

Using Pair Taping

Peter H. Schneider
[PeterSLA \[at\] aol.com](mailto:PeterSLA[at]aol.com)

Introduction

A lack of motivation in learners appears to be the greatest concern of English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers (Nunan, 1993). English as a second language (ESL) learners live in an English-speaking culture, probably desiring entry into that culture, and certainly needing English in their everyday lives, while few EFL learners have yet to experience a personal relevancy for English. Moreover, EFL learners most likely have not started learning English because they wanted to, and can easily be tired of studying it after years of compulsory courses, and subsequently not be motivated. One way to overcome this obstacle to their learning, I propose, is to focus exclusively on fluency, introducing EFL learners to communicating with only their English. Years of study have left them with an extensive vocabulary and knowledge of grammar that they probably have not had much opportunity to use to express themselves. They may believe themselves incapable of speaking English, or feel the hopelessness that many L2 learners suffer (Dornyei, 1994). In having to rely on their latent ability in English, EFL learners can demonstrate to themselves that they can succeed in speaking English. It may also activate in them the prime motivators for language learning (Dornyei, 1994; Crookes and Schmidt, 1991):

- They can gain self-confidence concerning their English.
- They can discover English has more relevancy for them and holds more interest.
- They can feel increased satisfaction from studying it.

I have found that an effective method for getting learners to access their own resources is to let them tape record themselves while speaking in pairs. "Pair taping" allows L2 learners to concentrate on making the output from this accumulated knowledge of English comprehensible (Swain, 1985), something they may do better talking with each other than with native speakers (Doughty and Pica, 1986). Learners speaking together will also teach one another (Pica, 1994), and almost never misinform (Long and Porter, 1985). In addition to helping to motivate EFL learners, pair taping offers solutions to other related problems that teachers face: students not feeling responsibility for learning, or not making much effort, or not speaking English in class, or using the native language. For dealing with these and other common EFL concerns, Nunan (1993) recommends a learner-centered curriculum, one in which L2 learners determine how and when and what they learn. This can be accomplished through pair taping. As learners who do pair-taping are essentially in charge of their language acquisition, they maintain personal accountability for that learning. They have an added incentive to speak continuously in English knowing that the teacher will be monitoring their conversations through listening to the tapes. This article will introduce pair taping and suggest some ways to implement it.

Preliminary results

A study of pair taping was conducted over several years with second year Japanese college students in their eighth or more year of English study. The teacher initially gave an option to two English conversation sections of fifty each: instead of attending their once-a-week class, individuals could utilize the language lab to record conversations in English for an equivalent amount of time spread equally over four days a week. Within this format they could talk about whatever they wanted to, whenever they liked, and with whomever they wished. The only other conditions were that they must speak only English and could not be silent. The results of the first year showed that there were differences between those who elected to pair tape and those who did not, although the reason for this is not necessarily the technique: the groups were not selected randomly, and the personality types of those who would choose to pair tape, for instance, might be more the cause for these differences. This understood, those who did pair taping reported "significantly" more that speaking had become easier and more enjoyable over the year. Both groups had equal increase in listening comprehension despite the fact that the learners doing pair taping had had no time with the teacher. This suggests that improvement in listening comprehension was not adversely effected by learners not having a chance to listen to and occasionally speak to a native speaker teacher in class. The learners who did pair taping were also quite positive about the effectiveness of taping, and appeared to be more relaxed, confident, and enthusiastic than before (Schneider, 1993). This paper will describe where and with what students do pair taping, how they do it, and how their tapes are checked, and then the ways to use the technique to replace a class.

Facilities and equipment

A language laboratory is a suitable location to do pair taping. There are obvious logistical reasons for this, and a sense of community may result when pairs are taping in the same area even if they are not all doing it together. That said, the taping could be done anywhere that students have access to a cassette recorder. Explaining pair taping to students Learners who do pair taping are given the following instructions:

1. Talk about any topic you wish and change partners any time. False beginners at the college level can be surprisingly capable of carrying on conversations when the content is left up to them. This type of interaction seems to energize them. As fixed pairs can run out of things to talk about, the teacher should encourage speaking with as many different partners as desired. Students can even, if necessary, tape alone, with the teacher as silent partner. Taping in threesomes probably should be avoided, in that these afford each learner less time to speak, if not more time for some to day-dream.
2. Have a natural, flowing conversation: don't pause or stop while taping, don't leave long periods of silence, and don't speak in your own language except to ask the English equivalents such as with "How do you say...?" or "What's...?" Pairs are further recommended to share their stores of vocabulary and structures, and so learn from each other. Learners following such guidelines will make the most of the opportunity pair taping affords them to increase their ability to communicate in English.
3. Tape once a day. A substantial part of the success with pair taping is seemingly due to students recording many times a week. Speaking English becomes a routine part of their daily schedule then and makes the act of speaking English feel more ordinary. Commonsense might accordingly suggest that the more frequent and longer tapings there are the better. The teacher must balance this, when deciding the number of days and length of sessions, with the function pair taping has in a class and with what students find workable and reasonable.
4. Write the date of taping in the class log. The teacher should establish a log that will show the days and frequency of taping and whether any students ever get behind. In person or by note the teacher can advise those who have missed a few days to record an extra day a week in order to catch up. Students who keep a written record of when they record are also apt to feel increased responsibility for the taping.
5. Get enough tapes for two weeks of recording. The students will use half of their tapes for recording during a week and the teacher will keep the other half a week for checking.
6. Hand in the tapes of your pair(s) together at the end of each week.

Checking tapes From all the collected tapes, the teacher takes one cassette from each pair for the same session(s) and fast forwards, listening momentarily to different parts of the students' conversation(s). Comments are stuck on the tape covers with stick 'em notes. For example, a relatively common note for me at first, Don't speak Japanese, soon ceases to be. Such reminders showing that the tapes are really being monitored should eventually make it unnecessary to do much more than token checking. The teacher might also inform the students that entire tapes will be reviewed from time to time. Monitoring reinforces the idea that recording conversations is a serious endeavor, not simply a diversion from a regular class period. Moreover, the taping wouldn't make sense to students if their tapes were never listened to. Learners can feel more natural speaking English with a teacher present (Matthew Taylor, 1991: M.A. thesis), even if, as in pair taping, that presence is only implied.

Special considerations when splitting a class

There are various advantages to letting students do pair taping rather than attend class. In a large conversation class the teacher is generally too occupied during pairwork with keeping the students "on task" to have much time to interact with individuals. The teacher directly hears learners who are pair-taping on their tapes, however, and can give them advice orally or in writing. Also, the students choosing not to tape will probably be in a considerably smaller class and can likewise receive increased personal attention.

The option to do taping in pairs is explained to students on the first day of class. To assign pair taping arbitrarily to all students might not be advisable. Not all will want to study independently, nor necessarily benefit from it (Dickinson, 1987). Having the choice to tape also fosters learner autonomy from the start. Students may find taping more attractive if the place for doing it is available as much as possible throughout each day. The fact that the taping can be done at any time is one of the major incentives for selecting pair taping over the traditional class (Schneider, 1993).

The teacher's relationship with learners who are pair-taping is rewarding for both sides. In listening to tapes weekly a teacher gets to know individuals better than before. The learners in turn seem to become less distant with the teacher despite never coming to classes. Indeed, they can appear to treat the teacher as an ally, perhaps because the teacher takes time to listen to them, openly

desires that they improve, and lets them study by themselves (Schneider, 1993).

Record-keeping and evaluation

Marking may not be necessary when pair taping is homework or a task in a class. Some record-keeping will be essential, though, and the aforementioned log can serve as a basis for it. Students who have used pair taping to replace a class can perhaps be given grades for doing it faithfully. Certainly effort should be rewarded, and there may not be any satisfactory method of fairly evaluating "improvement" or "increased fluency." Grading on a single interview test doesn't seem right because any student can have a bad day. Even conscientious taping will not prevent someone's language improvement from being roller coaster-like, complete with level spots and dips (Murphey, 1991; Van Patten, 1987; Harley & Swain, 1984).

Conclusion

Pair taping should be a suitable procedure for any intermediate FL students, especially those in a large class and/or who share a fear about being conspicuous in a group. It could also provide an excellent breather between or after academic-oriented classes at intensive English programs. The argument can be made that interaction in pair taping is not 'real' communication due to the artificiality of the setting. Yet learners whose surroundings offer them no opportunities to speak may not get much closer to real communication. It is doubtful that those who are pair taping would characterize their relating as anything other than real. Also, during pair taping, students are independent, with total control over the content and level of English, speaking in their English about what interests them. Hopefully this will make them want to speak English and want to speak it better. It could mean their experiencing English less as a subject they have to take than as something belonging to them that they would like to continue improving.

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The author

Peter Schneider is the author of *Some Tips for Japanese Speakers of English* and other texts in Japan. He is currently teaching at California State University Northridge.

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