

**A Book Review: *Nice Talking with You 1***

**By Tom Kenny, and Linda Woo**

**Cambridge University Press, 2011, 112 pp.**

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This paper provides a review of the textbook *Nice Talking with You 1*, which was written by Tom Kenny and Lindsey Woo, and published by Cambridge University Press in 2011. This is a two-level textbook series which aims to promote fluency-based exercises in the classroom. The main focal point of the textbook is its use of conversation strategies, the teaching of pre-fabricated language that allows students to more naturally replicate conversation functions, such as reacting in English, opening or closing a conversation, and extending a conversation. In focusing on conversation strategies, it is hoped that students will become more confident in speaking English, and be able to take part more naturally in non-scripted conversations. Through this paper, I put forward that this textbook would be best used in a communication class, or as a supplementary textbook for a Freshman English '4 skills' class. As such, I recommend it for use in those teaching contexts.

## Basic Overview

*Nice Talking with You* is a series of two textbooks which, according to the authors, are different from other four-skills ESL/EFL textbooks (Kenny, T. & Woo, L., 2011, p. 4). The primary focus of this textbook is on speaking. As such, there are no grammar points; instead, each of the twelve units is centred around two or three ‘conversation strategies’ which aim to improve students’ conversational fluency. The units cover such broad topics as family, shopping, and free time. Each unit is broken down into a sequence of up to nine activities, which are intended to be completed in order. These activities start with a short warm up activity (‘likes and dislikes’) to ready students for that lesson’s focus. Next, 20-30 vocabulary items are introduced in ‘words and phrases’, which are then used in word matching, and gap fill activities (‘match it’, and ‘fill it in’ respectively). The next section is a short listening activity, ‘put it together’, which is followed by a short pair work speaking activity (‘conversation questions’). The next two sections (‘watch out’, and ‘language point’) highlight common mistakes and give quick tips on some grammar that might be used. The following section is ‘conversation strategies’ which takes up a full two pages of each unit. In this section students are introduced to two or three conversation techniques to try to put into practice in the remaining speaking activities. In textbook 1, the focus is on strategies that enable students to keep a conversation going, make natural spoken reactions, and fix communication problems (‘conversation strategies’). These communication strategies include showing interest, showing surprise, and getting time to think. However, in the second textbook the conversation strategies are aimed at enabling students to take longer turns speaking. These include introducing a new topic, asking for a favour, and giving advice. After the conversational strategies have been practiced in short pair-work activities, the students are exposed to these strategies in a listening section (‘conversation listening’) before the students then prepare their vocabulary and questions (‘get ready’), and practice their timed conversations (‘do it’). Following the timed conversations, the lesson then winds down with a more ‘real world’ listening section (‘real conversations’), and then a self-reflection activity (‘thinking about...’).

Aside from the textbooks, there are also some supplementary materials on the textbook’s website where students can listen to the audio files, get pronunciation practice, share their opinions, and watch videos on some related topics.

### **Classroom Application**

I used this textbook for two different courses, which gave me a chance to use it in very different ways. First, I used this for a Study Abroad Communication class as the primary textbook for that course. The aim of the course was to give students more speaking practice in order to prepare them to study abroad. In this case, I was able to work through one unit per 90 minute class, using all parts of the unit as intended by the author. In a 15-lesson term, this gave me a chance for an introductory lesson, mid-term review, and final speaking test to be incorporated along with the 12 units of the textbook. The students in this class had already studied grammar in Freshman English classes, so the lack of grammar focus in the textbook did not impede their ability to grasp the material, or progress in class.

In my next experience using this textbook, I used it as supplementary material in my 5<sup>th</sup> day Freshman English class. Like in my other Freshman English classes, I used the Four Corners textbook for four classes a week: however, whereas my other classes have their fifth class with a Japanese teacher, this particular class had their fifth day with me. In this way, using *Nice Talking with You* provided a good opportunity to increase the students' conversational fluency, while keeping their other lessons synchronised with the other Freshman English classes. As I was only using it once a week, in a 45-minute lesson, I decided to focus on only the conversational strategies, and timed conversations in each unit, and I taught the units out of textbook order so that I could match them more naturally with the main topics and grammar points of their primary textbook.

