate that they are familiar with methods to create enjoyable and understandable classes for students to sustain their learning motivation.

### 2) Preferred and Skilled Subjects and Reasons

The 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> items are categorized in this section. Interestingly, instructor A and B who have exposed themselves to other countries prefer and are good at all subjects but grammar; instructor C who has been in Japan throughout his life prefers and is good at teaching grammar. This suggests that although all language instructors are familiar with the significance of the role of language systems, living in foreign countries allows them to realize that grammar is not the only language element necessary for communication.

### 3) Comparison with Native Instructors

2<sup>nd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 10<sup>th</sup> items are in this category. According to the survey, three of them are acquainted with their own teaching strength which is to instruct input skills. The other strength they are certain about is that nonnative instructors can understand the weaknesses and difficulties involved in the process of learning a new language, since they are and were also second/foreign language learners.

Instructor A mentions that, "if well planned out, even a nonnative instructor could lead effective



classes.” B states, “I love learning English myself, and that is something I can communicate to whomever I teach”, and C states that, “I think both nonnative and native instructors can complement each other. Therefore, as a nonnative instructor myself, I would like to believe I have some roles to play.” Overall, in spite of any weaknesses, nonnative instructors are positive and, to a good extent, confident in their teaching abilities and the roles of the nonnative instructor.

### **Students’ reaction towards Non-native English Speaking Teachers**

The research finding suggests that NNESTs have, to some extent, a negative impression for all their language abilities compared to NESTs; however, their teaching changes their students’ attitudes towards them. In other words, once NNESTs prove that they are capable of teaching as professionally as NESTs, their non-nativeness becomes a nonfactor in a language class.

I came to wonder if the results of such research are applicable to the students at the school where I teach. This curiosity led me to prepare questionnaires in order to collect data on how the students regard a NNEST in a language class.

In order to collect appropriate data, research was conducted in three different language level classes: advanced, intermediate, and beginning levels. The advanced class consisted of twenty international students from Nepal, Cambodia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Taiwan, China, France, and Japan, whereas the intermediate and beginning classes were composed of twenty and thirty Japanese students. The questionnaires are demonstrated below.

<i>Compare native and non-native English instructors and answer the questions.</i>			
1. Which teacher do you prefer?	Native	Both	Non-native
2. Which class do you learn English more effectively?	Native	Both	Non-native
3. Which class do you feel more relaxed?	Native	Both	Non-native
4. Which class do you understand better?	Native	Both	Non-native
5. In which class do you speak more?	Native	Both	Non-native

6. In which class do you have more friends? Native Both Non-native

7. Which teacher do you think is more professional as a language teacher?

Native Both Non-native

8. Which teacher do you think has more teaching experiences?

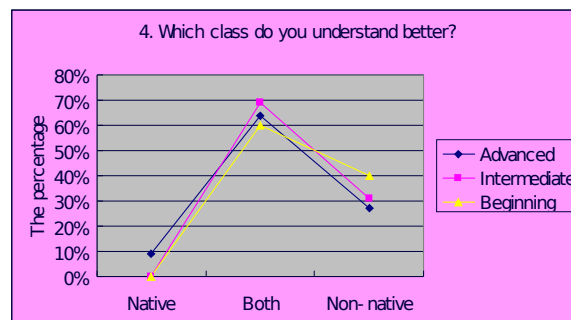
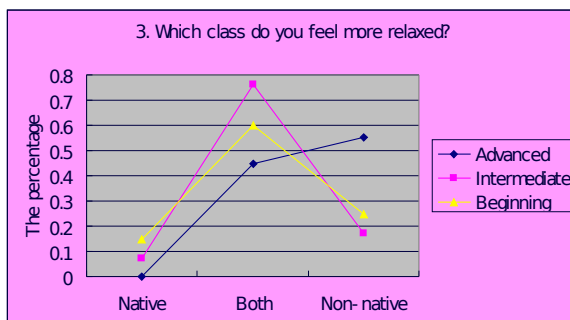
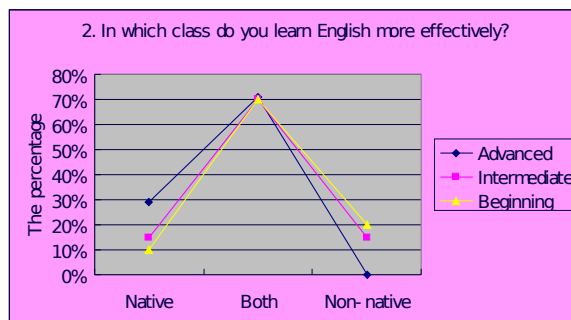
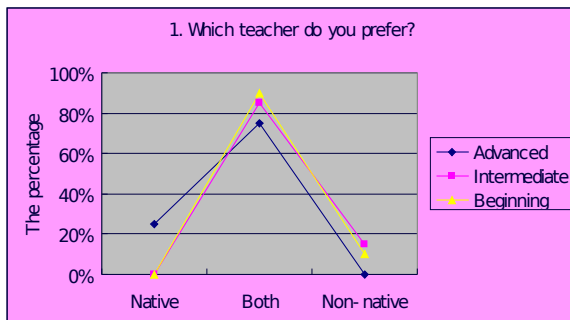
Native Both Non-native

