



**Title**

**English Workshop for Effective Teleconferencing**

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**Biodata**

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**Abstract**

This paper reports on the effectiveness of a one-day workshop developed for business people, aimed at improving English teleconference skills and at understanding the problems teleconference participants have. The workshop focuses on reduced forms for listening to natural speed English, conversation strategies for managing communication breakdown, and pragmatic hints and tips for a teleconferencing schema. According to the survey, the workshop was rated 'useful' by the attendees and two listening problems were highlighted as their main issues in teleconferencing: difficulty in following conversation speed and in recognizing pronunciations. Addressing those problems would improve the value of such a workshop.

**Keywords:** Teleconferencing; conference calls; reduced forms; conversation strategies; business; communication

**1. Introduction**

Today, audio teleconferencing (or conference calls) has become a key business tool for domestic and international communications. However, audio teleconferencing is

difficult for non-native speakers of any language because listening and speaking are the primary required skills even if some visual materials are available for reference. This report describes a one-day workshop built on a framework aiming at teaching basic skills required for English audio teleconferencing. The workshop was attended by 60 business people who had already participated in audio teleconferencing or might have to in the future. Also, a survey of the attendees was conducted to understand problems recognized while participating in teleconferences. The workshop was evaluated as 'useful' by the attendees and two listening problems were highlighted as common problems from the survey. This paper limits the discussion to audio teleconferences held in English, primarily General American English.

## **2. Workshop background**

### **2.1. Teleconference**

There are two types of teleconferences, video and audio only (conference calls). In reality, audio teleconferences are by far the most common due to the lower cost and ease of setting up and running them. Audio teleconferences only require telephone lines and the service or function to connect those lines into one.

In Japan, the business language used when dealing with other countries is commonly English and it is generally known that Japanese people are less skillful in listening/speaking than in reading/writing. Further, teleconference listening can be hampered by the line quality with various sound strengths and the existence of noise, echo, or cross-talk. Because of all these interferences it can be assumed that the challenge for Japanese participants in English teleconferences is not just a matter of improving listening and speaking. A skills framework is required to address the specific environment of English teleconferencing. However, the skills required for or issues involved in attending teleconferences held in foreign languages have not been adequately addressed in the literature.

There are sites on the Internet where some courses can be found that teach English teleconferencing skills to Japanese business persons, provided by professional development companies.<sup>1</sup> They advertise that they teach required skills for teleconferencing. However, on reading the course descriptions, they seem to primarily provide negotiation skills, not mentioning or addressing the fundamental issue that every dialogue occurs on the phone and seemingly not aware of the special problems this gives rise to.

As a TESOL course graduate, having witnessed many business people struggle with communication in English teleconferences, especially with listening, the author felt the need to develop a workshop for participants and potential future participants in English teleconferences. The aim was for the workshop attendees to understand what the key skills components are and use course materials as a reference for continual skills building as they gain further experience, not primarily to improve skills immediately during the workshop. The department manager approved this workshop to be held during business hours as one of the skills courses offered for the company employees.

The following will draw on suggestions from the literature and develop these into a framework for introducing exercises and a training program specifically aimed at addressing the issues faced by non-native speakers faced with conducting teleconferences in English.

## **2.2. Teleconferencing skills framework**

The author selected three components for elaboration in the course: (a) *Reduced Forms* for improving listening to English spoken at natural speed and supporting bottom-up processing, (b) *Hints and Tips* for understanding the business teleconference environment supporting top-down processing, and (c) *Conversation Strategies* for managing potential communication breakdowns that are expected to occur more frequently than in face to face communications.

Regarding reduced forms, Matsuzawa (2006) studied the comprehension of Japanese business people of English reduced forms, such as assimilation, palatalization, contractions, deletion, and linking (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996). Matsuzawa (2006) reported general listening difficulties not only in reduced forms but also in weak forms of function words (e.g., *have* in the conversation often pronounced as *'ave* or *'ve* instead of in its strong (citation) form, making it difficult to identify), and giving instructions on these resulted in improvements across the board for people with different levels of English skills.

