

## *Teaching Conversation in the Second Language Classroom: Problems and Prospects*

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*The current skills orientation to second language teaching and communication activities employed in communicative approaches have increased the amount of speaking practice in the classroom. Yet, the level of conversational competence reached by most instructed second language learners is far from satisfactory. This paper draws on concepts from conversational analysis, classroom discourse, and communicative competence in arguing for a direct approach to the teaching of conversation skills. It shows that materials and classroom activities used in communicative language teaching often fail to address the interactional dimension of conversation. The paper suggests principles and activities for the development of conversational competence in the classroom.*

It is common practice for general-purpose second/foreign language programmes to incorporate the teaching of speaking skills. The recognition of speaking as part and parcel of a second language curriculum is reflected in general methodology texts (e.g., Bowen, Madsen, & Hilferty, 1985; Doff, 1988; Nunan, 1991), as well as in second language syllabuses (e.g., Curriculum Development Committee/Council [CDC], 1981, 1983, 1994). Speaking is often broken down into subskills, one of which is the ability to take part in a conversation in the target language. This ability is often believed to be part of a learner's communicative competence (Faerch and Kasper, 1983), the ultimate goal of second language learning. Nunan (1991) suggested that "to most people, mastering the art of speaking is the single most important aspect of learning a second or foreign language, and success is measured in terms of the ability to carry out a conversation in the language" (p. 39). The importance attached to conversational

competence can be seen in the inclusion of a conversation section in many language proficiency/achievement tests (e.g., Australian Second Language Proficiency Ratings, International English Language Testing System, Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCE), Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (HKAL); see Boyle and Falvey, 1994, for a review of the major local and international proficiency tests). Coursebooks for general-purpose second language programmes invariably embody materials for developing learners' oral competence.

Yet, despite insights provided by discourse analysts into the workings of conversation, second language materials continue to present contrived and artificial dialogues which purport to be developing learners' speaking skills. Classroom procedures for teaching conversation often amount to nothing more than the "parroting of dialogues" (Richards and Schmidt, 1983, p. 126). After years of conversation practice, many learners are still unable to engage in genuine conversation in the target language. *Examiners' Report of the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Exam.* (Hong Kong Examinations Authority [HKEA], 1993) has the following comment on candidates' conversational competence:

Many candidates could not hold a more than rudimentary conversation mainly due to a lack of vocabulary to express their ideas effectively.... Many candidates satisfied themselves with "Yes" and "No" answers. In fact, if they had taken the initiative to say a bit more, they would have scored a much better mark. (p. 103)

Whether this weakness was due to candidates' lack of vocabulary is open to discussion, but this inadequacy in conversational competence is common among second language learners: "the inability to take up long turns in conversation is a feature of many second language speakers, who keep to short turns and appear to be less than collaborative conversational partners" (Richards, 1990, p. 70). A closer examination of the current materials and techniques for teaching conversation suggests that they do not actually develop learners' conversational competence. General methodology coursebooks give guidance on the teaching of speaking but are in fact paying little attention to the teaching of conversation.

This paper argues that this situation results from conceptual confusion over the teaching of speaking. It will begin with a review of the characteristics of conversational discourse. It will then point out that most classroom discourse in the form of interaction between teacher and learners, is

not conducive to fostering learners' conversational skills. The paper will then argue for the teaching of specific conversational skills. In this discussion, some of the practices within communicative language teaching will be examined and it will be shown that although such activities are carried out in the spoken mode, they do not necessarily develop learners' conversational competence. The paper will conclude with a discussion of the principles for teaching conversation and suggestions for classroom activities that improve conversational skills.