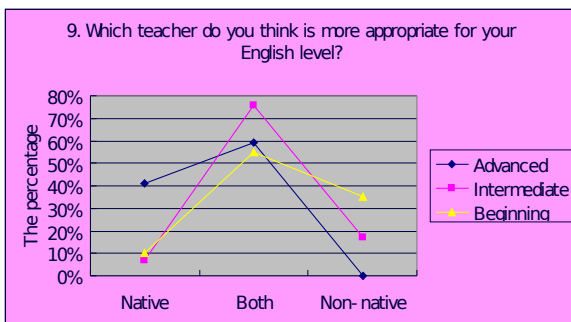
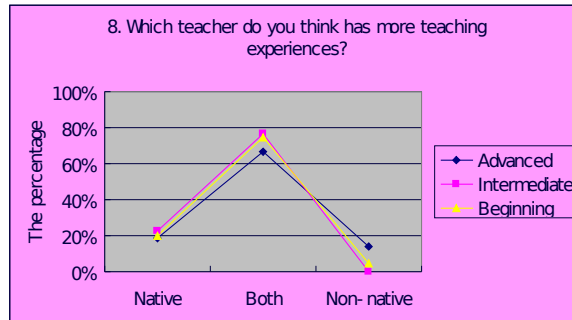
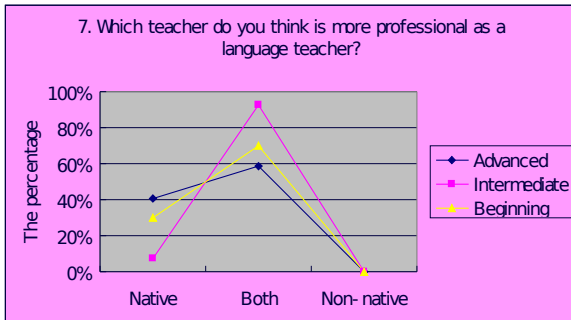
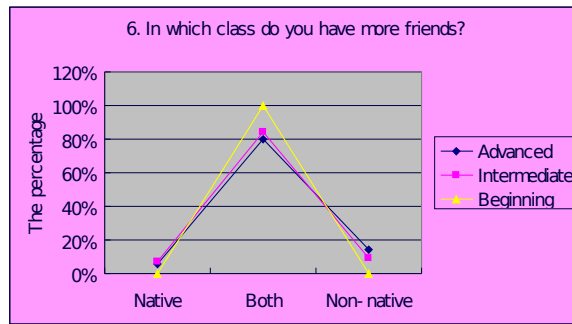
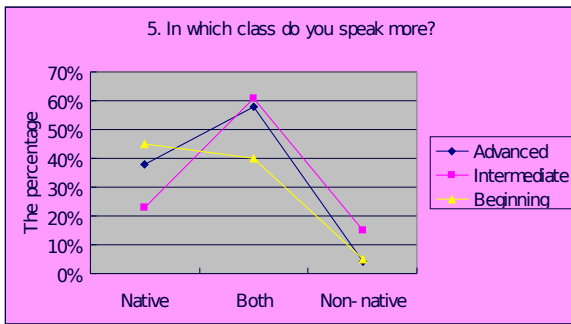
9. Which teacher do you think is more appropriate for your English level?

Native Both Non-native

10. Write some comments on native and non-native English instructors below.

## Result





The tables above illustrate the results of each question. Overall, nativeness did not affect the students' opinions for both native and non-native instructors. An advanced student commented, "as long as non-native instructors have proper pronunciation, it does not matter." Another student mentioned that, "both instructors have the advantages. For a beginner, native instructors may be too hard; however, as learners reach a certain level, it is the best that they learn from a native. Compared to non-experienced native instructors, experienced non native instructors are familiar with the learners' needs and the best way to improve their skills." This comment is a pleasure for every teacher: "as long as the teacher is kind and a good person, we are happy to be in his/her classroom."

