

Boosting Speaking Fluency through Partner Taping

David E. Kluge

[kluge \[at\] kinjo-u.ac.jp](mailto:kluge[at]kinjo-u.ac.jp)

Matthew A. Taylor

[taylor \[at\] kinjo-u.ac.jp](mailto:taylor[at]kinjo-u.ac.jp)

Kinjo Gakuin University (Nagoya, Japan)

Summary

To give students more fluency practice, students are required to tape conversations outside of class every week. The results of this "partner taping" have been encouraging. Students stay in English while taping, develop greater fluency, gain hours of extra practice, maintain a concrete record of their progress, and get a sense of responsibility for their learning. The teacher also gains a better sense of the students and their language problems. This paper describes the procedures and benefits of partner taping, then points out pitfalls to avoid.

Background and Rationale

For some time, we had been frustrated by the lack of time for open-ended English speaking practice in our once-weekly English oral communication course. We also wanted our students to take more responsibility for their own fluency development outside of class. We were encouraged by the work on student taping of Schneider (1993), and decided to institute our own system of "partner taping" as a supplement to our course, requiring students to record free conversation outside of class and turn in their tapes as homework each week. The results with our students have exceeded our expectations. Students stay in English while taping, and get hours of extra practice, as well as keep a concrete record of their progress. They develop greater fluency and a sense of responsibility for their learning. The teacher gains a better sense of the students and what their language problems may be. Partner taping has become an indispensable component of our course. This paper describes the procedures and benefits of partner taping, then points out some pitfalls to avoid.

Though our experience is with small classes of university English majors in Japan, it may offer a good departure point for interested teachers in other language learning settings, particularly monolingual settings where opportunities for L2 practice outside of class are limited or nonexistent. Our system requires a moderate amount of extra work by the teacher, but the rewards more than repay the additional effort. Our experience also demonstrates the enormous utility of a very "low tech" tool, the small, portable, cassette recorder.

Procedures

Our course is "Speaking 1," an oral communication course in English for first year English majors at Kinjo Gakuin University in Nagoya, Japan. Classes meet once a week, with approximately twenty students in each class (all female, ranging in ability from lower to upper intermediate). This section explains the procedures for partner taping.

Introducing the System

- On the first day of class, students are told that they must tape free conversations outside class and turn the tapes in as homework every week.
- The teacher emphasizes that outside taping is a requirement for passing the course, not an option.
- The teacher emphasizes the benefits of outside taping in developing fluency, and reports on the favorable experience of previous years' students.
- Students are asked to choose taping partners (groups of three are also allowed) for the whole year. (If, as occasionally happens, one partner withdraws from school or taping partners prove incompatible, students may need to find new partners or join another group.)

- Students are told to bring to the next class two new blank cassette tapes of precisely the length the teacher specifies.
- Students receive a handout (see Appendix A) with these and other requirements (see the section below) which the teacher explains, usually over the first two lessons.
- The students must label both tapes and cassette jackets precisely as the teacher specifies. (Labelling should include the day and period of the class, the student's name and student number, and "W" or "K" to indicate if the tape is the "Working Tape" or "Keepsake Tape"--to be explained below. This information needs to be written on side A and B of the cassette, on the spine of the cassette jacket, and on the front of the cassette jacket. The partner's name and student number should also be written on the front of the cassette jacket.)

Tape Players and Facilities

Students record on tape recorders which are small (slightly larger than a standard hardcover book), light, portable, relatively inexpensive, easy to operate, and which record clearly. Several dozen recorders are available. Students, sign out a recorder in a notebook, and must sign it back in on the same day. Students must not take the machines off campus. Student taping usually takes place during lunch or free periods, sometimes in empty classrooms or lobbies, but mostly in the lounge area near the English Department.

Tapes

Every week, students fill one side of one tape entirely with free conversation in English. Each student has two tapes, one for recording their first and last conversations of the year in order to evaluate their progress (Tape K), and the other for ongoing taping (Tape W).

- Tape K, the "Keepsake Tape," contains the first conversations of the year on Side A. The teacher collects and keeps these tapes until sometime toward the end of the academic year. At that time Tape K is returned to each student and they record their last conversations on Side B. The students, having a tape that contains their first and last conversations, compare them and evaluate progress in fluency using word-count, evaluation questions, and free comments on a handout provided by the teacher (See Appendix B). The tape is also (perhaps most importantly) a memento or "keepsake" of their progress.
- Tape W is the "Working Tape." Except during the few weeks when Tape K is used, the Working Tape will be filled up, turned in, and handed back to the students every week.