### What Is Conversation?

Before we look into the nature of conversation, we must address the issue of what kind of talk qualifies as conversation. While monologues such as lectures, speeches and TV news reports are obviously to be ruled out, talk involving more than one speaker does not necessarily constitute conversation. Take the classroom. Even though there may be a great deal of oral interaction between teacher and students during a lesson, few people would accept that the teacher is having a genuine conversation with the students. What is conversation, then? Goffman (1976) offered the following definition:

... conversation, restrictively defined, might be identified as the talk occurring when a small number of participants come together and settle into what they perceive to be a few moments cut off from (or carried on to the side of) instrumental tasks; a period of idling felt to be an end in itself, during which everyone is accorded the right to talk as well as to listen and without reference to a fixed schedule ... and no final agreement or synthesis is demanded, differences of opinion to be treated as unprejudicial to the continuing relationship of the participants. (p. 264)

This definition may be overly technical and indeed most people can intuitively tell a conversation from other "speech events" (Hymes, 1972). But it is a useful reminder to the teacher who sets out to teach conversation.

It is perhaps a lack of awareness of the nature of conversation that has resulted in the chaos in the teaching of conversation. As Richards (1990) puts it, "the 'conversation class' is something of an enigma in language teaching" (p. 67). Labels such as *speech*, *oral*, *speaking*, and *conversation* are often used interchangeably. The *Syllabus for English* (CDC, 1983), for

example, states that speaking skills can be divided into three elements: (a) the teaching of pronunciation (*speech training*), (b) manipulative activities (*drills and pattern practice*), and (c) communicative activities (*purposeful use of language*) (p. 63). While the first two types of activity will no doubt contribute to one's oral competence, they belong more in Rivers and Temperley's (1978) category of skill-getting activities. In fact, the second type of activity, drills and pattern practice, is usually carried out primarily for practising language form, not for improving speaking skills. In the Syllabus, the category of "communicative activities" comprises a range of fluency activities such as problem-solving tasks, improvisations, role-plays, and interviews, which provide an opportunity for students to use all their language resources for fluency practice. Attention to real life conversation skills, such as appropriacy of language (Widdowson, 1978) and techniques for managing a conversation in a second language culture (see Richards and Schmidt, 1983, for a review) is minimal. (See Tsui, 1993, for a comprehensive description of the functions of conversational utterances in English.)

Richards (1990) has highlighted one reason for this confusion. There is one assumption in second language acquisition research that language is acquired through conversation (e.g., Hatch, 1978; Sato, 1986; Swain, 1985). Hatch asserted that "one learns how to do conversation, one learns how to interact verbally, and out of this interaction syntactic structures are developed" (p. 404). Tasks that promote conversation therefore facilitate language acquisition. Swain has supported conversation practice in the classroom on the grounds that it promotes acquisition since oral interaction provides learners with the opportunity to push to the limit their emerging competence. Long and Porter's review (1985) also indicated that from a psycholinguistic point of view, interlanguage talk, interaction between non-native speaking learners, is conducive to interlanguage development. However, we can see that within this view, the teaching of conversation is a means to an end (language acquisition), and not an end in itself. The result is language being acquired, not enhanced conversation skills. While the goal of language acquisition is certainly crucial, it is important that teachers should be able to tell what an activity labelled "oral" or "conversation" actually practises. They should be able to distinguish between structural or fluency practice carried out by way of dialogues, and activities that teach and practise the skills for taking part in a conversation in the target language.

## The Nature of Conversation

Research by ethnomethodologists (e.g., Goffman, 1976; Jefferson, 1972; Sacks, 1972; Schegloff, 1972) and linguistic philosophers (e.g., Austin, 1962; Grice, 1975; Searle, 1969) has provided new insights in the characteristics of naturally occurring conversation. Studies into aspects of conversation such as turn-taking, topic negotiation and maintenance, repairs, openings and closings have revealed what genuine conversation is like. For example, Tsui's study of adjacency pairs in conversation confirms the finding that "conversation is by no means a string of utterances tenuously related to each other. It is organised in an orderly fashion. Not only are there sequencing rules governing what is expected to occur but also what can occur if the discourse is to be coherent" (1991, p. 128). Results from conversational analysis show that neatly constructed dialogues that often dominate instructional materials are highly unlikely to exist. Consider the following example from a coursebook for intermediate-level EFL learners:

### *Situational dialogue*

Sam and Lyn are talking about what they can do.

Sam: Let's go out for a walk.

Lyn: That's not a very good idea. It's raining.

