

# Conversational Fluency Through Role Playing

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## ロールプレイングを通して、流暢な英会話を

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**Abstract:** Since almost all spoken conversations are dialogic or multilogic, it is impossible to predict in advance how a casual conversation, a joint product, will unfold. The dependence on retrospection, or what has been said, shapes the succeeding utterances expanding or closing the conversation. Unlike written language, conversations lack staticity and predictability and this makes them a notoriously difficult subject to teach in foreign language educational settings. The experts in the field of conversation research inform us that it is not through sentences, but through phrases and clauses that we converse. Introspecting further, we can reduce conversations to the bare essentials, the building blocks; words, multi-word units, formulaic language arranged in a reciprocal exchange. It is here that we can provide the language learners a glimpse of predictability and a starting location to build conversational fluency on their own terms.

Key words: Conversation, excessive English, role play, frequent words

### 1. Introduction

A very common occurrence among Japanese English language learners in secondary education is the lack of ability to provide a response when spoken to. Initiations of exchanges are often left without an interlocutor's closing turn, inhibiting further development of conversation. Krashen (1982) states that among language learners a successful conversation is a result of language acquisition, which differs from language learning. According to his theory, the former is a process of gaining conversational competence through experience, exposure and use. Natural language, in this way, can be internalized and once acquired, it is automatically used during conversations. The latter is language learning, which is gaining conversational competence through formal education. One of the issues with secondary education of English language in Japan, through my observations, is related to Japanese learners being prescribed an excessive amount of English language, and in particular, unnecessary English vocabulary. Valuable class time is invested in learning new grammatical items, but not practice and solidification of more “ready made” language for

conversation. In this paper, I would like to introduce an idea of reducing the amount of English taught throughout the senior years of secondary education, in order to promote 'small talk' conversational competence. The paper is not intending to condemn "Juken Eigo" or English education for testing purposes. However, it tries to shed some light on the gaps in conversational English education. Through a role play written by two second year high school students with above average ability, I would like to describe my in-class observations and relate them to the constituents of conversation provided by Thornbury and Slade's (2006) research.

## 2. Current situation in classrooms

Availability of teaching resources that provide examples of real conversations are scarce. It is hard to record a real occurring conversation without compromising the content by letting the participants know about their dialog being recorded, the observers' paradox. Examples of conversations used in textbooks are planned, written and edited to fit instructional targets. In Japan, the government approved list of textbooks offers choices for classroom instruction. Most of the textbooks present acrolectal forms which are quantifiable, rendering predictable and testable education. For six years, students learn complex innate works of language through detailed instruction. During that time, the teachers ask learners to produce answers to the display questions. The learners produce fragmental pieces of language.

The teachers are under pressure to produce English speaking students through a delivery of all the chapters in the books before learners graduate, which leaves little time for relaxed-pace, natural language practice. The situation somewhat mirrors Krashen's theory of language learning. The attainment of conversational fluency is approached by teaching how to read and write. Thornbury and Slade's seminal book titled "Conversation: From Description to Pedagogy" (2006) informs us that despite some overlap, there are substantive differences between written and spoken grammar and the main factor that separates the two is *time* (Crystal and Davy, 1975:87). When the pressure to continue talking surpasses the mental ability to process what to say next, this is referred to as dysfluency effect. Van Lier points out that in conversation the "progression is fast and unpredictable and turns are tightly interwoven, each one firmly anchored to the preceding one and holding out expectations for the next one" (1996: 177). What Van Lier states, in my opinion, provokes a need to simplify and downsize the resources to make the interactions in foreign language more manageable when there is pressure to speak. If we have a command of less words which are well solidified in our memories, we can recall them instantaneously presenting ourselves as more fluent speakers.

In Japan, textbook materials designed as plausible conversations are improbable and unrelated to learners' immediate use. Below is just one example of a conversation from a junior high school textbook titled, Sunshine English Course 1, (2016).

A person: I have some bottles here. Oh, you have a lot of bottle caps.

B person: How many bottle caps do you have?

C person: I have about 500 today.

B person: We send the caps to an NPO.

A person: Wow! You save a lot of kids.

This is a linguistic ideal that the educational system wants the learners in the first grade of junior high school to understand and use. It is hard to imagine how much effort it would take for the learners in Japan to converse in this fashion. Adding further, it is also hard to imagine this type of topic being discussed in English by the thirteen years old learners. The governing body demands all inclusive education, requiring learners to progress through the four language skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking all at once, with the expectations of producing fluent speakers. Demanding linguistic exactitude from the students is unrealistic, especially in foreign language classrooms.

