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Freeing Up Free Conversation

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Free conversation is a general concept used in language teaching to refer to group speaking activities that promote a natural exchange of ideas. Though teachers are often pressed by students to include more “free conversation” in classes, students are frequently unprepared for the demands of naturalistic conversation in the L2. This paper examines the construct of free conversation from a performance perspective and outlines seven realistic principles for constructing accessible fluency-oriented communication tasks. The paper concludes with three published examples of “free conversation” tasks, outlining the dimensions of the task construction.

フリー・トーキングは、言語教育の中で使われる一般概念で、アイデアの自然な交換を促進するグループ発話活動である。フリー・トーキングをもっと授業に組み込むよう生徒たちは先生にせがむが、いざL2で自然に会話するよう要求されると、準備が出来ていないことが殆どである。この論文では、実際のパフォーマンスの観点からフリー・トーキングの構成概念を検証し、生徒が取得可能な程度の流暢さを重視したコミュニケーション・タスクの設定に必要な現実的な7原則の概要を説明する。また、既に発表済みのフリー・トーキング・タスク3例を紹介し、タスク作成構造の特徴を概説する。

The dilemma of conversation classes

Many language teachers face a familiar dilemma in conversation classes. While students often clamor for more “free conversation” in their language classes, experienced teachers realize that simply inviting students to share their ideas does not typically lead to worthwhile language practice. Faced with this quandary, most teachers gravitate instead toward conversation-like activities that are accessible to their students, but bear little resemblance to actual conversation.

Free conversation, the spontaneous exchange of ideas that students aim to be able to achieve in their L2, is generally not included regularly in language instruction because of three interrelated problems:

1. L2 students at most levels of proficiency do not have sufficient vocabulary and idiomatic access to express complex ideas comprehensibly. As a result, many exchanges involve frequent code switching to the L1 for communication to take place.

2. L2 students at most levels of proficiency cannot carry on coherent, meaningful conversation in the L2 for more than short periods due to limitations of short-term memory in the L2. As a consequence, extended conversations often disintegrate into incoherence with few students able to make sense of what is occurring.
3. Many students lack adequate listening skills for understanding spontaneous conversation in L2 and have not developed the necessary strategies for “negotiating meaning” when they encounter difficulties. Because of the lack of listening skills, many free conversations become unbalanced and marked by ongoing misunderstandings.

In spite of these significant difficulties, free conversation in language instruction is still *a worthwhile goal* for oral English classes, even in lower level classes. Authentic conversation in which participants are communicating original information, ideas, and feelings creates the conditions for true “comprehensible output,” a necessary condition of language acquisition (Swain and Lapkin, 1995; Miura, 2001; Smith, 2003). The key to using free conversation successfully – to “freeing up” free conversation – is in addressing these problems realistically through the effective design of conversation tasks.

What do we mean by “free conversation”?

Free conversation is composed of features of “naturalness,” “open-ended-ness,” and “personal-ness.”

Free conversation is characterized by:

- personal choice of topics, including multiple opportunities for self-disclosure (Tsui, 1994)
- open structure of the conversation, including roles for initiating exchanges and symmetry of contributions by participants (Stenstrom, 1994)
- self-revelation – speakers providing personal information and ideas, surprising and amusing perspectives (Gudykunst et al., 1996)
- high interactivity, including smooth turn-taking, mutual interest, mutual comprehension of the other’s messages and negotiation of meaning (Verschueren, 1999)
- “fluency,” an easy and smooth pace of exchange (Markee, 2000; 2004; Dornyei and Thurrell, 1992)

When we survey our students about their ideas concerning their needs for conversation classes, we will usually come up with statements about their desire to participate in real conversations that embody these same features.

I recently surveyed a group of 24 university students in conversation classes at the English Language Program, University of California. A key item on the questionnaire was: What is “free conversation”? (Other items concerned preferred activities for the class and preferred type of feedback from the teacher.)

The most common elements given by the students paralleled the expert characterizations of “personalness,” “openness,” “balanced exchange”:

Free conversation is:

- personal (e.g. *We talk about personal topics; We choose what to talk about; I can use my own ideas*)
- enjoyable (e.g. *We can have fun; We can enjoy speaking English*)
- balanced (e.g. *I get an equal chance to talk; Everyone gets the same chance to talk*)

A useful starting point for preparing and evaluating conversation class activities is this intersection between standards of successful free conversation and students' stated needs and goals in becoming proficient in English conversation.

What is the role of fluency in free conversation?

The concept of fluency is a useful handle for planning and evaluating specific conversation activities. While fluency is only one measure of conversational competence, it is a dimension that is psychologically valid for students and teachers alike. Students can intuitively assess their own progress in terms of progress in fluency, the smoothness of the conversation exchange and the feeling of ease and satisfaction in the conversation. At the same time, a fluency measure offers teachers a way to assess how involved students are in conversation activities. (See LARC, 2003 for commonly used scales of conversational competence, such as FSI and IELTS.)

