

# An intensive approach to building conversation skills

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*This paper describes an action research project undertaken to look into the effectiveness of tasks designed to raise learner awareness of conversational strategies. The goal was to test whether tasks and direct instruction aimed at promoting learner awareness of conversational language at the discourse-level had any impact on the students' performance. Excerpts from transcripts of students' conversations are included to illustrate how such activities can be effective in improving student performance on conversation tasks.*

## Speaking as a skill

Much work has been directed towards examining teacher–student interactions, and a number of instruments have been designed to analyse the patterns of interaction in the classroom (Malamah-Thomas 1987). However, less attention has been paid to the kind of discourse that student–student interaction produces. This oversight needs to be addressed, since most ELT coursebooks do not deal with speaking by breaking it down into micro-skills work. Instead, they often have the vague aim of ‘promoting learner fluency’. This paper argues that direct instruction strategies can be applied to help learners develop speaking skills, and in particular to become aware of patterns of interaction.

With the emphasis that communicative language teaching (CLT) places on oral production, by the time most students reach intermediate level they can produce fairly extended spoken discourse. Course designers and teachers employ a repertoire of role-plays, gap tasks, and the like, whereby students are initially guided through the conversations aided by role cards, diagramming, or other types of prompts. As the students' level increases, they are gradually given fewer cues, and must substitute more spontaneous language use for prescribed exchanges. Such techniques are unarguably a good way to get the students to practise speaking, which in turn helps them to develop their ability to produce coherent, fluent sentences, or their discourse competence.

What has been largely overlooked is that practising conversation also entails knowing how to use language to interact (Dörnyei and Thurrell 1994). Students' success in two-way communication does not just depend on what they produce, but also on how effectively they are able to participate in conversational exchanges. We have come to recognize that conversation ‘involves far more than knowledge of the language system and the factors creating coherence in one-way discourse; it involves the

gaining, holding, and yielding of turns, the negotiation of meaning' (Cook 1989: 117).

### **A direct approach to teaching conversation**

This paper presents a teacher-initiated action research project carried out in a public university in Mexico. The participants are students in the BA TESOL programme,<sup>1</sup> and in addition to other requirements, they must pass an institutional proficiency exam, which includes demonstrating their ability in spoken English.

I set out to discover whether intensive, direct instruction based on awareness-raising work would have an impact on student performance involving tasks requiring them to use conversational skills to interact. My approach to teaching conversation started from two premises: that learners are capable conversationalists in their own language, and that conventions in conversation are culturally-specific. With the first, learners can benefit from work on transferring unconscious interaction strategies from their L1. Secondly, we need to become aware of what the conventions in English are, and look at how these may or may not 'feel right' to speakers of other languages. English speakers, for example, generally have a 'no gap, no overlap' convention (Fasold 1990), which makes both silence and two people speaking at the same time inappropriate.

### **Developing awareness**

In total, we devoted ten class hours over a two-week period to looking at how conversations are managed. After a brief explanation of some discourse strategy, say, 'holding the floor', the students carried out a task to practise the strategy. Practice was organized in different ways.

- For some tasks, each pair had an observer who used a simple instrument or checklist to take note of particular aspects of the conversation (e.g. length of turns for each person speaking, strategies for negotiating meaning, etc.), and give their partners feedback. By rotating speaking and observing roles, the students were able to pick up on the more subtle aspects of discourse management.
- Another task was to have the students record themselves, and immediately after a task was completed, make a transcription. This was debriefed with the group by presenting a self-critique of their strong and weak points.
- The students also went to the self-access centre to find examples from talk shows, radio interviews, and movies<sup>2</sup> which illustrated specific interaction strategies. This approach to tasks gets the students critically involved in thinking about and analysing their own language use, and—since their own conversations become the materials with which they are working—the course content is relevant and meaningful.

### **Identifying and organizing elements of interaction**

Rather than prescribe what the course would include, I wanted the content to reflect what the students actually needed practice with. In order to isolate which aspects I would treat directly, I set an initial task. Various tasks of the same basic type were used during the two weeks, and another at the end so that the students could self-evaluate their progress.

The variables of the task were set so as to replicate conversational encounters, and encourage as much spontaneous interaction as possible:

### **Task variables**

- 1 *Familiarity*: Common, relatively neutral, and non-controversial topics.
- 2 *Complexity*: Some problem-solving, but not overly cognitively challenging.
- 3 *Planning time*: None (spontaneous).
- 4 *Input*: Photos, maps, charts, layouts, etc.
- 5 *Gap type*: Opinion gap.
- 6 *Participants*: Pairs.

