

Teaching and Curriculum Issue

Topic Talk: A Review and Suggested Modifications for Use as a Course Book

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Introduction

As far as textbooks go, few are as simple in format as David Martin's Topic Talk (2006). To the author's credit he admits as much in the introduction page exclaiming that it is "extremely easy to use and requires little reparation". (Martin 2006). The supposition being that it shouldn't be used as a course book on its own, but more as a supplement to one. However, having used it for a number of years I have found that with a few modifications including; changes to the writing exercises, a review of questioning techniques, plus some introduction of vocabulary, the textbook is a good base for a yearlong course book.

In this short review, I'll describe the books components, the author's advertised prescription of how best to utilize the text and offer my suggestions on how to modify and supplement the exercises from this basic blueprint so it can be used as a main text in a yearlong course.

The Text Book Plan

Topic Talk is a listening and conversation text and although it's advertised as being suitable for a "main speaking and listening course book", I have found that it does not, on its own, work as one. First let's examine the components and procedures of the book. There are 30 units of various topics in the text including Food, Family, Time, and Fashion, amongst others. Thus for university curricula it's ideal as most have 15 class meetings per semester. Each unit consists of two pages. The first is a listening exercise comprising of 13 questions which are written out for the students to read followed by a handful of single or two-word answers. The second page contains a list of the same 13 questions with two additional blanks at the bottom of the page, numbers 14 and 15, for the students to make their own questions. To the right of the questions are two columns, one for "Partner One" and the other for "Partner Two". There are also online resources which include; a cloze exercise of the questions for each topic followed by a blank for answers which act as a warm up, ten extra questions with a space for answers in case students finish the original 13 too quickly, ten "In Depth" questions which ask for information from the listening not covered by the original 13, a Teacher's Guide containing class procedures, key vocabulary with Japanese trans-

lations, and the answer key. Finally in the back of the text are the questions in Japanese but written out in alphabetical letters as well as the key vocabulary from the listening.

The author claims that this textbook is made specifically for the Japanese market. However, besides a few references to things Japanese such as yen in the chapter on "Money", sumo in the chapter on "Sports", Shinto in the chapter on "Marriage" and a few other examples, there is little here in 30 chapters that support the author's claim of it being "Japan focused". Even some chapters that could have been used more for Japan such as the chapters on "Holidays" or "Shopping", no mention of anything specifically Japanese appears. One reason for this of course is that the bulk of the interviews take place in Hawaii and with presumably non-Japanese English speakers. Therefore, in this context the speakers would have little experience with Japan and if memory serves correct, none of them mention having visited there in any of the listening sections. This detail however, doesn't take away from the usefulness of the book.

Procedure:

The online site of Topic Talk includes supplementary exercises that the author suggests the students do before listening and with books closed. It includes the topic questions as a cloze exercise with single-word blanks and answers on the top of the page for them to match. It also includes a space next to the question for them to write their own answers. After these are checked, the students open their textbooks and listen to two native speakers taking part in an interview. The students follow the questions being asked in order and circle the answers they hear. At times, the interviewer may ask follow up questions or make comments, but for the most part, they ask the text questions only. The listening section questions are repeated more slowly which acts as pronunciation practice. After the listening is corrected and the pronunciation done to the teacher's satisfaction, the students' pair up and after writing down their first partner's answers, change partners and repeat the same questions. Should this finish before the allotted time, there are 10 extra questions that the students can do. There is no suggestion as to whether this be done in pairs or for homework.

Modifications to the Textbook

As one can see the setup is quite straightforward and is repeated throughout the 30 units. There is clearly enough material if you include the warm up and extra questions for a 90 minute class. However, its simplicity and repetitiveness is one of the problems, especially if one intends to use it as a course book. I've found that students of all levels, especially the high beginner or low intermediate get visibly bored after a few lessons. There are obvious reasons for this.

First, most of the chapters have skeletal vocabulary input other than what is included in

the questions or answers. Therefore, time should be used after the warm up questions for additional vocabulary to be introduced. For example, the chapter titled "Family" doesn't include any relatives outside the nuclear family such as nieces, nephews, cousins, step family relations, or in-law relations. Since one common complaint of most EFL students is a lack of vocabulary, it should be part of any lesson, especially one which is topical in nature and has a conversational component. Second, if one follows the suggested listening procedures, students would answer in one or two word answers as they are written in the book. This is fine to check their comprehension, but one may expand this simple task as a good opportunity for them to reply in complete sentences. If one purpose is to use authentic English, this might seem a bit odd as we often don't respond to questions with complete answers. However, one of the biggest challenges students have is making themselves understood clearly and complete sentences would go a long way to that end. Therefore, what I like to do is to get the correct answer first to check their comprehension, then I get them to orally put the responses in complete sentences. It can be as simple as an answer such as the following exchange from Chapter 2, Food;

- A. What's one of your favourite foods?
- B. Apple pie.

