A TYPOLOGY OF DIALOGUES IN A POSTULATED ORAL COMMUNICATION SCALE FOR A STRUCTURAL - SITUATIONAL APPROACH TO EFL [1]

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DEFINITIONS

1. Every methodology has its own battery of techniques. One of the reasons for the importance of the dialogue at this time is its appearance in so many methodology batteries. This is explained not only by the usefulness of the technique but also because it appears to be closely related to the much lauded goal of communication. My purpose here is to expand the idea of communicative competence as an ultimate objective and to trace the relation of various types of dialogue, via specific objectives, to this ultimate goal.

2. With reservations which will be explained later, a dialogue is defined here as "a verbal exchange of limited length between two or more speakers." A dialogue is designed for oral practice. It is based either on certain visual prompts (which may be pictorial or simply a verbal frame) or on information which comes from the students themselves. It is not written out in full and therefore never intended to be read. Specifically excluded from consideration are textbook conversations, which are usually of some length and are to be read at some stage. Dialogues are not free conversation. A dialogue which is useful for the classroom is distinct from a "useful dialogue" between Cyrus Vance and Arab leaders.

3. The title mentions the structural-situational approach to teaching English as a Foreign language. This is not only with the intention of restricting a discussion which might otherwise be hopelessly wideranging; it also reflects a feeling that something as useful and popular as the dialogue must be specifically adapted to each methodology which exploits it. Therefore what is said here may make sense to teachers utilising other methodologies (particularly those operating in ESL conditions), may even have some implications for their classroom activities, but may be partly or wholly irrelevant to what they are doing.

[1] A section of this paper was presented to the Mexico City chapter of MEXTESOL in July 1976. I am grateful to Leslie Adams de Gogarty who made many valuable comments during its subsequent formulation and who kindly read a final version, detecting numerous errors in the process.

Stated at the most general level, the structural-situational approach introduces ("presents") and practises (there are stages of more control --or "first practice" --and of less control --"further practice") a sequence of graded structures. It is typical of the presentation stage that structures are introduced in isolation, of the further practice stage, that the new structure is combined with others previously encountered. Dialogues are thus excluded from the presentation stage; methodologies which introduce new structures in combination or in the context of other, known structures must accordingly extend the typology. However, dialogues are vital at the further practice stage. Before developing this distinction between early, restricted and later, freer practice into an oral communication scale, we must examine the nature of the dialogue a little more closely.

CRITERIA FOR DIALOGUE DIFFERENTIATION

Within the broad definition of dialogue offered above, there is considerable variation in their nature. This flexibility is an important factor in their strength and usefulness as a teaching and learning tool. If a discussion of dialogues fails to offer some account of this diversity, it fails both to give a clear explanation of their nature and to relate them to objectives. This shortcoming is illustrated in a recent article by Pat Rigg*. Rigg's objectives are not clearly stated; at times they seem to be confined to grammatical mastery, so that output is restricted to a four-line exchange; similar restrictions are imposed when the objectives are remedial. However, fluency and communicative objectives are not far away so that, as we shall see, the dialogue is to be expanded beyond its basic form. Let us, then, examine some of the ways in which dialogues may differ.

NATURALNESS. A dialogue may be more or less natural; that is, it may closely resemble an exchange between native speakers or it may be simplified and restricted to a point where a native speaker would claim, "I wouldn't say that." At one extreme, a dialogue may be a completely natural exchange. At the other extreme, we need to expand our definition of a dialogue to establish the idea of a MINIMUM LEVEL of NATURALNESS (MLN). This involves separating dialogues from drills, so that drills fall below the MLN. This is because a drill focuses on the manipulation of structure to the exclusion of other considerations. Drills may be one-phase:

John		week.
You	went to the cinema last	month.
They		Saturday.

*"Choosing and Using Dialogues" TESOL Quarterly Vol. 10 No. 3 1976 p. p. 291-298

two phase:

Where did	John you they	go last	week month Saturday	?
He I They		went to the	cinema. theatre. coast.	

four phase:

Did	John you they	go to the mountains last		week month Saturday	?
No	He I They	didn't.			
Where did	he you they	go?			
To the	cinema. theatre. coast.				

The drills may also be multi-phase (a sequence of questions and answers). In all such cases, the drills are concerned with the manipulation of structur (the simple past in the above examples). In recent years, of course, we have witnessed an increasing concern for "meaningful drills," "communicative drills" and so on, a valuable concern which we owe to the work of Julian Dakin, among others. However, the useful and diverse drills now at our disposal remain below the MLN because they lack certain features. These features I shall now attempt to describe.

