

SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR MATCHED PAIR PHOTOGRAPHS IN AN ENGLISH CONVERSATION ACTIVITY

J. Kevin McDougald

INTRODUCTION

Encouraging English conversation students to speak is the constant challenge of English conversation teachers in Japan. It is sometimes difficult to find activities that offer students the opportunity to make meaningful conversation inside the classroom setting. This paper will take a brief look at an information-gap activity that is both practical and adaptable for different levels of students.

Klippel¹ describes information-gap activities as those which "force the participants to exchange information in order to find a solution." One such activity that we have used for first and second year conversation classes at Wakkanai Hokusei Junior College is conversation based on matched pairs of photographs. This type of activity is well known and is included in any number of English conversation textbooks: pairs of students are given similar pictures and are instructed to find the differences between the pictures through conversation. This paper will suggest some types of matched pairs of photographs which can be used to increase the effectiveness of the activity.

THE ACTIVITY

In our classes, the teacher first gives the students a short example of the matched pairs activity along with some pointers for conversation based on the English the class has been studying. Next the students are paired off and the matched pairs of photographs are passed out; one pair of photos for each pair of students. The paired students sit facing each other from across a table and are instructed not to look at their partner's photo (in general the students become so intent on the task of describing their photos that "peeking" is not a problem). When the teacher signals the start of the activity, the students begin to speak in English to try to find the differences between the photos. The teacher observes the conversations to determine when the students have had enough time to fully discuss the differences. The students are then instructed to exchange photos with their partners. This exchange step allows the students to compare the mental image they have built through English conversation with the reality of their partner's photo.

The usefulness of this activity for promoting conversation can be observed as soon as the speaking portion of the activity begins. The students seem to respond immediately to the challenge of using English they have learned to accomplish the task of spotting the differences between the photographs.

SAME SUBJECT / DIFFERENT ANGLE

One pair of photographs from our classroom exercises illustrates a general type of matched pair. The subject of both photos is the same, a barn in a rural setting, but one photo has been shot a few feet to the right and farther back from the barn relative to the other. Thus one shot contains the barn as central subject, a wooded area for background, a tractor

to the right of the barn and a small animal in front of the barn. The second shot contains the same major elements as the first shot, but due to the change of angle also contains another small animal, a car on a cement parking slab and a basketball goal.

This simple change of angle produces several differences between the photos, and in turn provides several clear opportunities for students at any level of speaking ability to probe for and identify differences. This same subject/different angle type of matched pair seems especially suited to the needs of lower-level speakers due to the clear-cut nature of the similarities and differences.

SAME THEME/DIFFERENT SUBJECTS

Another matched pair from our classes has photos containing one man in each shot. The photos are of different men and were shot inside an apartment. Aside from the similarity of theme, one man inside an apartment looking at the camera, there are a variety of differences in the appearance, dress and poses of the men and also in the background items in the apartment.

This type of pair presents a greater challenge to students than the same subject/different angle pair previously discussed. Students may be slow to recognize that the photos are of different people if they ask questions that are too general. For example, a beginning speaker may ask "How many people are in your picture?" and if the partner answers "There is one man" the questions that follow in the conversation may concern the clothing and the actions of the man rather than the man's features. This added difficulty is a plus for the activity in that it gives students a practical example of the importance of probing carefully to avoid overlooking obvious differences.

Another pair type that relates to this one is a same subject/different setting pair. If our pair of photos had been shot using the same man instead of different men, changes in the man's attire, actions or position would make for a useful pair, especially for low-level speakers.

SAME EVENT/DIFFERENT TIMES

Another challenging pair from our classroom photos is two shots taken at a Christmas party. The photos are shot from almost the same angle in a room where people are opening Christmas presents. Because the photos were shot a few minutes apart, there are changes in the number of people visible as well as changes in actions and positions.

This type of pair contains any number of differences, but many of the differences may be slight changes of action or position. It seems especially suited to middle- and upper-level speakers who have more ability to seek out the finer differences and more need for the experience gained from the detailed conversations required to fully explain the photos.

Also, this type of pair is often readily available in Japan due to the importance here of taking photographs at various family, school and club gatherings. It may be possible to locate pairs of photos of direct interest to the students in your classes. The rather bland group shots which are regularly taken at various activities can provide a bridge to lower-level speakers for this type of pair. It is easy to imagine the ease with which lower-level students could practice simple dialogue such as "Is Taro in your picture?" or "Is Mayumi to the right of Tomoko?" if they were using a pair of group-shot photos from some school activity.

IN CLOSING

It is hoped that the short suggestions offered here will be of use to teachers who are looking for activities to spur more participation in their classroom conversation exercises. The matched pairs activity can be a useful tool, and the types of pairs which may prove effective in class are limited only by the teacher's imagination.

REFERENCES

1. Klippel, Friederike, Keep Talking. (New York: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1984), p. 4.