

Bowling vs. Rugby: Reconciling Conflicting Conversational Styles

Timothy Floyd Hawthorne

Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences, Hiroshima International University

h-timoth@it.hirokoku-u.ac.jp

Abstract

Japanese students generally find it very difficult to participate in group conversations and discussions with native ("inner circle") speakers of English, or with English speakers from many European, Latin American, African or West Asian countries. One possible reason for this seems to be that typical group interaction styles among the Japanese appear to be significantly different from those of people from many other cultures. But would students themselves be able to identify these differences and capitalize on them, both in and outside of the classroom? This study attempted to find out.

Keywords

Conversational styles, conversational dynamics

Introduction

Inspiration for this project was sparked by the author's observations during English-speaking "fellowship time" (random group interaction) after the English worship service at his church in Hiroshima, Japan (Mitaki Green Chapel). The author approached two Japanese visitors standing nervously in a corner of the fellowship hall who looked overwhelmed by the seemingly raucous, boisterous atmosphere, and asked them how they were doing. They responded that they wanted to participate in the English conversations and informal discussions going on all around them, but felt unable to join in.

1 Group Conversational Styles

These Japanese visitors might have been hampered by an inability to function in conversational (or discussion) styles they felt uncomfortable with. Discussion styles include what Meyers (2011) and Iannuzzi (2012) refer to as the "high-considerate model," the "high-involvement model," and the "basketball model."

1.1 High-Considerate (Bowling) Model

The "high-considerate model" of conversation is

most common in the cultures of East Asia and Switzerland (Tannen, 2001). These cultures are generally hierarchical and defer to those in authority, waiting in discussions until the speaker has completely finished talking. Characteristic of this style are long pauses between speakers, a "low key attitude" (low volume and slow pace), and a "consensus-building goal" (Meyers, 2011). There is tacit recognition that turns are taken, often in order of seniority, with the junior person speaking up when acknowledged or invited. "Just like you would take turns in bowling, in a bowling alley. I'll wait for you, and now it's my turn, and everybody knows that there are going to be turns" (Iannuzzi, 2012).

Another aspect of the "bowling" model relevant to group conversation and discussion in Japan is the nature of each person's utterance. Each speaker generally makes comments that are in harmony with, or at the very least do not contradict, previous speakers' statements. This correlates with rolling the ball in the same direction down the same lane. (On a similar note, when eating out together, a group of Japanese people will often follow the first person's lead and all order the same main dish in a restaurant.)

1.2 High-Involvement (Rugby) Model

At the other end of the spectrum from the "bowling model" is the "rugby model," which Iannuzzi describes as "high-involvement." In this conversational style, "you're expected to interrupt other people and the other people are fine with that, they expect to be interrupted. So there's a sort of rapid-fire changing of topic, changing of speakers and overlapping of speech. This is a style that's common in southern Europe, in African cultures, in cultures of Latin America, many voices happening at one time. It's also a style in Russia and Greece" (Iannuzzi, 2012). It also generally occurs in the Middle East and Mediterranean cultures (Meyers, 2011).

1.3 Basketball Model

Iannuzzi describes the "basketball model" as one that is "a little bit closer to what we have here [in the U.S.]." It is also claimed to be most common in Britain, Canada and Australia (Meyers, 2011). It is more similar to the "bowling model" than to the "rugby model" in its lack of the "overlapping" feature. In Iannuzzi's words, "You're dribbling the conversation, you're just going along. And when you hesitate, other people see that as an opportunity to jump in and steal the ball, to steal the conversation away. Not in a bad way, but just as 'Oh, it's my turn now.'" Meyers describes this dribbling as "holding the floor" with such statements as, "There are two points I'd like to make here" (Meyers, 2011). When the speaker hesitates or pauses, the listeners see that as an opportunity to "take or steal the ball" ("take the speaking role") in order to "keep the 'game' moving forward" (Meyers, 2011).

2 Research Methodology

In this study, a class of low-level English conversation students completed a questionnaire in which they were asked how they perceived conversation in general, with special emphasis on group conversational dynamics. They were asked to compare these conversational situations to participation in various activities such as: bowling, dancing, hiking, rugby, sumo wrestling, table tennis, etc., and to elaborate on the similarities and/or differences. Then they were asked if their English classes shared these similarities, or how they could be made to share them.

The results of the questionnaire were analyzed and evaluated as to their potential use in improving the teaching of these conversational dynamics. Attention was also given to how students could learn how to adjust themselves to these changing dynamics in the real world of group conversational English. Pedagogical considerations were then summarized.

3 Results

There were two sets of data collected: student feedback from questionnaires about perceived similarities between various sports and conversational styles, and student suggestions for classroom improvement.

4 Conclusions

Each stage of the project was very appealing to the students: the idea of sporting metaphors to represent

different communication styles; the students' role in interpreting the metaphors and the consequences of considering language use through these metaphors; then finally their reflection on how to apply these interpretations to the roles and behaviors of the teacher and students in the classroom. The students are not, of course, experts in SLA and their reflections are naturally restricted by their knowledge about language learning. On the other hand, the students are experts, much more than the teacher, in their own experience of language learning. As such their insights, and their active involvement in the classroom culture and practice, were valuable contributions to learner and teacher development.

Printed copies of a detailed analysis of the two sets of data, along with pedagogical implications, will be distributed in the presentation.

References

- Iannuzzi, S. (2012). What Is Your Conversational Style: Bowling, Rugby or Basketball?
<http://learningenglish.voanews.com/content/what-is-your-conversational-style-bowling-rugby-or-basketball--100908359/112844.html>
- Meyers, C. (2011) Play Ball! Discussion as Bowling, Rugby, Basketball
<http://uminntilt.wordpress.com/2011/11/14/play-ball-discussion-as-bowling-rugby-basketball/>
- Tannen, D. (2001) *You just don't understand: women and men in conversation*. William Morrow Paperbacks