Regarding hints and tips, Peterson (1991) explained that content schemata (e.g., topic familiarity and previous experience of a field) help the top-down processing of listening comprehension. Tyler (2001) reported using Mental Models, where the availability of topic knowledge could decrease the need for relying on working memory, enabling the non-native speaker to attend to passages with lowered

cognitive load. If the teleconference participants know how to sign on in a teleconference, how the teleconference is conducted, and what the key communication considerations are beforehand, then he/she can better focus on the subject matter.

Regarding conversation strategies, during the teleconference, communication breakdowns can frequently occur because the listener relies only on what is being heard through the ears. For example, if there is an interval while listening, the listener should judge whether it is the end of the speaker's turn or a pause. So it becomes both the speaker's and listener's responsibilities to maintain the flow of communication. Thus, successful communication also requires that the teleconference participant is capable of using conversation strategies.

### **2.3. The workshop**

Based on the framework explained above, the workshop was designed as follows:

*Reduced Forms:* Referencing Matsuzawa's (2006) study, this session aimed at providing knowledge and experience on reduced forms that are one of the key factors in understanding English spoken at natural speed. The main activity was listening to exercises of short reduced-form sentences either from recorded tapes or spoken by the author. Then the attendees were asked to fill in cloze exercises. Additionally, there were exercises where the attendees were required to predict how reduced forms could occur in the given sentences (e.g., *I miss your phone call*). Some exercises were adapted from Hagen (2000).

*Hints and Tips:* Selected items that had been important to the author's own experience of English-teleconference participation were stressed here and the selection rationale was objectively supported by theories wherever possible (see below). The emphasis was put on discussion considerations which are listed as a) through i) as follows:

Issues to note in discussions:

- a) Speak to the point (Sakamoto & Natsuoka, 1982)
- b) Be careful to use hedges, e.g., *maybe* (Hatch, 1992)
- c) Answering negative or tag questions
- d) Responding to unexpected requests

- e) Interruptions (Hatch, 1992)
- f) The speaker is unknown (don't be too polite) (Guest, 1998)
- g) Speaking in Japanese among Japanese attendees
- h) Exchanging thanks (Hatch, 1992)
- i) Expressing months by numbers (recent American trend)

These items were introduced in the short lectures with handouts but without exercises.

*Conversation strategies:* A Dornyei and Thurrell's (1994) set of conversation strategies were chosen for this purpose. The elements of the strategies were message adjustment/avoidance, paraphrase, approximation, appeal for help, asking for repetition, asking for clarification, interpretive summary, and the use of filters/hesitation devices. Exercises used were intended to let the attendees try and practice paraphrasing, approximation, and interpretive summarization in small groups of four to five people. For example, in a paraphrasing exercise (game), a group member picked up a face-down card on the table and had to explain the word on the card to the others without directly using the word. The words selected were *sightseeing, airplane, love, dolphin, and apple*.

As expressed by the use of the word *workshop* in the title, the course was built as exercise-oriented, as far as possible, so many exercises were included, keeping lecture to a minimum (except for the *Hints and Tips*) and providing handouts that would be available for future reference.

### **3. Aims of study**

By conducting this workshop, and by receiving survey feedback from the attendees, the author wanted to (a) confirm the appropriateness and value of the workshop, and (b) get information on English skills issues attendees might have in participating in teleconferences, for future workshop improvement. Two months after the workshop, the attendees who had in the interval actually participated in teleconferences were surveyed again to (c) see the long term effect of the workshop and to investigate if the hands-on experiences had resulted in changes in their views.

### **4. Participants and the survey method**

When the author announced the workshop in the department, enrollment in the workshop required that an applicant (a) currently participate in teleconferences for business or had the potential of participating in teleconferences in the future, and (b) had a TOEIC score of 600 or higher. However, the criterion of the TOEIC score was not strict. As long as the applicant's manager approved, enrollment was accepted. As a result, there were 60 attendees in five workshops held for various groups in the department in five months. Table 1 shows the details of the workshop attendees (hereafter students).

