

CONVERSATION IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

The conversation class has long been the stepchild in programs of English for non-native speakers. Students invariably request such an activity. Despite the expenditure of much energy and enthusiasm by all concerned, the conversation class still faces a lot of problems and sometimes it does not achieve its objective. The learners, even those at fairly advanced levels, simply do not converse spontaneously.

Although linguists have not found the final answer, it is sure that directed conversation practice is probably the most reliable route to true communication. Where students are interested only in learning to read and write the new language, directed conversation practice has little relevance. But it is rare for people who study a foreign language not to have a desire to speak it. Most students are eager to converse in the new language, and fluent conversation therefore assumes primary importance in their learning experience.

During the early stages of conversation practice, the teacher is bound to maintain a fairly controlled situation in which the student interacts with the teacher and other students within the constraints imposed by his limited knowledge of the language. During later stages, the teacher must gradually remove the controls until they are eliminated altogether, and the student enters a realm of real communication.

Directing conversation practice is probably the most demanding of all language activities. It is also one of the most rewarding. Simply getting conversation practice scheduled in an academic English teaching program can, in itself be a challenge.

Once conversation sessions have been scheduled, new challenges confront the conversation leader. The following is a list of major ones, along with suggestions how to handle them.

1. The student has adjusted to a passive role during the manipulative phase of language and is unprepared for the active role demanded in conversation practice. One cannot expect the student to leap suddenly to original and creative communication. The teacher must lead him step by step, gradually reducing control over what he says and how he says it.
2. The student (especially, if he is an adult) is frustrated by having to channel his mind into new, elementary language forms that are so different from those he is accustomed to. Sometimes this inhibits the student, making him unwilling to express himself altogether. As a

conversation leader, the teacher must be sympathetic to his frustrations and make him feel that what he is saying is a worthwhile step toward fuller expression, even if it must be couched in the simplest forms of the foreign language.

3. The student does not have a sufficient command of the foreign language to engage in conversation. He simply is not prepared for this kind of activity and if pushed into it, he will make so many errors that the experience will be counter-productive. The teacher should never program conversation sessions unless he is sure that his group is ready for them. It is far preferable to postpone conversation until the student can truly benefit from it.
4. The student has not learnt how to criticize his performance. Anyone who studies a new language must acquire the skill of evaluating his own speech in order to make progress. A way to help the student to become his own critic is to train him to listen carefully to what other students say during the class period. Through silently evaluating other people's performance, he should become more aware of his own errors and areas of difficulty.
5. One or more students dominate the conversation giving other students little opportunity to practice their foreign language. Such students may not wait for their turn to speak, may interrupt the teacher and others, they make life difficult for everyone around them. In this situation the teacher can tell such students that he appreciates their eagerness, but they must give others a chance to talk too. He can also point out that when someone else is speaking, they can benefit by listening carefully and improving their auditory skills. Too often a great talker is a poor listener.
6. The teacher finds himself doing almost all of the talking in conversation sessions. He/she may not realize it at first, because he must do some talking to keep the session lively and interesting. But the students may be all inclined to settle back and listen to the teacher speak, and before he knows it, he/she will be the only one practicing English. This may really seem paradoxical. A good conversation leader must learn to remain quiet most of the time, intervening briefly only when necessary to help the conversation along.
7. Immediate correction of errors that occur during the conversation session may inhibit the student. By its very nature, conversation practice will be a time of some errors in pronunciation, grammar or vocabulary. A few errors here and there indicate that they are going through a natural stage in communication practice. The teacher will want to correct the errors, but he should not interrupt the flow of conversation with constant minor corrections. While the teacher can

correct a few major mistakes the moment they are made, it is preferable to wait until the students finish a conversational exchange.

These were the examples of several ways of directing a conversational session successfully. Conversation is composed of two important activities: speaking and listening. If the interlocutor listens carefully to the speaker, he can make a coherent response to the speaker's utterances. Moreover, he is able to fix in his mind information he considers useful to remember. As he listens, the interlocutor can also indicate that the speaker's efforts at communication are of real concern to him. Through eye contact, facial expression, posture, and occasional rejoinders, he expresses his interest in what the speaker says. Listening is actually a hard work – and even more so in a foreign language. It is essential for the teacher to emphasize the importance of listening because the students may not have developed a good listening skills in their own language, making them even poorer listeners in a foreign language.

Certainly an English conversation session should be a time when everyone has a chance to talk, but it should also be a time when everyone sharpens his listening skills. After all, success in life depends on how well we listen, whether in our mother tongue or foreign language.

It is very difficult for a foreign language learner to achieve fluency through conversation. Many suggestions and solutions exist to prompt the process from class-room exercises to real communication. However, we must agree that trials and errors are an essential ingredients of the language learning process. This suggests that the students should be given the opportunity to use the language from the very beginning of their study. However, directed conversation practice is the most reliable route to true communication. The conversation elements which help to achieve fluency through conversation are: questions and answers, comments, rejoinders, exclamations, dialogues, improvisations, plays, speeches, small group discussions, debates. Without the help of these elements it would nearly be impossible to speak fluently. They are a great aid to the development of oral speech.

The questions and answers are the backbone of directed conversation sessions. They help the students to internalize the phonetic and syntactic design of English. The questions have no necessary relation to the students' life or interests, and he simply responds according to the instructions from the teacher. On the contrary, small group discussions and debates help the students avoid the fixed structures and use freely the language they know. Rejoinders and exclamations help to make the conversation spicy. They express interest, surprise, disagreement, enthusiasm, in short-they show the speaker's emotional attitude and their use will help to make the conversation natural and alive. So, all these elements have their functions in leading to fluency through conversation and the teacher must be well aware of the mechanism of how to practice.

However, the mere fact - the existence of these elements is not enough to make the student speak good English. Much depends on the teacher. If he constantly practices all the devices and drills mentioned above, even by making small improvisations, if he is motivated and is willing to lead the pupils to fluent communication, the progress will be inevitable and very soon most of the students will be fluent speakers of the foreign language.

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