

9. It's Good to Talk

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Abstract

This article takes as its starting point a description of how everyday conversation develops. It compares spontaneous conversation with the speaking skill activities that are widely used in the ELT classroom and reflects on the type of output often produced, suggesting that language teaching methodology can be usefully informed by research into conversational analysis and gender issues in language. It goes on to suggest practical ways in which, within a learner-centred approach, language teachers can act as a resource and a stimulus to enrich classroom discourse. Finally it highlights specific classroom management techniques to encourage extended turns and allow for spontaneous input by students.

Talking and listening in everyday life

Let us consider the kind of conversations that we have with friends or close colleagues. As an example, a recent conversation that I had with a friend that I had not seen for some time went as follows:

- We exchanged greetings.
- I recounted my news interspersed with prompts and questions from my friend.
- Prompted by my story, my friend recounted an episode in his life which had several parallels.
- I picked up on one point in his story and we moved on to a discussion about lifestyles.

In the course of this conversation, we moved from news and gossip to a fairly profound philosophical discussion, with odd phrases setting us off in new directions.

All of us can probably recall similarly meandering conversations that were enjoyable and interesting. When we say we've had a 'good conversation' with someone, we usually mean that the interaction felt like a genuine two-way experience in which both of us felt we were being heard and understood and the conversation had an outcome that we had not expected or predicted. In contrast, if we think back to conversations that have been less satisfactory, one of their main characteristics was probably our feeling of not being paid proper attention.

Talking and listening in class

Let us now turn to the language classroom. All teachers have a repertoire of techniques that they can call on with the aim of enhancing their students' speaking and listening skills. The current interest in task-based learning, with its emphasis on tasks that promote the everyday use of language, has perhaps produced the conviction in some quarters that students are using language spontaneously when they are completing a task. But in many, if not all, cases, the teacher chooses the topic as well as the mode of interaction, structures the way the conversation is to develop in order to keep the students firmly on topic and decides the desired outcome of the task, as this typical example from a well-known textbook illustrates:

Speaking

- 1 Work in pairs. Are you houseproud? Do you care if your home isn't in perfect condition? Say what's wrong with it at the moment.
- 2 Find out what needs doing in your partner's home. Is your partner going to do it him/herself? Or will he/she get someone else to do it?
- 3 Work in groups of four or five. Prepare a description of a home that would suit all of you.

From Reward Intermediate p. 69

Looking back at the example outlined earlier of a spontaneous conversation I had with a friend, we can see that a natural conversation moves from topic to topic following logical connections made by the speakers. The starting point of the task quoted above has great potential with adult learners as it allows scope for a comparison of personal foibles but the conversation is firmly directed towards a somewhat unrelated description of an ideal home. 'Real' conversation does not operate in this way. Indeed, the author of the *Reward* series, from which the activity quoted above is taken, said in a plenary talk at an ELT Conference:

"If I asked my dinner guests to do what I ask my students to do in class, I would never be invited back."

Simon Greenall, ETAS Conference 1999

Although it is generally accepted that what is 'real' to language learners in classroom situations is not in any way 'authentic' to speakers of the target language, we need to ensure that the choice of classroom activities provides sufficient opportunities for learners to operate within the patterns of natural discourse.

Talking and listening in linguistic theory

Our knowledge about natural discourse can be usefully informed by Conversational Analysis, the study of the linguistic characteristics of conversation and how conversation is used in ordinary life. In studies of discourse in institutional contexts such as school classrooms, researchers report that there is a tightly restrained use of question and answer sequences and strict turn design following the classic IRF type (teacher initiates-student responds-teacher follows up/gives feedback). This exchange structure can also be found in adult language classes (Dinsmore 1985; Thornbury 1996) and may be something which is learnt in our own school days and which automatically takes over when we are in the role of a teacher through 'the apprenticeship of observation' (Lortie). However, in the privileged context of teaching a language to small groups of adults in informal settings, it is possible - and I would argue desirable - to move towards a less constrained and more 'everyday' pattern of interaction.

Another aspect of linguistic theory that can inform our work as language teachers is the study of 'feminine' and 'masculine' verbal behaviours. One of the best known authorities in this field is Deborah Tannen, whose academic research has reached a wide audience through her more popular writing. Tannen distinguishes between the way men and women use language. Her findings indicate that men use language to exhibit knowledge and skill and maintain status in a hierarchical social order while women use it to establish connections and negotiate relationships. Tannen identifies these different approaches as 'report talk' and 'rapport talk'.

In an intriguing *volte face* from traditional male domination, the current emphasis on developing 'communication skills' in all fields of personal and professional life seems to privilege the 'female', rapport-building uses of language. The linguist Deborah Cameron points out that:

“ ‘skill’ in communication is strongly associated with such ‘feminine’ verbal behaviours as co-operation, rapport-building, sympathetic listening, showing empathy and projecting emotion, and not - or at least less - with such ‘masculine’ behaviours as verbal duelling, arguing, dominating the floor, being cool and reserved.”

(Cameron 2000)

Again, it is outside the scope of this discussion to open up a debate on language and gender. Indeed, in many cases the words ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ are most usefully seen as labels for modes of behaviour rather than as intrinsically linked to gender. My own experience counsels caution: after a close reading of *Talking from 9 to 5* (Tannen 1995) about male and female language in the workplace, this female writer came to the conclusion that in Tannen’s framework, I am indubitably a man!