From recordings and transcriptions I analysed from three pairs of students during the 'before' task, certain characteristic patterns emerged. These pointed to three problem areas for managing interaction:

- Poor monitoring
- Avoidance of negotiation of meaning
- Problems with turn-taking.

To some extent, these areas overlap: the fact that one speaker does not respond to what the other is saying, but abruptly takes the conversation in a different direction (e.g. by avoiding negotiating meaning) may well be because s/he was not really listening to her/his partner (poor monitoring). None the less, I choose to treat each area separately.

## **Monitoring**

I started by drawing the students' attention to one problem that was apparent when students did the pre-task. While one was talking, the other was hunched over the task sheet, trying to read the small print. There was no eye contact or other recognition by the listener that her partner was speaking. In conversation, all speakers have 'equal rights of communication', and therefore have an equally active part in contributing (van Lier 1984). This implies that an important part of interaction is listening to, or monitoring, what the other person is saying. Extracts such as the following emphasized the need to become an 'active listener':

### **Extract 1 (before):** Choosing a country for an exchange programme

2 Itz: mm + well I think it's a good idea to improve my English and in Canada + it's for example um my ah my partners my Mexican partners because you sometimes look for to speak English with them but you can't and you speak in Spanish and you don't have ah results because you speak with people who is from the same country but I think you can listen to music in English and in the school where you stay you can have many friends and take many things many um + words of them and I dunno maybe I like England because you know + the pronunciation of the British English and I like to + to understand what they say +

3 Ga: Yeah [...]

Itz's long turn rambles; she wanders from wanting to go to Canada to practise her English to talking about difficulties in understanding British pronunciation. However, she receives no feedback from her partner. By comparing this to authentic conversations, the students were shown the importance of using back-channel signals to show that they are following the speaker. Two weeks later, we see that Ga even over-emphasizes back-channelling:

**Extract 2 (after):** Deciding who to give an international award to

5 Itz: but you know when you have a sports star it's ah only for one country (mm-hm) and we are going to give ah: an international personality (OK) + and I think a science-tist is for the all the world (uh-huh) and have a:: ah

6 Ga: a what?

7 Itz: a solution for the world (uh-huh) and the sport is only a motivation for teenagers (uh- huh) or + ah: +

8 Ga: [laughing] OK you convinced me [...]

Being an active listener, of course, means more than merely throwing in a word of agreement every so often. What I hoped to develop was a sense that speaking in a conversation is not so much thinking of what to say, as it is paying attention to what the other person is saying. This proved a good starting point for looking at ways of developing interaction. The students found that if they were tuned in to the other person, it became easier to say something themselves, since while their contribution was not necessarily more than a sentence, it had to be linked to the other person's utterance.

## Negotiating meaning

The process of figuring out how to link one turn to the next is the negotiation of meaning. A conversation develops, shifts topics, becomes sidetracked, or even breaks down as a result of collaborative efforts of its participants. This on-going process is conversational maintenance. But when the participants' ideas do not fit together, or when they have difficulty expressing themselves, meaning needs to be negotiated; attempting to fit the pieces back together is conversational repair.

Everyday speech is marked by constant unconscious maintenance and repair. The '(before)' transcripts revealed that when the students found that their idea was not getting through, they often used avoidance strategies to get around such problems:

**Extract 3 (before):** An exchange programme

11 Itz: ... you know + the pronunciation of the British English and I like to + to understand what they say +

12 Ga: so you prefer to go to England?

13 Itz: well if because in the exam I have to + to =

14 Ga: = choose only one?

15 Itz: well + yes but Canada is a good country I think it's-it's cold and it's interesting ...

In (13), what Itz means is 'I need to be able to understand the British accent so I can pass the Cambridge Proficiency exam.' When she has a bit of trouble expressing this, Ga jumps in to complete the turn, but interprets her too narrowly, thinking she means that the particular task requires them to choose only one country to visit. Itz decides not to dispute Ga's interpretation and continues, taking the conversation in a different direction.

When this tape was played back in class, Itz commented that she thought it was more important to resolve the task by deciding which country to visit than try to explain what she meant about the exam. Because she was not expressing her idea succinctly, she worried that she was wasting time on something that was not relevant. This reveals that students are very cognisant of the fact that the task has given them a goal to reach, and only a certain amount of time to do it; their approach to the task is affected by seeing it as a transaction that should be completed.<sup>3</sup> We contrasted this with one where the learners did engage in negotiation:

**Extract 4 (during):** Organizing a trip abroad

4 An: ... because uh + it's a it's difficult to get to get + it's hard to travel there + and =

5 Co: =it's a long trav-a long trip? + // on the plane?

6 An: // no no no the\* the papers +  
I mean to get the passport

7 Co: oh yeah-yeah-yeah

8 An: the vi:sa you know? + those things

9 Co: OK + yeah you're right yeah

In this example, An is called on to repair Co's misinterpretation of 'it's hard to travel there'. From this example, the students brainstormed lists of expressions they could use to check meanings ('so you're saying that ...') and to clarify their own ideas ('I mean ...'; 'what I'm trying to say is ...'). The learners practised these by choosing to explain some fairly complicated procedure—like making mole sauce or changing the oil of a car—while the others interrupted to ask the speaker to clarify things, explain unknown concepts, or give more details.

