

# COFFEE TALK: A Learning Opportunity for Students with Few Chances to Speak

Lori Ann Desrosiers

Japanese university students often attribute their perceived poor ability to converse in English to having "few chances to speak". Research concurs with these students' intuition about the connection between use of the target language and acquisition of the target language (Seliger, 1977; Swain, 1995, 1998). They further submit that the fault lies in the Japanese entrance examination system. High school teachers are obliged to teach to the entrance examinations for universities and have little time to focus on the communicative aspects of English.

While the examination system is unlikely to undergo any significant changes soon, many teachers are convinced that the "communicative approach," where using the language is more beneficial than learning about the language (Lightbown and Spada, 1993), will help their students to apply English beyond the classroom. At all education levels, teachers may work hard to devise communicative activities and to offer relevant learning opportunities to achieve some language outcome. They may also make attempts to bridge the gap between the classroom and the world outside the classroom by bringing in guest speakers or visitors or creating assignments where students must interview people who speak the target language. And/or they may respond to students' concerns of having too few chances to speak by suggesting that students, out of class, "make foreign friends or join chat rooms." In this way they are placing the responsibility squarely on the students to find their own practice opportunities.

However, what if teachers extended the curriculum to include opportunities for increasing communicative

competence by arranging real communication situations for their students to speak English outside of the classroom? MacIntyre et.al suggest, "a fundamental goal of second language instruction should be to produce students who are willing to use the language for authentic communication" (2003). Considering this goal, we argue that language instructors should provide those willing students with some time and place dedicated to communicating in authentic L2 situations. Coffee Talk was started with just that in mind: creating a forum for social interaction between learners themselves to enable them to use English.

In this paper, Coffee Talk will be described, including its background and a profile of its participants. Further, relevant literature will be discussed to lend insight into what participants may consciously or unconsciously be experiencing.

## Brief History

Coffee Talk originated in 1996 as "Lunch Table," an idea of two former Utsunomiya University instructors, Jodi Nishimura of the Education Faculty and Sherman Lew of the Faculty of International Studies. Lunch Table was inspired by Professor Lew's experience as an undergraduate studying Chinese. The hope was that Lunch Table would provide the impetus to use English and would encourage more intra-university mixing between students of all faculties. Lunch Table was held once a week during the lunch break (about 45 minutes). Students and teachers sat around conference tables and, as a group, discussed various topics. Attendance was small, but participants got to know each other well.

The name and format were changed in 1998. The time slot was no longer lunch but after class hours, starting at 4:30. It was hoped that changing the time and offering a longer time (about an hour) would attract a wider audience. Coffee and tea were offered free of charge to students who joined, thus, the name Coffee Talk. In the beginning, Coffee Talk followed the same format as Lunch Table. Students sat around low tables on sofas and the group would talk about one topic. Students would say their ideas/opinions about the topic and others would comment. Often, teachers would prompt students to say something or to respond. Gradually, as more and more students joined Coffee Talk the format became more and more casual, having more of a party-like atmosphere. Students were now completely free to talk about what they wanted to discuss, to whomever they wanted, as long as they spoke in English. The role of teachers became that of speaker participant.

#### Coffee Talk Today

Every Thursday, during the regular semester, Coffee Talk is held in the Common Room of the Faculty of International Studies, Building B, from 4:30 to 6:00 p.m. Walk in on any Coffee Talk and you'll see about 20 to 30 people from various nationalities and of various ages drinking coffee or tea, snacking, and most importantly, engaging in English conversation. For some participants, it's their first time; others are regulars, or even long-term participants. For the first-timers, Coffee Talk might seem intimidating. The noise level is pretty high and participants form themselves into small groups. It might seem hard for a first-timer to break in. It's been our observation, though, that they are quickly approached by an individual or group and become part of the scene in no time at all. Some participants hop around from group to group getting to know as many people as possible or joining as many conversations as possible. Every once in awhile, there is a special twist to Coffee Talk. A group or individual might use Coffee Talk as a venue to perform dance, music, or drama. The audience is willing and enthusiastic.

#### Participants of Coffee Talk

Coffee Talk is not the first nor only such program of its kind. In other programs, however, emphasis is often placed on pairing learners of the language with native speakers of the language, as is done in the programs at Griffith University in Australia and Harvard University in the United States (Imamura, 2004; Haynes, 1996). In Coffee Talk, fewer than 20 percent of the participants are native speakers. As the recent debate over native speaker versus non-native speaker teachers attests, it is clear that both have advantages (Maum, 2002; Mattos, 1997). Learners, even if they have the same first language, can enjoy talking in the target language with each other, and they can gain a lot from this effort. On the language level, they use the language to express their ideas, process input, receive feedback, and produce output. For those learners with the same L1, one may be able to give a quick translation of the vocabulary their conversation partner may wish to express. In the social realm, they can make friends and gain insight into various topics.

#### *Japanese students*

The largest group of participants are Japanese students. They are students of all the faculties and levels of the university, but most of them are undergraduates from the Faculty of Education and the Faculty of International Studies. Many students are Coffee Talk regulars who have been attending since they were first-year students. Some of them are returnees or have had some experience abroad.

A paper titled "Benefits of Coffee Talk for Japanese Students," completed by Machiko Tanoue as a requirement for an academic writing class in January, 2005, provides descriptions of Japanese student participants. The descriptions come from Tanoue's insider perspective, which is particularly valuable because she is a Japanese student herself and is a frequent Coffee Talk participant. In addition, Tanoue's paper was informed by interviews she conducted with 20 Japanese students who regularly attend Coffee Talk.

Based on her interviews, Tanoue states that the students who attend Coffee Talk are positive and want to speak English to each other because there is no border between and among students, teachers and other participants. In addition, they have no fear of making mistakes be they grammatical, lexical or pronunciation errors. Consequently, "Once they can express their thoughts freely, they want to try to talk more and more," thereby increasing their motivation. Tanoue notes that traditional Japanese education is based on the concept that the teacher imparts knowledge and students are receivers of this knowledge. Because of this one-way education system, the atmosphere is not conducive to active interaction and participation of all members of the class and that students "can't ask a question, much less say their opinion." She claims that students are worried about making mistakes in class for fear of sounding foolish and that making mistakes is quite simply "not good." Furthermore, she reports that students think it is enough to simply attend the class and understand the content of the lesson. In contrast, Tanoue's interviews have shown that the same students who are passive in the traditional, one-way lectures, are active learners in Coffee Talk.

Our own intuitions are that, since this is a completely voluntary activity and one that does take up time and energy, we can describe these students as motivated. It is possible to describe their participation in Coffee Talk as being both instrumentally motivated and integratively motivated, although one may outweigh the other. In fact, many participants reported to us that "they want to improve their English communication ability" and "they want to become more comfortable speaking English." It is difficult to determine whether these statements indicate instrumental or integrative motivation since they can be applied to both.

Instrumental motivation has to do with their belief that English proficiency will help them to reach some objective. Quite a few of the Japanese participants are

planning to become English teachers themselves, to study overseas while still an undergraduate or to enter graduate school abroad. Others are aware that higher proficiency in English will make them more desirable candidates in the job market.<sup>1</sup>



Our inquiry found that Japanese participants feel that Coffee Talk is a worthwhile endeavor. They reported that they have made friends, feel more comfortable and confident with English, and that their communication ability has improved. In addition, they feel that the free conversation style of Coffee Talk is suitable and enjoyable.

#### *International Students*

One group of Coffee Talk participants is the international exchange students. They represent very diverse countries and are here on from one-year exchange programs to PhD. courses. For all the international exchange students, they reported to us that Coffee Talk gives them a chance to make friends and enjoy some social time. Because international students often live in the dorm set aside for them, they don't have much opportunity to interact with Japanese people aside from their classes. They often tend to make friends with other international students. Coffee

<sup>1</sup> According to a Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) press release, their view is that English-language ability is a must for anyone seeking employment in the international community, and even if not the international community, capability to use English in the workplace is required. Moreover, they "Urge corporations to attach importance to individuals with English abilities." (p.6)

Talk gives them this opportunity. As well as learning about Japan, they are able to share about their own country's culture, providing a mutually satisfying exchange. Many non-native English international students are fairly proficient in English, and they feel, as much as the native English speakers do, that Coffee Talk gives them an outlet to "let go" and say what they want to say more fluently. For other international students with lower proficiency in English, they also come to work on and improve their English.

For Japanese participants, the participation of the International students at Coffee Talk, all speaking English, really opens up to them the idea of English as an international language. Honna and Takeshita (n.d.) argue that although the Ministry of Education's guidelines describe English as a language for global communication, English is still perceived as being British or North American. They point out that the model given to students in the public schools through the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program (and others similar to JET), presents only English speakers from native English speaking countries such as the U.S.A., Canada, New Zealand and the U.K for example. This model limits English to the members of Kachru's inner circle only and neglects those speakers of English from the outer circle which does not represent the real situation of English (see Crystal, 1997). Speakers who have mastered English can be found in countries such as Singapore, India, and Fiji, but are never represented. Coffee Talk breaks the mold of who an English speaker is and invites Japanese speakers of English to participate in the international community at a grassroots level.

### *Shakaijin*

Another group is the older, "shakaijin" (members of society) Japanese participants. They reflect a growing trend where more and more adults are enrolling in continuing education classes. Lifelong learning and leisure education are terms used to express this phenomenon. Due to longer life-expectancy and earlier retirement<sup>2</sup>, more and more adults find

themselves with time on their hands. Many wish to spend the time in meaningful ways so they enrol in courses such as the English course of Koukai Kouza (Center for Lifelong Learning) or enter the university as full time students. Research by Furst and Steele (1986) and MacNeil (1998) describe their motivations in the following way. They are not looking for degrees or certificates or skills that make them more employable or boost their chances for advancement in their careers. Primarily, they are learning for the sake of learning itself and are enjoying learning. They are joining classes to keep active and aware, involved and social, to maintain a sense of self-esteem and achievement, and to finally do just what they want.

Unlike many clubs or circles at the university and in Japanese society in general, there is no "sempai/kohai" hierarchy in Coffee Talk. All participants, no matter their age or role now or in the past, are equal. Even the hierarchical barrier present in the classroom by the roles of teacher and student are non-existent.

These older members of Coffee Talk bring a wealth of knowledge and depth of life experience to all the conversations that they join. Conversations with them are shared experiences, nonetheless their stories are teaching about life without any particular curriculum or learning goal. This kind of informal education creates a living laboratory where younger members can gain valuable insights about attitudes, values, and skills (Anderson and Arsenault, 1998).

Besides that, they provide solid role models for the younger students in terms of language learning in that they are free from typical adolescent pressures of worrying about making mistakes, or what other people will think of them. General studies in education show

<sup>2</sup> In the international Year of Older Persons, the United Nations highlighted the growth rate of this population: "In 2000 10 percent of the earth's inhabitants will be over 60. Two decades later one out of three humans will be 60 or older (Hokenstad, 1999). They focused on the idea that older people should be able to find ways to participate in society through education and/or community service according to their interests and abilities.

that cross-generational experiences benefit both the younger and older participants (see Alleman and Brophy, 1994; Day, 1988; Haynes, 1996). They argue that the older students benefit by aligning them more into the world of the younger generations. For the younger participants who made personal connections, they may perhaps be reminded that they, too, will someday be an older person.

### Application of Theories

Coffee Talk is not a formal class and the atmosphere is very casual, which encourages participants to relax and converse freely. However, Coffee Talk is an important extension of the English language curriculum and is continually assessed by its organizers for effectiveness. Currently, assessment of Coffee Talk has been informed by research on communicative learning opportunities, language input and output, learner autonomy, and motivation and willingness to communicate.



Coffee Talk is held on the university campus and restricted to people with connections to the university (regular students, students in the Continuing Education, international students, teachers), not the general public. Also, Coffee Talk is held weekly for one and a half hours during the regular semester thus, the regularity of Coffee Talk resembles the scheduling and structuring of classes in that respect. Coffee Talk fits with Crabbe's definition as part of "an organisation of learning opportunities, or means for achieving certain outcomes, or ends." The ends can be as general

as increased communicative competence without stating particular, specific goals. Coffee Talk is very much a learning opportunity where those who are motivated have access to an "activity that is likely to lead to an increase in language knowledge or skill" (Crabbe, 2003).

Modern language classrooms are concerned with providing richer, more meaningful experiences for learners. According to Brinton, Snow and Wesche (1989 in Peaty, 2004), "many would claim that a second language is learned most effectively when used as the medium to convey informational content of interest and relevance to the learner." Language teachers are always looking to devise means to get their students to communicate and choose textbooks with built-in activities requiring students to interact with each other and discuss topics of interest. All this effort for the classroom is aimed at preparing students for real-world communication in the future albeit at a time and location no one knows for sure.

No matter how much a textbook or teacher presents students with meaningful activities, the context in which it takes place is still the classroom with all the limitations that entails. One limitation is the presence of the teacher. As much as the teacher believes in interactive, communicative learning, the difference in power relation still exists. The teacher is the authority figure handing out feedback and judgement in the form of a grade. As many researchers have found, speaking a foreign language causes a great deal of anxiety for L2 learners (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; Koch & Terrell, 1991; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991 in MacIntyre, Baker, Clement and Donovan, 2003) even though they may appear motivated (Lindenau, 1987 in Onwuegbuzie, Bailey and Daley, 1999). The evaluative nature of the foreign language classroom is pointed out as being especially negative, from answering questions out loud to role-play, oral examination, and course grade (Trylong, 1987; Phillips, 1992; Scott, 1986; in Onwuegbuzie, Bailey and Daley, 1999). Onwuegbuzie et al. insist that

instructors should correct errors less, but remind students that we learn through making errors. There are teachers present at Coffee Talk but they have no other role than that of equal participant which reduces language anxiety in a friendly, non-threatening atmosphere.

Another limitation is that students may be paired or grouped with people they don't know. They may be asked to discuss or do a role-play without ever having the chance to actually get to know each other. This may cause discomfort or it may restrict freer L2 interaction (Usuki, 1999). A further limitation is classroom dynamics. The mood and personality of the class and all its participants may present more or less resistance or acceptance of goals of meaningful learning. In addition, the class' perception of what a class is and their role in it may keep students unwilling, insecure and/or quiet. Finally, communicative activities isolate language and highlight certain features of the language as the goal of practice. And while students may perform well under the classroom condition, real - world communication requires the spontaneous use of language to communicate ideas, to respond to the ideas of others, and to ask and answer questions.

Real-world communication, which is what students experience at Coffee Talk, is ever changing and uncertain. Schmidt's noticing hypothesis and Swain's output hypothesis (in Sakai, 2004) can help to illuminate what learners may be experiencing at Coffee Talk. Noticing means that learners focus attention on features of the L2. Further, that noticing leads to uptake of the part of the input that the learners notice. Noticing can happen when learners a) attend to the input as in listening or reading, b) attend to problems in their own inter-language, as when a learner can not produce the message he/she would like to communicate, and c) attend to the differences between their inter-language and the target language as when an interlocutor recasts the learner's utterance correctly. The output hypothesis focuses on

production of language. Producing the language will help learners a) to become more automatic in their utterances, b) allow them to test their hypotheses of the target language, and c) to understand meta-cognitive uses of the language and d) to raise their consciousness of problems or deficiencies in their inter-language. Feedback plays an important role. If the learner's utterance is not understood, feedback in the form of a request for clarification will force the learner to find alternative ways to express their message. Or feedback in the form of a recast, for example, would enable the learner to notice the gap in their inter-language and modify it.

Natural settings, such as Coffee Talk, allow learners plenty of opportunity for input and output to happen. How much they notice, what they notice, and what they do with that information is difficult to measure because there are many complex internal and external factors at play (Robinson, 1995 in Sakai, 2004). Nevertheless, some recent results of research suggest that participation in interactive situations is crucial for noticing to happen. Izumi and Bigelow's study (2000) concluded that "extended opportunities to produce output and receive relevant input were found to be crucial in improving the use of the target structure" where the target structure may be something that they learned in class recently. Sakai (2004) found that recasts were better at getting learners to notice the gaps in their inter-language and make subsequent repair. It must be noted, however, that recasts, as well as other corrective feedback, are usually present in NS-NNS interactions, more than in NNS-NNS interactions (Holliday, 1993 in Bissell, n.d.). Nevertheless, NNS-NNS interactions do facilitate opportunities for feedback and negotiation of meaning and greater amounts of comprehensible input (Pica et al., 1996; Varonis and Gass, 1985 in Bissell, n.d.).

Since Coffee Talk is not a class and attendance is voluntary, the participants who do come can be said to be autonomous. Autonomous learners have a sense of responsibility for their own learning, are engaged with

their learning, and are proactive, seeking out opportunities in their learning environment (Little, 2003). Autonomy also respects learner choice and learner differences. Those who do come to Coffee Talk are choosing this opportunity as one that fits with their learning style. The notion of autonomy also includes an aspect of self-evaluation. Learners may be evaluating their performance or their learning but because of the nature of Coffee Talk, teachers are not made aware of how students evaluate themselves. We can surmise though that those participants who come regularly are positively evaluating themselves and their experience.

Along with autonomy, self-access learning and independent learning are concepts which have become prominent recently. They acknowledge that not all students are created equal: learner differences include a wide variety of backgrounds, goals, abilities and interests. The belief is that learners should be able to work at their own pace, at a time of their own choosing and at their own level in an environment offering diverse materials and ways to improve their language ability. Learners first assess their ability and choose the medium with which to work on topics of interest to them and finally self-evaluate. These premises have extreme value for creating better learning environments, but they are reformulations of the classroom and thus fall short of addressing students' concerns about how to negotiate language outside of the classroom. Coffee Talk certainly reflects the basic premises of self-access learning and independent learning and makes its goal to provide opportunities for students to have face to face conversation.

Purposefully seeking out and finding opportunities to use the L2 is one indicator of willingness to communicate (WTC) (MacIntyre, Baker, Clement, and Donovan, 2003) The important element to encourage WTC is to provide opportunity for use in a relaxed social environment. WTC depends on learners' motivations, perception of language ability, and level

of communication apprehension. Yashima's research revealed that when learners have less communication apprehension and more perceived ability, their WTC is higher (2002 in Hashimoto, 2002). MacIntyre and Charos (1996 in Hashimoto, 2002) found that there is an effect of WTC that builds on itself for learners who have more opportunity to use their L2. By having more opportunity to use the target language, they increase the frequency of using their L2 which, in turn, increases their motivation and perceived ability. Hashimoto's own research found that in her study with Japanese students in an ESL setting, L2 anxiety was the cause of lower perceived ability. She also found that increased perceived competence was directly related to increased motivation and more L2 use. The Coffee Talk setting is a perfect example of a no anxiety L2 environment where learners are encouraged by each other and their perceived confidence may increase which, in turn, would initiate further L2 use and instil a strong WTC.



### Influences of Coffee Talk

Since Coffee Talk was started at Utsunomiya University nine years ago, we've noticed the influence that it has had. First, a similar program was started by the International Students' Center. Their "Tea Party" is held twice a month. International students and Japanese students get together for social conversation in Japanese. In addition, one of the shakaijin students who attends Coffee Talk regularly has also created a salon, called "Chat Chat Tuesday", at her family's business located very close to the university. She plans

to hold a forum twice a month as well. Her plan is to bring together foreign students, Japanese students and members of the community in general. Her stated purpose is to help foreign students learn more about Japanese culture and not feel lonely, and to help members of the local community learn about foreign cultures. Lastly, Coffee Talk was videotaped by students from the Faculty of International Studies with the intention of incorporating it as a seven-minute segment in a 20-minute video used to promote the university to high school students. It was not used in the end due to the quality of the footage. However, this promotion video is a student project, and is newly made every year. The teacher coordinator for this project believes that using footage from Coffee Talk would be a fine segment to add to the video and hopes to see it incorporated in the coming year. It is clear that Coffee Talk has done a great service for not only the students, but the university and the community as well.

### Conclusion

Motivated foreign-language learners face many challenges, particularly the challenge of finding opportunities to use the language of study on a regular basis outside of the classroom. Coffee Talk provides English-language learners with opportunities for real-world, face to face communication, with all the demands that authentic situations bring. Real conversations allow learners to develop skills such as initiating conversation, keeping up with the twists and turns of topics, interjecting thoughts, and asking relevant questions, thus building their comfort and confidence in speaking English.

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### 概要

日本の大学生はしばしば、自分の英語会話能力が乏しいのは「話す機会のなさ」に原因があると考えるものである。こうした学生たちの直観、つまり、目的とする言語を使うことと、それを習得することの間に関係があるとみる直観は、これまでの研究と一致している (Seliger, 1977; Swain, 1995, 1998)。教師は何らかの習得成果を達成するために、教室でコミュニケーション活動や他の関連する学習機会を考案するであろう。教師はまた学生たちに、授業のほかに「外国の友だちを作ったりチャットルームに参加したりする」ことを提案し、話す機会があまりにも少ないという学生たちの心配に答えたりするであろう。こうようにして、教師は、学生に自分自身で訓練の機会を見つける責任を負わせるのである。しかし、教師自らがカリキュラムを拡大し、教室の外で英語を話す実際的な状況を用意することによって、意欲のある学生にコミュニケーション能力を伸ばす機会を与えることができる。「コーヒー・トーク」はそのようなことを念頭に置いて開始された。つまり、学習者自身が英語を使えるように、社交のための討論の場を設けるのである。

この論文は、参加者の経歴や人物紹介も含め、「コーヒー・トーク」を論じるものである。参加者の意識的または無意識的な経験への洞察を深めるた、関連文献も提示する。

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