The Weekly Routine

A pair of students have two Working Tapes between them. They turn in one of these tapes every week, and tape next week's conversation on the other partner's tape. At the next class, the tapes are exchanged and students record on the returned tape. There should always be a tape for the teacher to audit and another for the partners to record on.

When taping, students must:

- fill up one side (23 minutes) of a 46 minute tape every week.
- give names, student numbers and the date at the beginning of the conversation.
- speak in their own unrehearsed words, without using written material.
- not use any language other than English.
- not leave long pauses in their conversations.
- rewind the cassette to the beginning when they are finished taping.

Auditing and Evaluating the Tapes

Listening to every tape completely would be an unreasonable demand on the teacher and is unnecessary. In auditing the tapes, the button most often used is fast forward. Spot checks at the beginning, middle, and end of the tape suffice. With a double cassette player, the teacher can audit two tapes simultaneously, fast forwarding both and periodically stopping either to listen to short portions. Auditing the tapes for a class of twenty may take around 30-45 minutes, which would include marking off students' work on a roster, and evaluations (below).

In auditing the tapes, the teacher:

- ensures that students have recorded the full 23 minutes (there should be no blank portion at the end of the tape) in English without excessive pauses.
- ensures that names, student numbers, and dates are at the beginning of the tape.

In evaluating the tapes, we do not focus on accuracy or mastery of language, which are evaluated elsewhere. We see the value of taping as developing fluency, and insist only on the requirements given in the previous section. Both authors count partner taping as constituting up to 20% of a student's final grade. However, between the two of us, our evaluation methods differ somewhat.

One of us has chosen to assign points for each finished tape which ultimately figure into the students' final grade. Lapses in following the requirements mentioned previously entail reductions in points. A note on a small index card inserted into the cassette case informs students how many points they received, the reason for any lost points, a brief note of the topics, and perhaps some praise, encouragement, or personal comments.

The other of us chooses simply to evaluate tapes on a "Done/Not done" basis. When tapes are not turned in, it is clear on the roster, and a full complement of tapings at the end of the year will mean full points. All finished tapes receive a Post-It (a memo sheet that has a light adhesive on the back that allows it to be fixed or removed easily) on the outside of the cassette case, which may contain a request to do the tape again if the full 23 minutes have not been recorded, or if the native language is present on the tape beyond the occasional word or phrase. (Having students do tapes over again is sometimes common when the system first gets underway, but very rare afterward.) Otherwise, the Post-It may contain a warning or reminder (for minor infractions like slight use of L1, forgetting to give the date, etc.), a suggestion about L2 use, praise, encouragement, or a personal comment regarding some item of conversation.

Student Evaluation

Toward the end of the academic year we return Tape K, the "Keepsake Tape," to the students. Students record their last two conversations. They then compare their first and last conversations (sides A and B) using a rough word per minute count, and give impressions about their fluency progress using both a multiple choice questionnaire and free comments. This is done on a handout. (See Appendix B.) The primary goal of this student evaluation is for students to see for themselves how much they have improved, and more generally for them to recognize the value of concentrated, constant, independent practice. The student evaluations have been encouraging for us as well, as students often express surprise at their own improvement, as well as much more enthusiasm for taping than we would have expected.

Additional Procedures and Materials

An additional procedure we sometimes employ is to erase Working Tapes before returning them using a bulk eraser, a small device that erases an entire tape in about three seconds. This lessens (but does not completely eliminate) the possibility that students might simply turn in a previously recorded conversation, and just change the date.

In our course, partner taping is integrated into ongoing coursework using our textbook *In My Life: A Conversation Workbook* (Kluge and Taylor 1999). The units of the text are focussed on aspects of the students lives ("My Daily Life," "My Family and Friends," etc.), and students are strongly encouraged to take up these topics in partner taping. This textbook also includes a large number of conversational strategies (openers, closers, standard greetings, changing the subject, interjections, etc.) which students are encouraged to practice while partner taping. However, other strategy-based speaking textbooks could work well in tandem with partner taping.

