Building Better Dialogues

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Most EFL/ESL textbooks incorporate model conversations as a means to present and practice language in a meaningful context. However, these textbooks can be frustrating to use as some of their contents, including the dialogues they contain, are not always relevant to our students' interests. This paper describes a teacher-designed conversation course that follows a simple yet effective system of encouraging students to study model conversations tailored to their interests, and then create, practice and perform their own personalized dialogues. Suggestions for application of the principles and techniques presented in this work are also given.

　多くのELF／ESL教科書は有意味な文脈において、言語表現を提示し、練習する手段として、モデル会話を組み入れている。しかしながら、それらの教科書の内容は、挿入されたダイアログも含め、常に学生の興味に関連があるとは限らないため、彼らに挫折感を与えかねない。本稿では、簡潔で尚且つ効果的なシステムに従い教師がデザインした会話コースについて記述する。そのシステムにおいては、学生たちが、興味に適合したモデル会話を学習し、彼ら固有のダイアログを創造、練習し、演ずることによって、彼らの学習意欲を喚起することができる。大学一年生によるダイアログ構築システムの評価に基づき、特に、動機付けの面に焦点を当てて、研究結果を考察する。最後に、この研究における原理とテクニックを応用するための示唆を提示する。

The workshop on which this paper is based aimed to describe and demonstrate a teacher-designed conversation course for university students. Accordingly, this account has corresponding aims, and hopefully provides a guide for teachers wishing to enhance their use of classroom-based conversations between students.

Nearly all language teachers use model conversations as a means to present and practice language. More often than not, these are pair conversations in commercially produced textbooks made by large international publishers. Alternatively, model dialogues can be created by individual teachers. Each option has advantages and disadvantages.

Professionally produced textbooks are generally well researched and designed. They offer ready solutions to teachers and have enough content to appeal to a wide variety of users. Guidance and support in the form of teacher's books, additional online materials and training are usually readily available. However, one downside of most textbooks is that they are targeted at a large audience, and are therefore unlikely to fully match the needs of any one particular group of students. They can also contain too much content, which may result in feelings of dissatisfaction, especially if students are asked to purchase an expensive book for a one semester course. In class,

learners are often asked to listen to a conversation and then "practice", which usually translates into reading out loud. Although this may help to develop contextual understanding and provides some skills practice, such activities do not usually bring into play the positive affective factors that have been identified as important elements in successful language learning (Brown, 2000). In short, commercially produced textbooks are packaged solutions that whilst having numerous advantages, especially for less experienced teachers, do lack personalization.

On the other hand, teacher-designed materials are likely to be a closer fit to student and institutional needs, as individual teachers understand their own teaching situation better than any distant textbook writer or commercial editor. If learners use materials tailored to their own interests, which have been produced by their teachers, motivation is likely to increase. Additionally, having control of content allows teachers to match the amount of material in the textbook to the length of the course. The main downsides to the teacher-designed route are the time and effort needed, plus the lack of skills, knowledge, and resources to produce a professional product. Overall, however, teacher-designed materials allow a large degree of personalization for those who use them. Whilst many teachers may well begin by using commercially produced textbooks, they are likely, as part of the natural desire to improve on current practice, to become dissatisfied with published course books and think about producing their own materials. The next section aims to provide a broad outline of one simple, yet effective system whereby teachers can personalize learning for students.

Learning Activities

There are five main assumptions underpinning the activities that make up the dialogue building system described in this paper. These key elements were refined through the practice of what Richards & Lockhart (1996) termed "reflective teaching." Questionnaires and observation were used as the main means to gain insight into learner thinking (see Nojima, Storey & Stott, 2003; Stott & Storey, 2003).

Active, self-directed learning

English communication ability is composed of skills requiring active practice. By requiring learners to dramatize dialogues they themselves have created, students engage "the necessary bodily and emotional involvement which results in the motivation to make meanings and intentions clear in the target language" (Oller & Richard-Amato, 1983, p. 207). The "active learning" element of the dialogue building process draws from the Total Physical Response approach advocated by Asher (Cain cited in Byram, 2000, p. 631-633). As active class participants, students should become increasingly self-directed.

Personal and stimulating content

By providing learners with opportunities to generate content that is personally meaningful they are able to express themselves in a way that is likely to increase their self-esteem, reduce inhibition and positively influence other important affective factors as described by Brown (2000, p. 143-152).

