

THE CONVERSATION PARTNER PROGRAM

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One of the best ways to become fluent in a language is to have a friend who is a native speaker. The problem is that it is often difficult for Japanese students to meet English speaking people of their own age. Therefore, the E.S.S. Club began a Conversation Partner Program with the intention of creating friendships between Japanese students at Gifu Women's University and English speaking women. Initially, partners were Assistant English Teachers (AETs in the Japan Exchange Teaching Program (JET). and currently the new partners are international students enrolled at Gifu Women's University.

The program began in 1996 when E.S.S. Students invited AETs to become their *Kaiwa no Tomodachi*. The ad in the "Gifu Brief, (the AET newsletter) read "We are a group of students who want to help you with your Japanese while receiving help with our English."

Several AETs responded, sending their names, addresses and telephone numbers to the E.S.S. Faculty Advisor. The AETs and students were then matched, if possible according to the geographical area in which they lived. The JET Office sometimes assisted with this task.

Two Japanese students were assigned to each AET. It was up to the partners to call, decide when and where to meet, and how to practice.

The program began each year in April, when AETs were invited to the E.S.S. Club Kite Flying Party. After lunch, AET volunteers signed up to be Conversation Partners and/or to help with club activities such as the school festival and the speech contest. Students seemed to enjoy meeting the AETs and communicated in English and Japanese.

One of the reasons that having a native speaking friend helps fluency is that it is fun. Here is what one E.S.S. student wrote about her *Kaiwa no Tomodachi* in "ESSential" the Club's magazine:

"My conversation partner is Mariana Phillips. I got to know her in April at the Kite Flying Party. Then we talked away and became good friends.

About ten days later, we went out to dinner with my friends and enjoyed a really good time. She is very funny. Her jokes got a laugh out of me. There is laughter wherever she is.

She is not only witty but also a good English teacher for me. If I didn't use appropriate English or didn't understand her English, she explained politely and plainly.

I like Mariana!"

Another E.S.S. student expressed the benefit of talking to an English speaking partner for the joy of communication:

"I encouraged myself by speaking to an AET while eating lunch. I asked her a question in English and she answered me in Japanese. We studied each other's language like that and we communicated. . . When I study English now, I realize that I hadn't been enjoying English lately, but I studied anyway. Now I want to enjoy English. "

PREPARATION:

Sometimes students felt shy about calling and introducing themselves to a stranger. Meetings were held to teach them how to proceed. (See lesson handouts below)

KAIWA NO TOMODACHI: CONVERSATION PARTNERS

Dear E.S.S. Students:

When you call your conversation partner for the first time try this:

YOU: Hello, this is _____ I am your Japanese Conversation
(*your name*)

partner. May I speak to you in Japanese?

PARTNER: Mochiron!

If your partner speaks Japanese, you can speak in Japanese.

Or your partner may not speak Japanese:

PARTNER: I'm sorry, I don't speak Japanese. How about speaking in English?

YOU: Of course. I want to help you with your Japanese and I want you to help me learn English. Shall we meet somewhere?

PARTNER: O.K. Let's meet at _____ . Do you know this place

YOU: Yes. What day would you like to meet? What time would be convenient for you?

YOU: (or) No, can you tell me how to get there?

(with a busy Conversation Partner)

PARTNER: I don't have much time.

YOU: How may I assist you with your Japanese? I certainly need help with my English. Could we practice over the telephone? In that case, we could be telephone partners. Would you like to practice Japanese over the telephone?

(To finish)

PARTNER: Goodbye, nice talking to you.

YOU: Thanks, nice talking to you, too. Bye.

When you telephone, and get an answering machine, always leave your name and telephone number, even if your partner already has it. This makes it easier for her to return your call.

Get your partner's address and send a New Year's card. On the card repeat: "In the New Year, I'll help you with your Japanese in any way that I can be of service." or "Let's get together in the New Year and work on our Japanese and English."

IF YOU HAVE A CONVERSATION PARTNER:

Please ask your partner two questions.

1. *"Where are you from?"*
2. *"How long have you been in Japan?"*

Take a photo with your partner, or ask your partner to send a photo.

Write your partner's answers in English and hand them in with the photos
before December 16.

Then we will hang the pictures on the bulletin board with the information about our
KAIWA NO TOMODACHI: CONVERSATION PARTNERS!



Conversation Partners

Shizu Koide, Arina Aldar of Mongolia and Nana Tanaka with
Akemi Fukumoto and Takako Ui



Conversation Partners

Ayako Taketani, Archana Uniyal of India,
Mariko Shimizu and Yoko Tajima

SURVEY

The following were sample replies to a survey of AETs sent to them by e mail:

1. What was the best thing about your Conversation Partner experience?

"It was a good chance to meet people my own age, as in the environment in which I work, there are none."

2. Did your partner contact you or did you contact her?

"She contacted me by e mail and then I called her."

3. How many times did you meet? Where?

"We met twice: once in Yanagase where we went for lunch, and then at the E.S.S. Christmas party."

4. How did you divide the time between Japanese and English?

"It was mainly English we spoke because my Japanese was very poor.

5. What left something to be desired. Could you be specific?

"The biggest problem was that my student seemed very shy and I wasn't quite sure if she really wanted a conversation partner, so I didn't pursue it. Both of us were also pretty busy and it was hard to find a time to meet up every week. I think that perhaps it would be a good idea to have weekly/monthly gatherings instead, so the students are in a more comfortable environment and don't feel so pressured."

One AET was interested in "reasonably structured lessons" in Japanese. The strongest comment came from a male AET from New Zealand, who was helping to recruit women AETs as partners for our students: *"Obviously, language levels will dictate which language gets used the most but . . . it's not much fun being seen as a "free English Teaching Machine !!"*

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS:

The introduction of international students into this school for the first time has enhanced the Conversation Partner Program. Gifu Women's University recruited nine women from India and one from Mongolia. They came to the university to study Japanese intensively for one year, after which they will be expected to enter the regular classes in the new Culture and Tourism Department which are taught in Japanese.

There was a problem inviting these international students to be conversation partners because their Japanese teachers preferred that they be totally immersed in Japanese. However, these teachers did not rule out an occasional meeting, so the E.S.S. students were asked to speak to the international students in Japanese. Oddly, that instruction relaxed the shy E.S.S. students and the end result was a conversation half in Japanese and half in English with the Indian and Mongolian students. There were no "Free English Teaching Machines" but an equal exchange. There have been two meetings of these Conversation Partners to date and another is planned for the Fall.

To summarize, the effort to put together a Conversation Partner Program was difficult but worthwhile. The obstacles were the shyness of the Japanese students, the lack of learning Japanese for the AETs, the complications of assigning partners of the same geographical area, the dozens of letters, e mails, and phone calls required to set up the partnerships. However, with the coming of the international students, the Conversation Partner Program became a built-in opportunity to benefit both English speakers and Japanese students. The foreign students could make friends in the university and experience firsthand the use of youthful Japanese language, while the Japanese students could improve their English and gain international friendships.

RECOMMENDATION:

Over the years, it was found that allowing potential partners to discover each other works better than assigning them to a specific person by name. For example, two E.S.S. students who graduated from the university last year, still go out socially with the AET conversation partners they met at the E.S.S. Kite Flying Party two years ago. The AET women, one from England and one from Ireland, became friends with the two E.S.S. students from Gifu Women's University and their friendships have lasted.

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE:

As for the future of the Conversation Partner Program it is the dream of this faculty advisor that the foreign students, AETs and E.S.S. students will continue to meet and enjoy an international exchange, and that some may go on to become lifelong friends.