

# Creating Confident Creative Conversationalists with Communication Circles

by Thomas C. Anderson

*"I hear and I forget;  
I see and I remember;  
I do and I understand."*

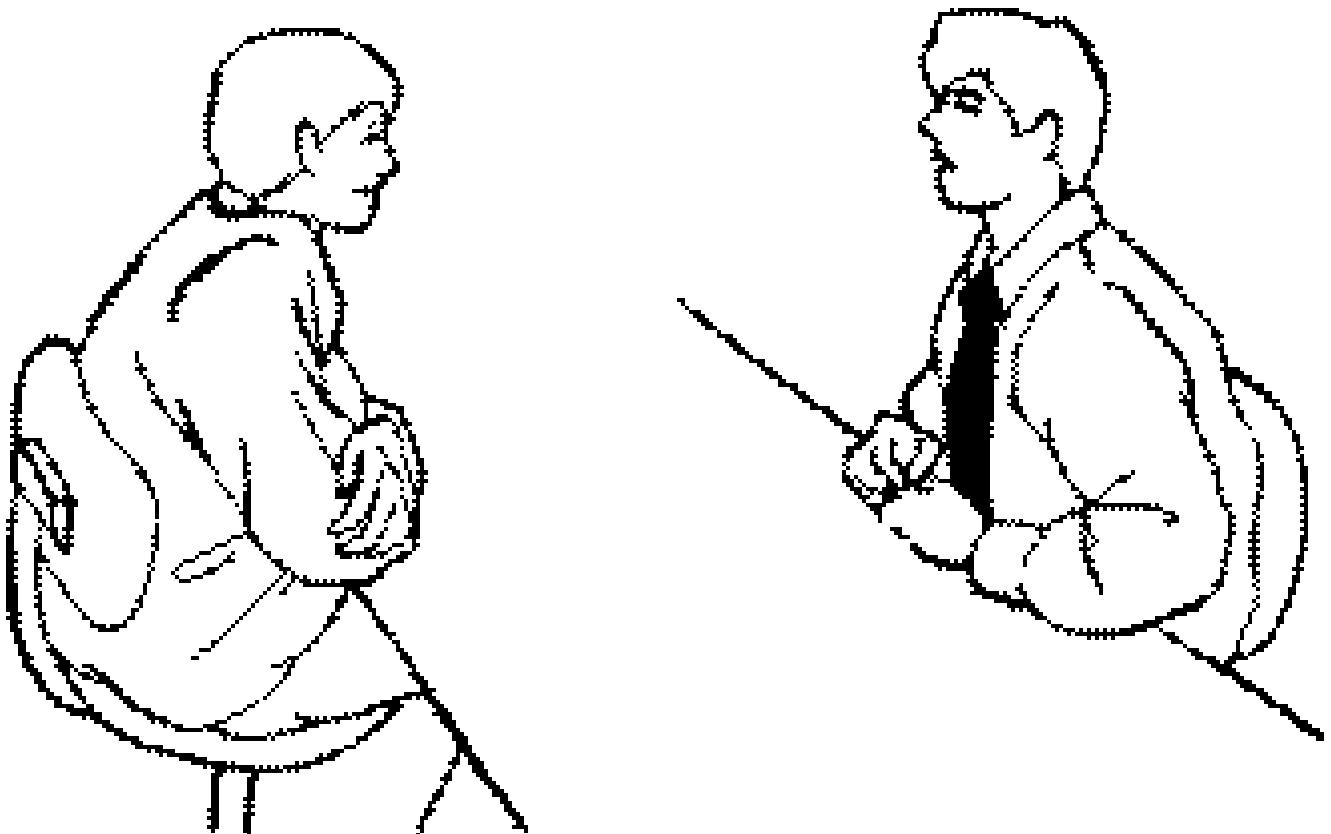
Ancient Chinese Proverb

As I approach my twentieth year of teaching English in Japan, I see that there are four major troublesome areas for educators here. First of all, I believe that many of us have developed an overly defensive mentality concerning what we do in the classroom. It seems that in everything we plan and do we are consciously or unconsciously trying to prove to ourselves and the Japanese that we are not "just" English teachers (with the unspoken message that we are nothing more than foreigners using English teaching as a means of making money to support ourselves while living here). How many times have we attended conference presentations or courses and seen grim looking audience members who are determined to find something negative in whatever is said.

