

Exploiting textbook dialogues dynamically

Zoltan Dornyei outlines a teaching approach which offers more efficient use of textbook dialogues, and aims to better prepare students for real communication outside the classroom.

Traditional, non-communicative methods like text-analysis, translation, reading practice, drilling, repetition after tape-recording, or even merely having the dialogue performed, often fail to involve the students sufficiently, and what happens is that the essence of the dialogues - their dynamic character - is neglected during language classes. It is not surprising then that the biggest problem language learners face in real life situations is to manage informal conversation with all the fast reactions and spontaneous responses of authentic communication.

Traditional teaching methods do not take into account the following:

- In real life, dialogues have no scripts; the speakers improvise on the spur of the moment.
 - In real life, a dialogue, even a formal one on a restricted topic, does not have an ultimate, perfect version (which the written text indirectly suggests) but has equal variations, of which one will be uttered during the course of communication.
 - In real life, a dialogue is, in fact, constant oral reaction to the other speaker's utterances. This requires the ability to respond at once in the foreign language.
 - In reality, the speakers are constantly affected by the physical environment and by their own emotional state.
 - In real situations we take part both physically and mentally. A great deal of our attention is absorbed in controlling our gestures and our body. To say a sentence 'actively' needs a different sort of concentration from merely reading it out.
 - In real life the student will be left to his/her own resources, without any help from the teacher or textbook. The sooner he/she gets used to independence and develops the indispensable skill of 'taking a risk', the better.
- Unless we prepare our students to cope with these difficulties, it is quite possible that they may learn a dialogue perfectly and will still be unable to perform a similar dialogue in real life. A more dynamic approach is needed which enables them to try out and practise the situations and roles offered by the dialogue with a selection of alternative sentences and phrases.

The following exercises can be best used with relatively short dialogues: maximum eight-10 utterances (10-15 lines). Any dialogues longer than that should either be condensed (an interesting exercise in itself) or split into shorter bits.

1. Dialogue exploitation

The main objective at the beginning is to achieve a good working knowledge of the dialogue in the textbook, so that it can be altered or elaborated, afterwards.

A series of varied repetition-exercises

Tense rhythm and lively intonation, together with frequently changing the pattern, can maintain the intensity of this relatively mechanical exercise for a surprisingly long time.

1. Read out the dialogue, utterance by utterance, and ask the students to repeat it in different formations, acting out the roles in the following ways:

- a) together in chorus;
- b) half of the class take one role and the other half take the other role;
- c) one student to another student;
- d) one student to the rest of the class;
- e) one pair to another pair;
- f) three students to three other students;
- g) girls to boys; etc. To make it a bit more interesting, you could divide the class into Michael Jackson fans and Mozart fans; left-handed and right-handed students; etc.

2. Either whisper the dialogue, 'prompt' it by exaggerated lip-movement, hum, whistle its tune, tap out its rhythm, or indicate it through miming and the class repeats it aloud.

3. Write the dialogue on the black-board and the class reads it out in chorus. After every reading rub out one or two words until only the punctuation marks remain.

4. Read out the sentences leaving out the final words which are added by the class. Then drop more and more words until you are saying only the initial word of each sentence.

5. Provide only the keywords of a sentence and the class repeats the complete sentence.

Adding a definite emotional dimension
Exaggerating the characters makes the

dialogue work even better so that each role in the dialogue has an emotional dimension. For example: depressed waiter, cynical taxi driver, overjoyed police officer, ignorant passer-by, etc.

The echoing technique might be interesting to use here: every sentence is said twice but differently. So, for example, ask the class to say or you say a sentence as if you were overjoyed. A second group or student repeats it as if depressed (depressed echo).

Practise in small groups of three or four students

1. One of the students in each group has his/her book open and reads out the dialogue for the others to repeat. Students decide among themselves which role they will each repeat. As soon as they finish the dialogue, they quickly change roles and a new student replaces the reader. You should point out that tense rhythm and speed is what they should concentrate on, and the more rounds they can do in a certain time, the better.

2. The student with the book open does not read out the whole dialogue



By intensive study of the textbook dialogue, students can adapt it for their own communicative needs

but functions rather as a prompter in a theatre. The others try to remember as much as they can of the dialogue without prompts. Tell the students not to look at the prompter but rather at the person they should be speaking to. Again they should alternate roles.

3. In monolingual classes, someone reads out the text in English, the others immediately translate it into their mother tongue. After some practice, the student with the book open should immediately provide the translation, and the others turn it back into English.

Listening comprehension exercises

The aim is to get the students to listen to the dialogue several times while they are busy doing easy problem-solving exercises. Do not play the tape more than twice for an exercise; the more quickly they follow the steps, the better.