3. Naturalness features can be classified in two ways.
SOCIAL FEATURES increase naturalness because they are identified as features of an exchange between individuals in a variety of social situations. Identification of these features will often enable us to comment on the

type of exchange (we can invoke such oppositions as formal / informal, polite / impolite, technical / non-technical and so on, as well as recognising such features as topic, domain, physical situation). In addition, it is often through the social features, rather than the handling of structures that we can label an exchange as "typically British (American, Australian)".

SEMANTICO - GRAMMATICAL FEATURES involve:

(1) The so-called structure words: single words which are more than simple lexical items but do not constitute, nor are part of generalised grammatical structures.

(2) Expressions which are grammatically distinct from what the student has learned so far; they may be isolated examples anticipating a major structure ("I don't know," for example, may be taught before the present simple as a whole); or idiomatic expressions; or simply "useful expressions" (some of which are known as "social formulae").

(3) Semantic (or usage) variations in what is grammatically familiar. Examples of (1) are words like instead, enough, too. They can increase the naturalness of structures:

I bought a dress instead.
Mary's brother came too.
I haven't got enough.

Examples of (2) are:

Would you mind turning your radio down?
I don't believe it!
How about a drink?
Could you tell me where the station is, please?
What a pretty dress!

Type (3) requires a fuller explanation. I am assuming that a drill will normally employ the most common and basic usage of a structure. Thus, for example, a drill for the present progressive --based, perhaps on a picture-- might look like this:

Is he running a race?
No, he isn't.
What's he doing?
He's playing baseball.

Part of the function of a dialogue is to extend usage wherever possible. A very natural usage of the present progressive might be:

> Have you got any white paint?
> Yes, as a matter of fact, I have. Why?
> I'm painting the kitchen and I haven't got enough.

Here we can also see the use of enough mentioned above as an example of (1) and as a matter of fact as an example of (2). The usage of the present progressive is extended to indicate something taking place in the present but not necessarily at this moment. This is arguably more natural than looking at a flash card, a blackboard drawing, or a student in the classroom and announcing:

> John's reading a book.

SOCIAL FEATURES can be divided into five categories, namely

I Ice-breakers (IB)
II Topic-floaters (TF)
III Fillers
IV Comments
V Closures

IBs include greetings, exclamations and approaches such as "excuse me" (or Am. Eng. "pardon me"). TFs may be questions, compliments, observations, criticisms or provocations. These two categories precede the main part of the dialogue, or HEART, as we shall call it, where the important structures are to be found. Fillers are usually included in the heart. They are the many expressions we use to expand what we say without adding to the meaning. "As a matter of fact" in the example above is a filler.

> What's the matter? can be expanded with a filler:
> What's the matter with you?

or even with a double filler:

> What's the matter with you then?

Comments can be related to a particular item in the dialogue:

> He's rather silly, isn't he?

or to the whole exchange:

I never knew that.
Thank you for telling me; that was very interesting.

In either case, they follow the heart. Also following the heart come closures-leave-taking or simply remarks which leave nothing else to say.

Thus, in terms of social features, the generalised structure of a dialogue is as follows:

(IB)
(TF)
HEART (+ Filler)
(Comment)
(Closure)

For example:

(1)

- Hello, Jenny!	IB
- Hello, Sue. What a nice dress. Where did you buy it?	IB / TF HEART
- In England.	HEART
- Really! Excuse me asking, but was it expensive?	Filler / HEART
- No, it wasn't. It cost about 200 pesos.	HEART
- Wow! That IS a bargain	Comment

(2)

- O.K. Susan. It's your turn	TF
- But I can't sing. I can't do anything.	HEART
- Come on. Surely you can do something.	Filler / HEART
- Well, I can play the violin a bit.	Filler / HEART
- Quiet, everybody. Susan's going to play the violin.	Closure

I am not suggesting that dialogues should contain all five social features. One is sufficient to raise an exchange above the MLN.

Semantico-Grammatical features are also sufficient but not necessary conditions for minimal naturalness. These features may appear in any part of the dialogue, although if they are of the third type -- extensions of usage-- they will nearly always be in the heart. Types (1) and (2) may be in the heart or may be incorporated into, or identical with a social feature.