Table 1. Workshop attendees

Number of workshops held	5
Total attendees	60
Attendees having teleconferencing experience (subject to the analyses)	50 (men: 29, women: 21)
Minimum TOEIC score	410
Maximum TOEIC score	965
Average TOEIC score	721.0
Median TOEIC score	727.5

*Note:* TOEIC scores were for the attendees having teleconference experience only.

At the end of the workshop, each student was asked to fill in a survey on:

- (1) number of teleconferences participated in to date,
- (2) selecting from the predefined list (see Table 2), problems the student found when he/she participated in teleconferences (if a student could not find a problem in the list, to write it in) in priority order,
- (3) evaluations of the workshop's three parts (reduced forms, conversation strategies, and hints and tips) and the course overall, by a five point Likert scale, from *very useful* (5 points) to *very un-useful* (1 point), and
- (4) time allocated to each session.

However, the analysis of item (4) is not discussed in this paper. Then, two months after each workshop, questions (1) through (3) above were asked again to the students who had participated in teleconferences during the two month interval.

Table 2. Predefined problem list

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- a) Speaking – difficulty in timely thinking of expressions
  - b) Speaking – lack of vocabulary
  - c) Speaking – lack of grammar knowledge
  - d) Speaking – formulating sentences first in Japanese
  - e) Speaking – difficulty in getting understood
  - f) Listening – difficulty in following conversation speed
  - g) Listening – difficulty in recognizing pronunciations
  - h) Listening – lack of vocabulary
  - i) Listening – trying to translate into Japanese
  - j) Lack of teleconferencing knowledge
  - k) Lack of business knowledge
  - l) Cultural differences – greetings and jokes, etc.
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*Note:* The original list was in Japanese.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1. Right after the workshop

Surveys collected right after the workshop showed that students had various amounts of teleconference experience. Table 3 summarizes the responses.

Table 3. Number of teleconferences

Number of teleconferences participated in	Number of students	Group name (by the author)
1 – 10	16	Beginners
11 – 99	25	Regulars
100 - 350	9	Veterans

*Note:* The low numbers of teleconferences may be more accurate than the high numbers as each participant could remember each teleconference and count them better with fewer teleconferences. However, both low and high numbers were used as reported in the analyses in this study.

The participants were categorized into three groups based on the teleconference experience: beginners, regulars, and veterans for the detailed analyses in the later sections.

Regarding research question (a), the evaluation of the workshop was analyzed for the total 50 people as a single sample because the sample size is not large. The result is in Table 4.

Table 4. Evaluation: Right after the workshop

Number of Students	Evaluation			Overall
	Reduced Forms	Conv. Strategy	Hints & Tips	
50	4.60	4.52	4.52	4.60

Scales 1: very un-useful, 2: un-useful, 3: neither useful nor un-useful, 4: useful, 5 very useful

The average evaluation by the 50 students was 4.60, between *useful* and *very useful*. Then correlation analyses were conducted using the Microsoft Excel (2001)'s built-in correlation analysis function. The first analysis was about the correlation against the overall evaluation to see who saw the most value in the workshop. The correlation between the overall evaluations and the number of teleconferences participated in was  $r = -.08$  so the correlation was negligible meaning that overall evaluation scores did not correlate with the students' past teleconference experience. However, due to the accuracy concerns related to the number of teleconferences participated in mentioned above, it may be too early to consider this conclusion final. Between the overall evaluation scores and the students' TOEIC scores, the correlation was  $r = -.24$  so there was a low negative correlation implying that there was a tendency for students with lower TOEIC scores to report a higher overall evaluation. Next, analyses were conducted on the correlation of the workshop's three part scores to the overall evaluation scores to see what component most contributed to the overall evaluation. It turned out that *Reduced Forms* had  $r = .74$  to the overall evaluation, *Conversation Strategy*  $r = .65$ , and *Hints and Tips*  $r = .73$  suggesting that the *Reduced Forms* and *Hints and Tips* parts equally contributed to the overall evaluation.

