

Speed Pairs, a Spoken Exercise

by ADRIENNE KISHI

Written exercises are often teachers' go-to method for reinforcing target-language structures. While written exercises may serve students adequately on tests, the structures they emphasize can remain elusive or difficult for students to master in conversation. Students tend to interpret their difficulty in applying what they have learned as a lack of language ability, and they can quickly lose confidence when speaking.

Producing a target structure on paper is different from using it naturally in conversation. The problem, therefore, is not that students are unable to apply what they have learned. The problem is that they are expected to apply what they learned in one context to another context—in this case, without sufficient oral fluency practice.

Speed Pairs is a technique that can increase students' proficiency and confidence in applying target-language structures in conversational contexts. This technique takes the concept underlying written exercises—consistent, repeated practice of the target structure—and uses it instead in a speaking exercise. By reinforcing target-language structures in a spoken context, Speed Pairs can help students use them accurately and fluently during conversation.

OVERVIEW

This activity is designed for use after students have learned and understood the target grammar; they may have already applied the knowledge of the grammar through written practice. Following a review of this material, pairs of students use different vocabulary to repeatedly produce the target grammar within a time limit. Students then pair up with new partners and repeat the process.

Speed Pairs is a highly adaptable technique. I have used it when teaching English in Japanese junior high schools with 40 students per class and in English conversation groups with as few as four students. The example in this article focuses on comparatives; however, teachers can use the technique frequently throughout a course to emphasize different grammar points.

In class, Speed Pairs can be repeated three to six times (or as long as interest remains). The initial explanation and demonstration may require up to ten minutes, and the activity itself can be done in 15 minutes. Keep in mind, though, that it is important to review and practice the target structure beforehand so as not to reinforce mistakes during the activity.

While written exercises may serve students adequately on tests, the structures they emphasize can remain elusive or difficult for students to master in conversation.

Speed Pairs is a technique that can increase students' proficiency and confidence in applying target-language structures in conversational contexts.

Teachers have flexibility when using Speed Pairs; although the version described here requires cards, the activity can be performed without them. Likewise, the activity can be used for simple grammar practice or made into a conversational speaking exercise, as described later in the article.

MATERIALS AND PREPARATION

The variation described here uses prompt cards and a timer. For use with practicing comparatives, each card contains one written adjective between two pictures representing nouns, as shown in Figure 1. I use a deck of 16 cards, each with a different adjective and picture pair. In the case of Figure 1, the adjective is *big*, and the comparative form is *bigger*, as in “An elephant is *bigger* than a bird.” The noun picture corresponding in greater degree to the adjective is always placed on the left side of the card.

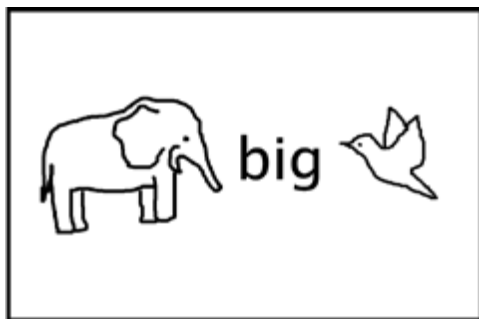


Figure 1. Card for practicing comparative adjectives

Other comparative sentence-prompt cards that could be created include the following:

- A train is faster than a car.
- A book is heavier than a pencil.

- Strawberries are more expensive than bananas.

(Note: When using cards with both the “[adjective + *er*] than” and the “[*more* + adjective] than” comparative forms, the teacher is advised to review this distinction beforehand and then have students practice choosing the correct variation.)

Teachers can produce their own sets of cards (one set for each pair within a class) or collaborate with coworkers to produce shared sets of cards. Teachers could also have students create the cards. If the teacher creates the sets, and if resources are available, the teacher can create a master table and make photocopies onto construction paper, which can then be cut into cards.