The following, extended from Ex. 3, shows that although Itz and Ga have not acquired any of the formulaic expressions from class, they are more willing to try to work out meanings between them.

**Extract 5 (after):** Giving an international award

10 Ga: scientist + ah could be a good idea to win this international to-to be the \*international personality of the year [reading together from task sheet] because + like you say it could + it's very + interesting that some person found something special to to: + ~convide? convided?

11 Itz: what?

- 12 Ga: to-to-to convey? conveyed?
- 13 Itz: // to sí convade [/kən'vaɪd/] // ~sí + no?
- 14 Ga: // to convade\* to convade something like illness like you say
- 15 Itz: and what do you think about the others? what do you think + they aren't good option?
- 16 Ga: uh:: + another option hmm
- 17 Itz: no // why:\* why: they areN'T=
- 18 Ga: ah ok-ok let's see

It is not clear exactly what word they are trying to get at in (11)–(14), possibly 'cure'. In any event, they collaborate to work out the word before finally settling on 'convade'. When Ga misses the question in (16), Itz jumps in to repeat; Ga cuts her off (18) and shows that she is on track again. It is clear that the speakers are 'in sync' with each other. Because they are monitoring each other's turns more carefully, they are more successful at making the conversation's meaning coherent (Hatch 1992: 17).

## Turn-taking

Most of the course was devoted to turn-taking, which is the key to interaction, but it also proved the most difficult for the students. Many admitted that their management of turns was 'off', but had a hard time deciding why. To address the question of how to get the students to analyse their own turn-taking patterns, I broke it down even further. The activities aimed to get the students to recognize the important features of turn-taking, namely the standard length of turns in conversation, and the use of intonation and other turnover signals, including nominating and interrupting.

Listening to the 'before' tapes showed that students took longer turns, generally of three to five sentences. The turns do not fit together exactly; there is a lack of conceptual adjacency: within a given exchange, each speaker's move ought to be logically connected to the previous move. Hence an initiation is logically followed by a response (McCarthy 1991), which together form an adjacency pair. Where conceptual adjacency is lacking, there are no exchanges, but rather a series of disjointed turns, as in the following:

**Extract 6 (before):** Discussing photographs showing different kinds of roads

- 7 G: [...] the-the second one uh I think it's faster but you have many cars in the route + you have to be careful + but in the case of the first maybe the road it's in bad conditions and-and you can have an accident too +
- 8 J: Well + I prefer to travel in the rural road + mm because I think it's more quiet it's quieter + also you can travel without problems + and because I think in this picture there is not smog or maybe you can have more accidents so I prefer the first [...]

It is evident that J's contribution does not really constitute a response to G. J does not acknowledge or comment on anything said, but basically repeats G. It is likely that while G was taking her turn, J was mentally preparing his next turn. Though his contribution may have seemed relevant to the task, the turns taken together can hardly be seen as a conversational exchange. This reinforced the importance of monitoring, or being an active listener.

Listening to the initial recordings provided many examples of this sort. We listened to the tapes, pausing them to identify where turnovers should have been made, what nomination signals the students were using unconsciously, and how to pick up on them.

**Extract 7 (before):** An exchange programme

- 20 A: I don't know if it's true but some people told me that the uh accent of people from Canada is-is-is better: ↑++ mm and ah I really + don't know + and-and-and + what else?

The speaker here indicates that she has completed her turn by trailing the sound and raising the pitch slightly on *better*, which, when followed by a pause (↑+), indicates a turnover or 'collaborative completion' (Hatch 1992). She is, in effect, nominating her partner—asking for a response. He does not catch the signal, however, and said he realized that he had not really been listening, but was looking at the map, and trying to think of something to say about the weather in Canada. Finally, she uses a blunt, somewhat exasperated nomination: 'what else?' What is lacking is attention to syntactic completeness and pitch level to signal turnovers (McCarthy 1991).

We contrasted these with the following example, where the learners demonstrate that 'turns to speak are valued and sought and thus the majority of turns in any conversation consist of only a single sentence' (Coulthard 1977: 61).