In the students' answers they would expand the response to include full sentences to the class;

"Her favourite food is apple pie."

This short addition which includes repetition by the whole class helps them get used to proper word order in English. Too often students respond to questions, both in and outside of class, in one or two word answers as it's written in this textbook or they translate using their L1. However, they often have problems making sentences or questions that adequately communicate what they want to ask or discuss. Taking that extra step of having them make complete sentences may help them with this.

Following the listening is the second section of the textbook, the "Practice" page. As mentioned earlier it comprises the original 13 questions from the listening plus two extra lines at the end for the students to make their own question about the topic. To the right of the questions are two columns asking the same questions to two partners. My observation is that after a few lessons this gets tiresome without some modifications, which brings me to my second point of "reviewing question formation" and "follow-up question" strategies. During the first few lessons of each term, I take a considerable amount of time to review how to make questions. Every student who has gone through the Japanese education system would have learned how to make questions. Unfortunately, they seem to have forgotten or do not get the chance to use what they once learned. Regardless, review is essential to my strategy of modifying the practice page to make it more challenging and interesting as a conversa-

tion exercise. Besides making questions properly, students also need to be able to realize that asking creative follow-up questions leads to better and longer conversations. The following example is typical of what students often ask as follow up questions;

- A. What's your hobby?
- B. My hobby is swimming.
- A. Do you like swimming?

The follow up question above is grammatically correct and perfectly comprehensible. However, few would argue that is isn't very creative and is repetitious. If one swims as a hobby, more likely than not they like doing it. So what could we suggest as a better follow up question. It's always better to ask the students first and I have been occasionally surprised by some well thought out questions. However, should this not happen we could illicit some suggestions and write them on the board like the following:

- A. What's your hobby?
- B. My hobby is swimming.
- A. Why do you like swimming? / How often do you swim? / Where do you swim?
Do you go swimming alone? / What kind stroke do you usually do?
How long do you swim each time? / Do you watch swimming events?
Do you compete in swimming? / Which swimmers do you admire?
Which is better for you, swimming in the sea or a pool?
If you could swim in the Olympics, what event would you enter?

These are a sample of follow up questions I often write on the board for the first few classes so they can get an idea of the range of questions that are possible. It is important that they understand both how to write questions and how to make questions interesting so the conversations become more interactive and thus last longer.

In addition, it's important for students to understand that often they won't get 'ideal' answers and they should be prepared to write something whatever the response. I'll illustrate using the above example:

- A. What's your hobby?
- B. (no answer)

I often witness students neglecting to write anything in the space or crossing out the answer block because their partner couldn't answer the question with an "ideal" answer. This might seem perfectly logical to them and I sometimes get the following reason; "They don't have a hobby so I can't write anything". Instead, we should encourage them to use a measure of creativity and modify the question or use follow up questions to illicit answers. First they should write down the original answer, two of which could be;

- B. I don't have a hobby. / Nothing.

Then with a bit of creative thought, they might ask as a follow up to the answer:

- A. Why not? / Did you have a hobby in high school? / What hobby is interesting for you? / Does anyone in your family have a hobby?

Therefore, regardless of whether the original question pertains to the students' life situation or not, they should always be able to either modify the original question or ask follow up questions that can entice a response and spark short conversations.

Next, after the review of questioning techniques and follow up questions is done, we can change the practice page to include them. First instead of changing partners and asking the same questions twice as suggested by the authors, the students keep the same partner for the whole class. They would change the second column from "Partner Two" to "Follow up Answer". This space can now be used for writing the answers to their partner's follow up questions as detailed above. In my experience having the students first think up follow up questions and then write them out can be time consuming. However, I have found that if they just ask the follow up question, but their partner writes out the answers in complete sentences, it's worked out the most ideally when class time is a consideration. I encourage students to make follow up questions for homework and write them in the space under the questions in their textbooks so they have a follow up question handy and ready to ask for the next lesson. In most instances, this is ideal preparation. However, it doesn't always work because we cannot know what the first answer to the question will be. Let's look at the following question:

- A. How old are you brothers and sisters?
B. I don't have any.

Let's presume that for homework a student wrote this as a follow up question:

- A. What do they do?

