

College Conversation Classes: Beyond Survival

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Doing the Possible

Conversation classes for English majors at many universities are tough assignments. Survival is not much of a problem for teachers who have been around the track a few times and have filled a bag of tricks which includes a conversation course book. But just surviving, and knowing that's all your efforts amount to, can hurt. It helps to be thick skinned. More than a few teachers find failure in the conversation classroom confusing. There is often precious little conversation even when there is talk. Teachers and students usually agree that they want to have conversations in the classroom but this goal too often proves elusive. Some types of talk are relatively easily come by: teacher monologues, question and answer exchanges, readings of models, memorized dialogues, and students' own versions of model conversations which contain more examples of embarrassment than of natural spoken language. Frustration comes from the painful recognition that talk is cheap when it's a poor substitute for the target - natural conversation.

Some times we justify these talking activities by telling ourselves and our students that a step by step skill building approach is logical. Other times we complain conversation is not a subject that is amenable to classroom study or not a fit subject for study at universities. There are more than a few teachers around who are embarrassed to say they teach conversation courses. Poor old conversation. It is the embarrassing relative of the language family. It has to be invited to the party but no one knows what to do when it shows up. And worse yet, if not kept quiet it is distressingly good at making the rest of the family look bad.

Should we do anything to make a happier language family ? It depends. If you need to learn special techniques just to take attendance in less than twenty minutes, you just go right ahead and survive as best you can. Or, you could teach a course on the place of conversation in the spoken language and contrast spoken and written language. In other words, you could tell your students why it is so hard to get conversation going in a classroom, just in case they think the only reason is that dozens of their pals are crammed into every nailed - to - the floor desk in the hall. You could give `A`s to the ones who realize they have been talking written language in some conversation classes. Real conversation ? Don't try it. Talk about it. Teach something about learning strategies and tell your kids to go converse somewhere else.

Real Conversation

On the other hand, if you have a class of twenty - five or fewer, or if you want to live dangerously in a bigger crowd, let them practise what you preach. Tell them something about one of the features of one of the types of conversation and give them a chance to try it.

This is your chance to shine by putting your intuition, your study, and your observations and experience in your own and another culture to work. Bring the real you into the classroom. Problem number one with course books is they tend to shut out the teacher. Don't throw your course book away but do put it down for a while. Course book authors often assume the worst about us. As a result, textbook activities too often preempt teacher - student collaborative and creative efforts. This throws us all, teachers and students, into zombie mode.

Think of yourself as a coach. In the end your players have to practise their own game. No matter how much they may want to, they can not play a role model's game. Keep two rules in mind. One: Make sure your students' own language has an important place in your classroom and that it is treated by all participants with respect. Two: Give them experience with game conditions. Analyze and practise. But don't limit yourself to versions of the game that are idealized images of what should happen.

Reference books will help you take control of your own classes away from course books more effectively than the teachers' guides. "English Conversation "by Amy Tsui (Oxford University Press, 1993) and "Speaking" by Martin Bygate (Oxford University Press, 1987) will get you off to a good start as a preacher. And to help your students with the practising aspect check out "Discussions That Work" by Penny Ur (Cambridge University Press, 1981) and "Designing Communicative Tasks for the Language Classroom "

by David Nunan (Cambridge University Press, 1988).

A second problem with many conversation course books is an absence of many of the interesting features which distinguish spoken language from written language. Try transcribing some recordings of real conversations and you will soon find out why, in the interests of the sanity of all concerned, book conversations have been tidied up. The best reading around on teaching the real stuff is the short chapter on teaching conversation in Jack Richards's book "The Language Teaching Matrix" (Cambridge University Press, 1990). It is chock full of suggestions for further reading on the many fascinating topics Richards discusses.

Switch on the Back Channel

The first decision the adventurous teacher has to make is which feature of conversation to introduce. Choose a feature of conversation that will be manageable in practice, conceptually challenging, and a feature the students can believe will help make them better conversationalists. Some features are easier to add to textbook conversations than others. Think about how you are going to explain it, demonstrate it, find it in real world examples, and relate it to Japanese conversations. In short, how are you going to get your kids to try it on for size and how are you going to convince them that it is important?

Back channeling is a good place to start. This is the way you help someone who is talking to you by making supportive or critical little noises like "uhhuh ", "hum" , and "aha" while you are listening. It is nodding your head, smiling, body posture, and hand gestures. It includes short comments such as "good, good" and "well, I don't know about that". The good listener also may finish the speaker's statement or echo some of the speaker's speech. Back channeling is the way the listener yields the main channel to the speaker but at the same time participates actively by indicating his feelings and by demonstrating and keeping open his option of taking over the main channel.