The Benefits of Partner Taping

Outside taping has become a vital component of our course, and several benefits are clear:

1. Students develop real fluency and ease in using English.
2. Students nearly always stay in English while taping, as they are conscious of a listener.
3. Students get hours of extra practice and a concrete record of their progress.
4. Students have a concrete record of their progress.
5. Students gain a sense of responsibility for their progress beyond the classroom.

6. Teachers gain a better sense of who the students are and what their language problems may be.
7. Most students enjoy the taping and recognize its value.
8. The spirit of the school is transformed as hallways, lobbies and lounge areas fill up with students chatting in English.

Avoiding Pitfalls

Students generally tape enthusiastically, but during the first few weeks, some students may try to get away with as little work as possible. The effectiveness of the system is compromised (and headaches in auditing tapes greatly increased) if the teacher is not firm on the following points very early on:

- Insist that students buy the required length of cassette. Refuse tapes of any other length. (This is mostly for ease of auditing. The teacher will automatically know students have recorded the required length by fast forwarding to the end of the tape, but not if the end of their conversation is hidden somewhere in a different length tape. Trying to find the end of that conversation, then eyeing the thickness of the recorded portion to estimate how long it is, are difficult and time consuming tasks.)
- Insist on correct labeling. Refuse mislabeled tapes. (This is for ease of handling tapes while auditing.)
- Insist that students record the required length. If students record less, make them do it again. Once students know the teacher is serious, this problem virtually disappears.
- Insist that students rewind the tape to the beginning. (Otherwise, the teacher will have to do it herself.)
- Scold students for native language use, long pauses, or reading into the tape. If scolded early enough, students will stop, but it is very difficult to stop such practices once they get established.

Additional items to insist on are giving names, student numbers, and dates on the tape. Warnings or reductions in points early on usually take care of lapses here.

Another problem for us is that signing out tape recorders is an "honor system"; several machines have in fact disappeared. It would be better to have staff from whom students need to personally sign out the machines. Run down batteries and knowing when to change them have also been problems, which our office assistant has solved in the following way: students must take fully charged batteries from a designated box and put them in the machines themselves, then put the used batteries in another box. Our assistant recharges all the used batteries. Using a Language Laboratory for student taping (Schneider 1993) would eliminate all of the above problems with recorders, though it would take away the flexibility and mobility that they provide. At any rate, some institutions may not have a budget for purchasing as many recorders for student use as we have had.

Late tapes or absent students can create problems (e.g. a teacher may hold two Working Tapes, leaving students nothing to record on). Such problems are best solved by arranging a convenient place on campus for students to pick up returned tapes rather than waiting to get them back in class.

Finally, we cannot be completely sure that some students are not cheating by turning in previously recorded conversations rather than recording new ones, an easily executed technical maneuver. As mentioned above, using the cassette eraser can reduce but not eliminate this possibility. However, our experience suggests that this problem is rare or nonexistent: we can see most of our students taping in the lounge areas, and auditing clearly shows that conversation topics are current (weather, recent news events, etc.).

Conclusion

Partner taping outside of class offers a simple, practical, "low tech" method of getting students to develop more fluency in a foreign language and take responsibility for their language practice. Though some additional work is required by the teacher, it is well rewarded. Ours is by no means the only possible system of partner taping. We hope that interested teachers will be able to modify or develop the simple, practical system presented here to fit their needs or situation. Auditing tapes could become difficult if partner taping is attempted with larger classes (more than 35 students), so teachers should think twice before using a system like ours in such classes without some changes. Our own system may not be the best one, even for small classes of 15 to 20 students. Much more could be done with students auditing their own or other students' tapes, especially with more noticing of the language they use and reflection worked into the procedure on a more continual basis. Our own syllabus and timetable have kept us from developing this to date.

We are also eager for teachers experimenting with this or similar systems to begin assessing the effectiveness of student taping, since

we have not yet had the opportunity to do so. We emphasize, finally, that our system is an integrated supplementary requirement, and as such does not stand alone from the other work of the course, or constitute, in itself, any complete approach to spoken foreign language proficiency. But, this system is one that has brought benefits to our program, and to our students' English speaking ability.