The concept of fluency itself is generally defined in two senses. In its broader sense, fluency is equated with proficiency, the person's global ability to use the language spontaneously and effectively in communicative situations. In its narrower

sense, fluency in an L2 is one component of conversational proficiency, which combines with other components such as lexical range and control, precision of pronunciation, grammatical accuracy, and appropriateness (Lennon, 1990). From a technical perspective, this narrower sense of fluency includes the measurable aspects of speech rate or articulation rate (e.g. mean length of "runs"), number and length of pauses (phonation-to-time ratio), number of dysfluencies (false starts, self-corrections, switches to the L1). Because of the observable character of fluency, in its narrower sense, we can use it as a basic criterion for assessing students' performance in communicative tasks.

What factors affect fluency?

The following factors are known to affect fluency in conversational tasks:

• Cognitive difficulty

From a psycholinguistic perspective, difficulty refers to the *subjective* experience of effort of the learner in a task, rather than objective features of the content or task demands (Robinson, 2001a). Familiar, relevant or interesting content will generally be "less difficult" (i.e. require less cognitive effort) to learners. Less difficult tasks generally lead learners to speak and interact more fluently. From a processing perspective, the less the demands there are on comprehension, the more attention the learner can focus on production.

• Complexity

Complexity is an objective term referring to cognitive demands of the task itself. Concrete tasks with a "here and now" focus

are generally less complex than tasks with an abstract “there and then” focus. For example, a task involving narration and sequencing from a tangible set of pictures is less complex than verbally reconstructing a story entirely from memory (Skehan and Foster, 1999). Similarly, tasks, which require exchange of information, ideas and experiences that are *unverifiable* (i.e. they exist only in one person’s mind) are more complex, especially *for the listener* in the task, as they require greater inference as well as more negotiation of meaning (Robinson, 2001b).

• **Prior knowledge**

Prior knowledge refers to having information about the content of the task and the form of the task before being asked to undertake that task. For example, if learners read a summary of a news story prior to discussing it, they are much better prepared for the vocabulary and concepts that they will need in the discussion task. Often called “schema building,” developing relevant knowledge prior to undertaking a task activates neural patterns that aid retrieval of information during a task, thus promoting fluency (Hulstijn, 2001; Crookes and Gass, 1993; Nation, 1989). Prior knowledge serves the function of “priming” relevant parts of memory, thus not only enhancing fluency, but other cognitive functions (such as inference) as well that are influenced by memory activation.

• **Planning time**

Planning refers to time allotted for specific rehearsal of language chunks or discourse strategies that will be used in an upcoming task (Ortega, 1999; Skehan and Foster, 1999). Planning can involve a range of preliminary activities, such as “inner speech” activation (Tomlinson, 2001), mind mapping, and visualization (Helgesen, 2003). For example, if learners are given the questions they will be asked in an interview ahead of

time, they can plan “hearing” the questions (or variations) when they come up as well as “responding” to the questions. The effect of planning activities is both affective (i.e., confidence building) and linguistic (i.e., language rehearsal). Students are given the opportunity to prepare specific language and interactive strategies that they will need in the upcoming task.

• **Advance organizers**

Advance organizer is a term that has been used in educational psychology for a number of years (see for example, Ausubel, 1960). An advance organizer is a graphic tool for guiding learners through a task. When presented effectively, advance organizers provide an overview of the task. They show the relative importance of different parts of the task procedure, provide links between steps, and offer various supports or prompts. The main intent of including advance organizers is to help learners activate and integrate knowledge and lead to stronger cognitive connections during task performance (Ellis, 2003). Generally speaking, tasks that are well designed graphically also promote fluency by providing attention guides, “on-line” memory aides and response prompts (Passini, 1999).

• **Task repetition**

Task repetition refers to direct repetition of a task (e.g. performing an opinion gap task three times, each time with a new partner) and to repetition of content or procedures in a parallel task. Language researchers are just now coming to understand the dynamics of task repetition (as differentiated from language repetition) on the development of fluency and automaticity (DeKeyser, 2001; Lloyd et al. 2003). A key effect is that of “mapping,” creating links between form (syntax, lexis, phonology) and meaning (task goals). Subsequent performance of tasks apparently allows for quicker and easier reactivation of form-function patterns and relationships

(Doughty, 2001). Genuine communicative tasks—those that involve exchange of *authentic personal information or opinions*—can often be repeated with new partners, generating a “fluency effect,” while still maintaining the freshness and meaningfulness of free conversation.