Cooperative communicative processes

With around thirty students in many university communication classes we need to use pair work and group work to practice skills, and make the most of the limited time available, if learners are to progress towards communicative competence. Gilfert and Crocker (1997) describe how a teaching system based on dialog performances can be used with non-English major classes, meeting once a week for 90 minutes, as a means to help students develop effective communication strategies. Their account includes a description of typical high school English learning experiences, which indicates that prior to university most students have focused on cognitive, non-cooperative learning strategies. In Gilfert and Crocker's (1997) approach, students work in pairs to study, create and practice dialogues which they then perform in front of the class. The researchers suggest that although learners are reluctant to perform at the front of the class at first, after a number of weeks they feel much more comfortable. This point is questionable, as for some students their level of anxiety may become debilitative. An alternative is to ask learners to form small groups and then have multiple pairs act at the same time (see Figure 4). After all the members of each group have completed their performances there is then time to mix pairs around the class and repeat the performance a second or even third time. This cooperative group work allows students to develop their speaking skills whilst working on affective factors like self-esteem, inhibition and anxiety that tend to impair their performance. Because students can mix with many of their classmates during the multiple performance process, they learn about each other, which helps them to develop as a "whole person." As such, the dialog building system described can be thought of as a broadly humanistic approach (Grundy cited in Byram, 2000, p. 282-285) in which the learners are central.

Strategy use and skill development

As mentioned previously (Gilfert & Crocker, 1997) most students come to university classes having predominantly used cognitive strategies to learn English. Whilst strategies such as translation, grouping and deduction are amongst the many identified by researchers (Brown, 2000, p. 125-26), and are appropriate for the goal of passing university entrance exams, other strategies are also helpful to learners wishing to develop communicative competence. As Oxford (cited in Methodology in Language Teaching, 2002, p. 128) states "the learner is a 'whole person' who uses intellectual, social, emotional, and physical resources and is therefore not merely a cognitive/metacognitive information-processing machine." That being the case, teachers should help learners to explore and use different strategies. For example, if during a dialog performance peers laugh, and then clap and praise afterwards, this is a useful affective strategy that contributes towards better future performance. Asking learners to engage in self-evaluation after their performance, perhaps using an evaluation form prepared by their teacher, is a useful metacognitive strategy.

As students progress through a course of study, repeat the dialog building process, and learn through the use of various strategies their language skills will improve. However, if learners are asked to perform the same tasks with material of similar complexity could they become

bored after a few classes? Csikszentmihalyi (1990) provides one useful means to conceptualize how humans react to challenges by developing their skills so that they experience an optimal state of focused attention he terms as "flow." For example, if language learners, as a means to develop contextual understanding, are asked to listen and transcribe a conversation, they are, under the flow model, likely to feel anxiety if the speaking speed is too fast or the vocabulary too complex. Likewise, if the speed of the recorded conversation is too slow, or the vocabulary too easy, learners can become bored. If the condition of "flow" is to be maintained, it follows that the level of challenge for learners should be increased as their skills rise to meet the difficulty of the learning activity they are engaged in (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p74). When the learning activity involves working with others, students naturally gravitate towards partners they feel are of a similar skill level to themselves, thereby negating many of the problems of multi-level classes.

Confidence building and positive pressure

Most students say they lack confidence in their ability to communicate in English. One way to increase self-assurance is to create situations, such as performances of dramatized conversations, in which learners can push against their perceived limits, experience success and develop new beliefs about their English communication abilities. Application of "positive pressure", also called "facilitative anxiety" (Brown, 2000, p. 151) is an effective way to help students overcome inertia and focus on the task at hand.

How can the above elements be incorporated into classes in a way that optimizes results, whilst being manageable for the teacher? The dialogue building system presented below uses a cycle of activities (Figure 1) that are repeated throughout a course of study.
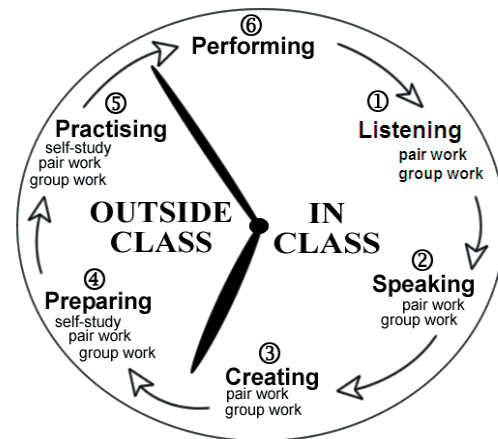

Figure 1. Cycle of Activities (based on The English Course Cycle by Stott and Storey, 2003)

Procedure:

Step 1 – Listening

Preparation: The teacher writes a dialogue (see Appendix 1), which is recorded.

Activity: Divide the class into two groups, say A and B, and assign group A to listen to and write the speech of one of the characters while group B is asked to do the same for

the other character (assuming a pair conversation). Play the conversation twice. Members of group A then compare transcription notes amongst themselves, whilst group B does the same. Play the conversation once more and ask groups A and B to repeat the checking process.

*Focus point: M*onitor the listeners and replay important or difficult sections.

