

# ***Teaching conversational skills intensively: course content and rationale***

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*With the teaching of conversational skills a major objective of current communicative language teaching, conversation classes are becoming widespread. However, teachers are often unsure about which topic areas they should focus on, with the result that many of their conversation classes tend to be characterized by a random, intuition-based selection of general communicative activities. Drawing on the results of oral discourse theory and conversation analysis, this paper begins by providing a list of conversational teaching points to serve as a menu for teachers as they design a syllabus for their classes. It goes on to discuss how these conversational issues can be taught in practice.*

**Introduction** One of the biggest challenges to current language teaching methodology is to find effective ways of preparing students for spontaneous communication. As one answer to this challenge, a new type of language lesson, the *conversation class*, has appeared, whose main teaching objective is to improve the students' conversational skills.

In spite of the growing popularity of such conversation classes, they are often not systematic enough, having been put together from a random variety of communicative activities. The teachers running these courses can hardly be blamed for this, because while communicative language teaching methodology has offered detailed guidelines for how to create genuine communicative situations in the language classroom, it has failed to specify which conversational skills and what kind of language input we should focus on. This paper addresses these issues by providing an overview of the relevant parts of oral discourse theory and conversation analysis, and then discusses how the selected conversational teaching points can be presented and practised in the language classroom.

**Conversation and conversational skills** Many people believe that informal everyday conversation is random and unstructured. This is, in fact, far from true. Although conversation may take many forms and the speakers and situations vary widely, all conversation follows certain patterns. There are, for example, subtle rules determining who speaks and when, and for how long. By following these rules, people in conversation can take turns neatly, and avoid overlaps and simultaneous talk.

There are also rituals and set formulae for starting or closing a conversation and for changing the subject. There are conventions prescribing how to interrupt and how to hold the floor, and even determining which style is most appropriate in a given situation. These conventions are fairly strong and consistent within a given culture: when someone breaks them, people can tell immediately that something has gone wrong.

The analysis of the rules that govern conversation has been of great interest to linguists over the last two decades (for a detailed discussion see, for example, Brown and Yule, 1983; Cook, 1989; Richards, 1990). We now know that conversation is a highly organized activity which requires certain skills on the part of the speakers. This is why language learners who are familiar with the grammar of a language and know a vast amount of vocabulary may still 'fail', that is, let themselves down in real conversation. They may need practice in the specialized skills that determine conversational fluency.

**Two approaches  
to teaching  
conversational  
skills**

*The indirect  
approach*

As Richards (1990:76) points out, there are currently two major approaches to teaching conversational skills. One is an indirect approach, 'in which conversational competence is seen as the product of engaging learners in conversational interaction' such as situational role plays, problem-solving tasks, and information-gap exercises. This approach was typical of communicative language teaching in the 1980s.

*The direct approach*

The second, the direct approach, 'involves planning a conversation programme around the specific microskills, strategies, and processes that are involved in fluent conversation' (ibid.:77). This approach therefore handles conversation more systematically than the indirect approach, and aims at fostering the students' awareness of conversational rules, strategies to use, and pitfalls to avoid, as well as increasing their sensitivity to the underlying processes.

The direct approach also involves providing the learners with specific language input. For example, there are many fixed expressions or conversational routines that crop up constantly in natural conversation. Polished conversationalists are in command of hundreds of such phrases and use them, for example, to break smoothly into a conversation, to hold the listener's interest, to change the subject, to react to what others say, and to step elegantly out of the conversation when they wish. Widdowson (1989:135) goes as far as to say that a great part of communicative competence is merely a matter of knowing how to use such conventionalized expressions, or as he terms them, 'partially pre-assembled patterns' and 'formulaic frameworks'. These lend themselves ideally to explicit teaching, and can serve as important language input for conversation classes.

**A classification of  
conversational  
issues**

In order to design the content of a conversation course, we must specify the relevant issues. We chose four topic areas as a result of reviewing research findings from linguistic fields such as discourse analysis, conversation analysis, communicative competence research,

sociolinguistics, and pragmatics, and after considering them from a practical perspective. They are:

- conversational rules and structure
- conversational strategies
- functions and meaning in conversation
- social and cultural contexts.

