

# Effective Techniques For English Conversation Groups



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Julia M. Dobson

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## FOREWORD

The conversation class has long been the stepchild in programs of English for non-native speakers. Students invariably request such an activity, and so a class is hastily and haphazardly scheduled and assigned to the most willing member of the staff who, more often than not, is also the least experienced. Despite the expenditure of much energy and enthusiasm by all concerned, the conversation class just doesn't come off; it doesn't achieve its objective. The learners, even those at fairly advanced levels, simply do not converse spontaneously.

Many reasons have been advanced for this failure to bridge the gap, to progress from classroom exercises to real communication. This is not the place to review the arguments for and against particular pedagogical theories. More important than placing the blame, it seems to me, is to suggest a remedy. Recent studies of language acquisition have uncovered the fact that hypothesis testing—what we used to call trial and error—is an essential ingredient of the language learning process. This suggests that we must provide our students with opportunities to use their knowledge of the target language, however scanty, in creative ways, from the very beginning of their study.

Our textbooks have not yet caught up with this new knowledge. Until they do, teachers will have to look in other places for help in planning ways to motivate their students to use language creatively. Julia Dobson has done the profession a great service by gathering the ideas and practices of many of our most talented teachers of English, together with her own original material, to form this well-organized synthesis which will serve as a ready reference for the leader of the conversation group, or for the forward-looking teacher who wishes to introduce some conversation into the daily lesson. Her chief assignment during ten years as a TEFLer in Europe, Asia, Africa, and South America has been to find better ways of getting the job done. This manual is evidence of her enthusiastic and diligent accomplishment of that task. It will be welcomed not only by the untrained volunteer but also by the professional teacher of English as a second or foreign language.

*Jean Praninskas*

## PREFACE

This manual, devoted solely to conversation techniques, is intended for teachers of English as a foreign or second language who want to give their students opportunities to speak English more spontaneously and creatively.

Most books on English teaching methodology concentrate on the manipulative phase of language teaching—the phase in which students learn basic language structure through drills and exercises. Almost no guidance, however, is available to teachers in the communicative phase of language teaching, when they must launch students in creative conversation practice. Particularly disappointing is that students who have endured long hours of study are deprived of the satisfaction of expressing themselves in progressively creative contexts, because their teacher lacks adequate published material on conversation techniques.

While realizing that no one can claim to have all the answers as to how to direct conversation practice successfully, I have gathered in this manual a variety of field-tested techniques for stimulating conversation among students who already have a basic command of English. Many of these are not my original creation—some of the techniques have been around for centuries. Certain of them have been adapted, after I had tried them out with students of different language backgrounds, to increase the effectiveness inherent in their original form.

The book begins with a discussion of what is involved in directed conversation sessions: conversation practice at various proficiency levels, challenges of conversation practice, motivational factors, and other related topics. The next chapter, “The Art of Conversation,” contains observations on conversation among native speakers of English, a discussion of style levels in language, and comments on the importance of listening.

Subsequent chapters treat specific techniques or devices for stimulating conversation such as questions and answers, dialogues, plays, speeches, audio aids, field trips, and games. Although each of these sections is intended to help you lead your students into a more advanced dimension that reflects their progress in English, you

should feel free to skip around in the book. Even within each section you will want to pick and choose just a few techniques of special interest to you, since you may not have time to use all the techniques outlined in each chapter.

Throughout the manual I have attempted to use clear and direct language so that it can be read quickly and with ease. While descriptions of techniques usually refer to the "teacher" and "students," you can interpret these terms as "club leader" and "members" or "hosts" and "guests" depending on your own situation.

Whether you conduct conversation sessions during portions of a class hour, in classes devoted exclusively to conversation, or at conversation clubs and similar social gatherings, I hope that you will find the manual of practical assistance. I am deeply grateful to Mrs. Anne C. Newton and Mr. Gordon F. Schmader who reviewed the manuscript and offered constructive criticism. I am also indebted to the teachers in so many countries who encouraged me to set down my ideas on conversation techniques. I doubt that the book would have been written without the inspiration of these dedicated teachers and of the many worthy students I have met over the years.