There are some outstanding differences in some of the answers. The first table illustrates that more advanced students tend to prefer native instructors to non-native, and they can study more effectively in a class with a NEST. Interestingly, however, they can relax more in a non-native instructor's class, which demonstrates that their preference does not necessarily affect their

relaxing level. The result of question four provides us with the idea of an advantage of non-native instructors; they can offer plain explanations for students since they are familiar with the students' problematic language weaknesses. The result of the fifth questions should not surprise us. The students make more output with native instructors. It is a positive aspect that native instructors do not speak the students' first language, so that the students are required to speak only English in order to communicate with the instructor. Also, native instructors put more emphasis on output skills than non-native, which generated the result. Some non-native instructors may not like the results of the seventh and eighth questions. Slightly more students consider native English instructors more professional and have more teaching experiences than non-native instructors. Answers to the ninth question may also be unfavorable for non-native instructors. The advanced level students especially think that a native instructor's class is more appropriate for them, which suggests that non-native instructors need to prove that they are capable of and possess high standard teaching skills with sophisticated language abilities and knowledge so that students can feel secure in attending their classes.

There is no significant distinction between native and non-native instructor on other tables. Overall, it is analyzed from this research that the students regard native instructors as more experienced and professional, which especially leads advanced level students to believe that they are more appropriate for their language level. Although more students assume that native instructors are more skilled as language teachers, they feel more relaxed in non-native instructors' classes. In addition, they may have a better understanding in a non-native instructor's class. On the other hand, the students do not have a distinctive preference between non-native and native instructors. The comments of some students suggest that it does not matter who teaches English as long as, for example, he/she is a nice person with correct pronunciation.

Although the data in this research is limited and further research is surely necessary to make a strong conclusion, one conclusion that can be drawn from this research is that not only native but also non-native instructors can provide effective English language classes.

## **Conclusion**

NNESTs' understanding abilities of their students' difficulties, purposes, goals, and feelings are advantageous in ESL/EFL; however, even fruitful teaching experiences and educational backgrounds do not allow NNESTs to fully obtain confidence stability. The research aimed at familiarizing NNESTs and teacher trainees with students' reactions towards them. Results in this paper illustrate that although more students assume that native instructors are more skilled as

language teachers, they feel more relaxed in non-native instructors' classes. On the other hand, the students do not necessarily have a distinctive preference between non-native and native instructors.

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## **Question: How do I keep my monolingual classes in the target language?**

**Answer: Give them a tape recorder.**

Michelle Segger, Kinjo Gakuin Daigaku, <michelleinj(at)yahoo.com>

### **Why it works**

There are several reasons varying in importance from student to student and class to class. First, having a concrete object on the table is a constant reminder of the task in hand. Second, the results are also concrete. Talk is usually so transient; this activity leaves evidence that the teacher can check. Third, it gives them a chance to plan out and try conversations in a safe environment. Finally, the current younger generations have grown up with gadgets all over the house. They are used to posing for photos and posing for videos; this activity is an extension of such activities.

### **Preparation**

You need a tape recorder for every four students in your class. The recorders need a microphone. Mine all have a built in microphone but I suspect that a large karaoke style microphone would be even more popular. They also need a tape counter. Do some experiments with the tape counters. I have found that the tape counter number generally has no correspondence to time. For example , on the machines I use at the moment, a tape count of 40 is about 3 minutes.

I have also tried this activity with mobile phone recorders and with laptops, but I have found that the more 'traditional' equipment works best. It takes time to set up the recorder which emphasises the activity, and it is so out of date that it is actually a bit of an adventure for my 19 year olds to play with. They can see the tape moving and 'feel' the progress. However, it may be that more up to date technology will work for you.

If using tape recorders; the week before you plan to begin, ask students to bring batteries and a tape. My machines take two AA batteries. I ask every student to bring one battery so there is some redundancy. A 90 minute tape is a good idea if you plan to do the activity weekly. I always carry spare batteries and tapes.

Make a 'hint' sheet and a record sheet. You can see examples of these at the end of this article.

