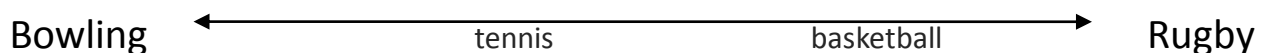


# From Bowling to... “No Silence Non-Stop Talking!”

- Level:** Lower intermediate – advanced
- Length of activity:** 30 minutes introduction, then 1-5 minutes in following classes
- Resources:** Blackboard/Whiteboard
- Goals:** To increase learners’ awareness of different cultural norms in conversational styles; to provide support language for more intensive conversational exchanges; to help learners to increase proficiency in intensive conversational exchanges

## Procedure

1. Explain how in different cultures (even within one country, language, or “culture”) the rate or intensity of exchanges in informal conversations or discussions varies a lot. At one extreme there is often a turn-space-turn-space kind of pattern, something like people taking turns at bowling, while at the other extreme, rugby may be a better image – with turns changing quickly or even merging, virtually no silence, and frequent tussles for the “ball”. Put this diagram on the board:



2. Ask students to think about their native language(s) and put it (them) on the scale. Next, they should do it for the foreign language they are learning – at least what they imagine... And think about cultures, not just languages. Is it the same for the USA and the UK, for Spain and Latin America? What about other cultures or languages in the world?
3. The teacher then adds to students’ suggestions, explaining something about what cultures, languages are typically found where along the line. At the same time, you should give, or elicit, examples of exceptions and variations within cultures – we don’t want to exchange ignorance for stereotypes! For example Mid-West USA vs. New York City, Osaka vs. country areas in Japan.
4. Next explain that if we travel or study abroad, we might encounter problems if we bring our home culture speaking style with us. This may especially be true for people nearer the slower “bowling” end who are staying in cultures further along the scale. In any case, just speaking a foreign language may slow down our talking. In conversations or informal discussions, we may find that all we can do is look from speaker to speaker, like a tennis match, and see no way to join in.
5. From 1. to 4., we have brought the problem to the attention of the learners. Now, with them, we need to try out a solution. Tell the learners:  
**Speak together in pairs for just one minute on an easy topic – but with no silence at all!**

6. It's worth asking the students how the experience was (Enjoyable? Exciting? Difficult? Too long? Too short?). At this point, it's also worth pointing out that in some cultures more than others, people use backchanneling (or *aizuchi*) to let the speaker know they are listening and interested. And to suggest that in English, short questions such as "What happened?", "How was it?", or "Did she?" are also used to show interest and help the conversation progress.
7. Repeat the 1 minute *No Silence Non-Stop Talking* activity in subsequent classes. Depending on student levels, increase the time to two minutes, then three minutes. You can change the group size from pairs to threes or fours. You can also increase the difficulty of the topic, from "what you did last weekend" to familiar social issues such as "Where I live", "Life after School" or "Family Life". This may involve a preview of vocabulary – and even the assignment of topics in the previous class, so that students can think about the topic, and what they feel about it.

### **Caveats and Options**

This activity can be expanded in various ways – from pairs to small groups, from one minute to four or five, and from everyday conversations to discussion of familiar social issues. As the activity is developed, however, it is important to not lose sight of the original goal – high tempo, intensive exchanges. (A sign of this problem is when students feel able to stop and look up a word in the dictionary mid-conversation!) In addition, students may need to be further equipped, with floor-taking strategies ("Mmm, yeah but..." "I know what you mean. I...") or with area-specific topics and topic-specific vocabulary.

### **Rationale**

Conversational styles vary from culture to culture, but learners and teachers in monocultural classes may not be aware of this, especially in a classroom environment. As a result, "English conversations" in class may really be conducted with the cultural norms of the learners – and so serve to reinforce this behavior. Learners who have been abroad and tried, and failed, to join conversations or informal discussions may be very aware of their lack of ability, but not be able to identify the nature of the problem, thinking of it simply as not being good enough at English. This activity helps them to gain a better understanding of the problem, and how to address it. The guided practice does make them better at higher tempo conversations, better prepared for using the language outside their L1 environment.

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