We describe below the issues which fall under these four topic areas, many of which, as already stated, are realized in conversation by means of a specific set of typical conversational phrases and routines. We provide examples taken from *Conversation and Dialogues in Action* (Dörnyei and Thurrell, 1992), a language teacher's resource book that has been entirely based on this structure. Other publications that contain useful language input material for conversation courses are Keller and Townsend-Warner (1976, 1979, 1988), Jones (1981), Blundell, Higgins, and Middlemiss (1982), and Golebiowska (1990).

### *Conversational rules and structure*

Conversational rules and structure have to do with how conversation is organized, and what prevents it from continually breaking down into a chaos of interruptions and simultaneous talk. The following points may be particularly relevant to a conversation course:

- 1 *Openings*: There are many ways of starting a conversation, and most of them are fairly ritualized as, for example, in different sequences of greetings and introductions (e.g. *How are you? / Fine thanks. And you?*). Other ways of initiating a chat include questions (*Excuse me, do you know . . . ?*), comments on something present (*That's a nice little dog . . .*) or on the weather (*At last some sunshine!*), general complaints (*The traffic in this city is simply incredible . . .*), social lines (*Great party, isn't it?*), etc. Students often don't know that they can turn a factual exchange (like buying something in a shop) into an informal conversation quite naturally by using some of these openings.
- 2 *Turn-taking*: How do people know when to speak in conversations so that they don't all talk at the same time? There are, in fact, some subtle rules and signals to determine who talks, when, and for how long, and these rules have been labelled 'turn-taking mechanisms'. The language classroom does not offer too many opportunities for students to develop their awareness of turn-taking rules or to practise turn-taking skills. This is unfortunate, since for many students—especially those from cultures whose turn-taking conventions are very different from those in the target language—turn-taking ability does not come automatically, and needs to be developed consciously through awareness-raising observation and listening tasks involving videoed and/or taped authentic conversation.
- 3 *Interrupting*: One special case in turn-taking is interrupting, which is a definite conversational blunder in many cultures. In English, a certain amount of interruption is tolerated (especially when the purpose is to sort out some problem of understanding), but too much, or in the wrong

situation, appears rude. Interruptions are almost always introduced by set phrases (e.g. *Sorry to interrupt, but . . .* or *Sorry, but did I hear you say . . .?*), which, depending on how they are introduced into the conversation, provide polite and natural ways of performing this rather delicate task. Students should be familiar with such phrases.

- 4 *Topic-shift*: When we want to change the subject, either because we don't want to talk about a certain topic any longer or because we want to introduce a new topic, certain conversational routines such as *Oh, by the way . . .* or *That reminds me of . . .* come in very handy. Skimming over a considerable number of topics in a short span of time is, in fact, a characteristic feature of informal conversation, and it is important that students know how to do it smoothly. They could also be taught phrases that help them *return to the subject*, e.g. *Going back to . . .*, *As I was saying . . .*, or *Yes, well, anyway . . .*
- 5 *Adjacency pairs*: There are some utterances (e.g. questions, invitations, requests, apologies, compliments, etc.) which require an immediate response or reaction from the communication partner; these utterances plus their responses (together) are known by linguists as adjacency pairs. One important feature of adjacency pairs is that after the first speaker's part (utterance), two different reactions are usually possible from the other speaker:
  - a an expected, polite reaction (e.g. accepting an invitation or complying with a request), and
  - b an unexpected, less common or more 'difficult' reaction (e.g. turning down an invitation, or refusing to comply with a request).

The two types of reactions have been called *preferred* and *dispreferred answers* respectively. Just like native speakers, language learners typically find dispreferred answers much more difficult to produce. This is partly because they are more difficult language-wise, since in many cultures when you give a dispreferred answer, you must be tactful and indirect in order not to sound rude, and you may need to apologize or offer justifications. For language learners these skills require practice.