As well as being a sufficient condition for a dialogue being above the MLN, semantico-grammatical features are important in terms of long-range

objectives. Students must learn that natural fluency, a command of a language approaching that of a native-speaker, consists of more than the ability to manipulate structures. Natural speech is liberally sprinkled with useful expressions. It is reasonable to equate the ability to suitably employ such expressions with communicative competence.

5. It may be useful at this point to examine other features of "free conversation" and to relate them to dialogue variation. One interesting feature is the right of a participant in a conversation to draw a particular section or topic to a close by

i.	changing the subject	(closure + new TF)
ii.	ending the conversation	(closure).

The corollary of this is that participants can also pursue a topic as long as they please.

A second feature involves the extent to which one utterance suggests or even compels the next. In other words, must you know the answer to the previous question before asking the next? I am thinking here of "dialogues" which sound like a bureaucrat asking someone questions in order to complete a form. The order of the questions is fixed and the interrogator is not really interested in the answers. This is like the student who has five questions:

1. Where did you go last Saturday?
2. Who did you go with?
3. Did you have a good time?
4. What did you do?
5. When did you come back?

which he proceeds to fire off without listening to the answers. In normal conversation, we are very often side-tracked because we receive an unexpected answer; we pursue the implications of that answer rather than the next question we had in mind:

2. Who did you go with?
   My brother's girlfriend.
   Really! Was he there too? etc.

We thus have two features (LENGTH VARIATION and PREDICTABILITY) which help to determine, first whether a dialogue is more or less MECHANICAL, and secondly, its length. On the criterion of MECHANICALNESS, Rigg comments:

> "I try to design the dialogs so that they will stimulate further conversation between the students. For this purpose I often include optional variations and students move from the basic dialog, through the variations, into free conversation." (p. 295)

Later, we find this on the question of length:

> "Is the dialog short and simple? The students should be able to memorise the dialog without deliberately trying to do so." (p. 298)

This represents one answer to the problem of length and mechanicalness. I am inclined to reject it because it fails to account for the possible variation in dialogues and fails to account for specific objectives. In other words, a short, "basic" dialogue is fundamentally concerned with grammatical control and simple manipulation. Free conversation, on the other hand, is not developed out of a particular dialogue. It is approached by a sequence of dialogues which vary in a number of features in particular, some are longer and less mechanical. To employ an analogy from swimming: the learner is ultimately to swim easily and confidently out of his depth (free conversation). He approaches this goal by swimming first with a large pair of water wings which support him without any effort on his part. He simply rehearses the strokes without actually swimming. Over a series of lessons, the water wings are reduced in size until the learner finally discards them.

6. Dialogues are thus envisaged here as stepping stones or building blocks towards free conversation. To be effective in this, their nature must vary. A further criterion for this variation is STRUCTURAL CONTENT, the items which constitute the heart of the dialogue.
Rigg writes:

> "One of the most common flaws in many published dialogs is the inclusion of several structures or vocabulary items the students don't know; this destroys the meaningfulness of the dialogue at the same time that it confuses the students as to what they are supposed to be paying attention to. An ideal dialog presents one and only one "unknown". (p. 298)

One can only agree with the comment about unknown structures and repeat that we are dealing with dialogues as a practice technique. Students are learning to put together the structures they know with useful expressions (words, phrases, formulae, new usages and so on) and appropriate vocabulary in their endeavours to achieve some measure of communicative

competence. Thus, new structures should be avoided (although the exact boundary between structure and useful expression is sometimes hard to determine). However, social features, useful expressions and some of the vocabulary should be new: the dialogue is an ideal means of presenting, not necessarily one but several unknowns. The meaningfulness of the whole depends not on restricting the number of items but on the situation. As to the number of structures and new items, it depends turning to the terminology of our title, where the dialogue falls on the scale of oral communication. Free conversation involves using a wide range of structures and expressions. The closer to that end of the scale the dialogue falls, the more such items are included. Thus, when Rigg notes:

> "Is the dialogue open-endened? Does it stimulate further conversation? If it restricts conversation, the dialogue becomes a set of irrelevant formulae." (p. 298)

I want to argue the opposite: if the dialogue is open-ended and stimulates further conversations, it takes a particular place on the scale, close to free conversation. If it is closed, it is nearer the other (drilling) end. If it restricts conversation, it is only because students are approaching unrestricted conversation through a series of exercises which are less and less restricted. Formulae are rehearsed in a restricted context in order to be exploited in a later, unrestricted conversation.