*Julia M. Dobson*  
*Washington, D.C.*  
1974

## SECOND PREFACE

During the seven years since this book was first published, the conversation class has grown from a stepchild to an integral part of the EFL/ESL curriculum. Three major professional developments have contributed much to this phenomenon: 1) An increasing emphasis on language teaching strategies in the United States and elsewhere that give particular attention to the *feelings* of students, helping them to articulate in "caring and sharing" contexts. Currently among these humanistic strategies are the Silent Way, Suggestopaedia, Counseling Learning/Community Language Learning, Total Physical Response and the Functional-Notional Approach. 2) A worldwide burgeoning of ideas in professional journals and conferences of creative ways to handle conversation groups. 3) Much more scholarly interest in what conversation actually is. Contemporary in-depth linguistic studies of the elements and aspects of conversation provide analyses that are helpful to EFL/ESL teachers as they seek to help their students master English conversation.

Just as one example, I attended a recent Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics where the entire program was devoted to "Analyzing Discourse: Text and Talk." Among the papers presented were "Persuasive Discourse and Ordinary Conversation" by Robin Tolmach Lakoff, "The Social Construction of Topical Cohesion in Conversation" by Frederick Erickson, "Discourse and Conversation: 'Uh huh' and Other Things That Come Between Sentences" by Emanuel Schegloff, "The Place of Intonation in the Description of Interaction" by Malcolm Coulthard and "Topic Analysis as Courtroom Evidence" by Roger Shuy.

With scientific studies like the ones above and new emphases in English teaching methodology, it is an exciting, dynamic period in helping students attain communicative competence. Even though the material in this book was collected a few years ago when there was less available on conversation techniques, it will, I am sure, augment resources available to teachers.

*Julia M. Dobson*  
*Washington, D.C.*  
*1981*



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## I. DIRECTING CONVERSATION SESSIONS

Teachers of English as a foreign or second language still face a situation aptly described by my professor of linguistics some years ago: “Language teachers lead their students down the road of pattern practice, only to find themselves confronted by a great chasm at the end. On the other side lies real communication, but the group is stranded on the side of drills because the teacher sees no strong bridge across.”

Although linguists have not found the final answer—if there is one—directed conversation practice is probably the most reliable route to true communication. Where students are interested only in learning to read and write the new language, directed conversation practice has little relevance. But it is rare for people who study another language not to have a desire to speak it. Most students are eager to converse in the new language, and conversation practice therefore assumes primary importance in their learning experience.

In directing conversation sessions for students of English as a foreign language (EFL) or English as a second language (ESL), you, the teacher, will help the student move from pseudo-communication, in which his use of English is fictitiously concocted and predictable, to communication where he expresses his personal ideas and needs in the context of reality. During the early stages of conversation practice, you are bound to maintain a fairly controlled situation in which the student interacts with you and other students within the constraints imposed by his limited knowledge of the language. During later stages, you will gradually remove the controls until they are eliminated altogether, and the student enters a realm of real communication.

In an article entitled “Development of a Manipulation-Communication Scale,” Clifford Prator suggests that there are four

major phases in the language learning process: (1) the completely manipulative phase, (2) the predominantly manipulative phase, (3) the predominantly communicative phase, and (4) the completely communicative phase.<sup>1</sup> A Phase One activity might be a drill in which the student merely repeats sentences after the teacher, while a Phase Two activity might require the student to take a sentence from the textbook, such as "My father is a doctor," and restate this with information about his own father, as in "My father is a farmer." Paraphrases of dialogues and various kinds of question-and-answer exercises might be Phase Three activities, whereas a Phase Four activity might be a free conversation among class members. According to Prator, the mastery of a foreign language involves a prolonged and very gradual shift from Phase One to Phase Four which is accomplished through progressive decontrol.

Directed conversation practice can, and should, begin as early as Prator's Phase Two—the predominantly manipulative phase. Actual scheduling of directed conversation practice at various proficiency levels is discussed in more detail in a later section of this chapter. But first, let's review the language teaching methodology that normally prepares the student for conversation practice.

## **SETTING THE STAGE FOR CONVERSATION PRACTICE**

Before students embark on conversation practice, obviously they must be familiar with some grammar patterns and vocabulary words—how these are pronounced and how they are combined to form meaningful utterances. If students have learned the basic patterns of English in a formal classroom context, these were probably taught through one of two major methods or a combination of both: the audio-lingual approach (sometimes called the aural-oral method), and cognitive-code learning. There are, of course, other language teaching methods in use today but they generally incorporate modified forms of the audio-lingual or cognitive-code techniques.