EFL students can spend time effectively on the back channel when taking a more dominant role could be difficult because of limited language proficiency or because they don't have much to say about the speaker's chosen topic. Back channel skills can keep them happily in the game for long periods by encouraging their friends to keep on chatting to them.

You can read more about back channel behaviour in the first work on the topic by Duncan in "Towards a grammar for dyadic conversation" published in 1973 in *Semiotica* (9 : 29 - 46) in your college library. Or better yet, keep an ear and eye out for examples you'll be sure to find all around you in English and in Japanese.

Preaching and Practicing - Keep It Simple

Do you tell your students all the fascinating insights that you come up with after you start thinking about back channeling ? No. Hit the pause button on your cerebral remote. Start with a few simple lessons and activities. Go slowly and in depth with a little instead of skipping along on the surface with a lot. Search for, wait for success. When your intuition tells you it is time, let more ideas about back channeling and spoken language loose.

When you first introduce back channeling keep it simple. Tell them how to look and sound like an interested listener by nodding and saying, "uh, huh ". Tell them why it is done. Tell them what happens if it is not done. Tell them about individual and situational variation. Telling is necessary because we are not always aware of these sorts of things about the ways we speak. Tell your students what might happen as they try it in class. This is the preaching.

What about the practice? Ask the students to write topics for conversations a week or so before needed . Write one yourself to get the ball rolling. For example: " Mari is a first year student at this university. She has stopped coming to class. She is disappointed in university life and she is thinking of dropping out. Her father would be angry if she quit but Mari thinks her mother would understand. Mari does not know what she would do if she left school. What do you think Mari should do ?" The students will probably write similar down home topics and heavy conversation stopping topics such as abortion, pollution, and the future of the EC's common currency will be pretty rare, I bet.

A third problem teachers commonly have in trying to adapt conversation course books for college classes is that there is too much text, too many activities. In this approach the target for language learning is narrow, the topic for conversation is student friendly, and there should be only one type of activity to occupy the class for a ninety minute lesson. In these three areas we want simplicity because the teacher's interaction with the students and the language the kids produce will be very complex.

Role playing is the obvious way to get students to put the language target, back channeling, into conversations about the topics they have written. Not obvious to students are the reasons why it is so hard to create conversations in the classroom. They wonder if there is any point in doing it badly. They worry about what their classmates will think of their mistakes and poor skills. They dread their partners will not be able to understand them.

Deal with these issues frankly, creatively and sympathetically. Take nothing for granted. Give students chances to talk often to all of their classmates. Do not leave them with the same partner. Look for opportunities for the whole class to observe successful examples.

Set up some rules and routines which can be clearly related to the overall aims. For example, you might ban written preparation for the role play conversations in the interests of promoting the spoken word. First language and second language use can be clearly separated. Start with a brainstorming session in Japanese in pairs to try to generate as many ideas as possible about their chosen topics. Then form larger groups of two or three pairs to report their ideas to each other in English and to ask for help with language problems. Conversation partners could then use Japanese to decide who they will be and what position each speaker will take at the beginning, middle and end of their conversation. The students should switch back to English for the creation and practising of their conversations. Larger groups could be formed for presentations. Listeners should be asked to monitor and count the use of the speech target, back channeling. Then form new pairs and start all over again. Devise a system for getting tips from the students. How about an exit card system ? Students spend the final five minutes putting their thoughts in writing to stuff in a suggestion box on the way out.

Coaching Conversation

The teacher will be kept busy. There will be a kickoff lesson and a wind up talk on the speech target, management instructions, timing and monitoring of the organizational structure. Monitoring of the students' conversations can be productive if one or two minute mini lessons and student demonstrations punctuate the class. The teacher is the coach, alert and responsive - strict with slackers, sympathetic with the frustrated, quick with praise whenever success is found, and ready with advice and demonstrations for those who need help.

The teacher as coach urges the class to agree to temporarily put aside differences in learning style. The class is asked to assume a single learning style. From this perspective this approach to conversation teaching does not seem like a year - long idea. Don't chuck out the course book yet.

On the other hand, if coaching is your strong teaching style some use of this approach may help you bring out the best in your students. One thing is certain. You will bring out into the classroom lots of learner language. Some folks call it data. Next thing you know you'll be able to write home about your research.

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