

College of Education for Humanities

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Chapter 9: Teaching the Conversation Class

1. What does it mean to converse in a second language?

Conversing in a second language involves much more than simply knowing vocabulary and grammar rules. It requires the ability to participate actively and appropriately in real-life communication. A learner must be able to maintain interaction by keeping the conversation going and ensuring mutual understanding between speakers. This includes focusing on meaning, using conversational grammar that reflects natural spoken language, and managing topics effectively by introducing, developing, and shifting them when necessary.

In addition, learners need to master turn-taking, which allows them to participate smoothly in conversations without interrupting inappropriately or remaining silent for too long. They must also be familiar with conversational routines such as greetings, requests, and apologies, which are essential in everyday communication. Finally, effective conversation requires adapting one's speaking style according to the social context, such as being formal in professional situations and informal with friends. Altogether, these skills enable learners to communicate fluently and appropriately in different real-world situations.

2. What is meant by maintaining interaction and meaning in conversation?

Maintaining interaction and meaning refers to the speaker's ability to ensure that communication is both meaningful and continuous. In conversation, there are generally two main purposes: transactional and interactional. Transactional communication focuses on exchanging information, such as giving directions, explaining a process, or describing a problem. In this case, clarity and accuracy of meaning are very important.

On the other hand, interactional communication focuses on building and maintaining social relationships. This includes activities such as greeting others, making small talk, or expressing feelings and opinions. In such situations, the goal is not only to exchange information but also to maintain a friendly and socially appropriate interaction.

Effective speakers are able to balance both purposes. They make sure that their message is clearly understood while also keeping the conversation flowing naturally.

For EFL/ESL learners, this can be challenging because they must focus on both language accuracy and social appropriateness at the same time.

3. What is conversational grammar and how does it differ from standard grammar?

Conversational grammar refers to the patterns and structures used in everyday spoken language. Unlike standard written grammar, which emphasizes complete and well-structured sentences, conversational grammar reflects how people naturally speak in real-life situations. It often includes short phrases, incomplete sentences, pauses, repetitions, and single-word responses.

For example, instead of saying a full sentence like “I am going to the bookstore because I need to buy some supplies,” a speaker might say, “Going to the bookstore... need some supplies.” This type of language is natural in conversation but may not follow strict grammatical rules.

Understanding conversational grammar is essential for learners because it helps them sound more natural and fluent. Without this knowledge, learners may speak in overly formal or unnatural ways that do not match real-life communication.

4. How do speakers introduce, develop, and change topics in conversation?

Managing topics is a key skill in conversation. Speakers typically begin with simple expressions or greetings, such as “What’s up?” or “How are you?” After this initial stage, they gradually introduce a topic for discussion. Developing a topic involves adding details, asking questions, and responding to the other speaker’s ideas.

Changing topics requires sensitivity and awareness of conversational cues. Speakers may use expressions like “By the way...” or “That reminds me...” to shift to a new subject smoothly. This process often involves negotiation between participants, as both speakers contribute to deciding what to talk about.

For language learners, this can be difficult because topic selection is influenced by cultural norms. What is considered appropriate in one culture may not be acceptable in another. Therefore, learners must not only develop linguistic skills but also cultural awareness.

5. Why is turn-taking important in conversation?

Turn-taking is essential because it organizes the flow of conversation and ensures that all participants have the opportunity to speak. It involves knowing when to

start speaking, when to stop, and how to respond to others. There are two main types of turns: short turns and long turns.

Short turns are brief responses, such as answering a question or giving a quick comment. Long turns, however, involve extended speech, such as telling a story, explaining an idea, or giving an opinion. Many EFL/ESL learners find long turns particularly challenging because they require organizing thoughts and producing continuous speech.

6.What are conversational routines and why are they important?

Conversational routines are fixed or predictable patterns of language used in everyday interactions. Examples include greeting someone, making requests, apologizing, offering help, or thanking others. These routines are important because they make communication smoother and more predictable.

However, these routines vary across cultures. For example, the way people offer food or respond to invitations can differ significantly between countries. If learners transfer routines directly from their first language into English, misunderstandings may occur. Therefore, learning these routines helps students communicate appropriately in different cultural contexts.

7. What does adapting conversational style involve?

Adapting conversational style means adjusting language according to the level of formality and the social situation. For example, asking “Got the time?” is informal, while “Could you please tell me the time?” is more formal.

Learners often face difficulties in this area because they may apply rules from their first language or lack awareness of social norms in English-speaking contexts. As a result, they might sound too formal in casual situations or too informal in formal settings. Teaching students how to adapt their style is essential for effective and appropriate communication.

8.How do EFL/ESL teachers teach conversation to beginners?

When teaching beginners, teachers simplify conversations to make them manageable. They use controlled language and limit the complexity of tasks. One common strategy is using simple question types such as yes/no questions, either-or questions, and identification questions. These questions require short answers,

allowing students to focus on understanding meaning rather than producing complex language.