• **Feedback loops**

Feedback loops refer to ways to recycle what the learners have produced collectively, in order to maximize the language learning value of the task. Because of the excitement and speed of free conversations, many learners are unable to remember new words and structures that occurred in the conversation. A feedback loop is a way to record the conversation, or parts of it, and have the learner re-analyze or reconstruct selected parts. This process is generally seen as beneficial to language acquisition because it creates opportunities for reflection, consolidation of memory, and recasts of errors (See, for example, Long, Inagaki and Ortega, 1998; Nicholas, Lightbown and Spada, 2001; Braid, 2002; Ohta, 2000 and Lyster and Ranta, 1997).

These seven factors and suggested adjustments are presented in summary form in Table 1.

Table 1. Factors affecting L2 fluency in tasks and possible adjustments

Factors affecting fluency	adjustments to make communicative tasks more conducive to fluency
Cognitive difficulty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • work with familiar, personal content • make task interesting, involving, collaborative
Complexity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • create concrete task (“here and now” focus) • use verifiable information
Prior knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • preview content (use “schema building”) • provide “priming” (vocabulary, grammar, discourse models)
Planning time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • allow time for choosing and planning what to say • offer preliminary rehearsals (mind-mapping, visualization)
Advance organizers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • display graphic overview of the task • include prompts, hints, guides
Task repetition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • offer parallel tasks • repeat task with new partners
Feedback loops	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • monitor task, provide feedback on errors and problems • record (audio or video) and have students review

Examples of task types

A critical aspect of “freeing up” free conversation is the design of a task. Reflecting the goals of successful free conversation, a successful task will attempt to provide conditions for personal choice of topics, symmetry of exchanges, self-revelation, high interactivity, and fluency. While the imposition of a structured task necessarily makes the conversation somewhat less “free,” tasks can provide the essential support that allows students to experience an authentic exchange with their partners.

This section presents three examples of well-designed communication tasks, all from the popular series *English Firsthand* (Helgesen, Brown, and Mandeville, 2004).

Task 1. Cave art (*English Firsthand 1, page 18*)


Task Summary: Learners work in groups of 3. Each learner draws 3 “cave art” sketches depicting events in his or her life. Learners then form groups and ask about each other’s sketches, in order to find out about the events in their partners’ lives.

Difficulty: High interest value because learners are revealing things about their own lives, and learning revealing things about their partners’ lives.


Complexity: Somewhat complex turn-taking procedure, but question models are given.

Prior Knowledge: None needed as learners are talking about their own lives. (Examples of “cave art” are given to activate the concept of “primitive drawings.”)

unit 1



Ensemble Cave art



Language Map

What's that? Is that your _____ (house? / school?)

Is this a picture of a _____ (guitar? / camera?)


Are these pictures of your _____ (hobbies? / plans?)


When did you _____ (go there? / do that?)

1 Plan ahead. Think of 3 or 4 important things about your life. Draw simple “cave art” pictures.

IDEA BOX

- your family
- interests
- where you live
- things you've done
- your plans and dreams






Draw quickly.
5-minute limit.

What does
mean?

2 Work in groups of 3. Look at your partners' pictures. Say what you think they mean. Ask each partner at least three questions.
 Who ...? When ...? Where ...? Why ...? What ...? How ...?



Finished? Choose one:

- **Once more** Change groups. Do the activity again.
- **Speaking game** Your name is special. Pairs. Page 120.

Planning: Time given for learners to preview a “language map” (useful question and answer exchanges needed for the activity) and to prepare their own “cave art” and think about what they will say about each picture.

Advance Organizer: A sample “cave art” drawing, sample figures, space to draw, “learning coach,” “idea box,” clarification question example.

Task Repetition: The task can (and should) be repeated with new partners.

Feedback Loop: No explicit feedback loop is built into the activity, though the Teacher’s Manual suggests monitoring students’ conversations and noting troubles they are having, in order to “recast” common problems for the benefit of the whole class.


Task 2. Talking about yourself (English Firsthand 1, page 34)

Task Summary: Learners work in groups of 3. Each learner selects 5 questions, from a “random” list of 15 personal questions (e.g. “When do you laugh a lot?”) that he or she wishes to talk about in the group. During the interaction, the learners look at each other’s lists and ask at least one question about each checked topic.

Difficulty: High interest value because learners are talking about themselves, and finding out about their classmates; opportunity to ask original, probing questions

Complexity: Somewhat complex, depending on the questions that each learner or group selects to talk about; and the types of questions learners try to ask to each other

unit 3



Ensemble *Talking about yourself*

Language Map

I like to / don't like to _____ (play baseball, / study, / travel.)

I always / never _____ (read comics, / talk on the phone, / ride my bike.)