Sam: I like walking when it's raining.

Lyn: Don't be silly. We can go out tomorrow.

Sam: Why? What's the weather forecast for tomorrow?

Lyn: It's going to be hot.

Sam: I don't like walking when it's hot.

Lyn: And I don't like walking when it's raining.

(Methold and Tadman, 1990, p. 185)

It is highly unlikely that conversations in which the speakers negotiate for something will develop in this fashion. Often, speakers proceed step by step, sounding each other out. The unnaturalness of this dialogue will be seen more clearly if we compare it with the sample of naturally occurring conversation below:

Jack: Say what ya doin'?

Judy: Well, we're going out. Why?

Jack: Oh, I was just gonna say come out and come over here and talk to the people.

(Coulthard, 1977, p. 71)

Let's consider another example. The extract below, which is also

taken from a coursebook for intermediate learners, purports to practise conversation:

Read this conversation. Then, with your partner, use the notes below to practise similar conversation. (You may use *must* in place of *have to*.)

S1: What do I have to do if I (want to have a telephone installed)?

S2: You should (write to the Hong Kong Telephone Company).

S1: What happens then?

S2: You have to (fill in a form).

S1: What else should I do?

S2: You (have to pay a deposit).

1. You want to have electricity installed/write to the Hong Kong Electric Company/fill in a form/pay a deposit.

(and so on)

(Howe, T. A. Kirkpatrick, & D. L. Kirkpatrick, 1987, p. 112)

This practice is in the form of a conversation, but we can easily see that what learners actually practise is producing grammatically correct sentences with *have to*, *must*, and *should*.

Thus, dialogues in second language learning materials are often used to exemplify structures or communicative functions. As a result, they easily convey to the learner a false picture of conversational discourse in the target language. The above examples ignore at least two important aspects of conversation:

1. The formal characteristics of spontaneous speech, such as false starts, fillers, re-phrasings, hesitations, slips of the tongue, repetitions, unfinished sentences, styles of speaking, etc.
2. The techniques of engaging in a conversation in the target language, such as how to open and close a conversation, how to take and relinquish speaking turn, how to show attention, how to agree and disagree, etc. "They need abundant practice in taking turns, interruptions and listening actively. They need to practise how to hold back the more talkative members and draw out the shy or self-conscious ones. They need to learn how to request clarifications, how to slow down, and how to explain" (Ernst, 1994, p. 315).

The second point above implies that conversation practice in the classroom should not be confined to making responses only. Following work on adjacency pairs (e.g., Coulthard, 1977; Schegloff & Sacks, 1973), Richards (1977) drew attention to the common practice in coursebooks of treating questions, especially yes/no questions, as if they belonged to one

adjacency pair (i.e., Request for Information — Answer) only. As a result, “many students are only capable of short stilted replies such as *Yes, I can* or *No, I can't*, which while grammatically correct, may be conversationally inappropriate as second part constituents of adjacency pairs” (Richards & Schmidt, 1983, p. 130). The second textbook example quoted above, hence, may be rewritten as:

- S1: What do I have to do if I (want to have a telephone installed?)  
S2: Why? Something wrong with the one you're using?  
S1: It doesn't work properly.  
S2: Well, you should (write to the Hong Kong Telephone Company).  
S1: What happens then?  
S2: Look, I've got (their guidebook) here. Let's see what it says.  
S1: It says you have to (fill in a form).  
S2: And then you have to (pay a deposit).

Brown and Yule (1983a) distinguished two functions of language: the transactional use, which is concerned with the expression of content, and the interactional use, which is concerned with establishing and maintaining social relationships. Bygate (1988) has contrasted motor-perceptive skills and interaction skills and pointed out that the latter is called for in real life communication: “Interactional skills involve making decisions about communication, such as: what to say, how to say it, and whether to develop it, in accordance with one's intentions, while maintaining the desired relations with others” (p. 6). He has highlighted three features which distinguish speaking from writing, the other productive skill. They are: (a) Speech takes place under the pressure of time, (b) interpersonal interaction in conversation is two-way, and (c) this two-way communication demands the ability to negotiate meaning and manage interaction. Nunan (1991) has emphasized the greater unpredictability of interpersonal encounters that are carried out to maintain social relationships. To recap, conversation is much more than the conveying of information in the spoken mode. Brown and Yule (1983b) has pointed out that the overriding function of spoken language is the maintenance of social relationships: “Most people spend a great deal of their everyday lives in ‘chats’, where the primary purpose is to be nice to the person they are talking to” (p. 11).