1. Pick out about six words from the dialogue in advance, and put them on the blackboard in alphabetical order. The students must decide their order of appearance in the dialogue. A word occurring several times makes the exercise more difficult.

2. They note down the succeeding, then the preceding word(s) of the above selected six words. If it is possible choose words from phrases, and then the students' task is to provide the complete phrase.

3. While listening to the dialogue, they count certain words. For example: How many articles can they hear? How many different prepositions? How many genitive cases are there in the text? How many proper names? etc. The word type depends on the dialogue.

2. Dialogue expansion

Having gone through the dialogue several times the students should know it almost by heart; now the time is ripe for a series of variational exercises — for the real dialogue-teaching.

Colouring the dialogue

The students must:

1. make the dialogue sound more natural by adding hesitation devices, like fillers: *Well, I see, Oh yes, You know* and so on;

2. adjust the roles in the dialogue, by including fillers, to add the already practised 'emotional' dimension;

3. transcribe the dialogue in a different style — formal, informal, colloquial — by changing the characters. For example, how would small children, scientists, aristocrats, etc. act out the same roles?

Extending the dialogue

The students must:

1. add at least two extra words to each sentence — either as fillers or extra information;

2. extend each sentence. (It always provokes laughter to listen to a 20-

word-long version of a sentence originally three or four words long);

3. add two extra utterances both to the beginning and the end of the dialogue. Then try and insert extra utterances within the dialogue. It might be an interesting competition to see who can extend the dialogue the furthest;

4. continue working on the textbook dialogue until each new part is as long as the original dialogue for the respective characters.

Paraphrasing

1. Echoing-technique: take the first sentence from the textbook — students have to paraphrase without changing its content in any significant way and say it back.

2. Say the original sentence and then collect as many variations as possible. This works particularly well if the dialogue has been already paraphrased for homework.

3. Provide the keyword of each sentence, and these should be put in as many sentences as possible.

4. Someone says a sentence taken from the textbook dialogue, another student responds by giving a variation of the sentence. This goes on quickly round the class.

5. The same method as in 4, but now an already changed sentence comes first and the response is any kind of proper English answer or reaction to this, like *I see, Is that so? That sounds good!*, etc.

Rewriting the dialogue

This step requires the student not only to paraphrase the sentences but to change the course of the dialogue and to depart from it.

1. Change some basic information in the dialogue.

2. One character should keep lying.

3. Each character should say the opposite to what he/she said before, or what he/she really thinks.

4. The students get a jumbled dialogue and their task is to keep adding sentences until the dialogue makes some sense.

5. The students should rewrite the dialogue by imagining how they would behave in a similar situation. (This could be done for homework.)

6. Small groups should record their best version, and this can be used as a listening comprehension exercise. Note the differences between this and the original version.

3. Performing the dialogue

The dialogue should be performed only after the students have reached a point where they can produce their own versions.

With each preparation the performance is sure to be a success; there are, however, some simple ways to make it

even more interesting:

1. The students could indicate the setting of the situation using symbolic props. For example, a sponge might easily become a telephone, a computer etc. This is an excellent way to get them personally involved in the activity. Encourage them to use as many objects found in the classroom as possible.

2. The actors should act out slightly exaggerated characters, like the absent-minded professor, the constant pessimist, the idealistic adolescent, the over-talkative old lady, etc. Encourage them to use stereotyped gestures and movements associated with these characters.

3. Give a twist to the dialogue by adding an unexpected element. For example, someone has his/her pullover inside out or something caught in their hair. You could change the location or the time of day. One of the characters has some hidden purpose, for example, he/she wants to borrow money and looks for the right moment to come out with it etc.

4. Put in extra non-speaking actors into the cast, like a lamenting aunt, who always cries *Oh!*. Even the ringing of the telephone 'acted out' by a separate actor can be very effective.

5. One person should speak English, the other speaks in his/her mother tongue, and of course they need an interpreter. It is always funny if the interpreter translates much more or less than is actually said.

6. The most exciting performances are those when one of the actors unexpectedly changes the course of the dialogue and the others have to respond to the new situation. You may provoke this by telling one student to cause a conflict, for example, by complaining that the soup is cold in the restaurant, or you might rely entirely on the students themselves who tend to be very imaginative in such cases. Do not forget to stress before the performance that every kind of reaction, even laughter, is allowed so long as it is in English. If they cannot make out what the other is saying they should try and sort it out in English as part of the situation. Remind them that native speakers often misunderstand each other, too.

Zoltán Dörnyei is working at the Hungarian Academy of Arts and Science on a project concerned with second language acquisition. He also teaches at International House, Budapest, and is co-author of an intermediate vocabulary-building coursebook, Words on Your Own.