Exploring spontaneity in teaching… and learning from the outcome
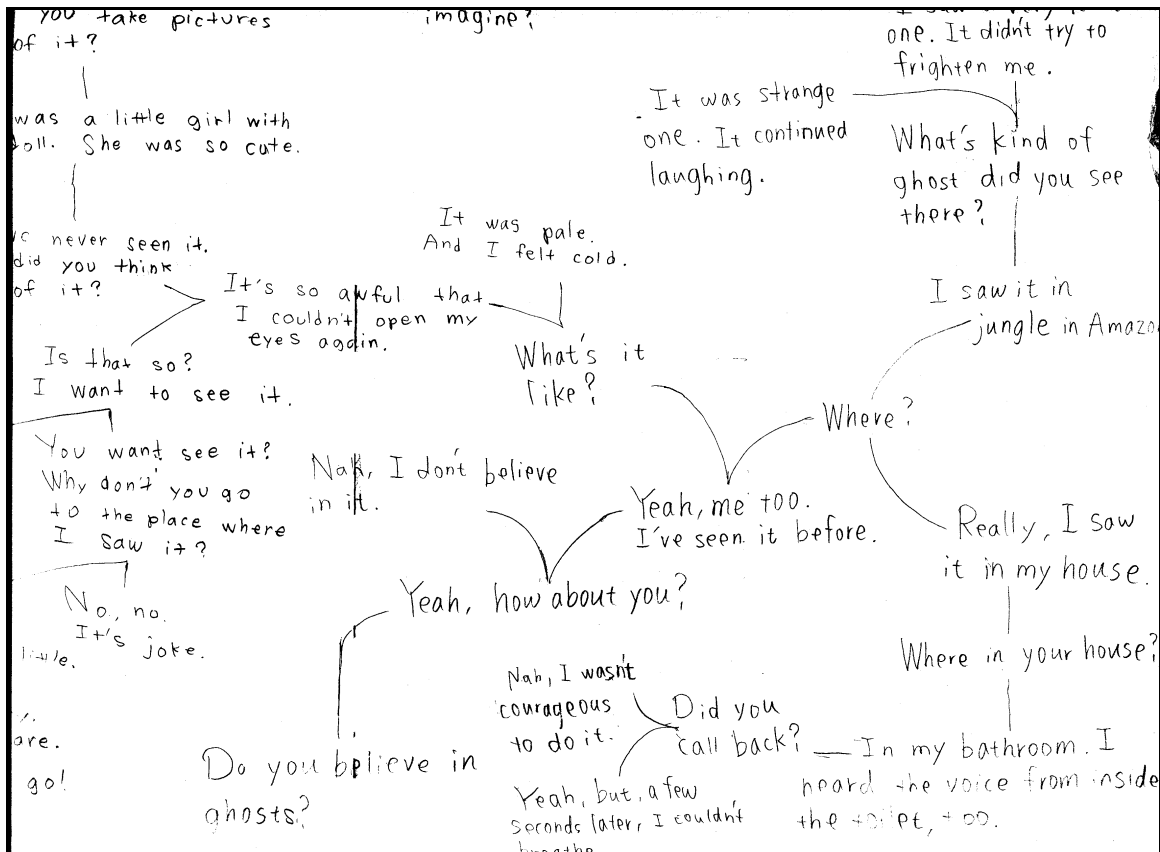
Duane Kindt, Nanzan University

Tree by my window, window tree
Robert Frost

Class was about to start. I had planned a lesson on mind mapping to help students prepare for recording conversations. But (among other things) I was wondering how to make the class more interactive, how to show students whether they need to pay more or less attention to their conversations, and how I can learn more about their learning styles. As I glanced at the trees outside the window, I remembered an activity called *Conversation trees* that Michael Cholewinski and I thought up a few years ago. And from that moment, the whole lesson changed.