Step 2 - Speaking

Activity: Group A students and group B students make pairs and try to reconstruct the conversation from their notes. This usually generates a lot of energy as the conversation jigsaw is pieced together.

Focus point: Encourage learners to guess words and use their partner's information for hints if they have gaps in their transcripts.

Step 3 - Creating

Preparation: When writing the model conversation the teacher includes key questions and phrases (see Appendix 1), which are used to guide the students as they prepare to create a new conversation.

The teacher makes "My Foreign Character" sheet (see Figure 2).

My Foreign Character

1. Which country are you from?
Answer: _____

2. What's your hometown?
Answer: _____

3. What's your name?
Answer: _____

. What do you study?
Answer: _____

5. What kind of music do you like?
Answer: _____

6. What kind of movies do you like?
Answer: _____

7. What kind of books do you like?
Answer: _____

8. Do you have a part-time job? What's the job?
Answer: _____

9. What do you like to do at weekends?
Answer: _____

10. Which foreign countries would you like to visit?
Answer: _____

Figure 2. My Foreign Character

Activity: Hand out a copy of the model conversation and allow time for checking. Highlight key questions and phrases and provide guidance on pronunciation and intonation. Set the task of creating a new conversation using the model as a base. Students select their

own partners, with one as "My Foreign Character" and the other as themselves. Instruct students to complete only the parts of the My Foreign Character sheet connected to the theme being studied. Show an outline of the new conversation (see Figure 3) so students have a broad framework on which to base their ideas.

Music Conversation

Situation

Q: Who are you? A: I'm _____ and my partner is _____

Q: Where are you? Q: We are _____

_____

Other details _____

_____

Conversation

(key questions and phrases may be written in this section as a guide students)

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Figure 3. New conversation outline

Set a target for the number of speaking turns (usually 16 to 20 in total). Start the new conversation creation activity in class and monitor pairs to ensure everyone has understood the task. Ask pairs to complete the new conversation for homework

and also to practice, stressing that students will be required to speak, without reading from their papers, in the next class.

Focus point: As students need to meet outside the class, and tend to work better with friends, they should select their own partner, at least until the teacher develops an understanding of the social groupings within the class.

Step 4 - Preparing

Activity: Students meet and complete the new conversation. Individuals memorize their lines.

Focus point: ask weaker pairs to make a commitment to a day and a time when they will meet.

Step 5 - Practicing

Activity: Most pairs come to the next class on task and already practicing before the lesson starts. Circulate and check the content of each conversation making corrections only where the meaning is not clear. Give hints and demonstrate how a native English speaker might communicate in a similar situation. Include non-verbal communication.

Focus point: Concentrate on only one or two elements of successful communication, verbal or non-verbal, per week so as not to overwhelm students.

Step 6 – Performing

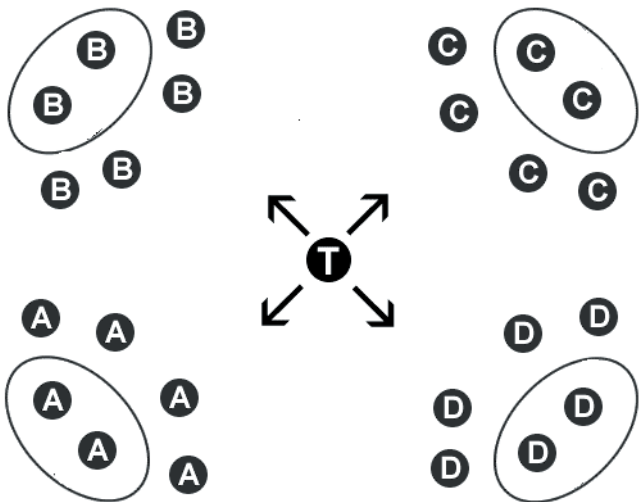*Preparation:* Teacher makes a self evaluation sheet (see Figure 5).

Figure 4. Performing in groups

Activity: Students are asked to make groups, each consisting of three or four pairs (see Figure 4).

Students within the ovals perform their skits first. Before speaking they stand up, face one another and pass their handwritten conversations to the other members of the group, who are told to provide hints if either speaker should pause for more than a few seconds. Performances are done simultaneously and last a maximum of two minutes.

Supporting pairs clap after each performance, and then the process is repeated for the other members of the group. To help students become better communicators a self evaluation sheet (see Figure 5) is completed.

CONVERSATION TITLE: _____

I WAS _____

MY PARTNER WAS _____

Please GRADE your performance using the box below

	Very weak	Weak	Average	Strong	Very strong
Memory	1	2	3	4	5
Eye contact	1	2	3	4	5
Gestures	1	2	3	4	5
Intonation	1	2	3	4	5
Speed	1	2	3	4	5
Confidence	1	2	3	4	5

What were your STRONG points?

_____

What were your WEAK points?

_____

What did your TEACHER say about your performance?