If resources are not available to create cards, all required information can be written on the blackboard. For example, teachers can write a list of target adjectives on the board with two corresponding nouns per adjective, such as “elephant” and “bird” with *big* in the previous example. (If students are more advanced, the nouns could be left out and generated by the students during the exercise.) During the activity, one student in each pair would face the board and call out adjectives and nouns to his or her partner, who cannot see the board. The student facing away from the board would form the target sentences.

PROCEDURE

The following setup assumes that students' desks are arranged in columns. If moving desks is not possible, have students stand in two lines facing each other.

1. Move desks. Pair off columns of desks and have students turn their desks

Speed Pairs is a highly adaptable technique.

inward to face their partners, creating long tables as in Figure 2. If there is an odd number of columns, students in the “extra” column can place their chairs at the ends of the columns already created. If the class has an odd number of students, the teacher may join in the activity as well.

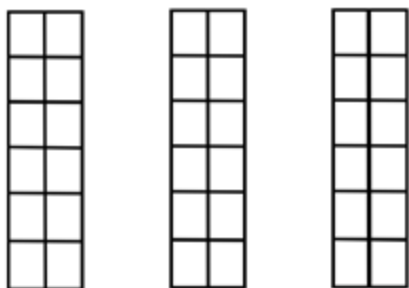


Figure 2. Columns of desks are turned to face each other.

2. Pass out one set of cards per pair (see Figure 1).
3. Determine who goes first. The student who is not speaking first holds the cards so his or her partner cannot read them.
4. Set a time limit and share it with the class. I used one-minute intervals; however, the time allotted will vary with context. If using cards, the teacher can time himself or herself to see how long it takes to finish the deck, then set the time limit a little longer.
5. Carry out the speaking drill. When the teacher says, “Go,” the partner with the cards flips over the first card in the deck and displays it. The speaking student mentally forms and then says the target sentence aloud, based on the card displayed (for example, “An elephant is bigger than a bird”). After the speaking student correctly forms the target sentence, the partner flips to the next

card, which contains a different adjective and two nouns. The goal is to orally form as many sentences as possible before the timer goes off, with the student who flips the cards counting the number of correct sentences formed.

6. After the first speaking student’s turn has finished, students switch roles, and the process is repeated. This time, the first speaker flips the cards while the second student forms and says as many sentences as possible within the time limit.
7. Change partners. Have students on one side of each table stand and move one desk over. The student on the end will move around the column to the first desk.
8. Repeat the process with the new partners. This whole drill may be repeated many times; again, I often aim for three to six rounds. The teacher may take time during partner changes to correct common mistakes he or she heard while walking around the classroom.

VARIATIONS

This activity may be adapted to suit a variety of grammatical or other target structures.

Targeted grammar practice (with cards)

Learners can practice many basic grammar structures with Speed Pairs. Ideally, cards will feature a combination of pictures and words; the purpose is not to read the target sentence but rather to mentally form it and then say it using visuals and knowledge of previously reviewed target-language vocabulary and grammar points.

Some grammatical structures I have used are the following:

Learners can practice many basic grammar structures with Speed Pairs.

Present progressive: Cards feature a name, an action picture, and an unconjugated verb, as in Figure 3.

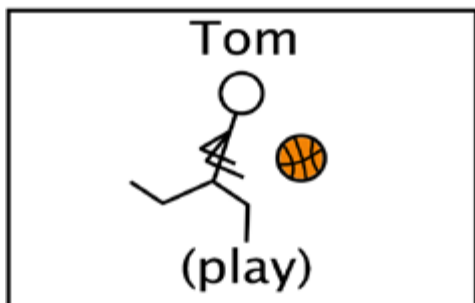


Figure 3. Tom is playing basketball.

Other examples of present-progressive sentences include the following:

- Emma is playing the violin.
- Charles is reading a book.
- Aki is listening to music.

Passive voice: Cards feature a subject, verb, and location, as in Figure 4.