- 6 *Closings*: Unless we want to be deliberately rude, we cannot end a conversation by simply saying, 'Well, that's all I want to say, bye', or, on the phone, just hang up abruptly without any notice. Instead, people typically apply a sequence of pre-closing and closing formulae to prepare the grounds for ending a conversation (e.g. *It's been nice talking to you . . .*, *Well, I don't want to keep you from your work . . .*, *We must get together sometime . . .*). Language learners can easily misunderstand closing signals in a foreign language, and they often lack a sufficient repertoire of such closing routines to be able to conclude and leave without sounding abrupt. It is therefore important to teach closing strategies explicitly, and to raise student awareness of the kind of phrases they might encounter in face-to-face conversation or on the telephone.

### *Conversational strategies*

Conversational strategies are an invaluable means of dealing with communication 'trouble spots', such as not knowing a particular word, or misunderstanding the other speaker. They can also enhance fluency and add to the efficiency of communication. Knowing such strategies is particularly useful for language learners, who frequently experience such difficulties in conversation, because they provide them with a sense of security in the language by allowing extra time and room to manoeuvre (see Dörnyei and Thurrell, 1991). Research in the past two decades has identified more than two dozen conversational strategies, the most important of which are the following:

- 1 *Message adjustment or avoidance*: This involves tailoring your message to your competence, i.e. saying what you can rather than what you want to, or nothing at all. It can be done either by slightly altering or reducing the message, by going off the point, or even by avoiding the message completely. While this last is only to be used *in extremis*, the ability to evade answers when in trouble or to steer the conversation away from a topic to a new subject may considerably add to the learner's communicative confidence in general.
- 2 *Paraphrase*: Describing or exemplifying the object or action whose name you don't know: useful routines are structures like *something you can . . . with, a kind of . . .*, etc.
- 3 *Approximation*: This means using an alternative term which expresses the meaning of the target word as closely as possible, e.g. *ship* for *sailing boat*, *vegetable* for *turnip*, or *buses* for *public transport*. A special type of approximation is the use of 'all-purpose words', such as *stuff, thing, thingie, thingummajig, what-do-you-call-it*, etc.
- 4 *Appeal for help*: Eliciting the word you are looking for from your communication partner by asking questions like *What's the word for . . . ?* or *What do you call . . . ?*
- 5 *Asking for repetition* when you have not heard or understood something, e.g. *Pardon?* or *Sorry, what was the last word?*
- 6 *Asking for clarification* when something isn't clear, e.g. *What do you mean?*, *What are you saying/trying to say?*
- 7 *Interpretive summary*: This means reformulating the speaker's message to check that you understood correctly. Typical sentence beginnings are: *You mean . . . ?*, *If I've understood correctly . . .* or *So are you saying that . . . ?*
- 8 *Checking* whether the other person has *understood* what you have said e.g. *OK?*, *Is that clear?* or *Are you with me?*; or whether the other person is *paying attention* to what you are saying e.g. *Are you listening?* *Did you hear what I said?*, or over the phone, *Are you (still) there?*
- 9 *Use of fillers/hesitation devices* to fill pauses, to stall, and to gain time to think when in difficulty; e.g. *Well*, *Now let me see*, or *The thing is*,

etc. Excessive and inappropriate use of fillers can be considered 'bad' for native speakers and language learners alike, but in times of need, hesitation devices can be an invaluable aid to communication.

**Functions and meaning in conversation** Functions and meaning in conversation concern the actual messages speakers convey and their purpose, that is, what meaning the speakers want to get through to their partners.

1 *Language functions*: Since the communicative approach to language teaching appeared in the mid-1970s, language functions (e.g. agreeing, asking for information, making suggestions, etc.) have played a very important role in the language classroom. A typical feature of language functions is that they involve a great number of set phrases and structures, and these are usually taught systematically through contemporary coursebooks. Conversation classes therefore need only to concentrate on those language functions which are particularly typical of conversation: asking and answering questions, expressing and agreeing with opinions, disagreeing politely, making requests and suggestions, and reacting in various ways to what a conversation partner is saying, for example by expressing happiness (*That's great!*), sympathy (*Oh dear!*), surprise (*Really?*), disbelief (*Surely not!*), or simply that you are listening (*I see, Uh-huh*).