### 3. Solution

How can the situation be improved? What can be done to make teaching materials more realistic and relative? By narrowing down the probable use of English language by high school students outside of the classroom, I came up with a narrow conversational pattern which I call “small talk.” This type of talk with host families abroad and vice versa is the most prevalent occurrence of language use in my students' context. These conversations are somewhat fragmental and a lot simpler than what the textbook contains.

In the Sunshine textbook, the purpose is to familiarize the students with the phrase '**How many... !**' According to Thornbury and Slade (2006) this exemplifies a bottom-up approach to conversation teaching which combines the smallest components of talk like phonemes, words, sentences and puts them all together into conversations. It is focused on parts rather than the whole. In an inverted manner, a top-down approach works with contexts and examples of conversations, and it is the starting point of instruction. Both approaches can be simplified respectively to accuracy vs fluency.

Despite the criticism of edited text not being the right tool for teaching conversation, I decided to instruct my students through edited text, but without a textbook and in a more learner-active fashion. Learners had to show their ability to blend accuracy from their language experience from junior high school, and fluency from my top-down approach instruction. I had the students write a role play using provided formulaic language. What fed the idea was a suggestion from Pawley and Syder (1983) who state that native-like fluency is attainable through memorization of thousands of lexicalized multi-word units and pre-assembled, formulaic patterns. The theme for the role play was a scenario in which Japanese high school students help their host families perform various chores at home during home stays. The theme reflects real-life situations encountered while abroad. After instruction of 12 formulaic phrases and explanation of their use in context, I allowed the students to write 8 more original phrases and clauses to make the required twenty-moves dialog. The conversation takes place in America and person A is acting as Japanese student and person B as an American host parent. Below is a transcript of the activity. The underlined sections are the formulaic items I

had taught.

1. A: Good morning.
2. B: Hi, what's up?
3. A: Nothing much. Can I help you?
4. B: Could you help me? What will you do?
5. A: Do you want me to wash clothes?
6. B: Of course.
7. A: No problem. Maybe, it will finish soon.
8. B: Ok. So please clean up in the kitchen.
9. A: Ok. Could you help me?
10. B: Sorry, that's impossible.
11. A: Why?
12. B: I have been washing my car.
13. A: Ah-Ok. I will do my best.
14. B: That's good. Please fight!
15. A: Ok. I finished washing clothes.
16. B: Oh, really? That's good.
17. A: So I'll clean up in the kitchen.
18. B: Thank you so much. If you finish it, would you like to go shopping?
19. A: That's good! I want to go to shopping mall.
20. B: Ok. So please clean up soon!

What are the main differences between this dialog and the conversation from the Sunshine textbook? The former is a product of scrutiny between two people. When performed orally, it is taking place in simulated shared time and space. The semantic units are like those in real-time conversation. And lastly, the conversation is rehearsed during the construction process and it is read until memorized. Through this process the learners are exposed to tens, if not hundreds, of repetitions of the same phrases.

The role play building presents a blend of bottom-up and top-down approaches in which the learners rely on their accumulated knowledge and “test the water” of free language creation. In most cases the negotiation to make coherent semantic units takes place in learners L1. This is evident in one phrase retaining a culturally coined phrase such as in the 14<sup>th</sup> move “Please Fight!”, meaning “do your best.” One of the goals of teacher's scaffolding during the conversation making is not to refute some of the cultural phrases. By avoiding 100 percent accuracy, we can promote confidence in language maneuvering and output. The teacher's scaffolding role is minimal and it's provided through not direct, but suggestive fashion. The acquisition of conversational competence is provided by a lengthy process of designing, creating, memorizing and performance. Such activities eliminate any trace of the dysfluency effect between a turn taking displaying the feel of “small talk”

fluency in the English language.