Teachers also use structured activities like dialogues and repetition exercises. These activities help students build confidence and become familiar with basic conversational patterns. Over time, as students gain more vocabulary and experience, the teacher gradually increases the level of difficulty.

9.What activities are used with post-beginner students?

For post-beginner students, teachers move beyond controlled practice and introduce more communicative activities. These include role plays, skits, group discussions, and problem-solving tasks. Such activities encourage students to use language creatively and express their own ideas.

These tasks often simulate real-life situations, allowing students to practice language in meaningful contexts. As a result, learners develop both fluency and confidence in speaking.

10.What problems do teachers face in teaching conversation?

Teaching conversation presents several challenges. One common problem is that some students are reluctant to speak due to shyness, anxiety, or lack of confidence. Teachers must create a supportive and encouraging environment to help students overcome these barriers.

Another challenge is error correction. Teachers must decide when and how to correct mistakes without interrupting communication. Too much correction may discourage students, while too little may prevent improvement.

A third issue is the misconception that any native speaker can teach conversation. In reality, effective teaching requires knowledge of language learning processes, teaching strategies, and classroom management skills. Being a native speaker alone is not enough to teach conversation successfully.

11. What is computer-mediated communication?

Computer-mediated communication refers to the use of computers and the Internet to engage students in communication activities in the conversation class. It includes tools such as e-mail, discussion boards, and Internet chat.

E-mail provides opportunities for students to communicate using written language that may resemble conversational language, including abbreviated grammar and informal styles. However, it only partly creates conversation because it lacks spoken language, nonverbal communication, conversational routines, and natural turn-taking.

Discussion boards allow students to participate in online communities by posting and responding to messages. They offer several advantages: students can participate at any time and place, all learners have a chance to contribute (not only the most active ones), and they often feel less self-conscious and more willing to express their ideas. In addition, students have more time to think and produce more thoughtful responses. However, like e-mail, discussion boards are asynchronous and do not fully develop speaking skills or real-time interaction.

Internet chat, on the other hand, provides synchronous communication. Students interact in real time, responding immediately to each other's ideas. Although communication is written rather than spoken, chat more closely resembles actual conversation because of its immediacy and interactive nature.

12. How do teachers teach pronunciation?

Teachers teach pronunciation using a combination of textbooks, structured practice, and creative classroom activities. Many teachers use pronunciation texts that provide explanations of how sounds are produced, including diagrams, minimal pair exercises, and practice with consonants and vowel sounds. More advanced materials also focus on intonation, sentence stress, and emphatic stress.

In addition to textbooks, teachers often design creative activities to address specific pronunciation problems. One common activity involves minimal pairs, where students practice distinguishing between similar sounds. The teacher may say a word, and students identify which list it belongs to, then take turns producing the words themselves.

Another activity uses tools such as a kazoo to focus on intonation patterns without the distraction of words. This helps students understand pitch, stress, and rhythm in spoken English. Teachers may also use repetition-based techniques, such as the "pronunciation computer" activity, where students repeatedly practice words or phrases while receiving immediate feedback.

Pronunciation can also be taught as communication by integrating it into meaningful tasks. For example, students may complete communicative activities that require them to use specific sounds correctly in order to convey meaning.

13. Why do some students refuse to speak?

Some students refuse to speak in class because they are shy or anxious. This problem is not limited to beginners; even advanced students may avoid speaking despite having strong skills in reading, writing, or listening. Their anxiety may result from having limited opportunities to speak in the past or from previous negative experiences, such as being criticized for their language use.

When students feel uncomfortable or lack confidence, they may remain silent rather than risk making mistakes. This creates a challenge for the teacher, who must find ways to encourage participation.

Teachers can also reduce anxiety by creating a relaxed classroom environment. Warm-up activities, such as breathing exercises, movement activities, and voice exercises, can help students feel more comfortable.

In addition, structured activities like dialogue practice allow students to rely on context and prepared language, which can make them more willing to speak. As students gain confidence through these activities, they become more ready to participate in more open and communicative tasks.

Overall, students refuse to speak mainly due to anxiety, lack of confidence, and limited experience, and teachers must address these factors through support, patience, and appropriate teaching strategies.

14. Can any native speaker teach conversation?

No, not any native speaker can effectively teach conversation. Although native speakers are often asked to teach conversation because they can provide authentic language input and expose learners to cultural aspects of the language, this alone is not sufficient for effective teaching.

The chapter explains that this belief is based on two assumptions. The first is that native speakers are the best models of authentic language use. This is only partially true, as the quality of exposure depends on how they interact with students.

The second assumption—that teaching conversation does not require special qualifications—is false. Teaching conversation is a complex task that requires an understanding of how learners acquire speaking skills in a second language. Teachers must be able to design and use appropriate activities that promote interaction and communication.

In addition, effective conversation teaching requires skills in classroom management, as well as interpersonal and cross-cultural communication. Teachers must be able to create opportunities for students to speak, manage group interactions, and address learners' needs.

Therefore, while native speakers may contribute valuable input, successful teaching of conversation requires professional knowledge, training, and teaching skills. Being a native speaker alone is not enough.