The place on the scale dictates the objectives behind any particular dialogue. These objectives in turn dictate the criteria we have been discussing: naturalness, mechanicalness, length, structural content. Thus, the crucial criterion for dialogue variation is position on the oral communication scale.

3. A Postulated Oral Communicative Scale.

1) Interestingly, a second article * discussing dialogues begins from this very point. Farid quotes Clifford Prator from a 1972 paper which outlines " a scale ranging from manipulation (tightly controlled drills) at one end to communication (free or uncontrolled expression of ideas) at the other." (p. 299). This statement is darkened by the shadow of audiolingualism which falls across it. I find it hard to accept a scale from "mere parroting" to communication. I would argue that communication can be tightly controlled or free; that we can postulate a scale of communication and break it down according to other parameters, most of which we have already discussed. Farid also quotes Kenneth Chastain, who argues that the behaviourist and cognitive teachers who differ in their

* Ann Farid: "Communication in the classroom: Student-improvised dialogues". TESOL Journal Quarterly 10.3 p. 229-304

activities when student output is tightly controlled will be barely indistinguishable at the communication end of Prator's scale. I am not arguing from a specifically cognitivist point of view; but I contest the implication that communication is, almost by definition, impossible in controlled practice. Without attempting a comprehensive definition of what does and does not constitute communication, I take it that the basis for communication between A and B is that A has information not available to B, that B has some interest in that information and, finally, that A has the means to convey it. In foreign language classes, this last point is the objective of both student and teacher. If B is interested in the information itself, so much the better, although I think we can be satisfied that B's interest in taking part in the exchange as a means of improving his performance in the target language will normally compensate for any lack of interest in the substance of the activity. The crucial point is the first: does B have access to the information or does he depend on A ? Clearly, in any kind of repetition activity, the answer is no. Thus, choral and individual repetition must be regarded as activities preliminary to communication.

Beyond these activities, I would argue that communication is possible. All drills, for example, substitution, question and answer, 4-phase and so on, have potential for communication. A lot depends on the way the information is held. If it is personal information, there is no problem. If the activity is based on visual information (wall pictures, flash cards, blackboard drawings, realia) then the teacher must seek teaching strategies whereby the information may be concealed from some students but available to others. All this refers to factual information; when the students are required to express an opinion, then communication is much easier to organise. The proper establishment of this premise requires a much fuller analysis of situations, visuals and such techniques as personalisation. However, the scale can be readily accommodated to match any doubts which may remain on this point.

3.2 One other point must be made before presenting the scale. The scale put forward here is ambiguous in that it indicates: (1) development of the students' ability to use a particular structure; it charts the students' progress in, say, the present simple from the time it is first heard to when it can be used in free conversation; (2) development in the language as a whole; it follows progress from the time when most of the students' classroom experience is in controlled practice to advanced levels, when much of the time is spent in free conversation of one kind or another.

3.3 A. Postulated Oral Communication Scale

Stage	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Typical Activities	Choral/Individual Repetition Substitution drills Question-Answer drills	4-phase drills (1 structure) 4-phase drills (2 structures)	Personalized Practice	Mixed-Question - Answer-drills.	Oral Composition	Discussing a reading passage	Free Conversation
Dialogue Types (see section 4)	—	—	A B	C D	E	F	—
Length (utterances/lines of dialogue)	1 / 2	4	4-6	up to 12	up to 15 +	no limit	no limit
Freedom	NIL	NIL	very limited	limited	some freedom	only initial limitations	complete freedom
Structural Complexity (difference structures) employed	1	2	4	6	6+	no limit	no limit
Information Source	Teacher	Teacher	Teacher (students)	Teacher (students)	Students (teacher)	Students	Students
Social Features	NIL	NIL	1/2	2/3	3/4	no limit	no limit
Maximum number of Speakers	1 (2)*	2	2	4	4	many	many

* for Q-A drills

+ depending on the level

3.4 It should be said at once that there is nothing magical or significant about the number seven. A scale whose parameters include such clearly non-discrete items as freedom can be broken into as many or as few gradations as one likes. As for the parameters themselves, most should be self-evident from what has been said above. As a prelude to the different dialogue types, brief comments are made on each stage.