References

- Kluge, D. & Taylor, M. (1999). In My Life: A Conversation Workbook. Nagoya: Kinjo Gakuin University.
- Schneider, P. (1993). Developing Fluency with Pair Taping. JALT Journal 15(1):55-62.
- Schneider, P. (1997). Using Pair Taping. The Internet TESL Journal
<http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Schneider-PairTaping.html>

Appendix A Partner Taping Instructions Handout

Partner Taping

To help you become more fluent in English, you will record free conversation with a partner outside of class for 23 minutes each week. Many of last year's Speaking 1 students commented that partner taping really improved their fluency in English and was also very fun! Here is how to do it:

Partner

Find one person who has almost the same schedule as you do, and is someone that you want to talk to a lot over this next year. This person will be your partner for the entire year, so choose well. (It is also possible to make a group of three if you like. If you do, this group of three people will be your taping group for the entire year, so, once again, choose well.)

Materials

You will need two NEW 46 minute cassette tapes. No other length of cassette tape is acceptable. (No 60 minute, 90 minute, 120 minute, or other length cassette tapes will be accepted. Only 46 minute cassette tapes will be accepted.)

How to Label the Tapes

- Label the spine of the tape case with the code the teacher shows you and the names and students numbers of you and your partner.
- Label the side of the tape case with the code the teacher shows you and the names and students numbers of you and your partner.
- Label both sides of the tape with the code the teacher shows you and the names and students numbers of you and your partner.

How to Record

Use one of the tape recorders already set up in the lobby in front of the English department office, your own tape recorder, or check out one of the portable tape recorders from the English department office (E7-508).

If you use one of the portable tape recorders from E7-508, you must sign out for it in the notebook on the nearby table. You must never take these tape recorders off campus and must always return them on the same day that you use them.

For each week's conversation, you should:

1. Push PLAY for 5 seconds until the tape is ready for recording, then push RECORD and PLAY.
2. Each person should say her name and student number.
3. One person, or both people should say the date.
4. Record a free conversation for 23 minutes (one full side of the 46 minute tape).
5. When you are finished with your conversations, rewind the tape to the beginning.

If you feel a 23 minute conversation is too long or too difficult, you can record two shorter conversations on the tape during the week instead. In this case, do step one only for the first conversation, steps two and three for both conversations, and step five only for the last conversation.

Be Careful!

You will not receive credit for the recording if . . .

- you do not use a 46 minute cassette tape.
- your tape is not properly labelled (on the spine of the cassette case, on the side of the cassette case, and on both sides of the tape).
- you do not say your names and student numbers.
- you do not say the date.
- you do not rewind the tape to the beginning after you finish.
- you read conversations into the tape recorder instead of speaking freely.
- you use Japanese on the tape. (It's OK to use a few Japanese words if you also try to translate them.)
- you have too many long pauses in which nobody says anything.
- you record less than 23 minutes.
- you do not remove extra cassette labels or other extraneous material from the cassette case.

The teacher has many tapes to listen to. Make the teacher's job faster and less confusing by keeping these rules.

How to Use the Tapes

Tape One: The Keepsake Tape

Record your first conversation on side A of Tape One. When the first side of Tape One is finished, the teacher will collect the tape. This tape will be returned to you toward the end of the year so that you can record your last conversation on side B of the same tape.

Therefore, on Tape One you will have a chance to listen to your first conversation of the year and your last conversation of the year. You will be asked to compare the two conversations. This will show you whether you have improved in fluency over the year, and if so, by how much.

This tape will also be a nice "keepsake," something that you can keep as a record of good memories in your university life!

Tape Two: The Working Tape

After the first side of Tape One is finished, you will then start taping on Tape Two. Tape Two is for ongoing taping throughout the year. These conversations will not be saved. The teacher will collect them each week and return them the following week, with some written comments or advice.

Ideas for Topics

Any topic is OK! If you need ideas for topics, try some of these: 1) topics that you are studying in the textbook, 2) things you have done recently, 3) things you plan to do, 3) family and friends, 4) recent news from TV or newspapers, 5) movies or TV shows, 6) movie or TV stars, 7) musicians or groups, 8) sports stars or teams.

Final Advice

Enjoy your conversations! Increase your fluency with this fun, practical method!

Appendix B Partner Taping Evaluation Handout

Name _____ Student Number _____ Day-Hr. _____