A second problem area is the tendency we have to bounce from one buzzword or fad to another. Content-based learning, communicative language teaching, CALL, The Silent Way, video, and most recently learner autonomy are examples of these. Educators are often made to feel guilty or less than "professional" if they do not drop everything and grab on to the latest educational solution.

A third problem we encounter is the fact that English educators in Japan are expected to be all things to all people. There seems to be no end to the things that "should be done" by good teachers. The problem is that if we tried to do everything that we "should" do, not only would we quickly burn out, we wouldn't have a life outside the classroom.

Related to this "shoulded to death" problem is one that is caused by educators who are—and I say this at the risk of being politically incorrect—wrapped up in issues. This is not to say that environmental awareness, gender equality, anti-ethnocentrism, and peace education/conflict resolution



are not important but it becomes problematical when everything that is not an “issue” is discounted or trivialized. Is it right for us to bring an agenda into our classes and ignore things such as music, relationship problems, sports, fads, and so on that are important to our students? There is also the danger of crossing the fine line between teaching and proselytizing which needs to be considered.

The final problem, which is perhaps an outcome of the previous ones mentioned, can be seen in the common lament we hear that our students are passive, dependent, unwilling to do more than a bare minimum in class, and so on. To use an analogy, I believe that what has happened in Japan is that we struggle and desperately try to find ways to carve or shape our “square peg” students to make them fit into educational round holes rather than carefully considering and analyzing our students and designing “square holes” into which they may move. This must underlie our attempts to improve the quality of English language education in our classrooms and in this country.

Taking all of this into consideration, let us now look at Communication Circles/Lines, an activity which has become the mainstay of my Oral English curriculum. This activity, which is very easily modified, can be done both inside and outside of the classroom with a minimum of preparation. It is success-oriented and very motivating. A spillover effect occurs when this activity is put into practice. The enthusiasm

that is generated continues into other more mundane classroom tasks and activities. For the most part, the activity is student-centered.

Communication circles are NOT “free conversation” (which, to my mind, is perhaps a nice way to describe classroom anarchy). The activity involves what is mostly true unscripted one-to-one English communication. It provides the teacher with a buffer zone in which they don’t necessarily have to be “on” and it can easily be used as a diagnostic tool to find student problem areas. Perhaps most important of all, doing this activity is a very good way to settle down and focus students.

When doing this activity for the first time, students are divided into two groups and stand either in two circles with each student in the outside circle facing a student in the inner circle or in two lines of students facing each other (depending on the size and shape of the classroom). An odd number of students can make a group of three or the teacher can participate as a speaking partner.

For the first quarter or half of the term, students begin their communication with a set “introduction pattern” as follows:

S1: Good morning/Hi. (depending on the time of day)

S2: Good morning/Hi.

S1: (Pointing at self) My name's ==== (says name clearly). And you are? (points at partner)

S2: =====. (full name)

S1: Nice to meet you.

S2: Nice to meet you, too. (Ss 1 and 2 shake hands)

As I lead students through the routine, I point out the importance of eye contact, body language, gestures, rising intonation, “hinting or signal” language, and even the firmness of the male-male North American handshake! After being walked through the routine once, I have students repeat it and then give them a subject such as “HOMETOWN” to talk about.

The first time students are given a topic in this way, there are usually a few moments of stunned silence (depending on the student level) and then a few brave souls say something to their partner. I cut the students off after a short time—perhaps twenty or thirty seconds—and have them say thank you to their partner. One of the groups moves one person to the left or right and the process is repeated. At first I only use two topics twice so that students talk to four different people. Over the course of the term, conversation length and the number of partners and topics increase (normally I end up having students talk to nine different partners about three different topics).

After their first experience of doing this communication, I have the students sit down and I do a debriefing session. In it, I emphasize the importance of what they have just done (you said something to your partner who listened carefully and replied—communication in English, in other words). Students are often surprised when they realize that they really did communicate with their partners in English.

Before doing Communication Circles the second time, students are given a handout (see Appendix) containing eight “communication elements”. I go over one point per class (and review previous points covered) before students move into their circles or lines. I emphasize the fact that these are items which I will be watching for and considering when observing and grading their speaking test.