Then, regarding research question (b), English problems reported in the survey were investigated. Table 5 shows the top five problems reported by the total and by each group of students.

Table 5. Reported problems by the total and each group: Right after the workshop

Total (N = 50)	
Listening – difficulty in following the conversation speed	66.0%
Listening – difficulty in recognizing pronunciations	58.0%
Speaking – difficulty in timely thinking of expressions	54.0%
Speaking – lack of vocabulary	48.0%
Listening – lack of vocabulary	24.0%

Beginners (1 – 10 times conference participations: N = 16)	
Listening – difficulty in recognizing pronunciations	68.8%
Listening – difficulty in following the conversation speed	62.5%
Speaking – difficulty in timely thinking of expressions	56.3%
Speaking – lack of vocabulary	43.8%
Listening – lack of vocabulary	37.5%
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Regulars (11 – 99 times conference participations: N = 25)	
Speaking – difficulty in timely thinking of expressions	64.0%
Listening – difficulty in following the conversation speed	64.0%
Listening – difficulty in recognizing pronunciations	52.0%
Speaking – lack of vocabulary	44.0%
Speaking – formulating sentences first in Japanese	24.0%
Cultural differences – greetings and jokes, etc.	24.0%
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Veterans (100 – 350 times conference participations: N = 9)	
Listening – difficulty in following the conversation speed	77.8%
Speaking – lack of vocabulary	66.7%
Listening – difficulty in recognizing pronunciations	55.6%
Speaking – formulating sentences first in Japanese	33.3%
Listening – trying to translate into Japanese	33.3%
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Note: Each student was allowed to report up to five problems. The percentage shows how many students in the group listed a problem.

As shown, two listening problems (*difficulty in following conversation speed* and *difficulty in recognizing pronunciations*), one speaking problem (*difficulty in timely formulating of expressions*), and the *lack of vocabulary* in both listening and speaking were ranked as the top five problems. This tendency was common overall and across groups. However, there were some differences, for example, *Listening - lack of vocabulary*, did not appear in the regular and veteran groups' problem lists; the veteran group reported the use of Japanese for the cognition process of the communication.

## 5.2. Two months after the workshop

Research question (c) was then analyzed. This question was for the workshop attendees who actually participated in a conference within two months after the workshop. There were 14 respondents here. The overall evaluation of the workshop two months later was 4.07, slightly above *useful*. (Refer to Table 6 below.)

Table 6. Evaluations: Two months after the workshop

Number of Respondents	Evaluation			
	Reduced Forms	Conv. Strategy	Hints & Tips	Overall
14	3.93	4.07	3.79	4.07

Scales 1: very un-useful, 2: un-useful, 3: neither useful nor un-useful, 4: useful, 5 very useful

Then analyses were made on the correlations of the three parts to the overall evaluation. It turned out that *Hints and Tips* part contributed the most to the overall evaluation ( $r = .85$ ). This would mean that the information of *Hints and Tips* had more practical value than was assumed in the workshop.

Table 7 shows the items the respondents now felt were problematic after actually participating in teleconferences after the workshop.

Table 7. Reported problems: Two months after the workshop

N=14

Listening – difficulty in following the conversation speed	69.2%
Listening – difficulty in recognizing pronunciations	61.5%
Speaking – difficulty in timely thinking of expressions	53.8%
Listening – lack of vocabulary	53.8%
Speaking – lack of vocabulary	38.5%

*Note:* Each student was allowed to report up to five problems. The percentage shows how many students in the group listed it.

The reported problems remained the same as the ones right after the workshop; especially the top three problems which were in exactly the same order. This means that even if the respondents saw value in the workshop, they could not see rapid improvements in their teleconferencing skills, which were not targeted when the workshop was developed.

