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Toss 'n Talk: A Conversation Card Game

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Toss 'n Talk is a card game that can be used in mixed level EFL/ESL classes to generate lively sustained conversations. It is a student-centered activity that can increase participation, cooperation, and enthusiasm. This article will describe the basic conversation pattern that inspired Toss 'n Talk, and explain how the game is played.

Toss 'n Talk は、レベルの違う生徒の混ざったクラスでも、英語での会話を途切れないよう続けさせるのに役立つゲームです。生徒中心のこのゲームは、活動を通してゲ

ームへの参加や生徒同士の協力を促進し、熱中して学ぶことができます。ここでは、このToss n' Talkのゲームを始めたきっかけとなった基本の会話文とゲームの仕方を説明します。

Introduction

One of the ongoing challenges teachers face in the EFL/ESL classroom is to provide their students with the chance to engage in meaningful, sustained conversations. Conversation activities drawn from target language textbooks are often too closely tied to specific structures to encourage creativity or sustain student interest. The more open-ended activities from topic based textbooks can overwhelm lower level students and leave them with the feeling that they have little to say. In the mixed level classes that most of us teach, students at lower proficiency levels may lack confidence or may be intimidated by their more proficient classmates. This is especially true when students are asked to take part in “free conversations” or small group discussions and are expected to use the language they may have acquired with a minimum of imposed structure or guidance from the instructor.

The Toss 'n Talk card game is the result of my classroom experience, collaboration with colleagues, and my efforts to reduce the obstacles that limit conversation practice. This card game offers teachers a student-centered activity that generates lively conversations. It is based on a “Question / Response / Follow-up question” (QRF) conversation pattern (see Appendix A), developed by one of my colleagues (V. Hansford, personal communication, October 2000). It enables students to interact with their peers even if they are at lower proficiency levels.

The QRF Conversation Pattern

Before students can play the card game, it is necessary to introduce the conversation pattern upon which it is based. I have used this game in both ninety-minute and forty five-minute classes, and the introduction of the QRF pattern usually takes about twenty minutes. During my workshop at the JALT 2002 Conference I introduced the QRF pattern just as I usually do in class to give the participants an idea of how the card game is set up. I will do the same below. Of course, teachers who use the game should adapt this introduction to fit their teaching style and the proficiency level of their students. For example, the components of the pattern can be presented one at a time to allow students to practice them separately before they are asked to produce them by playing the game.

The Question

I begin by telling the students that we will be practicing a conversation pattern that I call QRF. I tell the students that Q is for question. The question introduces the Topic of the conversation. I write “**Q**uestion = **T**opic” on the board. I use the word *topic* here because it is the word that students will see on the cards when they play the game (see Appendix B). I then model a few typical questions while pointing to the words **Q**uestion = **T**opic on the board to emphasize that the **T**opic of the conversation is in the **Q**uestion that is asked:

- “Where do you come from?”
- “Do you have a part-time job?”
- “What do you like to do in your free time?”

The Response

I continue by saying that when we ask a question, we will get an answer, and I write “Answer” on the board. Then I point to Question again as I repeat the questions and this time I model possible answers as I point to the word “Answer”:

- “I come from Seattle.”
- “Yes, I do.”
- “I like to go skydiving.”

I tell the students that when someone answers our question, we show interest by offering a **R**esponse. I write some common responses on the board: “Oh, really?” “I see.” “Wow!” I say that another way to respond to what someone says is to “Echo”, which means to repeat key words from the answer we hear. I tell the students that the response I want them to practice in this conversation pattern is the Echo, and I write **R**esponse = **E**cho on the board. I use the word echo here because this is also the word that is on the card when they play the game. Then I model the pattern so far by repeating the three Questions, answers, and Responses while pointing to the corresponding words, **Q**uestion = **T**opic, **R**esponse = **E**cho on the board so that students can begin to visualize how the components of the pattern fit together:

- “Where do you come from?”
- “I come from Seattle.”
- “Seattle?”

This is also an excellent opportunity to review how intonation can affect meaning and have students practice various responses with intonation that is appropriate to the answers they hear.

The Follow-up question

Next, I tell the students that one of the best ways to keep a conversation going is to ask a Follow-up question. I say that follow-up questions ask for more information. I write “Follow-up question” on the board and model the pattern again, pointing to each component as I did before:

- “Where do you come from?”
- “I come from Seattle.”
- “Seattle?”
- “Do you like the Mariners?”
- “Yes, I do.”

I demonstrate that at this point in the QRF pattern, we can continue the conversation by echoing the new answer and asking more follow-up questions.

How about you? + Question

The final component of the QRF pattern is “How about you? + Question”. I tell the students we use this when we want to change the speaker, and I write “How about you? + Question” on the board. I acknowledge that native speakers don’t always ask a question after “how about you”, but I want the students to do so in order to maintain the focus of the conversation. For example:

- “Where do you come from?”
 “I come from Seattle.”
 “Seattle? Do you like the Mariners?”
 “Yes, I do. How about you? Where do you come from?”

The last question “Where do you come from?” reminds the speakers that the topic of the conversation is still hometowns and not baseball.

Finally, I model the complete QRF pattern as I point to each of the components:

- (Q): Where do you come from?
 (A1): I come from Seattle.
 (R): Seattle? (F): Do you like the Mariners?
 (A2): Yes, I do. (H+Q): How about you? Where do you come from?
 (A3): I’m from Saitama.
 (R): Saitama? How long does it take you to come to school?
 (A4): About two hours.

And the pattern continues.

Preparing to Play Toss ‘n Talk

After you introduce the QRF conversation pattern and your students are comfortable with it, you are ready to set up the Toss ‘n Talk card game.

- Ask students to suggest topics they like to talk about with their friends and list them on the board. Topics may include sports, movies, music, etc.
- Divide the class into groups of four (no more than five).
- Distribute the cards. Each student receives a set of cards made up of one **Topic** card, four **Echo** cards, four **Follow-up** question cards, and four **How about**

you? cards. You may want to start with fewer cards from each category and add more as your students become familiar with the game.

Playing Toss 'n Talk

- Students select one person to start the conversation.
- The first topic is “free”. The student who starts chooses a topic from the list on the board and asks another student an appropriate question, but he/she does not play a **Topic** card.
- All questions must be directed to specific students, not the group as a whole.
- After the first question is asked, any student, in any order, can continue the conversation by responding (playing an “**Echo**” card), asking a **Follow-up** question, or changing the speaker (playing a “**How about you?**” card). Remember: when “they say it, they play it”. When a student plays a “**How about you?**” card, he/she should ask a related question to keep the conversation on track. This does not count as a **Follow-up** question.
- When the conversation “lags”, or a student doesn’t like a topic, or feels he/she doesn’t have much to say about it, he/she can change the topic by announcing, “New Topic” and playing a **Topic** card. He/she then asks another student a question related to the new topic, and the conversation continues.
- The first student to play all his/her cards is the “winner”.
- Suggestion: have the students play until two students have run out of cards.

A Sample Round of Toss 'n Talk

The following example is intended to illustrate the points at which cards are played during the game. We’ll call the players Eriko, Taro, Mari and Ken. Mari has been chosen to start.

MARI: The topic is sports. What kind of sports do you like, Ken?

KEN: I like baseball.

TARO: (*Plays an **Echo** card.*) Baseball? (*Plays a **Follow-up** question card.*) Can you play baseball?

KEN: Yes, I can.

ERIKO: (*Plays an **Echo** card.*) Oh really?

MARI: (*Plays a **Follow-up** question card.*) How often do you play?

KEN: About once a month. (*Plays a **How about you** card.*) How about you Mari? What sports do you like?

MARI: I like tennis. I play tennis two or three times a month. I belong to the Tennis Club. (*Plays a **How about you** card.*) How about you Eriko? Do you like sports?

ERIKO: No, I don’t. But I watched the World Cup with my friends.

TARO: (*Plays a **Topic** card.*) New topic. Let’s talk about part-time jobs.

Do you have a part-time job Mari?

MARI: Yes, I do. (*Plays a **How about you** card.*) How about you Ken? Do you have a job?

KEN: Yes, I do.

TARO: (*Plays a **Follow-up** question card.*) What do you do?

KEN: I’m a waiter.

MARI: (*Plays a **T**opic card.*) New topic. Where do you come from, Eriko?

ERIKO: I'm from Osaka.

TARO: (*Plays a **H**ow about you card.*) How about you Mari? Where do you come from?

The game continues until two players have used all of their cards.

Conclusion

The Toss 'n Talk card game can be a useful supplementary activity in the EFL/ESL classroom. Teachers who have tried it in their classes report a significant increase in participation and enthusiasm. It is a fun way for students of different proficiency levels to talk with one another about topics that are of interest to them. By reinforcing the QRF pattern, students develop their ability to think quickly, listen carefully and speak spontaneously. These are the skills they need to move beyond the textbook and use their English naturally, in real conversations.