### **The Audio-Lingual Approach**

Probably the most popular method currently, this language teaching approach is based on the premise that learning a new language means learning a new system of habits. It is an outgrowth of behaviorism, a school of psychology which proposes that all learning

is a process of conditioning—a process based on stimulus-response-reinforcement—and structural linguistics, a school which looks on language as a structured system of sounds learned through stimulus-response-reinforcement. Basic assumptions in the audio-lingual approach are:

1. A linguistic analysis of the new language and the mother tongue is essential for organizing classroom material.

2. The new language should be learned through imitation and analogy.

3. Every language is patterned. Students must practice these patterns through intensive drills such as repetition of dialogues or through exercises (substitution, transformation, etc.).

4. The new language habits must become so automatic that the student calls them forth without conscious effort.

5. Allowing the student the possibility of making errors should be avoided, since it is thought that mistakes will lead to bad habits.

6. Listening and speaking are viewed as primary activities, and reading and writing secondary; therefore, the habits learned first are those involving auditory discrimination responses and speech responses.

7. Function words (words like articles, prepositions or auxiliary verbs that tie other words together) should receive greater attention in the initial stage of language learning than content words (words such as nouns and adjectives which have lexical meaning).

8. Audio-visual aids can assist the student in his formation of new language habits.

9. Use of the student's native language for explanations of new vocabulary and syntax should be avoided.

### **Cognitive-Code Learning**

This approach, in some respects a modern version of the classic grammar-translation method, is gaining favor as more language teachers become familiar with transformational (generative) grammar theory. The major implications in cognitive-code learning are:

1. A language is a rule-governed system. Students must learn the rules in a new language through analysis in order to use the language competently.

2. Language learning is more than a matter of habit formation; it is a creative process, and therefore the student should be given the

opportunity to be as mentally active as possible in all assigned work.

3. Drills and exercises should be meaningful—rote learning is to be avoided in most cases.

4. The student's creative involvement in the learning process is viewed as more important than the avoiding of errors.

5. Reading and writing should be taught at early stages along with listening and speaking.

6. Occasional use of the student's native language for explanation of new grammar and vocabulary is beneficial.

### CONVERSATION PRACTICE AT VARIOUS PROFICIENCY LEVELS

A few EFL/ESL teachers, particularly those who use the audio-lingual approach, feel that conversation practice should be introduced only when students have reached the intermediate or advanced level. A student must master all of the major patterns *first*, these teachers contend. Then he can begin to use the language creatively.

The problem with such a procedure is that pronunciation drills, oral or written grammar exercises, questions on reading selections, dictation exercises, vocabulary drills—all of the necessary manipulative activities that give the student mastery of English patterns—also tend to condition him to regard English as classroom mental gymnastics, rather than as a means of communication. As a result, the student may reach the intermediate or advanced stage performing satisfactorily in the most intricate exercises but actually dreading situations where he must carry on an elementary conversation. It is not that he is too shy or unequal to the challenge. The fact is that language drill has rendered him psychologically unprepared to use his English as a means of expression.

To avoid this distressing situation, I believe it is essential to schedule conversation practice at the earliest possible stage of language learning. As soon as students have mastered a given pattern through manipulative drills or exercises, you can use this pattern in carefully controlled conversation format so that a process approaching conversation may take place.

The rewards of even limited conversation will compensate for the reduced progression in manipulative drill. By the time the students

reach the intermediate or advanced level, they will be accustomed to exchanging ideas in a fashion through classroom conversation. This, of course, will facilitate the application of their English conversational abilities to situations outside the class.

At the intermediate level, the possibilities of extended conversation practice increase rapidly. At the advanced level, the opportunities are almost unlimited. Ideally, directed conversation practice might occur as follows in an EFL/ESL course: Elementary Level—two to five minute sessions throughout a class hour; Intermediate Level—five to twenty minute sessions per class hour; Advanced Level—periods of thirty minutes or more.