## 6. Discussion

For research question (a), the overall evaluation of 4.60 after the workshop can be interpreted to show that the workshop gave the students valuable information and support for English teleconferencing. And it could be said that the lower TOEIC score holders see the workshop as more beneficial than attendees with higher scores. However, after two months, in answering research question (c), the evaluation is 4.07

vs. 4.60 at the workshop. This lower evaluation may mean that the attendees see the value of learned skills, but, they also see the difficulties in applying those skills during real teleconferences. Yet the average evaluation of 4.07 stills indicates a *useful* level, improvements are required to sustain the level of initial evaluation.

For research question (b), the responses show that the problems the teleconference participants have are fairly common across the groups and the problems continue beyond two months after the workshop. Then, what can be done to improve this workshop or give workshop students suggestions for use in day-to-day business teleconferences that will help them continue to feel increasingly more successful here?

Two listening problems, *difficulty in following conversation speed* and *difficulty in recognizing pronunciations*, are at the top of the problem list. For these problems, support in improving listening comprehension specific to the teleconference would be the answer. Krashen (1996) has been advocating the importance of narrow listening and Caspino (2005) and Dupuy (1999) report the effectiveness of narrow listening. So, it may be useful advice to the student to try recording real teleconferences, with the permission of the other participants, and replay it afterwards until the discourse can be fully understood, or to ask a more fluent person explain what has been communicated. This approach would seem most valuable if teleconferences are held with native English speakers.

Concerning one speaking problem, *difficulty in timely thinking of expressions*, it would be beneficial to list high frequency phrases pertinent to each teleconference purpose, e.g., a review of project status, product sales status, financial business results, and so on. As an example, a quality circle named Hera-hera 5 (2003) at IBM Japan developed a booklet titled *Practical Expressions for Conference Calls: Better English with us!*, available for general reference on its Website, which was based on the experience of communications between the circle members and the US software development organization. The main body of the booklet was about commonly used phrases but it also covered various scenarios of teleconferences from start to finish.

Another aspect of improving teleconferencing skills can be the amount of vocabulary the participant has available to draw on, which also appeared as problematic across groups. Adding one component to the workshop suggesting vocabulary enrichment may help the students, for example, by creating and

maintaining a glossary based on each teleconference objective. There is a high frequency of domain specific vocabulary.

Considering the applicability of the predefined problem list provided in the survey, there are eight problems reported besides the predefined problems. Among them, three problems are the same, resulting in six different non-listed problems. (There are more problems given than the eight, which are judged as part of the predefined problems by the author.) So the predefined problem list could be said to cover and capture the main and common teleconferencing problems for these students.

It may be noteworthy though that three participants write the same problem of *difficulty to interrupt* while a teleconference is going on. At the *Hints and Tips* section of the workshop, the lecture covered the topic on the appropriate interruptions (turn taking) so that Japanese participants would not be considered rude. Still, three students have difficulty in interrupting and talking. Indeed, there are situations where a native English speaker continues speaking and there seems to be very little opportunity of breaking into a monologue and of contributing to the teleconference. It may be necessary to elaborate on the subject of *how to interrupt* while someone is speaking during a teleconference.

## **7. Conclusions**

This workshop was developed based on business needs and the survey responses showed the workshop useful; suggesting that the teleconferencing skills framework has worked. On the other hand, the author acknowledges that this study cannot objectively capture what component or element was effectively acquired as teleconferencing skills or helped in teleconferencing. No doubt, the workshop participants are looking for further ways or suggestions on teleconferencing skills improvement. Based on the feedback analyses, some possible suggestions to the teleconference participants and improvements for the workshop are discussed. Accommodating these improvements would make the workshop more valuable to actual teleconferencing.

## **Footnote**

1. For example, teleconferencing training courses are available at Canning Professional ([www.canning.co.jp](http://www.canning.co.jp)) and Kurdyla and Associates. ([www.kurdyla.com](http://www.kurdyla.com)).

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