**Extract 8 (during):** Organizing a dormitory room

- 18 M: alright and so + that would be the bed in this part (mm-hm) so the closet is =
- 19 Gi: = maybe we could make a kind of division in the room + and in this place the studio area and in this place // the resting a:nd-↑\* having fun area
- 20 M: // it could be the-the-the
- 21 M: [laughs] OK

In (20), M attempts to self-nominate by proposing a completion of Gi's turn (which he stole in (19)). Gi, however, wishes to maintain his turn (he has a little joke he wants to make), and does so by raising his pitch and lengthening 'a:nd ↑'. M gets this signal, and responds accordingly by breaking off her attempt to steal the turn, and laughing at Gi's reference to the bed as the 'having fun area'. Coulthard (ibid.) explains that turn-overs are usually a matter of 'cutting in': 'a speaker is vulnerable at every sentence completion' (p. 61). This is particularly difficult for English L2

speakers to get the hang of, and after some discussion the class proposed that ‘unless the other person gives you some signal, you should be ready to jump in at every pause’.

All students showed improvement, especially the students from Ex. 6, who produced the following exchange in the post-task:

**Extract 9 (after):** Discussing development project proposals

- 4 G: I don't know it could be this kind + I like the uh + the um
- 5 J: mall
- 6 G: mall OK but I think ooh but it could be + not a good idea to have + one here + what do you think?
- 7 J: hm + I think it's OK it would be great to:: (yes) eh to have one of these but ah I don't think so because er Oaxaca City is a + it's ah + colonial city (yes) so + // it's a contrast\* with the city (it's true) with the buildings
- 8 G: // but yeah OK
- 9 G: yes ah // it's ah + for
- 10 J: // maybe we could do this mall in a kind of for example + Plaza del Valle
- 11 G: it could be best for us (yeah) because [...] (yeah) well↑ the city you know=
- 12 J: =yeah because Oaxaca is a small city and it's not uh it's not a big city + yeah it would be perfect to have one of these but +
- 13 G: I would like that [laughs]
- 14 J: yeah I would like too

Comparing extracts 6 and 10, the performance in the second strikes us as demonstrating much greater fluency. The excerpts are of roughly equal length—about a minute, but the second is delivered at a very acceptable conversational speed, while the first (a third fewer words) has a slow, plodding pace. As expected, the first, in longer, more carefully thought-out monologue-like turns, shows a slightly better range of vocabulary and grammatical complexity and accuracy.

The transcripts reveal that G and J are more sensitive to making their performance interactive; considering that the two recordings were made only two weeks apart, it is evident that both have improved greatly. This suggests that the approach to teaching students aspects of interaction such as turn-taking, as McCarthy (1991) argues, ‘is not a question of telling learners that speakers take turns; they know this naturally from their own language. The problem is to make sure that activities generate the natural sorts of turn-taking that occur in the target discourse type’ (p. 128). Just because a given task calls for the students to engage in conversation, it does not mean that it will necessarily generate ‘natural’ interaction; rather turn-taking must be developed consciously (Dörnyei and Thurrell 1994).



## Summary

The design of awareness-raising activities were aimed to address the 'need [for] practice in specialized skills that determine conversational fluency' that Dörnyei and Thurrell (1994: 41) call for. This is the 'direct approach' they advocate, which handles 'conversation more systematically, [...] 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 process' (ibid.). As the transcriptions show, the students picked up on many of the features presented through the tasks, and incorporated them into their performance on subsequent tasks. Since each group of learners will face different challenges in interactions depending on cultural conventions and personality types, each teacher will have to tailor conversation practice so as to address the particular needs of his or her group. This article has demonstrated how the approach was used in one setting, and showed that it can be effective for helping the students to analyse and improve the interactional elements of their speaking.

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## Notes

- 1 The class consists of 23 students (17 females and 6 males), between the ages of 21–24. All were L1 Spanish speakers from the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca who were studying to become English teachers.
- 2 Obviously, movie dialogues are scripted. Access to authentic spoken materials, especially in EFL contexts, is problematic. One group even created their own materials by clandestinely recording tourists in the town square.
- 3 The student raises a valid point. The conversations presented are motivated by a task, rather than being instances of 'authentic' interaction. As Seedhouse (1996) has pointed out, it is important to recognize that the L2 classroom produces its own peculiar type of institutional discourse. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to address this, I am working from the premise that becoming more aware of and comfortable with conversational conventions by working on tasks designed to practise speaking micro-skills will transfer to 'authentic' interactions beyond the classroom, and thus remains a valid pedagogic activity.

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