_____

What will you DO BETTER next time?

_____

Figure 5. Self-evaluation sheet

The teacher circulates and responds to the evaluations, providing feedback and support. New groupings are then made by mixing pairs around the class. Skits are repeated with the teacher encouraging students to improve their performance. Ideally, pairs are mixed a third time and the performance repeated. This reinforces skill development and highlights the importance of speaking in the class.

Focus point: Demonstrate and check for the suitable use of gestures and intonation as these elements help to add emotion to performances. For classrooms with fixed seating ask students to stand in the available spaces. For additional feedback, students can exchange the self-evaluation sheets amongst other members of their group.

Discussion

So how do the steps described in *Procedure* relate to the five key assumptions mentioned in *Learning Activities?* In *Step 1* students are asked to listen to and transcribe a conversation that has been written by their teacher. Because the content is derived from, and tailored towards, learners' interests it is likely to be *stimulating* to the vast majority of students and also of an appropriate level. As learners progress through a course of study and repeat the transcription activity their ability to hear, understand, and comprehend should increase. The teacher can, through careful monitoring and setting of appropriate tasks, challenge students and so maintain what is described above as the *"flow"* state (see Strategy use and skill development). By comparing transcription notes students are using a *cooperative* strategy. In *Step 2* learners form pairs and *actively* reconstruct the original conversation. Again this uses *cooperative communicative processes* and also useful *cognitive strategies* such as auditory representation and inferencing. In *Step 3* students also use *cognitive strategies*, such as repetition, as they check their transcriptions. In creating a new conversation learners *actively* select their own partner and are *self-directed* as they decide the characters and background of the dialogue. Writing a conversation with a partner is a

cooperative communicative process and learners naturally make the *content personal* and *stimulating* to themselves and others. In *Step 4* students are asked to meet outside the class, complete the conversation and to memorize their lines. Here they are *self-directed* and use mainly *cognitive strategies* such as repetition. In *Step 5* students practice individually and with their partner. The imminence of the upcoming performance exerts *positive pressure* and focuses attention. This "facilitative anxiety" builds gradually as students are asked to, through a *self-directed communicative decision process*, make groups and decide the performance order. In *Step 6* learners perform their dramatized dialogues in front of peers. Although most students feel anxious, by successfully performing their dramatized conversation learners *gain confidence*. Peers provide praise and encouragement, utilizing both *affective* and *cooperative strategies*. Learners are requested to self-evaluate their performances, which is a useful *metacognitive strategy*.

Conclusion

The dialogue building system presented in this paper offers a means to personalize learning for students. More experienced teachers will have probably experimented with various classroom conversation ideas, and can therefore use this as a reference point to try out some of the activities mentioned above. For those who are new to the ideas discussed, they could first start by asking students what kind of topics are of interest. Using this feedback as a theme guide, teachers could then write some model conversations for listening and speaking practice. Next, learners can take the key step of creating their own personalized dialogues based on the

models. Performances in small groups, repetition and self evaluation are other important elements of the system. Above all, teachers should experiment and adapt these ideas into their own style and teaching situation. The rewards make building better dialogues well worth the effort!

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Appendix 1
Example Dialogue

Two, or more, characters are created, one of which is a native speaker of English (John) and the other (Mari) is a Japanese speaker of English. Key questions or phrases are *italicized*.

THEME: MUSIC

John: *So what kind of music do you listen to, Mari?*

Mari: Umm…well, I like all sorts really.

John: Ah, right, like what for example?

Mari: *I suppose my favorite group is* Queen

John: Queen!? You mean the British rock band?

Mari: Yeah, you know Freddie Mercury was the lead singer.

John: Really! I'd no idea that Queen would be popular in Japan.

Mari: Yeah, yeah, rock is popular. Eric Clapton is also big.

John: Oh, wow. Let's talk about music then. *Who have you seen live?*

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Mari: Err…*the last concert I went to was* Elton John.

John: Oh, yeah?

Mari: It was really good, especially when he did Your Song.

John: *That's a classic*. Did he sing Candle In The Wind What about Don't Let The Sun Go Down On Me?

Mari: Urr…he certainly did Candle In the Wind.

    Anyway, John, what kind of music are you into?

John: *Well I was into rock, and still am, but I like other stuff now as well. Like* err…Morrissey, kind of more solo artists who can sing a bit. In fact I'll listen to anyone with a good voice.

Mari: Me, too. *Hey, have you heard of* Ken Hirai?

John: No, who's he? Japanese?

Mari: That's right. His voice is really special.

John: Oh, really? *I'd like to listen to some of his songs. What's his name again?*

Mari: Ken Hirai. I've got a few of his English songs on my MP3 player. Would you like to listen to them?

John: For sure!

Mari: I'll bring my player tomorrow.

John: Great!

Mari: Good.