Leaving aside gender politics, a brief review of a selection of widely-used EFL textbooks supports the suggestion that most of their language practice activities focus on certain types of communication such as problem-solving or transactional tasks such as making arrangements. Very few encourage entertaining narratives, idle chat or gossip. One of the few exceptions is an activity again from *Reward Upper Intermediate* in which students are asked to prepare and give a sports commentary, another is a ‘short talk about one of your first friends or one of your first teachers’ (*New Headway Upper Intermediate*) or a debate (*Language Issues*) - although this last slips back into negotiation-mode by asking the students to prepare their speech in groups. Once again, we must steer a careful path between the ‘authentic’ and the ‘real for language learners’ but I would suggest that there are specific ways in which, at the macro and micro level, teachers can act as a resource and a stimulus to enrich classroom discourse within a task-based approach.

‘Parler, écouter, communiquer’

These three words provided the French title of the 2000 TESOL-France Colloquium. The English title, ‘Enhancing Speaking and Listening Skills’ put pedagogy firmly at the forefront of the discussion but the French title broadens the debate and encourages us to look at the role of all the participants, including the teacher, in enriching classroom discourse. I would like to focus on ways in which the teacher can contribute to classroom discussion - *parler* - learn

to listen to the learners - *écouter* - and in this way encourage meaningful interaction - *communiquer*.

Parler: encouraging extended turns

One legacy of direct method teaching is the view that teachers should talk as little as possible in class. This principle had the laudable aim of reducing lengthy explanations of grammatical points or over-complex instructions for activities but has been almost universally interpreted as a veto on the teacher contributing to class discussion. This orthodoxy overlooks the fact that the teacher is a valuable resource not only as a highly proficient speaker of the target language but also a cultural informant and that input by the teacher can act as a stimulus and a model for extended turns by students. The teacher can have various 'roles' but the key factor in all of them is that he or she is a real person who encourages reciprocity of regard between teacher and students by means of real, open-ended communication.

Storyteller Telling a story about something that happened to us is an authentic, 'real time' experience. This can be followed up by an analysis of the elements that made it a good story (detailed descriptions of people, use of direct speech, reference to the emotions felt) so that students can start to craft their own stories. If the original story is memorable, this analysis should not detract from it.

Cultural informant The teacher can answer questions about aspects of life in the target culture, including topics that can be handled by students at lower proficiency levels such as what questions it is acceptable to ask (e.g. Are you married? -acceptable. Do you have children?- acceptable. Why not?- not acceptable.) or when people shake hands or kiss.

Curious observer The teacher may share a nationality with the students but if they are adults who work in business or industry, they are part of another culture and can act as informants to answer the teacher's questions. With full-time students who are by definition younger than the teacher, the age difference in itself creates a potentially fascinating cultural divide.

Whole person Much of language learning involves talking about oneself and the teacher should be prepared to contribute to these kind of discussions.

'Ecouter': making classroom talk more communicative

I commented previously that task-based methodology can on some occasions create an inaccurate impression that learners are speaking as themselves in order to encourage real responses from their classmates whereas in fact they have very little engagement with the set task. A key factor in making classroom talk more communicative is the teacher's role in the interaction. A fuller discussion of specific features of teacher talk is given in Thornbury (1996) where he reports on an assignment set for student teachers to transcribe and analyse sections of their lessons. The key features that he asked them to focus on were referential questions, content feedback, wait time and student-initiated talk. Their conclusions can be reformulated into simple guidelines for teachers on structuring classroom interaction.

Ask genuine questions Too often, teachers ask a sequence of display questions to which they know the answer. This is an accepted way of structuring a lesson but does not stimulate conversation. In one of Thornbury's examples, the lesson came alive when the teacher asked a genuine information question and the students rushed to supply the answer.

Respond naturally We need to learn to listen to *what* learners' say rather than *how* they say it. In another example quoted by Thornbury, the student teacher is so pleased that a student self-corrects 'it like me more' to 'I liked it more' that she omits to ask why.

Increase wait time We need to learn to wait three or four seconds instead of the customary one so that students not only have time to respond but give responses above the single word level. This is one area in which increased awareness had a definite effect on teacher behaviour.

Let students take the initiative By giving students more space, we give them room to move the conversation in the way they want. In one example quoted by Thornbury, the students participated more actively and in a greater number when they had initiated the interaction, in this case explaining an obscure sport to the teacher. They were able to take this initiative for a few exchanges because the teacher was willing to loosen control of the pattern of exchanges and go 'off message', albeit briefly.

To return to Greenall's analogy of a dinner party, these guidelines reflect nothing more than the kind of conversation techniques displayed by the guests that we invite back!

'Communicuer': a learner-centred approach

Up till now, the emphasis of this article has been on the role of the teacher but this is not at the expense of a learner-centred approach. At the heart of the suggestions I have made, both at the macro-level in terms of different roles and at the micro-level in terms of structuring classroom discourse, are the three basic tenets of learner-centredness:

Authenticity of language content Students' knowledge, experience and feelings as a source of valued input, further validated by the teacher's genuine response to it.

Appropriateness of language to learners' needs and interests Attention needs to be given to the type of task and the language it produces.

Learners' active role in the learning process Students need to be given the space to take the initiative in terms of topic and outcome.

Let me conclude with a quote that refers to language development with first language speakers but could act as a clarion call to teachers of second and foreign languages.

'I would like to see the... individual language-users given more opportunities to study and to practise ways of using spoken discourse that are 'liberating' rather than limiting and oppressive... the teaching of spoken language must go beyond narrowly utilitarian definitions of 'skill' embracing a wider range of discourse functions, genres and styles. Once upon a time...conversation was an 'art' like music, dancing and good food (and) good talk was counted among life's pleasures.'

(Cameron 2000)

We need to look beyond classroom pedagogy and think less about teaching transactional skills and more about offering learners the language to '*parler, écouter, communiquer*'.

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