3.5 Stages 1 and 2 exhibit most control. Students are dealing with one or two structures without employing social features, so that both stages are below the MLN. The teacher provides the information in the sense that he controls the students' sentences by the visuals, realia, mime or whatever employed. The students' freedom is thus limited to choosing between the possibilities thus made available to him; his freedom to produce original utterances is nil. However, I repeat, communication is still possible: the students convey information made meaningful by the situation exploited by the teacher. Stage 3 is above the MLN. Exchanges are still short, no more than 3 or 4 structures are combined in a single exchange (and commonly only 2), few social features are employed and the students' freedom is limited to composing sentences about himself (personalised practice) and adapting simple dialogues. At stage 4, the length of the exchange increases considerably, more structures and social features are combined and more than two speakers can be involved. Stage 5 takes us to story-telling (oral composition) as a typical activity and, for the first time, the student becomes the major information source. At stage 6, it no longer makes sense to talk of the number of lines or utterances; structures and social features are employed at will and the teacher ceases to provide information. This leads to free conversation.

4. The Dialogues.

4.1 Type A (stage 3): Adapted four-phase drills.

We have discussed the distinction between drills and dialogues which was established by the concept of a Minimal Level of Naturalness and marked by the absence or presence of social features. The simplest type of dialogue can be created by adapting a short drill: for example, by adding a TF.
This would give the following kind of general structure:

TF
Inverted Question
No - answer
Wh - question
Answer

For example:

Who's your favorite actor (singer), etc?
.....
Is he from.....?
No, he isn't.
Where's he from?
He's from.....

This kind of dialogue has obvious communicative advantages over the bare drill: the introduction of the TF does away with the need for a visual prompt. The students can talk about themselves:

What a pretty ring!
Thank you.
Is it new?
No, it isn't.
When did you buy it?
Three years ago.

4.2 Type B (stage 3): Game dialogue.

The problem with many games which are suggested for language teaching is that the challenge is put into the activity and not into the language. Game dialogues are a suggestion, particularly for younger students whereby a fairly simple exchange is encased in a game context.

A simple structure would be:

Game introduction
Question
Answer
Game result

For example:

A	Jorge, choose a number.
B	I'd like number 7, please.
A	Number 7 for Jorge.
C	Where's Paris?
B	It's in France.
A	Very good. One point for (team A) or (the men)

This kind of exchange qualifies for our MLN in that the part which does not vary (the first three and the last lines) contains social (the comment "good" for example) and semantico-grammatical features (the use of "for" and "I'd like", for example). In the heart, the participant has to understand the question, select and correctly express his answer.

4.3 Type C (stage 4): Substitution dialogues.

Types A and B involve substitutions in that they involve manipulation of the heart. The limited naturalness features in type A and the game structure of type B will normally be invariable: the student is expected to concentrate on the structures in the heart. Type C is labelled "substitution" because any element in the dialogue may be varied according to the situation. Because of this we can talk of a movement towards less predictability in that students must modify not only the heart but also such social features as the comment in the light of the beginning of the dialogue (normally the TF). The emphasis is still, however, on the manipulation of the structures in the heart and there will not normally be any fillers at this stage.

This gives the following general structure:

IB and/or TF
Structure A
Structure B...
Structure X
Comment

For example:

A: Good morning!
B: Good morning. You look busy.
C: Yes, I am. Have you got any _____? (e.g. red paint)
B: No, I haven't. Why?
A: I'm _____ and I haven't got enough. (e.g. painting the kitchen)
B: Well, I've got some _____ (e.g. white paint)

Or:

(Scream): Ooooh!
What's the matter?
There's a tiger in the kitchen!
What's it doing?

It's eating a sandwich.
It must be hungry.

4.4. Type D (stage 4): Learned Dialogues.

At the same stage as type C, we can reverse the priorities of that type and utilise Learned Dialogues. Here, our objective is maximum naturalness; this means more control and therefore no substitutions. All kinds of social features are used and the structural heart is made more natural by the use of fillers. The use of the term "learned" does not imply that other dialogues are not learned; rather that the first stage in the handling of this type are such that the students are made to pay particular attention to pronunciation, stress, and intonation and to learn the dialogue through listening and repetition.

It is not strictly true to say that there are no substitutions; rather it is envisaged that students will write their own versions after sufficient practice of the original.