Decide your tape counter targets. I have university classes and have to grade my students. I set a tape count of 40 as a passing grade, 60 is a B, 80 is an A and over 100 is an AA. Keen students

talk for more than 200 every week. Students do the activity about 10 times in a semester and I work out the average tape count. I assign 25% of the overall grade to the tape talking element of my classes. If you were not grading a class but wanted to give incentives you could award prizes for the group that did the longest total tape count at the end of a set period.

### **Class organisation**

I ask my students to arrange themselves into groups of 3 or 4. It is best if the desks can be moved so students can sit facing each other. Give each group a recorder. Typically, they need step by step instructions on how to use the machines. For many of them it is the first time to use such out-dated technology. Make sure you know all about the machines before you introduce them to the students. Important points to check are; push the tape counter zero button before they begin so they start on zero and be careful of any long play options, they slow down the tape counter!

Give them about 20 minutes to make a recording. A passing tape count of 40 is only about 3 minutes. I discourage them from planning with paper and pencil, but encourage them to stop the tape and think through the next section of chat.

They can talk about anything. Shopping, TV, food, friends, part-time job, boy/girlfriends. I really encourage them to chat about the stuff they usually talk about with their friends. It is great if you can play a short section of tape in the style you want. First, I made one with a friend, but after the first year you can play a couple of minutes from an old tape.

When they have finished talking, get them to write the tape counter number on the record sheet next to the week number. In the first week I ask them to write the lesson time, their names, and to add a group name at the top of the paper. They place the record paper and the tape back in the tape box so I can see the tape count. They remove the batteries to use next week and then return the tapes and recorders to me.

### **To listen or not to listen**

When I began using this activity I listened to at least a few minutes of every tape every week. Now I usually don't listen to them. The activity in itself is enough for the students. They rarely ask me if I listen to them and are mainly happy to have the opportunity to 'chat' in English.

### Using the 'free' time

Students are pretty autonomous in this activity. A teacher hanging over their shoulders can actually adversely affect their production. I usually spend the first two weeks helping them get going. After that I leave them to get on with it. I head from table to table, checking attendance and homework assignments. I like this because I no longer have to check homework outside of class and students like it because they get immediate feedback on homework.

### Finally

I have found that most students find this task very motivating. They are excited to do their usual chatting, but in English, and something about the presence of the machine in the centre of the table really does encourage them to stay on task. And if you do have the time to listen, their conversations are really most entertaining!

### Appendices

Put ten of these on one side of A4 and they will be a nice size to fit in the tape box.

Names:			
Tape count: ALWAYS START AT 000			
Wk 1		Wk 7	
Wk 2		Wk 8	
Wk 3		Wk 9	
Wk 4		Wk 10	
Wk 5		Wk 11	
Wk 6		Wk 12	



<p><b>Starting</b> Hi. How are you today? What shall we talk about today? Do you have any news/ gossip?</p>	<p><b>Thinking time</b> Wait a minute, please. Let me look at my dictionary. Can you say that again? Speak slowly please.</p>
<p><b>Homework</b> Did you do your homework? What did you write about? Why? Do have a lot of homework?</p>	<p><b>Part-time job</b> What's your job? Do you like your job? How about your co-workers? How much do you earn? How many hours do you work?</p>
<p><b>School/Study</b> Shall we get lunch together? What's your favorite class? Why? Who's your favorite teacher? Why? How do you come to school?</p>	<p><b>Family</b> How many people in your family? How old is your (brother, father...)? Where do you live? What does your (mother, sister...) do?</p>
<p><b>Free time</b> What do you do in your free time? Do you like going to movies? Do you play sports?</p>	<p><b>Weather</b> Will it rain today? It's (hot, cold...), isn't it? Do you like (cold, hot...) weather? What do you like to do when it's (raining, sunny...)?</p>
<p><b>Food</b> What's your favorite food? Do you like (natto)? What Japanese food do you like? What foreign foods do you like? What's the worst thing you ever ate?</p>	<p><b>Drinks</b> What's your favorite drink? Do you like alcohol? How much (water) do you drink everyday? What's the worst thing you ever drank?</p>
<p><b>Friends</b> Do you have a boyfriend? What do like to do with your friends? Who's your best friend?</p>	<p><b>Finishing</b> I can't think of anything to say. Shall we finish? What's the tape count? Wow. We talked for a long time! Oh no! It's short. Next week let's try harder.</p>
<p><b>Showing interest</b> Really! That's interesting. Uhh-uhh Mmmm You're kidding. Tell me more That was a good story</p>	<p><b>Your ideas</b></p>



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