

THE CONVERSATION CIRCLE:
A COMPREHENSIVE PROGRAMME FOR CONVERSATION
PRACTICE AT ALL LEVELS¹

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Up to now, very little interest has been shown in what is perhaps for most students the main objective of the EFL course: to speak the language, to communicate in the language they have chosen to learn. Focus of interest has generally been on methodology, the importance of which cannot be denied when we recall the boredom of the traditional course with no aids other than the textbook, blackboard and uninspired teacher. Thankfully, that is something of the past. However, now that interesting and effective methods of teaching have been devised which transform ELT into an exhilarating learning process, we should review the objectives of the course to ensure they are all being fulfilled.

On the results of the monthly or semestral test, we may be satisfied that our students can read and write in English and feel we have achieved our objectives; but these are only two of the four. Can the same students manage equally well in an oral situation outside the classroom which calls for understanding and active participation? Granted, our job as teachers is to teach the language, but what good is knowledge of a language without training in its use; if the students cannot bring themselves to make simple requests like, "Could you pass the salt?" or "Do you happen to have a spare pen?".

We might believe that our students, through pattern practice are actually conversing, but in fact they are just learning a specific structure in which the demand on them is strictly limited. In conversation practice, the demand is infinitely greater, as they must recall and produce many structures and vocabulary items in a logical manner to express their ideas, and will usually need new vocabulary.

Just as we forget a language we never use, students in a three year course covering all the basic structures, will tend to forget the patterns they learnt the previous semester or the previous year unless they have sufficient opportunity to practice them repeatedly and meaningfully in conjunction with the patterns they are currently learning. How often have you heard teachers making remarks like these: "This student has been

¹ A talk given at Mexico City MEXTESOL Chapter on January 21, 1976.

studying English for four years but he can't speak a word", or "This student writes quite well, but he's hopeless at oral work". And students themselves are usually conscious of this inability.

We aim at having an equal balance of skills, but because of the pressure to cover the syllabus there is a tendency to neglect listening and talking. In the classroom we present new structures; give oral and written practice in them; do some revision exercises; once in a while give a listening comprehension test; and assign reading or written work for homework. What about talking? Students cannot talk to anyone in English at home. In fact, once outside the classroom, their experience comes to an abrupt end as far as the oral skill is concerned. Therefore, when they suddenly find themselves in a situation requiring English, in the company of visitors from North America, seated next to an English speaking person on a train or plane, visiting, or studying in, an English speaking country, and many other similar instances, they are panic stricken as they have not received any practice in spontaneous communication; and as a consequence they feel frustrated at their failure to express themselves after investing so much time and effort in learning the language.

The ESL student is more fortunate, as he has every opportunity to listen to and practice the target language. This needless to say is the ideal language learning environment, but here in Mexico our students are learning in a vacuum. So it is up to us to provide the opportunity for them in the classroom, allowing them to use the language they have learnt, at the same time enriching their learning experience and giving them the motivation to continue studying.

How often do we allow time for conversation in our teaching programme and, when we do, how much talking time does each student have? Let us consider a 60 minute class of 25 students and say we devote the whole period to conversation; suppose the teacher takes up 5 minutes of the time to introduce the subject, occasionally interject a question and make a comment once in a while to keep the conversation going; that would give each student just about two minutes talking time. That is in theory: in practice, a certain amount of time would be lost in pauses, stumbling, and hesitation. A more realistic figure would probably be one minute per student.

To justify the dedication of a period of time to conversation practice, the session should be organized in such a way that students can talk in pairs and small groups. If we observe the communicative behaviour in a very large group, e.g. in a school playground or at a party, we see that people tend to split up into pairs or small groups of three or four. The same pattern should be followed in the conversation session to give every student adequate talking time. The total number of students is not so important, provided the space is ample enough to accommodate the chairs in small circles, and absorb the noise. A buffer zone between groups is desirable

to avoid interference. Obviously, the more groups there are the more demanding is the teacher's task, as he must circulate faster and can afford less time with each group. A total of 18 or 20 would be the most one teacher could satisfactorily cope with alone; however, a monitor might be employed to help a teacher with a larger class.