2 *Indirect speech acts*: Speech acts are utterances which, rather than just conveying information, actually carry out an action or language function. For example, the question, *Could you open the window, please?* is not really a question but a way of getting the listener to open the window, and is therefore equivalent to a request.

Some speech acts are direct and straightforward (e.g. *Put that gun down!*), but the majority in everyday conversation are indirect. For example, the sentence, *I wonder if you could post this letter for me* does not mean 'I'm curious as to whether you are able to post this letter', but is rather an indirect way of making the listener post the letter.

Language learners, especially at an early stage, can easily misunderstand indirect speech acts in English and take what has been said at its face value. This is not helped by the fact that indirect speech acts are rarely covered in foreign language teaching syllabuses. It is therefore very important to help learners early on to recognize indirect speech acts, and to encourage them as they become more advanced to use them naturally and with confidence in the way that native speakers do.

3 *Same meaning—different meaning*: It is not only with indirect speech acts that the literal meaning of a language form differs from the deeper meaning: utterances often have subconscious, semi-conscious, or quite intentional undertones. For example, a 'compliment' like *What a nice car you have!* might mean 'I didn't know you were so rich' or 'I hope you'll let me borrow it next Saturday'. It is well worth students spending some time getting to grips with and analysing the possible differences between the 'surface' and the 'real' meaning of utterances. They could, for example, perform a dialogue in such a way that each sentence is followed

by an 'echo' which is an underlying hidden meaning of the message. Students should also be made aware that in some cases different language forms can have very similar meanings. A technique which tends to work well is to ask students to make alterations to every sentence of a dialogue while leaving the meaning intact.

### *Social and cultural contexts*

Every conversation takes place in a social context within a particular culture. The participants may not realize it, but conversation is in many ways determined by these external contextual factors. In fact, a lack of awareness of social and cultural language rules can often be the source of much more trouble and embarrassment for language learners than gaps in their knowledge of grammar.

The fact that language is significantly determined by the context it is used in has been the topic of a great deal of research in linguistics, more specifically in sociolinguistics and pragmatics. The following sociolinguistic/pragmatic issues are among the most important for a conversation course:

- 1 *Participant variables—office and status*: A person's office is his or her job or profession, rank (military or other), and positions held (e.g. chairperson of the local council). Status refers to social standing or position in the social hierarchy and is determined by factors like age, education, family background, office, and wealth. Both office and status tend to determine how a person talks and is talked to in conversation. When someone does not follow the expected patterns of conversational behaviour in this matter, they might elicit comments like *I would never have thought she was a minister* or *He treated me like a VIP. What a laugh!*.
- 2 *The social situation*: Some social events require different behaviour from others. For example, a beach party is an entirely different social situation from a university degree ceremony, and as people are usually aware of such differences, they adjust their language accordingly. If they don't, they are likely to be on the receiving end of comments like *He behaved as though he was at a football match* or *You're not at home now, you know*, etc.
- 3 *The social norms of appropriate language use*: The two most important (and somewhat interrelated) dimensions of linguistic appropriacy are how formal or informal the style is, and what degree of politeness is present in the speech.

The *formal–informal continuum* is a measure of how much attention people pay to their speech. When they speak most naturally and casually, their style is informal, which is appropriate when the social setting is informal and the speakers are of more or less equal status. In contrast, the more carefully we attend to our speech production, the more formal it becomes, which is appropriate in formal contexts and between people of different status/office. The main features of the formal and informal speech styles can be summarized and taught to students directly.

The *degree of politeness* does not depend entirely on the degree of formality (informal speech, for example, is not necessarily impolite!); it refers to the extent people want to make the other person feel comfortable in conversation, either because, for example, they respect the person and his or her privacy, or because they would like something from him or her. There are several typical politeness strategies (for a practical overview, see van Ek and Trim, 1991; Dörnyei and Thurrell, 1992), and language learners can benefit a great deal from knowing and being able to use them.

