



RESOURCE
BOOKS FOR
TEACHERS

series editor

ALAN MALEY

CONVERSATION

Rob Nolasco &
Lois Arthur

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Foreword

The distinction between accuracy and fluency is now a familiar one. Almost as familiar is the further distinction between fluency and appropriacy. To be accurate is not necessarily to be fluent. And to be fluent is not necessarily to be appropriate in a given set of circumstances.

In this book the authors make a further distinction: between speaking skills and conversation skills. They contend that there are skills specific to conversation which make it easier for people to talk to each other informally, and that these do not overlap a hundred per cent with the skills involved in fluent speaking. 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. This is not to deny that speaking skills are necessary for conversation; simply that they are not alone sufficient for successful conversation to take place.

It is these specific conversational skills which the book sets out to cover. In order to do so, the authors first examine in the introduction what it is that native speakers *do* when they 'make conversation'. They then use this information as the basis for the tasks and activities in the remainder of the book.

Two obvious, but nevertheless frequently neglected facts about conversations, are that they involve at least two people, and that the participants in a conversation cannot talk simultaneously all the time. Unless they agree to share the speaking time, listen, react, and attend to each other, the conversation dies.

This is in contrast to a view of speaking, which is often handled as if it were the only factor of importance. Absorption in speaking, without attending to the other, can only lead to surreal parallel monologues, such as we encounter in Pinter. The mutual, interdependent, interactive nature of conversation is given special emphasis in the sections on *Awareness activities* and *Feedback activities*. A series of tasks is developed here to sharpen the students' awareness and observation both of themselves and of others. The importance given to equipping the students with tools to evaluate their own performance (both in the conversations and in their own learning) is especially welcome.

Conversation is unique in its insistence on the need to teach conversational skills. The importance it gives to developing a sensitivity to fellow participants in conversations is likewise highly original. