

Controlled Independence in a Partner Taping System for University English Majors

David Kluge & Matthew Taylor
Kinjo Gakuin University, Nagoya, Japan

Abstract

For over ten years, the authors have used a 'Partner Taping' system. First year English majors are required to record 23 minutes of free speaking outside of class each week as homework. The authors have had consistently good results with this system in boosting fluency and fostering a positive attitude about learner autonomy. The authors describe the system and the role of autonomy within it, then present the results of student self-evaluations. The Partner Taping system has also been adopted at several other institutions. The authors present results of a questionnaire they used to find out how these other institutions were using the system, and what degrees of autonomy they permitted. Every adaptation of the Partner Taping system entails some adjustment in the range of learners' choices to fit needs and aims in different programmes.

Introduction

The difficulty of getting EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners in Japanese universities to use English more frequently and willingly is a common problem (Yashima, 2002). There is typically one, weekly 90-minute speaking skills class, and often a certain resistance to using English. This was the situation for first and second year English majors in the authors' department. They felt that learners did not get sufficient practice, and that an attitude was being reinforced in which speaking in English did not extend beyond the classroom. In puzzling through their dissatisfaction, the authors encountered the work of Peter Schneider (1993) who introduced a 'Pair Taping' system of recording out-of-class target language use as an independent study alternative for learners who did not want to attend class.

The authors felt that allowing complete abstention from classwork, as Schneider had done, was inappropriate to their situation, but the idea of out-of-class taping itself was appealing. They considered how to use it, not as a substitute, but as a supplement to their speaking courses. They decided against using a language laboratory, as Schneider had done, in order to give learners more freedom about when and where they could tape, including during lunch (food or drink is not allowed in the language laboratory). The authors requested that the department buy small, sturdy, portable cassette recorders that learners could use in the free spaces around campus. They then initiated the Partner Taping system.

Partner Taping in the Context of Learner Autonomy

The authors take a practical and incremental view of learner autonomy within their institutional setting. They would like learners to 'take charge of their own learning,' (Holec, cited in Little, 2007, p. 15), which, according to Little, is the universally accepted definition of learner autonomy. Yet they also recognise that their learners 1) need focused classroom instruction, and 2) have not been educated or psychologically prepared to undertake autonomous learning in great leaps. The authors therefore see Partner Taping as a small but important 'bridge.' It should activate learners' awareness

about how English use extends beyond the classroom walls, and about how proficiency is their own responsibility.

Crabbe (1993, p. 444) distinguishes between the 'public domain' (classroom activity) and the 'private domain' (personal learning); fostering autonomy involves forging a bridge between the two, enabling the learner to transfer what is learned from one domain to the other. This almost perfectly describes the aims and the realisation of the Partner Taping system. For instance, topics or key expressions covered in class (the public domain) get talked about or used in the tapes (the private domain), while upcoming presentations, interviews, or (in the second year class) role plays in class are likewise practiced, prepared or rehearsed in partner taping prior to class. Partner taping creates a movable private domain on campus which criss-crosses continually with the public domain of classroom activity.

The literature has also come increasingly to emphasise the social, interdependent aspect of learner autonomy (Little 2003, Little and Dam 1998); the individual learner (in the sense of being alone) is no longer idealised as the optimal realisation of autonomy. In the Partner Taping system, speaking partners support and motivate one another (e.g., keeping the conversations going), and also keep one another accountable (e.g., about finishing the taping homework, or meeting at agreed upon places and times). Partner Taping thus incorporates a constant element of interdependence.

Methods

The authors have described elsewhere how to implement the Partner Taping system (Kluge and Taylor, 1999, 2000). Here, a brief description can suffice. At the beginning of the year, first year speaking classes (approximately 20-25 in each class) are oriented to the system, and are asked to prepare and label cassette tapes. 'Keepsake' tapes are prepared for recording and preserving the first and last conversations of the year, and 'Working' tapes are prepared that can be taped over repeatedly and exchanged with the teacher throughout the year. During their free time, learners sign out recorders and record free conversation with their speaking partner in empty classrooms or in the English department lobby. Each week they must fill one side of a cassette tape. The teacher collects their tapes each week and monitors them (usually with use of the fast forward button) to ensure that they meet basic requirements. The teacher returns the tapes to the learners the next lesson, with comments written either on a Post-it (tm) or a small business card-sized sheet, and collects new, incoming tapes. This process is repeated each week. Toward the end of the year, learners record their last conversations on the B side of the 'Keepsake' tapes. They then compare their first and last conversations by completing a self-evaluation sheet (see Appendix) and also give opinions and impressions about Partner Taping. In the second year, learners continue with Partner Taping, but use it to prepare and rehearse role play scenarios rather than for free speaking.

The authors have been encouraged by the apparent results of Partner Taping. Learners and teachers alike seem to recognise the value of the system, and the idea has been adopted at several other institutions, usually with some modification (described later). In the next sections, the authors consider the system in relation to learner autonomy, then present and discuss results, first from student self-evaluations, then from a survey of colleagues at other institutions who adopted the taping system.

Results

Learner Self-evaluations

As mentioned, first year learners perform a self-evaluation about Partner Taping at the end of the year (see Appendix). Although the self-evaluation is done primarily to encourage learners and activate awareness about their own progress, it also provides the authors with some quantitative and qualitative data on the Partner Taping system.

Learners perform comparative word counts on the first and last conversations, answer questions (on a five-point Likert scale) about Partner Taping, and add free comments. Representative results from one group of first year learners are used in this study.

Self-Evaluation Data and Other Impressions

Table 1 shows the words per minute fluency results.

Table 1: Partner Taping Words Per Minute Fluency Results

n=25	Range	Min.	Max.	Median	Mean	Std dev
First Week	102.00	18.00	120.00	56.00	60.76	31.1278
Last Week	163.00	21.00	186.00	86.00	87.96	45.9733

Note: n = number of students, Std. dev = standard deviation

Though a words per minute count is only a rough measure of fluency, for the sake of the learners it gives them something concrete and quantifiable to know about their own speaking progress, and from the authors' standpoint it indicates in a general way whether or not an increase in fluency is taking place. The results in Table 1 show increases in fluency as measured by words per minute in all columns. Table 2 shows the various categories of speaking rates for native speakers of English (Richards, 1987).

Table 2: Speaking Rate of Native Speakers

Slow	Mod. Slow.	Average.	Mod. Fast
under 130 wpm	130-160 wpm	160 -190 wpm	190-220 wpm

wpm = words per minute

Looking at both tables, at the beginning of the year all learners fell in the category of Slow for native speakers (with the maximum learner speed of 120 wpm). At the end of the year, there were two learners at 136 wpm, which put them in the Moderately Slow category for native speakers, and two learners at 186 wpm, which put them at the top of the Average category, very close to the Moderately Fast category for native speakers of English. The authors find it encouraging that in their first year 8% of a speaking class reached a speaking speed that approached moderately fast native-like fluency.

Table 3 shows the results regarding learners' opinions of partner taping.

Table 3: Partner Taping Self-evaluation Results: Impressions

n=25	Range	Min.	Max.	Median	Mean	Std dev
Easy?	2.00	1.00	3.00	2.00	2.04	0.7895
Useful?	3.00	2.00	5.00	4.00	3.76	0.9256
Interesting?	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.00	3.16	1.0279

n = number of students, Std. dev = standard deviation

Learners found partner taping to be fairly difficult (mean 2.04 on a scale of 1-5, 5 being easy), but fairly useful (mean 3.76) and somewhat interesting (mean 3.16). Learners typically find the taping hard (though progressively less hard as the year progresses), and by the end of the year they nearly always characterise it as useful.

Free comments on the student evaluation sheets in some ways give a more informative picture. A few typical comments are presented here unedited:

I think this taping is one of the better ways of English speaking. I can speak English more fluently than before.

It is hard to do this homework. Now I compared to a first tape and a final tape. I think my speaking skill improved.

I think it's good for learners to do this partner taping. My first time, it was very difficult for me to talk in English. But little by little, I could talk more, be interested and be happy in this taping. If I had not had this chance, partner taping, I would have not talked in English so much over the year.

The authors have garnered other experiential impressions over time. Partner Taping appears to have highly beneficial effects on speaking and learning:

- 1) Learners develop fluency and ease in using English.
- 2) Learners nearly always stay in English while taping, being conscious of the teacher as monitor.
- 3) Learners get hours of extra practice and a concrete record of their progress.
- 4) Learners gain a sense of responsibility for their progress beyond the classroom.
- 5) Teachers gain a better sense of who the learners are and what their language problems may be.
- 6) Most learners enjoy the taping and recognise its value.
- 7) The atmosphere on campus is positively affected by learners conversing in English in public spaces.

The fact that the Partner Taping system has been enthusiastically adopted (and maintained) by colleagues in other institutions lends further support to the authors' impressions.

The Taping System in Other Institutions

The authors were interested in learning how their colleagues in other institutions were using the Partner Taping system, and sent a questionnaire to teachers at four other universities who have adopted the system. The authors were interested

particularly in micro-decisions: which choices were left up to the learners ('independent' vs. 'not independent')? In this, the authors roughly followed Dickinson (1987) in his 'degrees of autonomy' schematic (p. 14), which rates various aspects of learning according to whether they are freely chosen (more autonomy) or externally directed (less autonomy). However, our focus on 'micro-decisions' was also compatible with Littlewood (1996) who proposes 'levels of autonomy' ranging from lower order choices (e.g., grammar and vocabulary) to higher order choices (situations outside the classroom where language can be used independently) (p. 429-430). The questions on the questionnaire were about the decision to tape, the mode, length, frequency, topics, language, times, places, speaking companions, and the place of Partner Taping in the curriculum.

Comparing Taping Systems

Table 4 shows the results of the comparison with other institutions. The authors' own system, for first year students, is shown in the first column, and Schneider's (1993) original 'Pair Taping' system is also included.

The results are informative but ambiguous. The authors' taping system is the most 'independent' in terms of the number of decisions left up to the learners (topics, language, when, where, and speaking companions). However, tallying up independent choices is not meaningful or informative in itself. Schneider's system is clearly the most 'independent,' since students can either opt out of taping, or out of coursework altogether. Other programmes give less independence on topics and language, but this is because they want the taping to be more stringently integrated into the coursework. (In our system, we encourage but do not require first year learners to speak on the topics or use the language being covered.) In the course of following up some of the answers, the authors found that one of the programmes above, which does not allow learners to choose speaking companions, assigns new companions every two weeks. This would seem to be less 'independent,' but changing speaking companions may actually introduce more novelty and topics, hence more range in autonomy, according to Littlewood's (1996) model above, and it also fosters social integration and interdependence, since students will have taped with every student in class at least once by the end of the year. Recently, the authors have experimentally adopted this partner rotation procedure in their own taping system.

Table 4: Questionnaire Results

	Our System (Kinjo Gakuin Univ.)	'Pair Taping' (Schneider)	Sugiyama Univ.	Nanzan Junior College	Chukyo Univ.	Nanzan Univ.
Decision to Tape	NI	I (option: instead of regular class)	NI	NI	NI	I
Mode	NI	NI	NI	NI	NI	I
Length	NI	NI	NI	NI	NI	NI
Frequency	NI	NI	NI	NI	NI	NI
Topics	I	I	NI	I/NI	I/NI	I or NI
Language	I/NI	I	I	I/NI	NI	I/NI
When	I	I	I	I	I	I
Where	I	NI	I	I	I	I
Who	I	I	NI (assigned every 2 wks)	NI	I	NI
Curriculum	Course Component (1 st , 2 nd year learners)	Whole Course	Course Component (Self-Access Class)	Course Component	Course Component (1 st , 2 nd year learners)	Course Component

I=Independent, NI=Not Independent

Conclusion

The Partner Taping system is an example of 'controlled independence' that the authors feel has benefited learning and proficiency, and fostered a positive attitude about autonomy. The adoption of the system at other institutions is encouraging and supports the authors' impressions. The system might be beneficial in other EFL and ESL settings around the world. The use of 'speaking journals' by Ho (2003) is a good example, though Ho's system is less oriented toward fluency building and is more script-based.

How 'independent' an out-of-class taping system should be, i.e., what choices it allows, will depend greatly on the specifics of each course and programme. In this

sense, learner independence is of relative and not absolute value, in proportion to its practical value and the goals of a programme.

One recent development in out-of-class fluency practice is the creation of communication or 'interaction' spaces on campus (Croker, 2007). Such systems are promising and could conceivably be an alternative to solutions like Partner Taping. However, at present, the authors do not have the resources or administrative backing needed to create such a space on a scale that would match the results of the simpler Partner Taping system.

The Authors

David Kluge is Professor of English at Kinjo Gakuin University. He has written and presented on EFL Pedagogy and CALL, and has co-authored several textbooks now being used at Kinjo and other institutions. Most recently, he has co-authored with Matthew Taylor the textbook *Basic Steps to Writing Research Papers* (Cengage Learning).

Matthew Taylor is Professor of English at Kinjo Gakuin University, where he teaches language skills, academic writing, culture, media and teacher training. He has written and presented extensively on literature, culture and EFL Pedagogy. Most recently, he has co-authored with David Kluge the textbook *Basic Steps to Writing Research Papers* (Cengage Learning).

Appendix

Partner Taping Self Evaluation

First Taping

First Conversation

Topics:

A. Words per 10 seconds = _____

Second Conversation

Topics:

B. Words per 10 seconds = _____

Third Conversation

Topics:

C. Words per 10 seconds = _____

FIRST FLUENCY: $2 \times (A + B + C) =$ _____ Words per Minute
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Last Taping

First Conversation

Topics:

D. Words per 10 seconds = _____

Second Conversation

Topics:

E. Words per 10 seconds = _____

Third Conversation

Topics:

F. Words per 10 seconds = _____

LAST FLUENCY: $2 \times (D + E + F) =$ _____ Words per Minute

FIRST FLUENCY: $2 \times (A + B + C) =$ _____ Words per Minute

IMPROVEMENT IN FLUENCY = _____ Words per Minute

Evaluation

Write a comment on your thoughts on improvement in fluency over the year.

Partner Taping Questionnaire

Circle your answer.

I thought doing partner taping was . . .

easy 1. Not at all 2. A little 3. So-so 4. Yes 5. Very

useful 1. Not at all 2. A little 3. So-so 4. Yes 5. Very

interesting 1. Not at all 2. A little 3. So-so 4. Yes 5. Very

Free Comment on Partner Taping

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