Many schools plan cultural activities in English, plays, films, and lectures which give the intermediate and advanced student a chance to listen to the language, but the elementary student limited in both structures and vocabulary cannot derive much benefit from these. What would be more beneficial to students at all levels would be programmed conversation time in the syllabus or complementary conversation sessions. Some of the advantages would be the following:

1. Reinforcement of patterns through meaningful structured practice of the language.
2. Extension of vocabulary and use of English.
3. Reduction of revision time.
4. Creative talking experience.
5. Confidence in the ability to communicate orally.

For the student, the last advantage is the most pertinent, as it constitutes the ultimate measure of his success, which justifies all the time he has spent in the EFL classroom. An advanced student who spent last Christmas in the U.S. came back delighted because she had actually been able to communicate with people. She had made several visits to the States before, but this was the first time that she had really been able to talk to people. This, after one semester in the Conversation Circle.

Convinced of the need for conversation practice a team of teachers of the Instituto Anglo-Mexicano de Cultura set up the Conversation Circle for all levels, beginning with 2nd year, and the programme was put into operation in September of 1975. The objective of these sessions is to give students the opportunity to practice the language they have already learnt in a natural and meaningful way. Idiomatic expressions and new vocabulary are given as the need arises, but no new patterns are introduced. The sessions have a duration of 75 minutes and are structured up to 4th year. By structured, I mean that the main stimulus used in a given session lends itself to the use of patterns learnt two or three weeks before according to the textbook, in conjunction with many other patterns covered at an earlier date. Higher levels are, naturally, not subject to these limitations. We have produced a teacher's book and a variety of materials; the students are not given a book to avoid distraction and interruption in the flow of conversation.

The following outline of a typical conversation session has been planned in such a way that each student may have sufficient talking time, our aim being, maximum student talking time and minimum teacher talking time.

- 10 - 15 mins. GENERAL CONVERSATION
INTENSIVE PRACTICE (in pairs or groups of three.)
- 15 mins. STIMULUS
LESS INTENSIVE PRACTICE (in one group)
Poster, paper, tape, cut-outs or slides.
- 35 - 40 mins. TRANSFER
INTENSIVE PRACTICE (in groups of 3 or 4)
- 5 mins. CORRECTIONS
(in 1 group)

TOTAL 75 minutes.

GENERAL CONVERSATION

When you have not seen your friends for a week, you usually ask how they've been, what they've been up to and so on, which invariably leads on to other things, such as how they spent the weekend, their troubles at home work or school, or topical themes like inflation, the match between Guadalajara and Toluca, the latest highjacking or Elizabeth Taylor's re-marriage. And we expect the students to do the same when they get together with their classmates after a week's absence.

These few minutes of general conversation give the opportunity for intensive practice and serve as a warming-up period.

STIMULUS

Although there is less intensive practice in this section, it is a vital part of the session, as it must be sufficiently stimulating to generate the conversation which follows in the transfer. If a poster is used, it should be clear and of a suitable size to enable every member of the group to see each detail: the more detail, the more scope for discussion. Short tapes are preferable at the elementary levels, and they should not be very long at the intermediate or even advanced levels, as the student must be able to remember the dialogue in order to report and discuss the points or prob-

lem involved. Humour, as always, is a valuable asset; amusing materials, we find, are the ones which provoke the liveliest discussions. Slides can be difficult to find but can be made from good quality pictures in magazines or books: the National Geographic is particularly useful for this. Papers may be copies of passages, articles, newspaper reports or can be specially written for this purpose. They should include questions for discussion and be given out in the previous session so that students come prepared to talk on the subject. Cut-outs, which can be readily found in magazines, are mounted on thin cardboard of a manageable size and covered with transparent adhesive plastic, and are used for pair work. Relevant vocabulary or suggested themes can be written on the back to facilitate discussion.

TRANSFER

In pairs or small groups, themes emanating from the stimulus are discussed. Frequently it is a switch from the general to the particular, a local or personal situation. To reduce teacher talking, especially at elementary levels, the themes or ideas can be written on the blackboard, along with key expressions and vocabulary that may be required.

CORRECTIONS

This area cannot be neglected and should be managed with a certain tact and consideration for the offender's feelings. As Acy Jackson has pointed out, "Some students are especially sensitive about making mistakes. The teacher never laughs at a student's mistakes or allows other students to do so. Serious harm can be done to a student whose honest struggles with the language call forth ridicule." The student himself will often realize he has made a mistake and will pause, hoping for correction from his classmates, who more often than not can help; if not, the teacher is there to do so. Otherwise, it is not advisable to interrupt to correct an error and run the risk of making the student lose his train of thought or inhibiting him for the remainder of the session. A more constructive method is for the teacher to make a mental or written note of the major errors (many slips are the result of nervousness) and allow a few minutes at the end of the session for corrections.