For example:

- Hey, George	IP
- Yes, dear?	IB
- Is this your glove?	TF
- No, it isn't. This is a woman's glove.	Heart (struct. A)
- Exactly.	Filler
- Isn't it yours?	Heart (struct. B)
- No, it isn't. I never wear purple gloves.	Heart (struct. C)
- Oh, I know. It must be Jack's golf glove.	Heart (struct. D)
His hands are very small.	Comment
- And this is his lipstick, too, I suppose?	Closure

4.5 Type E (stage 5): Open-ended.

Stage 5 ends the restriction on length. Thus, comments and closures are no longer formally built into the structure of the dialogue. Students are encouraged to continue the exchange and to conclude it with suitable comments and closures already in their repertoire.

Example:

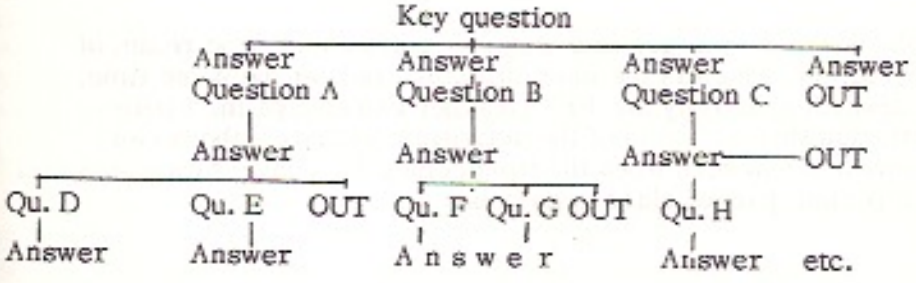
- Excuse me.	IB
- Yes?	IB
- Could you tell me where the _____ is?	TF
- Well, it's rather difficult to explain. But I can show you. I'm going there myself.	Heart
- That's very kind of you _____.	Heart ____

This leads to continuations appropriate to what has been used in the space in the TF. Questions like: Is it interesting? How long will it take? Have you been before? suggest themselves. Students should be asked to listen carefully to the answers in order to continue the exchange as naturally as possible.

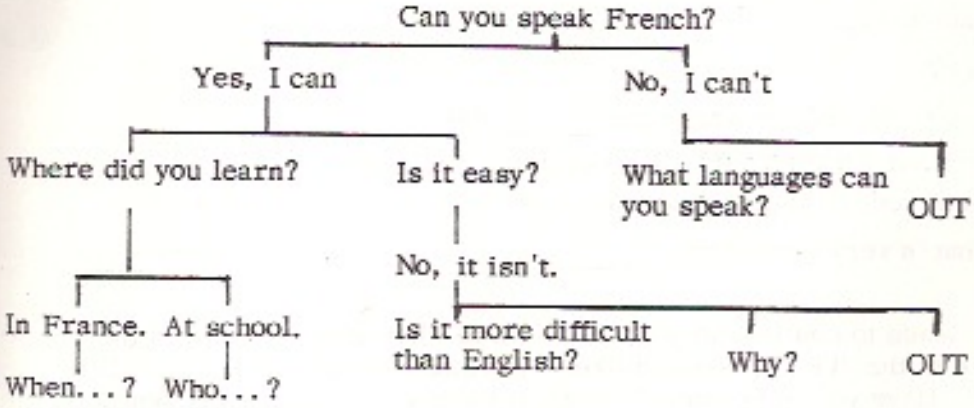
4.6 Type F (stage 6): Branching dialogues.

Dialogue structure now disappears almost entirely. This type of exchange is based upon an initial prompt whose function is to lead to an exchange within which there are numerous possibilities. These possibilities give the dialogue its name: branching. With reference to what was said about length and predictability, it should be remembered that one possibility at all stages of the branching dialogue is to end the exchange or change the subject. This possibility is indicated in the diagram below as OUT.

General structure:



Example:



I am not suggesting that the branching frame is to be put on the blackboard although it may be useful the first two or three times the exercise is attempted with a particular group. Rather, the diagram represents the teacher's plan. He has to encourage the students to listen to the answers to their questions and ask appropriate follow-up questions. If nothing occurs to them, they change the subject or keep quiet.

Other useful key questions are:

Have you ever been to _____?
read _____?
seen _____?

or questions calling for opinions:

Do you think people should _____?
What would you do if _____?

At this point stage 6 merges into stage 7 and we enter the realm of free conversation, which is the most difficult, and, at the same time, the most rewarding activity an EFL teacher can engage in. I believe that preparation through some of the activities described above can help students and teachers when the time comes for conversation sessions to be an important part of class activities.