Now going back to the conversation from the Sunshine textbook, the script is just modeled, read and the specific linguistic features are pointed out, taught and practiced within the class-time limits. The retention of those features is left to the learners' discretion. The stand alone features are used in testing and are mostly unrelated in real time conversations. Although Sunshine textbook, the use of it, and the amount of acrolect forms prescribed have their drawbacks, they also provide a source of knowledge based on which the role play can be written. High level students are able to recall some of the linguistic features without teacher's intervention, however, middle to lower level students almost always confirm their linguistic hypothesis or ask directly for the translations. With that we can see that junior high school, bottom-up education and "learning" has its place. It is a fragmental stepping stone to a different goal. Although the phrase **How many** seen earlier is similar to the items I would teach my students before they make their role plays, my concern is, however, that in junior high school the excessive linguistic items are being somewhat passively received without learners' deeper involvement and a lack of a human factor for practice and use.

#### 4. Excessive vocabulary

In the next section I would like to focus on lexical content. Learners need a decent word count to build multi-word units. Adding words to a conversation "adds fuel to the fire" to keep the conversation alive. For the inadequacy in new word learning, the top-down approach as been criticized even in previous centuries. Sweet (1899) states that conversation is not a place for learning new words and expressions, it is only reserved for the practice of already learnt items and we already know that according to Krashen's (1982) language learning theory, learnt items rarely make it to the tongues in real-time conversations. Words like *consequence* or *appropriate* probably won't see any use in the types of conversations that high school or university students will engage in. Just to add, these words were taken from Corpus 3000 (2010), a word book for university test preparation. These kinds of books are widely used as auxiliary materials by Japanese high schoolers. West (1960) says that less words give the learner an advantage, because when we talk, a little goes a long way. A well arranged lower word count can provide a source to circumvent the missing vocabulary. McCarthy and Carter (1997) add that the Cambridge International Corpus of the 50 most frequent words for written and spoken text cover 38.8 percent of all written text, and 48.3 percent of all spoken text.

According to MEXT, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, in Japan, the lexical standard is a command of 3000 English words after six years of secondary education (2016). However, according to Thornbury and Slade (2006) for conversational competence in English as a foreign language, the number is drastically different at 1200 lemmas. Nation states, "to speak English it is not necessary to have a large vocabulary. In developing learners' spoken English vocabulary it is best to give learners practice in being able to say a lot using a small number of words" (1990: 93). We are told that an average person speaks about 120 words per minute. This number is consistent with the role play being just under one minute and containing 117 running words.

### 5. Role play's word composition

Experts inform us that conversations have less lexical density which is a ratio of content words to its function words. With 12 nouns and gerunds, 25 verbs, 15 adjectives and 12 adverbs, the total is 64 content words. The remaining 53 are functional words including 11 auxiliary verbs, 5 interjections, 7 prepositions, 2 articles and 1 conjunction. This particular role play contrasts a real-time conversational standard with a high lexical density. The assumption at work here is that the *written*, not *real time* spoken, exchange of utterances is prominently displaying evidence of being staged and not pressured by time. The parallel between the role play and real-time, however, returns with the high pronoun count, as often seen in real-time conversations. It is the highest of all parts of speech at 27 words. Also, consistent is the frequent use of appraisal language. At the count of 15, the adjectives are third highest in frequency of all parts of speech. Table 1. contains the 50 most written and spoken words from the corpus mentioned above and the total use of those words in the role play. The words are displayed as they appear in the top 50 order. 19 words out of the 50 most spoken (right side of the table) appeared 43 times in the role play out of the 117 word total, resulting in 36.7 percent use. Coincidentally, in the comparison of the 50 most written words (left side of the table), 18 words were also used 43 times, resulting in the same 36.7 percent use. Both 36.7 percent numbers are close to the earlier mentioned 38.8 percent that cover all written text. In addition, both 36.7 percent numbers are a lot lower than that of the 48.3 percent that covers all spoken text.

Top 50 order	50 most written	total use	Top 50 order	50 most spoken	total use
1	the	2	1	the	2
2	to	4	2	I	6
3	of	1	3	you	1
6	in	2	5	to	4
7	I	6	6	it	2
10	that (without 's)	4	9	that (without 's)	4
11	it	2	10	of	1
14	is (as contraction)	5	11	in	2
16	you	1	13	is (as contraction)	5
18	at	1	16	no	1
22	my	2	17	oh	1
23	have	1	18	so	4
27	me	1	23	what	1
35	been	1	25	have	1
36	up	4	28	do	1
44	if	1	30	That's (also counted)	4
48	will	4	36	like	1
50	would	1	44	if	1
			47	at	1
		43 total			43 total

Table 1. The total use of the 50 most written and spoken words in the role play.