The primarily interactional function of spoken language has implications for teaching. As Richards (1990) puts it, “interactional uses of conversation are very different in both form and function from the kinds of transactional language found in task-oriented communication, and should

have a central place in a conversation program" (p. 79). This was echoed by McCarthy (1991), who commented that "there is no doubt that some teaching materials are imbalanced between the two types of talk" (p. 137).

### **The Nature of Classroom Discourse**

If second language materials seldom provide authentic conversational samples, does classroom talk help? Research into the nature of classroom discourse (e.g., Coulthard, 1977; Holmes, 1983; Sinclair and Brazil, 1982) has shown that most exchanges that happen in the classroom follow the "teacher initiates — pupil responds — teacher comments" sequence. Sinclair and Brazil's comprehensive study of teacher talk shows that students "have only very restricted opportunities to participate in the language of the classroom" (p. 5) and that "the teacher dominates the talk in quantity, range, and degree of control" (p. 7). This sequence is shaped by the role of teacher and that of students in the classroom (the teacher is the authority figure) (see Gremmo, Holec and Riley, 1985, for a fuller discussion), the setting (the classroom requires students' obedience), and the relative knowledge level of the participants (the teacher is the more knowledgeable person). Most classroom talk is concerned with pedagogical content and not with the teacher's or students' real life experiences or feelings. This means that although the teacher is seemingly talking *with* the students, trying to involve the students as much as possible, she is in reality talking *at* them (see Tsui, 1992, for a summary of the features of teacher talk). As a result, classroom discourse does not provide a model for students to learn: (a) how to initiate a conversation, (b) how to nominate topics for conversation, and (c) how to initiate exchanges during a conversation. This perhaps explains why the "conversations" between the examiner (an authority figure, usually a teacher) and the candidate in HKCE English Oral tests often sound more like interrogations than conversations.

### **Conversation and Communicative Competence**

One might argue: Is conversational competence that important? Is the ability to convey information a sufficient goal for foreign language teaching? How many of our students will really need to maintain social relationships in a foreign language? These questions about realistic goals are certainly important with respect to an entire foreign language programme (Education Commission, 1995) and the teaching of the spoken language



(Brown and Yule, 1983b). Teachers should always bear in mind the needs of their students and plan their programmes accordingly. Indeed, when faced with low achievers, teachers may justifiably accord priority to what they consider to be the more "pressing" areas such as grammar, vocabulary, and reading. However, one should not lose sight of one of the ultimate goals of second language instruction, which is to facilitate learners' acquisition of "communicative competence" (Faerch and Kasper, 1983), the ability to speak both accurately and appropriately (Wolfson, 1989, p. 36). For Hymes (1972), "there are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless" (p. 45), so that true communicative competence embraces knowing what to say to whom in what circumstances and how to say it. While priorities may vary from programme to programme, appropriacy of language use should not be dismissed altogether from second language teaching (Nolasco and Arthur, 1987, p. 19).

The inclusion of an oral test in the Advanced Supplementary Level Use of English Examination from 1994 reflects the importance that examination bodies attach to speaking abilities and, in particular, conversational competence. Part 2 of this test requires candidates to take part in a group discussion for the planning of a project. This is not a mere fluency test, because the candidate who monopolizes the group discussion will in fact be penalized. In other words, this test involves "interpersonal interaction and the candidates will therefore be assessed on much higher level skills of communicative abilities over and above purely linguistic abilities, including fluency, turn-taking, range of vocabulary and structures and intelligibility" (Fullilove, 1992, p. 143).

