

# CONVERSATIONS IN CLASS

NO.2 OCTOBER 2007

アルマ言語教育研究会ニュースレター

## Editorial

Thanks for your support of the *Conversations in Class* project, which is growing gradually into its niche in conversation teaching. We understand that, for a number of reasons, it is not always easy to break with traditional ways of doing things, and conversation teaching is no different. However, at the same time we are confident that the features of CiC and the Immediate Method provide simple, effective answers to many of the problems that dog conversation teaching at university level in Japan. We hope you find the content of this newsletter useful. It is meant as a springboard for exchanges of ideas, in the same way as the Immediate Method Autumn Workshop is (see below). We work closely with active teachers and always welcome all feedback, positive or otherwise. Please contact us anytime with any questions, comments, or suggestions.

### 7th Annual Immediate Method Autumn Workshop

The annual Autumn Workshop is our most prominent training and sharing event. If you are new to the Immediate Method, you can benefit from the whole day. And even if you have already attended an IM workshop, you will surely find something useful and interesting from the string of presentations we have scheduled for the afternoon. ■

## Workshop Program

November 3rd, 2007. Kyoto University



### Morning : Training

- Cultural codes and silence in class (seminar)
- Introduction to the Immediate Method (immersion class)
- Class management (Q&A session)

### Afternoon : Debates, case studies

- Testing and the IM (David Latz)
- Teaching using Grammar Toolboxes (Stephen Richmond)
- Notes from a first year university experience (Kathy Riley)
- Time management in high school (Gary Brockett)

### Evening : Dinner party

## Conversation Tests as a Tool for Boosting Student Confidence and Cultural Learning

Bruno Vannieu

### Thou Shall Test Your Students

Many years ago in Southern France, I was visiting an old castle when I saw advertised that, thanks to the local rock climbing club, it was possible for a small fee to climb down the outside wall of the tower, which stood at an impressive 42 meters. Since it looked like fun, I quickly signed up, but it turned out to be a seriously heart-shaking experience. To begin with, when looking down from a height of 42 meters there's a big distance between you and the good old ground. Then, the instructor got me harnessed but found it more efficient to postpone the basic training until after I was hanging on the outer side of that wall. "Go ahead, I'll explain when you are on the other side, you'll understand immediately". I was never in



A conversation test

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We are interested in your comments, critics, ideas, drawings, surveys, etc. We are also at your service to answer any questions.

### Research Group for Teaching Conversation in Japan

ALMA Publisher ( [www.almalang.com](http://www.almalang.com) )

Contact us:

By Email : [info@almalang.com](mailto:info@almalang.com) By fax or phone : 075-771-7039

By mail : 606-8311 Kyoto-shi Sakyo-ku Yoshida Kaguraoka-cho 5-41

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any danger, and finished the climb without mishap, but the experience went beyond learning how to use a rope to let yourself down a wall. It had a huge effect on my self-confidence, and afterwards I could proudly remind myself: "I did it".



Oh la la!

I believe that for a Japanese university student, having a conversation in a foreign language falls in the same category as the experience I just described.

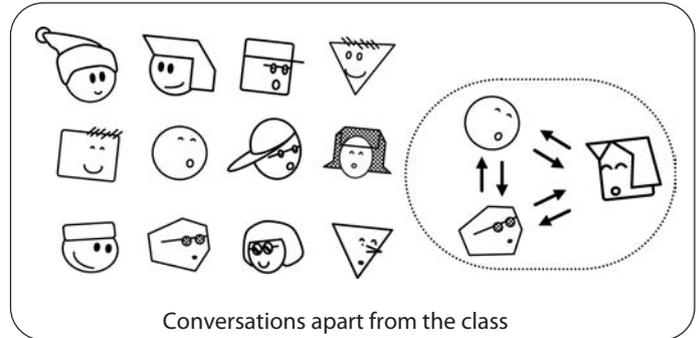
When I say conversation I mean a real conversation, which is going to last a few minutes, and during which he will have to speak, understand what a native person said, respond accordingly, all the while maintaining eye contact and smiling from time to time. Well, I can tell you that as a teacher using the Immediate Method I have had hundreds of students do exactly that on a regular basis. Of course, my students were never in any real danger but in the beginning they were extremely tense, and sweated profusely. Once they had completed a conversation, however, they felt "I did it! It wasn't that hard...". I think it was better for them to have this training in class rather than during their first trip abroad, since they may not 'take the plunge' at all while abroad. And even if they do, they may very well encounter a case of the infamous "cross-cultural misunderstanding", in one of its many shapes and sizes. An example of this is provided by Makoto, who has struck up a conversation with a person at a neighboring table in a London café. Makoto is so keen to give a 'good' answer to the question he was asked that his partner in conversation, uncomfortable with the long silence, suggests a possible answer. As Makoto's confidence plummets, he takes longer and longer to respond, and soon the "conversation" is reduced to a monolog on the part of the native person. Confidence in tatters, Makoto then retreats to his guest house and weeps.

This story is a little exaggerated, but the point is this tragedy can be avoided. Having regular conversation tests during a semester or a whole university year should be part of any language student's training. First, the student must discover that it is actually not very difficult to maintain an active role in conversation. Then, he or she must learn to apply a few basic guidelines that help him or her create a good impression, or at least not commit one of the very standard cultural faux-pas, such as remaining silent too long, or giving a one-word answer to a question meant as a conversation-opener ("Do you work?" "No"). Regular conversation tests are the core of the class-management technique called, perhaps a bit too grandly, the Immediate Method (IM). In

an IM class, regular, mostly-spontaneous conversations tests are held with individuals or pairs during class-time. Testing time for each class can vary from 20 to sometimes up to 45 minutes in a large group. I regularly do teacher training workshops based on the IM, and the following two questions are usually raised.

### Isn't it too hard on the teacher?

Well, considering the teacher conducts tests on a semi-private basis (two students are being tested in a corner of the classroom, while the rest of the class does something else), the issue of time management is a real one. Time is short. The teacher must



be well-organized and make use of the tools designed for the IM (the Presence Sheet, etc.). But on the other hand, the test provides such a powerful anchor to the whole class that a lot of energy is saved on another level. I used to try to convince students of the interest of learning my language, then to try and convince them that it was a good idea to do pair practice, etc. Now they know they will get tested very soon, later that day or the following week. So all I have to do as a teacher is give them some advice about how to succeed in the test and they listen to me intently, practice hard, and make real progress.

### Isn't it too hard on the students?

Well, obviously they are nervous the first time they converse one-to-one with a foreign teacher, but they quickly realize that it is quite easy to have a simple conversation in a foreign language. We are talking here about a beginner, false beginner or low-intermediate level conversation, using the grammar structures and vocabulary that have been studied and practiced thoroughly in class. In fact, students get used to it so quickly that the challenge is to keep them under pressure, to constantly raise the bar. This is why it is good, and even necessary, to vary the kind of conversation tests you give your students.

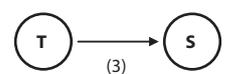
## Thou Shall Vary Your Tests

### The Interview Test

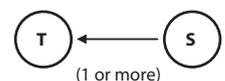
The teacher asks a few questions to a student, then has the student ask a question. The point of this kind of test, recommended at the beginning of an IM course, is to put emphasis on quick answers.

#### "Alternate interview" test

The teacher asks 3 questions, then the student asks one or more questions.



and after



When in trouble with something (didn't understand what the teacher said, doesn't know how to express what he wants to say, etc.), the student must resort to one of the "meta-communication" strategies that have been taught and practiced in class. This sounds very simple, but is not so easy to do when students are 'in the spotlights'. In this case, it is fortunate that the spotlight only consists of a kind but demanding teacher. This is where individual testing shows its worth; since the rest of the class is busy doing something else, no group is watching, and the main potential pressure on the student is eliminated.

Students quickly get the fact that answering a few questions (which are a variation of those studied in class) and asking one or a few questions, quickly, is not very difficult. All you have to do is practice seriously, and here you are, having gotten through a live "conversation" in English (at this stage, it is more a live oral exchange than a real conversation, but the feeling is there) and having fielded a mark that is the first step to getting your credit.

### The Questions Test

For the second or third test of the year, I usually tell students that I am not going to ask any questions that day. They have to do all the asking. At most, I will ask "How about you?" after answering a question. A murmur runs through the class. I quickly point out that this way they get to choose the content of the conversation; in a way it's easier than the first kind of test. What matters here is that they will have to take the initiative in conversation. Psychologically, this is a big shift, but the skills they learn here are vital.

**"Questions to the teacher" test**

The teacher doesn't ask any questions, except « how about you ? ». The student asks questions to the teacher and speaks about herself.

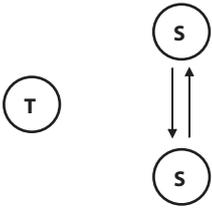


### The Prepared Dialog Test

Not too long after that, I announce that today's test (or next week's) will be a prepared dialog. Each pair simply has to recite their dialog in front of me, and maybe I will ask a question or two at the end. The reaction in class is one of relief; this sounds easy. And it is, but I point out that naturally I will be expecting long sentences and a natural conversation flow; I won't be happy if they jump from "Where do you live?" to "Do you like baseball?". I will expect a realistic connection between questions, like "Where do you live?" followed by "So, do you come here by train?". I also expect detailed answers: "Yes, I come by train and then I take a bus. It takes me two hours, it's really tiring" rather than something like "Yes, by train and bus". What was OK a few classes ago (a few tests ago) will not suffice any longer, meaning that the mark will be lower. This kind of test encourages elaboration. I

**"Prepared dialog" test**

The students do what they have prepared.



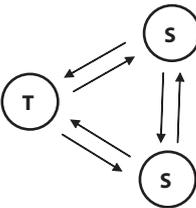
find students speaking in long sentences for up to five minutes and thinking they are getting away easily.

### The Conversation Test

Of course, our aim is a real conversation, which is not prepared, and flows in both directions (in all directions since I almost always test two students simultaneously). Thanks to the Questions Tests, they are now comfortable with asking questions and taking the initiative in conversation. After the initial greetings, I just open my hands in a "Go ahead" gesture to start the conversation. They ask me questions, I ask them questions. We all respond to each other. This is a conversation. In order to get a good mark, they will have not only to speak in this way without lapsing into silence, but also to connect what is being said in a nice manner, and to give long and rich answers, from which more conversation can arise. In short, their speech must be both culturally appropriate and interesting. I sometimes tell my class very candidly: "You know I am having all these tests every week. I will of course get bored if I hear the same question ten times, and when I am bored I don't give good marks. I'm only human".

**"Three person conversation" test**

Since the beginning of the test, students ask questions to the teacher and to each other; the teacher participates in the conversation.



### The Variation Test

Recently, I discovered a new way to conduct conversation tests. The target here is variation. When you listen to a conversation between native speakers, you will find that of course they don't stick to one type of question. They will, almost unconsciously, use a mix of closed questions (or yes/no questions, such as "Do you work?", "Are you married", etc.), and open questions ("How often do you work?", "Where do you live?"). What's more, when two people converse, they will often communicate without using any questions at all:

John: "I went hiking this weekend. It was great".

Mary: "Really? I had to stay home and prepare for my exam, what a drag".

In short, when people have a conversation in English, they speak in a number of ways, sometimes asking open questions, sometimes asking closed questions, sometimes speaking about themselves. This is something that came to light early in the history of the Immediate Method, through having so many short conversations with our students. We found that by varying the form of their speech patterns, students could sound much more polished and 'natural'. We decided to explain this point in Japanese in the introduction to our textbooks. In our university textbook *Conversation in Class*, we understood that this kind of pragmatic advice had to be broken down into small pieces. We added "Sounding Natural" sections to every lesson, on top of what had become a full-blown three pages of pragmatic advice, boldly titled The Golden Rules, at the beginning of the book. The

fact remains, though, that as much as we stress the importance of obeying cultural codes, it is difficult to get students to incorporate them in their oral practice.

However, I recently realized that I could simply design the test around this specific instruction: Vary the way you speak. The test instruction for that class was "This time, I won't ask any questions. You will speak as much as you can in the allotted three minutes. But you have to respect the following constraint: before moving on to the next question, you have to formulate it in three different ways".

- (1) Student A: "Have you ever been abroad?" (*closed question*).  
Student B: "Yes, I went once to America, two years ago" (*answer*).
- (2) Student A: "Where would you like to go next?" (*open question*).  
Student B: "I don't know... maybe Europe. France or Italy might be nice" (*answer*).
- (3) Student A: "I have never been abroad, except to Guam. I want to visit many countries!" (*speaking about oneself*).

The order can change (speaking about oneself first, for example), but I won't let the students move on to a different question if all three forms haven't been used. I give one point for each correct sentence and half a point if the sentence contains a mistake.

This being quite a complicated test instruction, it helps that my students have gotten used to conversation tests with specific instructions each time. It also helps to demonstrate an example conversation such as the one above on the black board. The first time I did this kind of test was on the spur of the moment, so it was a little haphazard. I refined the way I explained this test, and by the end of that week everything was smooth. I was satisfied to have found a way to get students to practice varied ways of speaking in a conversation, and to review in these three ways the linguistic content we had studied until that point.

So, we have been over a few basic kinds of tests. I believe it is essential to vary conversation tests for a number of reasons. First, it is actually quite easy for students to succeed in a conversation test, and the teacher must constantly raise the bar. Second, different kinds of tests have different pedagogical objectives: getting students to speak quickly and without silence, getting them to take the initiative in conversation, getting them to make longer sentences, and getting them to vary the way they speak. Finally, I discovered that designing new test patterns was a good way to be creative as a teacher, and that is a good enough reason in itself.

There is a lot more to be said about testing in class: how to grade conversation tests, how to use the Progress Sheet; what other students do during the test; etc. These topics and more will be discussed at the annual IM Autumn Workshop (held this year on November 3rd at Kyoto University), or during the various workshops we give throughout the year. If you would like us to give a workshop for your local teachers' association or a group of interested teachers, please contact us and we will be more than happy to organize something for you. ■

## Desperately Seeking Conversation: From General English to the Real Thing

David Latz

*David Latz has been using CiC in his university classes at Shimono-seki City University since April 2007. Here is an account of his first semester with the textbook and the Immediate Method.*

### Anything goes?

Like many people who come to Japan, I thought my visit would be short-term. One year turned into two, and before I knew it I found myself getting more serious about teaching, until I decided to make it my profession. I returned home for postgraduate study, and then came back to Japan ready to start university teaching. With a better understanding of language teaching theory, I thought it would be a snap to land a job. I thought the university workplace would have clear professional standards and explicit goals and curricula for students. I anticipated helpful colleagues ready to advise a new teacher, along with frequent meetings and observations. That's not what I found, and I learnt that I would be teaching something termed "general English" conversation, pretty much on my own.

### First Steps

It dawned on me that I was free to teach any way I wanted or use any text I chose. For a new teacher whose head was still buzzing with linguistic jargon and communicative catchphrases, this was worrying. Of all the different teaching approaches and methods, which one would I choose and would it benefit my students? The more I studied the art/science of teaching, the more complicated and unfathomable it seemed to be. In the midst of my confusion, I attended a presentation on the Immediate Method (IM) and the *Conversations in Class (CiC)* textbook. On the surface, *CiC* seemed to be another bright textbook, with various activities and targets for students to follow. What made *CiC* stand out for me were the ideas and theory underlying it. Like a solid family car, the *CiC* text was nothing much to look at, but when I popped the bonnet (hood, for our American readers), I could see something of the engine that drove this unassuming text. The authors of *CiC* used their insights gained from pragmatics research to inform the activities of the text.

### Pragmatics-driven Conversation

As have many teachers, I've often puzzled at the difficulty some Japanese students have in speaking English. I've wondered why some are slow to respond, why their answers are so brief, and how the breadth of their vocabulary and grammar isn't reflected in their speech. One of the cornerstones of *CiC* is the "Three Golden Rules":

- (1) When you are asked a question, don't remain silent,
- (2) Give long and rich answers,
- (3) When you take part in a conversation in English, make sure that you vary the way you speak.

Most people would agree that silence serves a very different function in Japan. Similarly, lengthy responses to questions are not valued in Japan, especially if the interlocutor is a “me-ue”, high-ranking person – one answers their question and no more. Western cultural codes suggest that someone who responds in this way, offering no information about themselves, is unfriendly. Lastly, failing to vary your speech strikes Western speaking partners as being stiff and unnatural.

These rules were distilled from pragmatics research into Japanese and Western cultural codes of conversation, and made a lot of intuitive sense to me personally. More importantly, they were relevant to Japanese students and their conversational style. There was no assumption in *CiC* that long answers and avoidance of silence were uncritically taken as a universal norm – the text recognized that at base Japanese and Western communicative styles differ.

To realize the pragmatics theory embedded in the *CiC* text, the authors devised the Immediate Method, from its emphasis on getting students to engage in actual, real-time conversations. As Bruno Vannieu indicated in personal correspondence, the IM could more properly be called a ‘classroom management technique’. There is not really an overarching theory with an associated teaching method, as for example with Structuralism and the Audio-Lingual method. I do, however, feel that pragmatics theory gives the IM a useful theoretical grounding.

## A Tale of Two Classes

To illustrate my experience with *CiC* and the IM, I will describe two classes. The first used both the IM and *CiC*, and were 2nd year economics students. The second used a different text with 1st year economics students. The first class generally went quite smoothly; the students grew accustomed to *CiC* and the IM within the space of a few lessons. I was having real conversations with my students – I was able to recall their names, hobbies, jobs, and interests. I was able to bring students’ attention to the Three Golden Rules and contrast aspects of Japanese conversational style with Western forms. Key pragmatic ideas were made accessible to students through bilingual passages, ruling out the need for explanations from me in my limited Japanese.



My other class, by comparison, seemed without aim. Each chapter of the text had a theme, such as work, travel, or a grammar point, e.g. past tense. Various games and activities aimed to get the students talking, but there was no real impetus to this unfocused, artificial conversation. The students were exchanging information about fictional Toms’, Dicks’, and Harrys’; they were describing jobs they didn’t have; they were ordering food they

didn’t like – in short, there was no connection to the students as real people with their own personal histories. These weren’t real conversations, and the students treated them as activities to be mumbled through just because the teacher told them to. Halfway through the semester, I introduced the IM and its associated Progress Sheet. I announced that in the second half of the lesson, pairs of students would perform dialogues from the text. With this belated introduction of the IM, I could ask the students about themselves, and we could actually have conversations in real-time, something that just wasn’t happening before.

By semester’s end, both classes were progressing well. I felt confident enough with *CiC* and the IM that I could start to use variations on activities, including having students in multiple groups speaking simultaneously, and revolving to other groups at a signal, thus increasing their talk time noticeably. The students were increasingly confident; quieter types volunteered more, and higher students stretched themselves to perform even better. All of the students passed their speaking tests, even in the face of absences due to club activities and excursions.

My one source of consternation was how to handle the university-mandated final exam. This wasn’t necessary, as I had my grades obtained from the students’ weekly speaking tests marked on their Progress Sheets. In the end, I based the final test questions on the written exercises in *CiC*, figuring that as students were familiar with the format this would be a fair assessment method. The students found the test far too easy, and this has led me to consider how to better integrate a written test with *CiC* and the IM.

As part of the next Immediate Method Autumn Workshop, on November 3rd, I will be presenting my ideas on how to integrate *CiC* and the IM with a written test. As it would seem many university personnel are unfamiliar with what actually happens in classes, it is sometimes difficult to explain how one is grading students using the Immediate Method; I will be very interested to hear about other teachers’ experiences at the workshop regarding this.

## Heading Out To The Highway

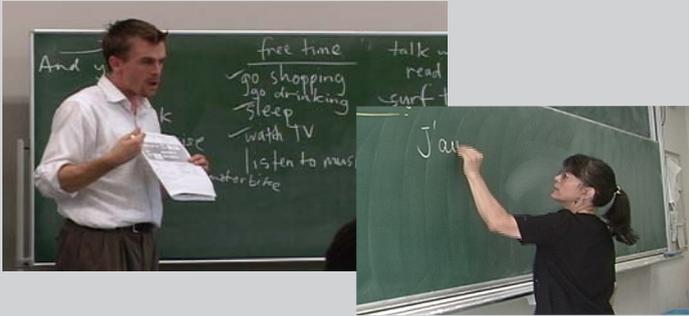
In looking over the semester of my use of *CiC* and the IM, I was satisfied that I had chosen a text and method that helped me to better define what “general English conversation” as a subject would mean for me as a teacher and for my students. I found a textbook that was not a random collection of supposedly communicative activities, but instead one that was grounded in legitimate theory (pragmatics) and that was relevant to the Japanese sociolinguistic context.

To conclude, *CiC* and the IM have been very useful tools for me as a beginning university teacher confronted with a vague assignment to “teach general English conversation”. Both text and method satisfied my need for a sound basis in linguistics with an approach to realize these ideas practically in the classroom. To return to the car metaphor earlier, the unassuming *CiC* family car is now being modified and changed by me into a sports car, as I learn to tinker with the Immediate Method, the engine fuelled by pragmatics that powers what for me is a very useful teaching vehicle. ■

# A Step-by-step Guide to the IM

For those readers who aren't familiar with the Immediate Method, we thought we'd introduce its basic features again in this issue, in a concise and easy-to-read way. You can find more detailed information at [www.almalang.com](http://www.almalang.com).

## Step 1 | Teach conversation content



- ☛ Topics based on everyday life and personal opinions
- ☛ Content that can be immediately used in a conversation

### Secret weapon :

**IM-compatible textbooks** and teaching material published by ALMA save teachers the effort of extracting material from traditional textbooks.

## Step 2 | Have students practice in pairs



- ☛ Students practice until they can easily use the material in real time exchanges. They can be required to practice with several partners or to complete certain tasks.

### Secret weapon : the conversation test itself

- Students understand that they need to practice in order to succeed in the conversation test they will be having later that class or the following week.
- Specific test instructions give direction to their practice. (see Bruno Vannieu's article in this issue).

## Step 3 | Give students conversation tests during classtime



- ☛ The teacher conducts a series of conversations with one, two or three students at a time. These exchanges last between 1 and 5 min.
- ☛ Students receive a mark on their Progress Sheet.
- ☛ The conversation test is done away from the class-group, for example in a corner of the classroom.
- ☛ During the conversation tests, other students continue oral practice in pairs and do written exercises.

### Secret weapon 1 :

Frequently practiced **meta-communication tools** help students not to get stuck in silence.

### Secret weapon 2 :

The **Progress Sheet** allows the teacher to easily keep track of marks and confers to students the responsibility of their learning. (see *CiC Newsletter No. 1*)

Progress Sheet			
Class Name	ALMA	Student's Name	
Family Name	ALMA	Classroom	
Student Number	012345	Teacher	
Grade	1st year	Year	
<p>この進捗シートは、授業中の対話練習の記録と、授業後の振り返りシートとして活用してください。</p>			
Date	Attendance	Conversation	Comments
1. October 2nd	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		
2. October 9th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	8 / 10	Good!
3. October 16th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		
4. October 23rd	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	7 / 10	Keep your good habits
5. October 30th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		
6. November 6th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	8.5 / 10	
7. November 13th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	7	
8. November 20th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		
9. November 27th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	9.5 / 10	Good on independent
10. December 4th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		
11. December 11th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	8.5 / 10	
12. December 18th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		
13. December 25th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	9.2 / 10	Well done!
14.			
15.			
16.			
17.			
18.			
19.			
20.			
TOTAL		7 / 10	9.2 / 10
			TOTAL : 141 / 140
			92



## Feedback

As in previous issues, we publish below a transcript of a conversation with a teacher currently using CiC. Karen McAllister teaches English Communication at Doshisha Joshi University in Kyoto, and has been using the textbook for six months.

**Stephen Richmond:** Hi Karen. I saw that you've been using CiC in some of your classes, and I was wondering what you thought of it.

**Karen McAllister:** I really like the textbook. I think it helps the foreign teacher. The content seems quite easy, but it covers all the grammar mistakes that even higher-level students make. I find the different sections of each lesson well-designed. For example, I like how the *Your Turn!* sections allow students to write conversations straight into their textbooks- they don't have to turn to their notebooks. I think the *Sounding Natural* sections are fantastic; they really show the students how conversation is different across cultures. I read out the English, and have a student read out the Japanese, so everyone understands the concept. And the students seem to love the freedom of the vocabulary boxes. They enjoy coming up with their own vocabulary, and having the Japanese on the side is an advantage, since I can quickly go around the class quizzing students and checking comprehension.

**SR:** Is there anything that you find difficult to use?

**KMcA:** Well, I find the *Vary Your Speech* sections awkward. I go through all of the other sections quite smoothly, but can't seem to get this section to work.

**SR:** OK. These sections aren't absolutely essential to the lesson, but if you show students how to use them, their conversations begin to sound so much more natural. Native speakers unconsciously vary the patterns they use when they speak. For example, we don't constantly use the same 'open pattern' in a conversation, since it sounds repetitive and quite boring. You know what I mean: *Where do you live? - Osaka. Where do you go to school? - In Higashi-Osaka. Where is your part-time job? - At a convenience store near my house.* Students, however, tend to stick to the one pattern that was used when they learn a new structure, and as a result often sound quite unnatural when they speak, unless teachers do something about it.

**KMcA:** That's right.

**SR:** If you listen carefully to a real native-speaker conversation you will notice that they use a balanced mix of open questions (*How often do you shop on the internet?*) and closed questions (*Do you ever buy clothes online?*) and sometimes also converse without using no questions at all (*I've been buying so much on Amazon recently. Yeah, me too.....*). I tell my students that, as one of the 'Golden Rules' of English conversation, they must vary the way they speak. Each time they learn a new grammar structure, they should try to think about how to make three different versions of the same basic structure (open question, closed question, and statement) so that they can use them freely in their conversations. The *Vary Your Speech* sections are simply a way of guiding them to think about this. They only have to fill in the missing word to complete the phrases, so it can be done

by everyone at the same time in about a minute and quickly corrected and explained. Or there are other ways of making them use different patterns. You could request three different patterns to be used in each pair practice, or oral test if you do them, or have higher-level students write original questions or statements in their book.

**KMcA:** Really? I'll have to try that.

**SR:** Yeah, it's definitely one little thing that I've found to have made a huge difference. I suppose that is one of the philosophies behind the book; changing basic things slightly to make big improvements.

I am also curious about how you run your classes. Do you give your students tests in class?

**KMcA:** No, I don't test every student each class. We work through the unit, practicing pronunciation and intonation for all of the example conversations. As I said, we also look at *Sounding Natural* in detail. For each *Your Turn!*, I have the students write and practice their own conversations in pairs, I correct their mistakes. They love to have their mistakes corrected. Then at the end of the class, I'll choose two or three pairs at random to come up and perform one of their dialogues for the class.

I test the students every few weeks. They come up in the same pairs that they have been practicing in, and perform a conversation that they have prepared. Aside from their fluency, I mark them on things like eye contact, enthusiasm, and intonation.

**SR:** Yes, I was wondering how you assessed students. What aspects of English do you tend to focus on when you teach?

**KMcA:** Hmm. Having the students use follow-up questions, and make longer conversations. And that's something I think the book does very well; the students have the scope to go further. Also pronunciation and intonation.

**SR:** How do you teach those things?

**KMcA:** Well, there are three ways I do this. I model the speech myself, or we listen to the audio and repeat. I have them speak at the same speed as the audio. And sometimes I draw diagrams of tongue placement on the blackboard- they enjoy that.

**SR:** Wow- that's interesting. This is kind of a broad question, but what would you say were your biggest challenges as a conversation teacher?

**KMcA:** (thinks) Just the lack of ability to communicate. It's hard standing in class as just another teacher. You have to let them know that English is important, and it will help them later on. That's why I like *Sounding Natural*; because it helps break down the cultural barriers between the teacher and student.

**SR:** How do you motivate students to, for example, practice in pairs?

**KMcA:** My students are quite motivated and don't need a great deal of motivating. Just being able to make their own conversations is usually enough to get students working. But the book is great because it's not too grammar-heavy, and not too unstructured. Some of the really communication-focused texts around these days just have so much material in them that you don't know where to begin.

*Continued on page 8 →*

→ Continued from page 7

**SR:** I'm glad to hear you say that, because it's exactly the niche we were aiming for when we developed CiC.

**KMcA:** The language is really natural, too. Things like *How many days do you have off a week?* - that's much more natural than most textbooks. Some of the material is a little dry, though, and I sometimes have to spice it up a little.