## 6. Discussion

Frequently occurring words in a spoken (written originally) role play and the frequently occurring words spoken by English speakers show a difference of 11.6 percent. And the difference in written words between the role play and the average for English speakers is only 2.1 percent. At 11.6 percent behind the English native speakers, the role plays are in need of more real-time conversational traits. Perhaps less content words would be needed to raise the functional words averages. As for the written, with 2.1 percent difference we can see that the students are reusing words to make linguistic components just like their English speaking counterparts.

Nearly 40 percent of the entire role play conversation is reused. That leaves the other 60 percent to be managed. This percentage can be left to the learner's discretion to acquire. The missing words can be recalled from memory or looked up in a dictionary which can somewhat customize the word learning to individual needs. In almost a minute of role play conversation almost 40 percent of it contains functional words, showing

a strong foundation of navigating basic grammar. The above dialog does not exactly have the light lexical density found in real-time, but nevertheless it is a starting point for practice before the grammar-in-use is solidified. Through the repetitive practice of written conversations, students can acquire fluent blending of functional and content language.

What does the role play teach us? A lack of response does not mean that the listener doesn't possess conversational competence, a common misconception shared by many teachers. Do we as teachers with a short amount of lesson time and a large group of students in the classroom have the disposition to wait for responses? Most likely NO, as long as we are in the formal setting. To promote conversational competence teaching scenarios will need to be rethought, especially now that elementary education also includes language learning. Overwhelming learners with a demand for 100 percent accuracy, plus excessive linguistic concepts deter enjoyment of learning communication in a different language. Words can not be acquired if too many are provided without a chance for free invention of semantic units in which those words can be practiced. It is worth looking into the frequently used word corpuses to see how and which words appear foremost and use them as a base to allow the students to work out for themselves how these words can be fitted into their own speaking habits. Also, by allowing students to write their own scripts in their L1, then changing them to L2, learners can independently expand their vocabulary accordingly.

Bottom-up approaches in language instruction in the early stages of secondary education do provide evidence of being effective. Written work shows that some learned items can actually be acquired. On the other hand, top-down approaches seem to be appropriate in the latter part of secondary education, allowing students to take the reins and steer their own joint development of conversational competence. Employing multi-word units is in fact a part of tackling the unpredictable side of conversations or, at least, be the starting point from which further language development can take place.

Conversational fluency through writing and memorization is also noticeable in everyday outside-classroom school life. Students, after being taught various adjacency pairs, show the ability to respond, making them sound fluent for that moment. So during a walk down the hallway at school, to the question of "Hey. How's it going?", I formerly received silence, or "I'm going to classroom," but now, post instruction, I receive "It's going good."

With the decision to trade quantity of grammatical items and word count for time to practice, Japanese learners in secondary education can have the chance to sound fluent in small fragments of conversations. Teaching specific chunks for specific situations in English is somewhat parallel to outsourcing where companies try to save money by using non-native English speaking staff in different countries like India to work for them. Outsourcing staff are able to converse with English speaking customers from English speaking countries and solve their problems with their company's products. These employees can not be considered native-level English speakers, yet, they manage to run big companies for those moments. This works.

## **Conclusion**

In this brief description of my in-class observations, I was able to notice some shortcomings of Japanese English education as well as opportunities for better use of time. Top-down and bottom-up approaches can be organized not as two opposing, but as complimentary sides. There seems to be a need for a large scale research in this area to really see if my observations have any substance in pedagogic application.

We need to continue to look further into what is possible in 45 minutes of class time, twice-a-week of the core English communication classes. Although both approaches have been used in my instruction, after a few years in use, the top-down approach has proven to be more effective learning tool in my lessons and it is more popular among the learners. Students often say that rather than studying with textbook, they prefer writing role plays because of their usefulness during their school trip to America. We can use the students voices as our guide to what medium should be used in the classrooms. By giving our learners more freedom in language instruction we can promote language ownership and avoid unnecessary prescription.

Role plays are standing in the middle ground containing elements of both written and spoken in real-time communication. We can draw out that accuracy and fluency can work in both directions providing a place to start conversation practice as well as writing practice. Only if universities with their tough entrance exams adopted the 'small talk' conversational items as a target instead of technical linguistic accuracy, Juken Eigo would seem like a helping agent to learn how to converse in another language. By lowering the “must-know” standard of language we can perhaps sling shot past the present situation of conversational competence. Less is more.

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