- 4 *Cross-cultural differences*: Conversation is heavily loaded with cultural information, which becomes apparent when members of very different cultures meet. Language learners tend not to realize that a lack of cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity can cause more serious misunderstandings, and indeed communication breakdowns, than an incorrectly-used tense or wrong word order. In fact, there are so many culture-specific *do's* and *don'ts* that a language learner is constantly walking through a cultural minefield. Of course, students of different nationalities will find different cross-cultural aspects of conversation particularly difficult, and what teachers need to do is a sort of cultural needs analysis to select the relevant norms, conventions, and rules to be taught to their particular group of learners.

### **Teaching conversational issues directly**

The direct teaching of conversational skills does not differ radically from the indirect approach of communicative language teaching (CLT), but is rather an extension and further development of CLT methodology. Indeed, many of us who have used CLT techniques such as role-play activities, information-gap exercises, problem-solving tasks, discussions, and so on, will have found ourselves adding more and more conscious elements. Such elements might be part of the following three larger tendencies:

- adding specific language input
- increasing the role of consciousness raising
- sequencing communicative tasks systematically.

#### *Adding specific language input*

As teachers we are beginning to realize that free communicative activities are potentially much more efficient, and are also appreciated more by the students, if specific language input, especially conversational routines and phrases, are included. One technique we have used a great deal is to give cue cards with some phrases written on them to each participant in a role-play activity, which the students have to incorporate in their parts a minimum of two or three times; the audience's task can be to spot these 'person-specific' phrases. Another simple technique is to specify at the preparation stage the minimum number of different phrases the students are to include in their performance. This idea works even better if there is a competition between the various small groups on who can use the most phrases in their sketches.

#### *Increasing the role of consciousness raising*

Consciousness-raising is based on the belief that making learners aware of structural regularities of the language will enable them to learn it faster (see Rutherford and Sharwood Smith, 1985). Consciousness-raising about grammar differs from traditional grammar teaching in that the new

material is presented in a way that is compatible with the second language acquisition process in the learner. In a recent interview in *ELT Journal*, Ellis (1993) provided a very useful description of what this entails, distinguishing among three types of consciousness-raising activity:

- a *Focused communicative activities*—producing a grammatical focus in the context of communicative activities.
- b *Consciousness-raising activities*—helping the learners construct their own explicit grammar inductively.
- c *Interpretation grammar activities*—providing learners with input that has been selected or manipulated to contain examples of the particular grammatical structures the teacher would like to focus on.

Although Ellis talks mainly about increasing grammatical awareness, the same approach can be followed to draw the learners' attention to the organizational principles of language use beyond the sentence level, including conversational strategies.

**Sequencing  
communicative  
tasks systematically**

By giving communicative tasks a specific focus, it becomes possible to plan the sequence of communicative tasks in such a way that each activity introduces some new material while recycling material the students are already familiar with. The four larger areas of 'conversational grammar' (structure, strategies, meaning, and sociocultural factors) are interrelated, and therefore a natural guideline for sequencing activities is to extend a task which concentrates on one area by adding a dimension from another. An example of this would be to start with a role-play task to practise disagreeing politely ('Functions and meanings in conversation'), and then add interruptions to the same conversation ('Conversational rules and structure'); the next step could involve the students in producing a formal and an informal version of their performance ('Social and cultural contexts'), and finally they could be asked to change the sketch into a telephone conversation where the line is so bad that the speakers have to constantly ask repetition and clarification questions ('Conversational strategies').

**Conclusion**

In this paper we have tried to outline a new approach to teaching conversation skills, based on a more explicit conceptualization of what such skills and subskills involve. The list of conversational focus areas presented is intended to serve a practical purpose; we believe that by drawing on such a list, it may be possible to introduce a firm and theory-based syllabus for conversation courses. Teachers should treat the list as a menu to choose topics from according to the need and level of their groups.

Although the focus of this paper has been on one area of language teaching, namely on conversation classes, the direct approach we advocate can be extended to the teaching of communicative competence in general. The interested reader could refer to Celce-Murcia *et al.* (1993), for a comprehensive and more theoretical discussion of this issue.

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