If language is to be learnt for communication (Widdowson, 1978) so that linguistic competence alone is not enough, it is necessary to examine what communicative competence embraces. Wolfson (1989) pointed out that the notion of communicative competence by Hymes (1967, 1972) has often been misinterpreted in second language teaching, so that "grammatical competence was regarded as something separate from communicative competence instead of an intrinsic part of what speakers need to know in order to communicate effectively" (p. 46). This has resulted in approaches that either ignore grammatical accuracy or treat the teaching of "what to say to whom under what circumstances" as something separate from work on accuracy. Some methodologists have somewhat equated communicative competence with fluency or the ability to get one's meaning across only.

Canale and Swain (1980) identified three components of communicative competence: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. Under sociolinguistic competence are two sets of rules: sociocultural rules of use and rules of discourse:

Sociocultural rules of use will specify the ways in which utterances are produced and understood appropriately with respect to the component of communicative events outlined by Hymes.... The primary focus of these rules is on the extent to which certain propositions and communicative functions are appropriate within a given sociolinguistic context depending on contextual factors such as topic, role of participants, setting, and norms of interaction. (p. 30)

“Strategic competence” consists of the verbal and nonverbal communication strategies that can help learners to cope with or remedy breakdowns in communication which result from lack of proficiency in the language (Canale & Swain, 1980, p. 30). Different typologies of communication strategies have been proposed to account for what learners do when faced with a linguistic gap (e.g., Faerch and Kasper, 1983; Tarone, 1977). Canale (1983) emphasized that the framework of communicative competence was to “prepare and encourage learners to exploit in an optimal way their limited communicative competence in the second language in order to participate in actual communicative situations” (p. 17). To rephrase the above in plain language, a person who communicates well not only knows what to say and when to say it, but also knows what to do when he doesn’t know how to say something. While this is widely recognized in L1 (first language) communication (Cook, 1991, p. 70), the question of how to make up for lack of language in L2 (second language) communication is neglected in second language teaching. Faerch and Kasper have argued for the need to foster learners’ ability to apply communication strategies since no language programmes can address all the learners’ future communicative needs. Cook suggested that while we may not need to teach communicative strategies directly, “this does not mean that it may not be beneficial for students to have their attention drawn to them so that they are reminded that these strategies can indeed be used in an L2” as “they form part of the normal repertoire of their communicative competence” (p. 71). (See Bialystock, 1990, Chap. 8, for a discussion of the teachability of communication strategies.)

A second language teacher’s job, hence, is to help learners attain communicative competence which consists of the ability to produce

grammatical sentences, the ability to communicate appropriately according to the social situation, and the ability to cope with gaps in their interlanguage. We can see then that the development of conversational competence should not be treated as a low-priority concern. In the words of Richards and Schmidt (1983), "conversational competence is just as important a dimension of second language learning as the grammatical competence which is the focus of much formal language learning" (p. 150).

Some methodologists have argued that given the constraints of the classroom, communicative competence is unattainable in formal instruction (Jakobovits & Gordon, 1980). Harmer (1983), for example, argued that a more realistic aim for the classroom was "communicative efficiency":

Here we will expect our students to be able to express what it is they wish to say. In other words, if they wish to express disagreement we can ensure that they are able to do so and that their meaning is understood.... We are not teaching our students to be model Englishmen or Americans, etc. but to use the tool of the English language to communicate. (p. 24)

While there is reason to be realistic with the goals of a language programme, an argument like the one put forward by Harmer is not without problems. After all, one major reason for second language instruction is to facilitate intercultural communication. The classroom may not be an ideal place to develop sociolinguistic competence (Scarcella, Anderson and Krashen, 1990, p. 284), and not all learners are integratively motivated (Gardner and Lambert, 1972), but these are not reasons for excluding sociolinguistic competence in a language programme. In fact, the fourth component in Canale and Swain's (1980) framework, strategic competence, is vital even to communication between non-native speakers. Scarcella (1990) has highlighted specifically the negative effects on second language speakers that a lack of conversational competence produces.