My favorite / least favorite kind of movie is _____ (comedy, / suspense, / romance.)

1 Plan ahead. Look at the questions. Choose 5 you want to talk about. Check (✓) them. Think about your answers.

☐ What kind of music do you listen to?

☐ What do you do at school or work that you don't like?

☐ What would you like to do more often? How often do you do it?

☐ When do you feel really good?

☐ Do you use English outside of class? When?

☐ Which member of your family do you talk to the most? What about?

☐ When do you feel bored? What do you do?

☐ Which food shouldn't you eat so much? How often do you eat it?

☐ When do you laugh a lot?

☐ What kind of books or magazines do you read?

☐ What don't you like to do? How often do you do it?

☐ What do you like to do in your free time?

☐ What kind of movies or TV shows do you watch?

☐ How often do you buy new clothes?

☐ Where do you usually study? Why?

2 Work in groups of 3. Show your book to your partners. Partners, ask a question. Answer the question. Give extra information.

3 Partners, ask at least one question about each topic. Take turns. Talk about at least 5 questions.

Finished? Choose one:

- **Card game** Every day Groups: 4. Page 121.
- **Free conversation in English** Talk about your schedule this week.

Prior Knowledge: Some questions may require vocabulary help.

Planning: Time is given for learners to preview all the questions, obtain vocabulary help, and select the questions they would like to be asked. During this process, learners are also planning how they will respond to the questions.

Advance Organizer: Space is provided to select questions.

Task Repetition: Task can be done again with new partners. (New questions may also be selected for the second round.) In addition, a follow-up card game is provided that allows the learners to continue to talk about their daily activities.


Feedback Loop: No specific feedback loop is provided, though there is an opportunity to recycle questions.

Task 3: Palm reading (English Firsthand 1, page 85)

Task Summary: Learners work in pairs. Learners first complete an information gap to find out the “meaning” of five different lines in the hand. Following this, learners then work in pairs to “read” their partner’s palm and make predictions about their life in the future in the five areas given (i.e., Life, Intellect, Heart, Success, and Marriage).

Difficulty: High interest, because it involves learning some psychology, speculating about your own future, and “predicting” your partner’s future.

Complexity: Vocabulary and concepts have been simplified; turn-taking procedure is carefully planned to encourage negotiation.



Duet A *Palm reading*

unit 9

Language Map

What is _____ (the first line / the second line) called?

What does _____ (a long Life line / a short Head line) mean?

It's _____ (the Life line. / the Head line.)

It means that _____ (you'll probably live a long time. / you'll have to study hard.)

1 Plan ahead. Some people believe palm reading can tell the future.
Look at the picture. Look at your hand.
Can you find the five lines on your hand?

2 Look at the sentences.
Ask B for the missing information.

Life

long = live a long time
_____ = have to _____

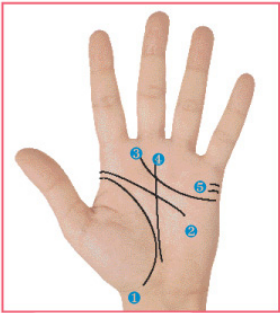
long = be very smart
short = have to study very hard

_____ line = have _____
wonderful romance

_____ lines = have many _____

starts at the bottom of your hand and goes to your third finger = be if
starts far from the bottom = be successful when you are old

close together = get married when you are _____
far apart = get married _____



How do you spell (that)?

Challenge!
Think about the topics:
• life • intelligence • love • money • marriage
Think about your life, your family, etc.
Make five predictions for yourself. Give reasons or hopes.
*I think I'll live a long time. My grandparents are over 80 years old.
I have no sun line! Maybe I'll be an English teacher.*

Prior Knowledge: Prior vocabulary and concept knowledge is needed; this knowledge is developed during the information exchange part of the activity.

Planning: A “language map” is given for conducting the activity in English; time is provided to ask questions about the meaning of new vocabulary. Guidance is provided to find the lines on your own hand before proceeding to partner exchange.

Advance Organizer: A picture of a hand is provided, along with the lines clearly labeled. The three main steps of the activity are clearly marked.

Task Repetition: Activity can be repeated with a new partner.

Feedback Loop: Space is provided for filling in information; this allows students to keep a record of some of the language they used.

Conclusion

This article has outlined ways of “freeing up” free conversation, that is, techniques for making free conversation more productive and more rewarding for both students and teachers. Initially, many teachers may find this level of analysis of “free conversation” and the imposition of task structuring to be antithetical to the notions of naturalistic language development and fluency. However, my own experience and that of many of my colleagues has been that without clear guidance, the activity of free conversation can be very frustrating and unrewarding to students. The principles discussed here are intended to help teachers set up appropriate conditions and then “get out of the way” to allow students to work on their fluency.

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