**SR:** That's actually something we should have made a bit clearer - as much as possible, the teacher should give examples from their own life, tell their own stories. I find the students love finding out more about the teacher, and that is something that can happen naturally when the class is focused on conversation.

**KMcA:** Yeah, I've found that, too.

**SR:** Well, I'm really happy to hear the textbook has helped your classes in some way. Thanks for your time today Karen, and good luck with CiC in the next semester.

**KMcA:** My pleasure. ■

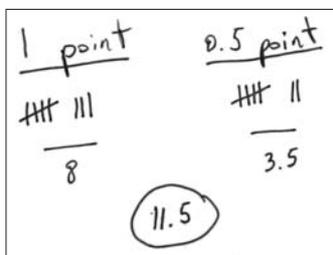
## Classroom Tip : Open-ended Marking

### Problem : It is not always easy for teachers to mark conversation tests.

For one thing, there are many variables to take into account : accuracy, intonation, pronunciation, interest, speed... Also, the teacher has to balance between the strictly evaluative aspect of the mark and its motivational aspect (encouraging students who did their best to maintain a conversation). When the class has taken on a good dynamic, as is often the case when regular in-class testing can be implemented, teachers end up giving marks in a quite small bracket, say between 7 and 9, if the maximum mark is 10. The occasional outstanding student can get a 9.5, and the occasional lazy student a 6, but the bulk of the class will often get very similar marks, and what is even more important, there isn't much room for variation for a given student, from test to test. This ends up being not so motivating.

### One possible solution : Open-ended marks

From time to time, the teacher can decide that there is no maximum mark for that week's test, only a limited amount of time per student (time can be measured with a stopwatch or a hourglass, for example). This method works best with individual tests, rather than tests involving two or three students. If a given test is three minutes long, the teacher just counts how many successful sentences are produced. A correct sentence yields one point, a sentence which contains a single significant mistake half a point, and a completely unsatisfactory sentence will get no points at all. There is no maximum mark, and the onus is on the student to come up with as many grammatically-correct sentences within their allotted time.



## Simple maths

At the end of the term, the teacher can then add all the marks collected on the Progress Sheet, and do a simple calculation.

Let's say that the best student in class has accumulated 153 points over the semester, between the in-class conversation tests, the final conversation test and small written tests. The teacher decides that this student deserves a 90. Other students' marks can then be calculated on that basis.

It is then a question of simple mathematics. The first time I did this, it took some figuring out, what with high-school arithmetic being but a tiny speck in my memory, but now I can apply the formula almost without thinking.

153 accumulated points mean a mark of 90.

$(153 \times 100) \div 90 = 166$ . To achieve a perfect mark (100), a student should have accumulated 166 points.

Each student's score (x) must then be calculated. If a student got 125 points for example,

166 points = 100 (perfect mark)

125 points = x (that student's mark)

$x = (125 \times 100) \div 166 = 75$ .

By these calculations, the student who has accumulated 125 points will get a mark of 75.

## Advantages

This method has two distinct advantages :

- it solves the problem of a cluster of conversation test marks in a narrow bracket, which is not very motivating for students in the long run,
- it gives flexibility to the teacher : instead of trying to find a round number of questions for a short written test, there is no problem with just choosing, for example, six questions; it doesn't matter if the total number of tests in a semester is not a round one; etc.

Of course, it is good to also have tests with a specified maximum mark, especially at the beginning of the term when students need to be able to compare their performance with their classmates' (which is paradoxically very motivating, considering that marks are given straight after the conversation). Students also tend to compare their score with their previous performance, and even half a point improvement seems to justify the practice and hard work they put in during the class. ■ BV

## JALT International Conference in Tokyo

November 23rd - 25th, 2007

Presentations about the Immediate Method :

- "Introduction to the *Immediate Method*", by Bruno Vannieu  
Friday, November 23, 16:45 - 17:45 (60 minutes). Room 308
- "Teaching conversation in junior high school", by Scott Brown  
Friday, November 23, 14:25 - 14:50 (25 minutes). Room 407

ALMA Publisher will also be present at the Educational Material Exhibition.