Nevertheless, communicative efficiency has come to dominate communicative approaches to language teaching, both in terms of materials design and classroom procedures.

### **Conversation and Communicative Language Teaching**

Communicative approaches to second language teaching have generally increased the amount of speaking practice in the classroom. Activities such

as information-gap tasks, games, role-plays, and interviews, are usually done orally. In the accuracy/fluency polarity (Brumfit, 1984), such activities are usually employed for the development of fluency. In respect of each activity, success is measured by how accurately information has been conveyed, or how well a problem has been solved. In other words, many communicative activities involve "transactional language" only (Brown and Yule, 1983b).

At the same time, it is common practice for materials and programmes that claim to be "communicative" to be based on a notional-functional syllabus (e.g., Munby, 1978; Yalden, 1983). Different structures that realize a language function are grouped together and presented to learners (e.g., Blundell, Higgens, & Middlemiss, 1982). Although this approach seems to facilitate the development of conversational skills, the implementation actually displays a number of problems.

First, it gives the learner the false impression that there exists a one-to-one correspondence between form and function. In reality, this matching is not as straightforward as one might have imagined. Sinclair and Coulthard (1992) exemplified with the interrogative "What are you laughing at?" (said by a teacher to a student) and showed that whether the utterance is to be interpreted as a genuine question or a warning from the teacher depends on a host of factors, many of which are not linguistic (see also Holmes, 1983, for an analysis of children's interpretation of teacher's directives). Nolasco and Arthur (1987) warned that "any approach that leads students to equate one particular language form with one particular function, will lead to misunderstanding in conversation because an important requirement for success is being able to interpret intended speech acts correctly" (p. 8). This view was echoed by McCarthy (1991), who acknowledged the necessity of showing learners the structures that serve a certain language function but pointed out that most utterances in a language could not be categorized into functions simply by their surface form, and that most coursebooks were exemplifying a very small subset of form-function matches only (p. 10).

Second, many of the communicative functions deal with social formulas (Blundell, Higgens, & Middlemiss, 1982), such as asking and giving directions, greeting someone, congratulating, thanking, and so on, or initiating specific actions, such as offering, accepting and refusing help, asking and giving permission, and so on. While such expressions are important, they are not enough for sustaining a conversation. Genuine conversations require speakers to take longer turns from time to time.

Activities that practise social formulas only are not enough to develop students' ability to sustain a conversation (Brown & Yule, 1983b).

Communicative language teaching also relies heavily on activities that convey information and meaning. As pointed out earlier, communicative efficiency, or how much and how accurately a message has been conveyed, is often used as the yardstick for evaluating performance on a communicative task. Littlewood (1981) distinguished between functional communication activities and social interaction activities. In social interaction activities, "learners must still aim to convey meanings effectively, but must also pay greater attention to the social context in which the interaction takes place" (p. 20). Nunan (1989) emphasized the need to consider the goal behind any communicative task. The goal provides "a point of contact between the task and the broader curriculum" (p. 48). Nunan has drawn attention to an example of goal classification provided by the Australian Language Levels project. As far as the development of conversational skills is concerned, the following goals seem crucial to communicative language teaching (Clark, 1987):

1. Establish and maintain interpersonal relationships, and through this to exchange information, ideas, opinions, attitudes, and feelings, and to get things done. (p. 226)
2. Have some understanding of how interpersonal relations are conducted in the target language speech community. (p. 229)
3. Have some insight into the cultural traditions of the target language community. (p. 229)

The project recommended conversation and correspondence in order to establish and maintain interpersonal relations. To this end, activities should be organized that enable learners to:

solve problems through social interaction with others, for example, participate in conversation related to the pursuit of a common activity with others, obtain goods and services and necessary information through conversation or correspondence, make arrangements and come to decisions with others; to establish and maintain relationships and discuss topics of interest through the exchange of information, ideas, opinions, attitudes, feelings, experiences, and plans. (p. 227)

In other words, opportunities should be created for learners to engage in genuine conversation. Conversations should not be used only for

relaying information, practising structures or communicative functions, and developing fluency.