The original activity
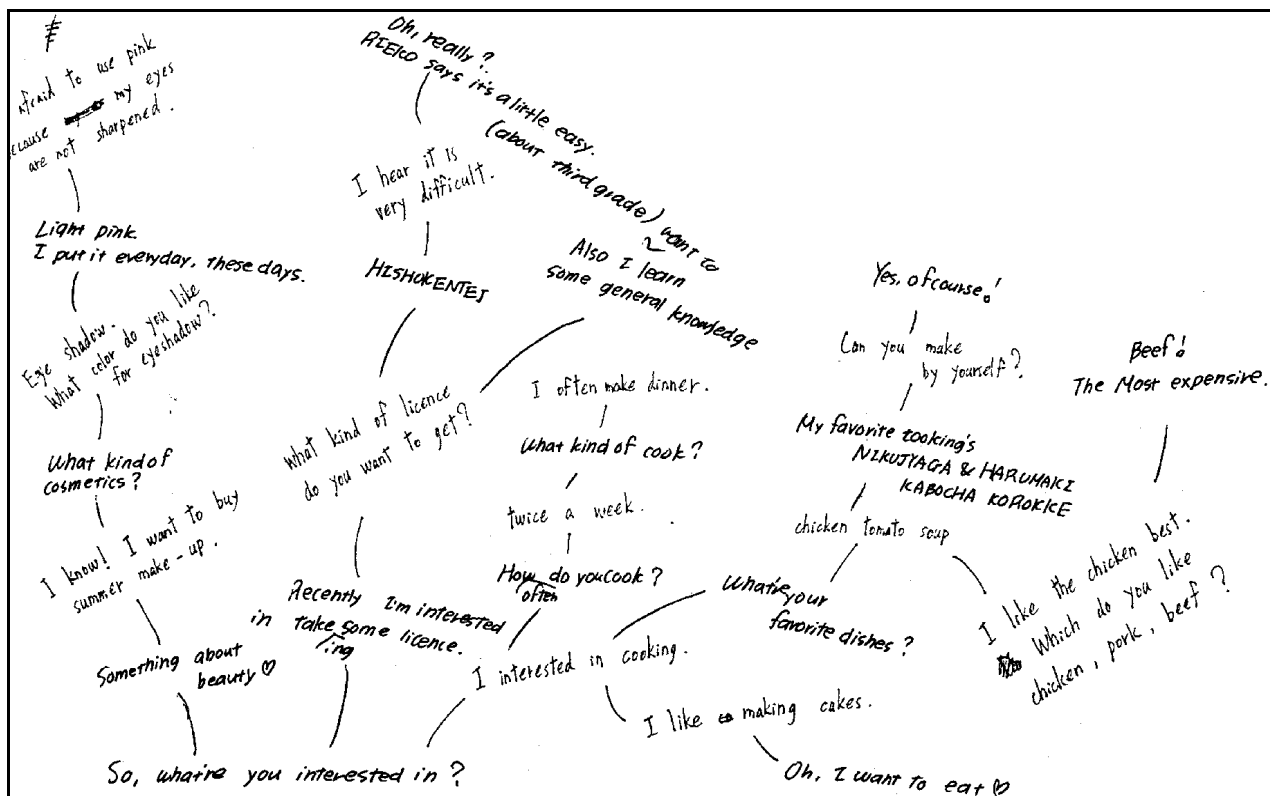
Originally, we asked students to work with a partner and write a conversation on a large piece of paper. For example, if you start with "Do you believe in ghosts?" as the trunk of your tree, your partner might write, "Yeah, how about you," as a branch. Then you might write, "Oh yeah, me too. I've seen one," as a twig, and so on (see below). To make your tree grow, you include alternative

you take pictures of it?

was a little girl with doll. She was so cute.

'c never seen it. did you think of it?

It's so awful that I couldn't open my eyes again.

Is that so? I want to see it.

You want see it? Why don't you go to the place where I saw it?

No, no. It's joke. little.

are.

go!

Do you believe in ghosts?

imagine?

It was pale. And I felt cold.

What's it like?

Nah, I don't believe in it.