What do students talk about with their partners? Anything and everything! I have had students talk about such varied topics as sumo, tamagochi, cell phones, friends, dating, and even their Oral English instructor! Students can be given topics by the teacher or can be put into small groups who are told to brainstorm and choose a topic. They then write it on the blackboard and three topics are chosen by the class from the list. Towards the end of the term I sometimes give the students a free topic (meaning they can talk about whatever they want).

When possible, I try to relate topics to textbook themes, vocabulary, and grammatical structures. For example, if we are studying travel, I might use “dream vacation”, “favorite trip”, and “foreign travel” as topics. With lower level students it often is helpful to write sentence frames (for example, “Where did you---?”) and possible vocabulary on the blackboard. Students sometimes ask for the English translation of Japanese words or expressions and these can also be written on the blackboard and mentioned to the class between conversations.

As I monitor students, I listen for common mistakes (such as “go to shopping”, “What do you like food?”, or “play snowboard”) which I mention to the class between conversations. This information can also be used in planning review lessons.

I give my Oral English students one speaking test per quarter (two for a one semester course or four for a full-year course). Students are assigned a partner and a five-minute time block well in advance of the test period. Ten possible topics for the test are chosen from the topics used

in the communication circles. Students write down these topics. I usually tell the students two or three topics per period. One or two conversation circle times are used as a review. Rather than give new topics, students talk with their partners about some or all of the test topics. In addition, I emphasize more than once that there are two ways in which they can prepare for the test. One is to make a list of possible vocabulary and question/answer forms for each topic. A second, and more important way, is for the student pairs to meet together several times outside of class to have conversations in English about the topics (i.e. the best way to study for a communication test is to communicate!).

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The question now arises “What do you do if they speak Japanese?”. In the first class period (and from time to time afterwards) I talk to the students about how it is not possible to think and communicate well in English if they are using Japanese. In addition, I stress how using Japanese is selfish because it is a distraction to others and prevents them from thinking in English. As I monitor the students as they communicate, I try to keep my reprimands light-hearted. I might say something like “Some people here are speaking Swahili when they’re supposed to be speaking English!” or “Your Japanese is very good—like a native speaker—but...”. A very effective way to deal with a student pair chatting in Japanese is to stand behind one of the partners and not say anything while waiting. Sooner or later (usually sooner) these students and others get the message. I also remind the students regularly of the purpose of the activity and the fact that it is test practice.

Communication circles/lines, therefore, are not just a “teacher down time”. The teacher is kept busy as a consultant, monitor, diagnostician, information source/translator, and even participant. Are conversation circles/lines worth all of

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the effort and possible frustration involved? My answer to this question is an unqualified “YES!”. In class after class, year after year, students have commented either in end of term course surveys or directly to me that they enjoyed the activity very much and gained self-confidence in using English as a

communication tool. Success breeds success and the energy and positive atmosphere that are a product of this activity affect other class activities in a positive way. Communication circles/lines may be just the spark you need to enliven your students and classes. Why not try and find out? [ETJ](#)

## Appendix: Communication Elements

1. **The Beginning** (after the greeting) Is it better to start talking about yourself from the start or to ask your partner a question to show that you’re interested in what (s)he has to say?

2. **Showing Interest** Do you always look at your partner (not the floor, the teacher, your feet, or out the window)? Do you have a stone face when your partner speaks or do you show interest by smiling, using body language (such as nodding your head), or “interest phrases” (such as “Really?” or “That’s too bad.”).

3. **Responding** Do you use Answer plus 3 (fact, opinion, or question) when you communicate?

4. **Turn-Taking** Does one person speak most of the time or does each partner have equal time?

5. **Thinking Time** Are there long silences in your conversation or do you use English “aizuchi” expressions such as “Well...”, “Let’s see...”, “Um...” or “Er...” to give yourself thinking time?

6. **Repair** Do you panic when you make a mistake or try to correct it and then continue speaking?

7. **The Ending** Do you just stop talking or do you use a signal \_expression (such as “Oh, I really have to get to going.”) to let your partner know it’s time to finish the conversation?

8. **Sincerity** Are you seriously and enthusiastically trying to communicate with your your partner or are you just going through the motions?