### **Pedagogical Considerations**

While successful language learners have reported on their strategies for improving communicative competence (Naiman, Frohlich, Stern, & Todesco, 1978), we know very little about how conversational competence can be developed in the classroom. For instance, many of the skills required for Part 2 of the oral test in the new A.S. Level Use of English Examination, "cannot be taught in a programmed or mechanistic way" because students need to be aware "not only of the linguistic features or spoken discourse, but also of paralinguistic and extralinguistic, or proxemic, features" (Ingham & Murphy, 1994, p. 92). Suggestions in terms of classroom technique (e.g., Ernst, 1994; Nolasco & Arthur, 1987), methodological framework (e.g., Littlewood, 1992), approach (e.g., Richards, 1990), syllabus design (e.g., Dornyei & Thurrell, 1994), and general principles (e.g., Scarcella, 1990) have been made, but there are no coherent frameworks for teaching conversation and incorporating it into a general-purpose second language programme. In this concluding section, I shall start with discussing the main principles of teaching conversation. Then I shall suggest a number of classroom activities for developing students' conversational competence.

The following principles should be considered when teaching conversation:

1. Do not confuse the teaching of conversation with other activities that are done orally, such as pronunciation drills, grammar drills, language games, information gap activities, language functions incorporated in dialogues, etc.
2. Distinguish between speaking skills and conversation skills. In the words of Nolasco and Arthur (1987), "being able to speak reasonably correct and even fluent English is one thing. Being able to engage in on-going, interactive, mentally satisfying conversation is another" (p. 3).
3. Do not assume that all of one's conversational competence in the mother tongue is transferable to a second language. Because of cultural differences,

transfer of features of first language conversational competence into

English ... may have much more serious consequences than errors at the level of syntax or [sic] pronunciation, because conversational competence is closely related to the presentation of self, that is, communicating an image of ourselves to others. (Richards & Schmidt, 1983, p. 150)

There are specific culturally appropriate skills of conversation which need to be learnt, as not all such skills are transferable from the first language (Keenan, 1976). (For cultural differences in conversational skills, see, e.g., work by Maynard, 1990, on back-channel expressions; Testa, 1988, on interruptions; and Garcia, 1989, on politeness in apologies.)

4. If we accept that communicative competence is the ultimate goal of language instruction, then sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence should form part of any language programme.
5. A programme that is based on a functional/notional syllabus and makes abundant use of speaking activities does not necessarily lead to conversational competence.
6. The teaching of conversation should be organized and should form a coherent part of the overall language programme (Nolasco & Arthur, 1987; see Richards, 1990, pp. 79–84, for suggestions for a direct approach to teaching casual conversation; see Dornyei & Thurrell, 1994, for a suggested inventory of skills for a conversation programme organized around conversational rules and structures, conversational strategies, functions and meaning in conversation, social and cultural contexts).
7. Students should be made aware of the dynamic nature of conversation. An utterance in a conversation produces meaning by interacting with other utterances in the conversation. Moreover, speech acts are often multifunctional (Richards & Schmidt, 1983, p. 126). The teaching of conversation is hence “far more than the parroting of dialogues” (p. 126).
8. The interactional function of language should not be neglected. This means helping learners with strategies for casual conversation. Richards (1990) advocates a two-pronged approach which teaches conversation indirectly through interactive tasks and directly through practice that focuses explicitly on the skills of conversation.

Based on the above principles, some classroom activities that develop conversation skills are now suggested:

1. Expose students to recordings of unscripted conversations between native speakers. If such recordings cannot be obtained, semiprepared conversations such as interviews, forums, and phone-in talk shows on the radio and television, also provide examples of the skills of conversation. Draw their attention to the conversation skills involved, such as opening and closing a conversation (see Schegloff & Sacks, 1973), turn-taking (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974), providing feedback to the speaker, negotiating and changing a topic (Hatch, 1978), repairing (Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977; see van Lier, 1988, Chap. 7 for a discussion of developing repair skills in the classroom), conversational routines (Pawley & Syder, 1983; Richards & Sukwivat, 1983), and so forth. Ask students such questions as:
  - “How did Speaker A indicate that he wanted to speak?”
  - What did Speaker B say to indicate that he wanted to finish the conversation?
2. Conversation involves nonverbal strategies. Hence, the use of video recordings should also be considered in conducting the awareness-raising activities mentioned above.
3. Many second language learners think that (a) spoken English is written English said aloud, and (b) utterances produced by native speakers are always perfectly organized and constructed (Lewis, 1993, p. 53). As a result, they tend to overmonitor their speech (Krashen, 1982), or produce utterances which are bookish. Show students transcripts of informal conversation so they have a better idea of what spontaneous speech by native speakers is like. (Rings, 1992, suggested showing learners a transcript of a casual conversation and a formal written text on the same subject for comparison.) For instance, show students that interactional talk consists not of complete grammatical utterances, but of what Bygate (1988) calls satellite units, which are moodless utterances which lack a finite verb or verb group. Students will also realize that authentic conversation is full of false starts, hesitations, fillers, unfinished utterances, insertions, repetitions, grammatical deviations, and so on, and that native speakers apply communication strategies when they are “lost for words.”



4. Even in conversations that really practise language form or function, have students practise asking questions after they have made a response. This practises the important skill of sustaining a conversation (Holmes & Brown, 1976).
5. Conduct awareness activities that help students to interpret the speech act of an utterance or the intention of the speaker:
  - How do we know that Mr Wong didn't really want to go to the party?
  - Was the teacher scolding Peter when she said "Why are you laughing"?
  - What did Mr Chan say that showed that he did not agree with Miss Lam?
 (See Nolasco and Arthur, 1987, Section 2, for sample awareness activities.)
6. Teach expressions for taking part in pairwork/groupwork early in the programme, so that students can use them in communicative activities (see Klippel, 1984, p. 194, for a list of sample expressions). Communicative activities, besides their use for fluency work, provide opportunities for practising sociolinguistically appropriate behaviours.
7. A fluency activity may be attempted twice. In the first attempt, students concentrate on conveying meaning. In the second attempt, they repeat the activity, paying special attention to appropriacy of language. (See Richards, 1990, pp. 81–84, for a sample teaching sequence that develops both the transactional and interactional use of language through communicative tasks.)

## Conclusion

The current skills orientation to second language teaching, coupled with the view of teaching language for communication, has led to increased attention to the teaching of speaking skills in the classroom. However, fluency in speech is often inadvertently confused with conversational competence. Even materials that purport to develop conversation skills are often a far cry from what naturally occurring conversation is like. As Richards and Sukwivat (1983) put it:

Theories of how we teach conversation reflect our view of what conversation is. Conversation is often defined very narrowly as the oral exchange of

information. ESL/EFL materials often focus on the finished product of the act of communication, rather than on the processes that underlie conversational discourse. (p. 124)

As a consequence, learners who have gone through several years of information gap tasks may not be able to carry out a simple casual conversation in the target language. This paper began with a quotation from the *Examiners' Report of the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Exam.* (HKEA, 1993), which pointed to the appalling state of candidates' conversational competence. At the same time, from 1994, candidates who sit for the Advanced Level Examination will find their conversational skills tapped even further as they have to carry out a conversation among themselves in small groups, with no participation of the oral examiner. The oral skills tested include "seeking understanding and clarification through questioning and discussion" and "using appropriate interaction skills" (HKEA, 1994). This development is a further sign of the importance that second language instruction attaches to conversational competence. However, much more thought has to be given to the teaching of conversation in the second language classroom, if we are to stop condemning students for failing to speak beyond "Yes" and "No."

This paper has highlighted some of the characteristics of conversational discourse, and pointed out that classroom talk between teacher and students, and the stilted dialogues in second language learning materials, are not conducive to developing learners' conversational competence. It has argued for keeping conversational competence as a goal for second language teaching. It has suggested some principles and techniques for teaching conversation in the classroom. Yet, second language specialists have to continue to search for a coherent framework for teaching conversation and for integrating it into a general-purpose programme.

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