### **Strengths**

Due to there being some crossover in topics and vocabulary between this textbook and this university's assigned Freshman English textbooks, I found that the topics for each unit are familiar enough to the students that they already had a basis to begin having conversation without having to acquire new vocabulary items. Therefore students should be able to focus on using the conversation strategies to extend their conversations and make them more natural. Similarly, as stated in the textbook, the vocabulary should be already familiar to the students from their previous studies, allowing them to focus on using it more naturally (Kenny & Woo,

2011).

The conversation strategies themselves are very useful as a focal point for student conversations. Moreover, they have filled a gap in my students' abilities, as especially for freshman students, conversational fluency is not covered elsewhere in their other course book. In this way students can aim to navigate conversational functions by 'chunking' these phrases, and importing them wholesale into their conversations. Research has found that close to 60% of spoken English from L1 speakers can be identified as pre-fabricated language chunks (Erman & Warren, 2000), so the learning of these phrases can be seen as important to further fluency. This chunking is made easier in the textbook by the fact that the phrases are mostly two-five words long. Therefore, it is easy for students to memorise. The memorisation of pre-fabricated language chunks can improve learner confidence, as rote memorisation of a phrase allows students to enter 'zones of safety' where they can be confident of avoiding errors (Boers, Eyckmans, Kappel, Stengers, & Demecheleer, 2006, p. 247). Likewise, the phrases almost entirely avoid slang, so they should be easy to use in most social situations, and will have a longer functional shelf-life. Furthermore, practicing the conversational strategies in the context of timed conversations worked well in the class. By breaking down the conversations into timed 'rounds', students were able to apply focused practice, receive feedback in between rounds, and then refocus their efforts through repetition. As a fluency practice, this has been shown to motivate students, and encourage students to engage more frequently in the target language (Deacon, 1999).

### **Limitations**

Although this book is aimed at promoting conversational fluency, the lack of grammar guidance throughout the book could be a limitation. However, unless your students have a solid grammar base, or are studying grammar in other classes, this book would not be best used in a Freshman English class as a solo course book. It would be better to use in a fluency-aimed communication class, or as a supplementary textbook to be paired with a grammar text.

Another point that was disappointing to find, but did not adversely affect my classes directly, was the lack of supplementary materials to use alongside the book, when compared with other texts. There are some vocabulary quizzes, and polls linked to the textbook topics: however, the video links are broken, so they cannot be found on the website. Furthermore, for a textbook

that promotes fluency so well, I would have expected more interactive features with a view to encouraging spoken responses, such as shadowing, or submitting a recorded response.

Likewise, unlike other textbook series, like for example the Four Corners series which includes supplementary unit tests, there are no pre-made materials with which to grade students' abilities. In this case the teachers should decide how to grade the students' level of conversational fluency and understanding of the course materials.

### **Conclusion**

I found this textbook to be easy to use and apply to the two different class contexts in which I used it. I found that there was enough material to use it as a solo textbook for a communication course. However, it is important to realise that the students will get no grammar support from the textbook itself, and they are expected to be able to hold short, basic conversations about the topics upon entry to the class. Nonetheless, as an aid to improving fluency in this context, I found it to be a great choice of material. Similarly, when used as a supplementary material to aid fluency as part of a larger four-skills course, I found that the textbook was easy to use. In this case, the steps of each unit are short enough that some can be skipped, either in order to save time, or to reframe the focus of the lesson onto speaking rather than listening or writing. I found that by focusing on the conversational strategies and use of timed conversations the students were able to increase their speaking times, and appeared to deal more smoothly with the various requirements of a more natural conversation.

## References

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