EXAMPLES OF CONVERSATION SESSIONS

SECOND YEAR LEVEL. (80 hours)

MATERIAL

Slides of Mexico

10 mins. GENERAL CONVERSATION (in pairs)

15 mins. SLIDES (in one group)

Students are asked to talk about the slides, describe them, say where they've been, when they went, what they've seen, what they liked or didn't like.

Relevant patterns, expressions and vocabulary
to be put on the blackboard as a guide:

I think it's . . .

Have you ever been . . . ?

Yes, I've been . . .

No, I've never . . .

Have you ever visited/seen/watched/played/eaten/
taken/driven/stopped off at/climbed up . . . ?

only - once - often - several times - stadium - canal -
pottery - altar - fresco - pyramid - steps - sculpture -
mural

40 mins. TRANSFER (in groups of 3 or 4)

Ideas for discussion:

1. What are you going to do in the summer holidays?
2. Where are you going? Have you been there before?
3. Your favourite holiday spot.
4. Do you like to spend your holiday with your family,
or do you prefer to be with your friends?
5. Are holidays important? Why/why not?

10 mins. CORRECTIONS (a drill might be necessary at this
level)

SECOND YEAR LEVEL

MATERIAL

Cards (cut-outs of
actors, musicians,
pop groups, etc.)

CARDS (in one group)

Hold up two cards for comparison, and ask students to give their opinion of the people involved.

Some patterns and vocabulary to be included:

He's better than . . .

She's not as good as . . .

She's prettier than . . .

Do you think he/she sings better . . .

actor - singer - musician

TRANSFER (in group of 3)

Ideas for discussion:

1. Give your opinion of cars you're familiar with. Compare: appearance, speed, quality, space and comfort. (faster - slower - better made)
2. Give your opinion of different makes of television sets.
3. Talk about, and compare TV programs you usually watch. (interesting - amusing - educational - entertaining)
4. Compare schools or universities that you're familiar with. (discipline - strictness - freedom)

INTERMEDIATE LEVEL

MATERIAL

Tape (Christmas)

TAPE

Play the whole tape once, then let students listen to it in sections. They can report the conversation, discuss the problems, say what they'd do or would have done.

TRANSFER (in small groups)

Discuss: a. Mexico City at Christmas (lights, traffic, festivities)

- b. Christmas at your house (food, shopping, customs)
- c. How you spent the last Christmas holiday

Transcript of Tape

It's Christmas time and the Robinson family is making plans for their Christmas Eve party.

Father - If we invite some people, I'll prepare the drinks.

Mother - If we have a formal dinner, I'll cook a turkey.

Junior - If I get enough money, I'll buy a car.

Alice - If my parents let me, I'll invite my boy-friend. (Peter)

It's Christmas Eve and everything is ready. The guests have arrived. Suddenly, the telephone rings; it's Junior calling to say he has had an accident. He has smashed his new car and is at the police station. His future brother-in-law is badly hurt. Father, mother and daughter leave the guests and set off for the police station.

AT THE POLICE STATION

Mother - If Peter weren't hurt, we'd go back home.

Father - If I had enough money, I'd give them a bribe.

Alice - If I knew a good lawyer, I'd call him.

AT THE HOSPITAL

Peter - If I'd known Junior was such a careless driver, I'd have driven myself.

Alice - If you'd remained at home, nothing would have happened to you.

Father - If I hadn't given Junior the car, he wouldn't have smashed it.

Mother - If it hadn't been for the accident, we would all be very happy now.

ADVANCED LEVELMATERIAL

Paper - 'Ask No Questions' (from the "Manchester Guardian Weekly")

DISCUSSION (in one group)

Discuss the tone, content, and vocabulary.

Did you enjoy the letters? Why / why not?

Do people like reading about other people's problems?

TRANSFER (in groups of three)

Students, in turn, state their problem (imaginary or true) while others in the group act as counsellors.

KEY EXPRESSIONS

If I were you I'd . . .

Have you tried . . . ing . . .

What about . . .

You could always . . .

I once had the same problem and I solved it by . . .

The only thing you can do is . . .