Appendix A of this manual contains a list of conversation techniques and devices that are especially useful at the elementary level and those best reserved for the intermediate/advanced level. Some devices and techniques are appropriate at all proficiency levels, but the way you use them will depend on the abilities of your students. For example, in an elementary class you might use a picture showing a picnic scene and have the students create simple sentences about objects in the picture. For an advanced class, however, you could have the students construct an elaborate story around the picture or discuss the ways in which picnics in their country differ from the picnic shown in the picture.

## **KINDS OF CONVERSATION GROUPS**

Directed conversation practice for students learning English may occur in regular classroom surroundings or in non-academic environments such as conversation clubs or social gatherings at someone's home. Every day thousands of these conversation sessions take place around the world, reflecting the tremendous interest that people everywhere have in learning to speak English.

### **Academic Conversation Groups**

English teaching programs vary from school to school, but if directed conversation practice is scheduled, it is likely to appear in one of two forms: a brief session or sessions during a given class hour, or a session covering an entire class hour. If students are enrolled in an intensive program where they have, for example, four hours of class and two hours of lab daily, one of the class hours may be devoted to conversation. Another intensive course schedule might

include one or two conversation classes (each one an hour or more) per week. In non-intensive courses where students study English three hours a week, for instance, one of these hours could be a conversation class.

Frequently, the teacher who trains the students in the fundamentals of English is the one who directs their conversation sessions. In other cases, someone else is invited to lead conversation practice. The latter procedure is often favored where a teacher who is not a native speaker of English wants his students to have a chance to converse with a native speaker. He may ask the visiting conversation teacher to come in once a week, for example, to direct conversation sessions. Preferably, the regular teacher remains in the classroom while the guest teacher is working with the group. In this way, he can observe student progress and gather material for subsequent conversation periods where he is in charge. He also benefits from the session himself.

### **Social Conversation Groups**

English conversation clubs are organized by teachers and students who want to practice English in a more congenial atmosphere than the classroom may allow. Meetings generally follow a regular schedule—once a week or once a month, for instance. Vital to their success is a dynamic leader or leaders who can skillfully arrange entertaining activities such as debates, film showings or games that will stimulate all members to use their English.

Club meetings may take place in quarters intended for such gatherings or they may be held in members' homes. Somewhat akin to meetings of this sort are social gatherings in a home where the host (hostess) invites a number of non-native English speakers over to practice their English. In such instances, the host is likely to be a native English speaker who often includes other native speakers as guests to help keep the conversational ball rolling.

## **NATIVE LANGUAGE FACTORS IN CONVERSATION GROUPS**

### **Groups with the Same Native Language Background**

Most English conversation groups are formed of students who have the same native language and cultural background. Sometimes the teacher is a fluent speaker of the students' native language and is well acquainted with the culture. In other cases the teacher knows only



English and the culture(s) associated with English.

If you and your students speak the same language, you may find it helpful to use it occasionally for certain explanations. On the other hand, if you do not know the students' native language, you are apt to make the conversation period all the more productive because the students and you *must* use English to communicate.

### **Groups with Different Language Backgrounds**

Some English conversation groups consist of students with different native languages. While the teacher may speak fluently one or two of the languages represented in the group, it is unlikely that he will know all of them. Therefore, he conducts the class much as the monolingual teacher does.

People visiting schools that conduct English courses for multi-national groups, such as the American Language Institute at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., are often surprised to see the ease with which a teacher who knows only English directs conversation among students from different language backgrounds. Although the teacher may not know much about the language and culture of each student, he knows how to stimulate the students to talk about their respective backgrounds, adding variety and interest to the conversation session.

### **QUALITIES THAT MAKE A SUCCESSFUL CONVERSATION GROUP LEADER**

Anyone who speaks English fluently, and who is reasonably inventive, interested in people, friendly, firm, and patient should make a fine conversation leader. A person with these qualities need not be a professional teacher to serve as a conversation group leader. In fact, many people volunteer their services as conversation leaders in English teaching programs or social get-togethers because they enjoy helping speakers of other languages use English.

Certainly an enthusiastic attitude is essential. A spirit of inventiveness is also important, so that as you experiment with the techniques suggested in this manual or make up your own variations as you go along, you can maintain the lively continuity that is so necessary in conversation sessions.

A discreet interest in people is crucial to success as a leader. You should make a point of learning the students' names and some facts