This question would then be irrelevant as the student has no siblings. However, with a bit of creative thinking, the subject of the question could be changed from "they" to "your parents". Then the follow up question can be used, even if there is only one parent. Furthermore, let's say they don't have any parents and have passed away, the tense could be changed from "do" to "did". In addition when students don't know the answers, encourage them to "guess" what it may be as the following example illustrates:

- A. How much is the bus fare in your city?
B. I don't take the bus, but maybe it's about 300 yen.

It would be fine if they could write "generic" questions that would work in any situation regardless of the answer. However, we can hardly expect low level students to be able to do this. Nonetheless, what I have found is that as we progress in the textbook, students get more adapt at asking follow up questions and conversations tend to be longer for each question. In fact, it is often the case that all the questions are not completed within one class meeting because as students get more comfortable asking follow up questions, their conver-

sations tend to extend and like many conversations, sometimes get off track.

Challenges to the Modified Class

Firstly, as mentioned earlier the students spend more time writing than they would otherwise in the recommended procedures. Thus occasionally 90 minute classes finish without all of the questions being completed. As well, the addition of question review and added vocabulary tend to take up more time than intended and therefore speaking time is sometimes sacrificed for vocabulary input or writing. It's important to remember that we need to start the lesson on time and go until the end and limit the warm up exercises and question review plus the vocabulary input to 20 minutes. The listening exercises of thirteen questions can be done in 20 minutes including the pronunciation. That leaves 50 minutes for the speaking exercise. I have found this to be ideal for the students to cover all of the questions including the two that they make themselves. If they have time they can do the extra questions. However, I have seldom used the extra questions. More often, they prefer to prepare for next week's lesson by writing out the two extra questions or the follow up questions on the practice page.

Second, as much as I encourage the students to stay in the target language, English, they often veer off into their native tongue, especially after a second follow up question is answered. Unfortunately, unless frequent reminders are given, there tends to be much Japanese spoken between the partners after the first few questions are done. It's encouraging to see your students getting involved and motivated to ask more questions or give more information than is required by the text. However, with lower level students especially, they often revert to their native language too quickly and need to be reminded to stay in English "mode". One strategy I have learned is once the lower level pupils are known to you, have them pair with a higher level one. This has worked well for the most part. Also, to limit the amount of Japanese in class, be sure that they are paired with someone new each week and preferably someone who they do not know. After a few questions they do get more comfortable speaking and furthermore, tend to stick to the "plan" by speaking in English more.

Third, there is no materials for evaluations from the authors, nor does the book or online resources contain any suggestions about how evaluations could be done. Thus it would appear to be up to the discretion of each instructor. I have tried a number of things, but have mostly resigned using an oral test as a midterm and a written as a final.

My oral tests are quite simple. I have the students speak in pairs, but they do not know which topic out of the ones studied I will give them. I provide a choice of two or three topics to choose from and they must speak for 5 minutes. They can if they wish choose one more topics should their first choice die out.

The final exam is written because of the university's requirement of having a written

exam as a final. Since question formation is a key objective, I start a conversation and have them continue it using at least two follow up questions. Points are given for both proper grammar and creativity or how well the question could promote conversation. Since I input vocabulary to each lesson, I add a section on this important facet using matching, multiple choice and/or cloze exercises. As well, statement correction is an important part of the test, so I write questions and sentences with some of the most common errors. Lastly, I add a listening component to the test. It's a 5 to 10 minute exercise of similar level borrowed from a listening text with "reproducible rights granted" of course. In most cases, the students finish the test within one hour.

Conclusion

Topic Talk is a highly useful textbook for any low level English communication class. For the most part it contains interesting topics and authentic language from native speakers who reply in unscripted responses. (The questions are purposely read out as they are written in the text per the author's request). The online resources including the extra questions and warm up cloze exercises complement the text well and serve the lower level students in class the most. In addition and to my surprise, I have observed that students often check the back pages of the textbook for translations of the questions or for vocabulary references. This feature has been proven to be quite useful for them.

Nonetheless, the simplicity of the exercises tend to make it mundane after a few lessons. Therefore, a few modifications are recommended. First more detailed vocabulary needs to be introduced to contribute more to the content of students' conversations. Next each class should have a short review of the various ways of making follow up questions and a reminder that they have much flexibility with this and that creative questions often spark conversations more than bland ones do. Lastly, students should have just one partner per class and prepare follow up questions for homework so they are ready to speak once the listening is done. This will ensure enough class time for short conversations for all fifteen questions on the practice page. Although this won't always work as we do not know what the original answer will be, it will get the students thinking about the possibilities and often they need only minor changes, such as tense or subject to make their questions useful for conversations with their partner for that day.

Bibliography

Martin, D. F. (2006). Topic Talk, Second Edition. Japan: EFL Press.