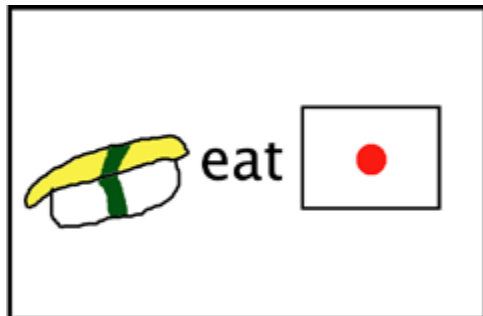


Figure 4. Sushi is eaten in Japan.

Other examples of sentences with the passive voice include the following:

- Chopsticks are used in China.
- Kangaroos are seen in Australia.

- Kimchi is made in South Korea.

Other targeted practice (without cards)

Speed Pairs may be used to reinforce specific questions and verb tenses, in addition to providing basic speaking practice in a large class. For example, the following procedure can be used to practice the simple past tense:

1. Write a target question on the board: “What did you do during summer vacation?”
2. Indicate a target number of sentences (for beginners, three is a good target).
3. Students form pairs and determine who goes first.
4. The first student asks, “What did you do during summer vacation?”
5. The second student responds with three sentences using simple past: “I went to Nagano by train. I visited my grandparents. We ate soba.”
6. If students are more advanced, the first student can then respond with a follow-up question or comment, which the second student would answer: “That sounds fun! How long did you stay in Nagano?” / “We stayed for three days.”
7. Students switch roles.
8. Change partners for a new round; previous answers may not be repeated.

Because this variation is less structured, teachers should use their own assessment of the students’ needs and current abilities to guide practice. If students are less advanced, or if their primary challenge is producing self-generated material in English, the goal

of the activity might be simply to reach the target number of sentences. In this case, Step 6 would be omitted in favor of gradually increasing the target number of sentences in order to enhance students' confidence in speaking. If, however, students are more advanced and have moved from the challenge of self-expression to that of interacting in conversational environments, it might be best to review question formation and common conversational responses before the activity, and to then include Step 6.

Note: In each of these variations, it is important to review the target grammar beforehand so that learners do not practice incorrect structures. It is also important to prepare additional cards/prompts or backup plans, as some classes may move faster than others. Extending the number of rounds is also possible if the class moves more quickly than expected and remains engaged.

BENEFITS OF SPEED PAIRS

- 1.** Pair work increases student talk time. In this activity, each student is obligated to speak 50 percent of the time, and more vocal students will not overshadow quieter students. Also, students tend not to feel singled out; each student's speaking attempt coincides with similar attempts by others, making the speaking component less daunting.
- 2.** Changing partners allows for longer engagement and varied experiences. Speed Pairs differs from simple pair work in that it employs alternating partners and a timed environment to achieve repeated practice of the target material. Speaking with a new partner in each round helps students maintain interest in the activity, despite practicing

the same concept many times. Students often have fun, shouting "Good-bye!" to their old partners when the timer goes off and "Hello!" as they greet their next partners. This also allows struggling students to practice with a variety of partners, creating more opportunities to learn and reducing the frustration or embarrassment that a student may feel when working with a single partner.

- 3.** Spoken practice, rather than written practice, applies more readily to conversational contexts. Reinforcing the target structure through speaking, as opposed to writing, gives students greater experience with and confidence in conversation while building their oral fluency. It also keeps students engaged and makes English language learning relevant—when students use what they have learned in an authentic spoken context, it allows them to feel invested in the material.

Watching my students work hard to produce the target structures again and again, and seeing their enthusiasm for completing the deck or assisting their classmates, has increased my own dedication to providing them opportunities to apply what they have learned through speaking activities. I hope that, having created and practiced target structures in a spoken context, they not only will be able to use these structures in authentic conversations, but will do so with confidence.

Adrienne Kishi holds a Physiology degree from the University of Arizona. She currently teaches English in the Dunkirk Adult Learning Centre in La Liniere refugee camp, France. Previously, she has taught English in Japan with Phoenix Sister Cities.

Prompt cards designed by Adrienne Kishi

It is important to review the target grammar beforehand so that learners do not practice incorrect structures.