Yeah, how about you?

Nah, I wasn't courageous to do it.

Yeah, but a few seconds later, I couldn't breathe.

It was strange one. It continued laughing.

Yeah, me too. I've seen it before.

Did you call back?

one. It didn't try to frighten me.

What's kind of ghost did you see there?

I saw it in jungle in Amazon

Where?

Really, I saw it in my house.

Where in your house?

In my bathroom. I heard the voice from inside the toilet, too.

(even imaginative) responses. Say your partner didn't answer the last question and instead went back to the "branch" and wrote, "Nah, I don't believe in them." Then you'd need to respond to *that* question, or write something somewhere else on the tree. In this way, the tree grows as students explore the topic.

The spontaneous version

Now, with interaction, attention, and learning styles in mind, I made a major change to the activity. While students are writing their conversation trees on paper, they try to keep a casual (spoken) conversation going *about other things.* To model, one student tried it with me on the board. This was hilarious as we tried to split our attention between writing and speaking. We laughed. Other students laughed. And then they all spent the next 20 minutes or so trying to have written *and* spoken conversations (see below).

A conversation tree (handwritten) containing fragments such as:

"Afraid to use pink because my eyes are not sharpened."
"Light pink I put it everyday, these days."
"What color do you like for eyeshadow?" "Eye shadow"
"What kind of cosmetics?"
"I know! I want to buy summer make-up."
"Something about beauty ♡"
"So, what're you interested in?"
"HISHOKENTEI"
"I hear it is very difficult."
"Oh, really? AIEKO says it's a little easy. (about third grade)"
"Also I want to learn some general knowledge"
"What kind of licence do you want to get?"
"Recently I'm interested in taking some licence."
"I interested in cooking."
"I often make dinner."
"What kind of cook?"
"twice a week."
"How do you cook?" "often"
"What're your favorite dishes?"
"I like to making cakes."
"Oh, I want to eat ♡"
"Yes, of course!"
"Can you make by yourself?"
"My favorite cooking's NIKUJYAGA & HARUMAKI KABOCHA KOROKKE"
"chicken tomato soup"
"Beef! The Most expensive."
"I like the chicken best. Which do you like chicken, pork, beef?"

As the class ended, I asked students to think about whether or not they liked the activity, whether or not it was useful, and whether attending more or less helped them to have more natural conversations. I asked them to answer these questions in their action logs, and I collected the notebooks later the same day.

Students' written comments

Responses were amazing. But before listing some of them, I should note that students responded to this activity with vigor. In two classes of sophomore English majors, all students drew elaborate trees. Even before reading the comments I thought, "Hmm. This was a good one."

> *"It was difficult for me to write on paper asking and answering questions."*
> *"Difficult, but very interesting…deepens our concentration."*
> *"It's hard to concentrate on more than two things at a time." "I realized how important paying attention to our conversation is."*
> *"I want to do conversation trees many times and become able to talk naturally."*
> *"It is very helpful to improve our conversations because of non-concentrated speaking."*
> *"We could talk more naturally than without the conversation trees."(+)*
> *"I think I can talk and think about our topic more deeply without conversation trees."(-)*
> *"I think it was good practice for us. Conversation is like art."*
> *"This is the best and funny way to add to my English vocabulary." "We were always stopping and laughing."*

> *"Conversation is unpredictable."*
> *"I want to do it again."* [x14]

Conclusion

I could spend hours trying to figure out why most students and I thought this activity was successful. But I think it had to do with a) its novelty (no one had ever done it like this before, including me), b) dealing with the distraction (whether inhibiting or contributing), c) the integrated use of language skills (perhaps students felt it's like "real" communication), and d) the introduction of a language learning strategy (varying levels of attention). I know that there was a lot more going on during conversation trees, and this short paper barely scratches the surface of the deeper complexities of spontaneity in the language classroom. But this is one instance when a little more spontaneity on my part actually made an activity more interesting, effective, and enjoyable for students. And as a result, we learned a lot about one another.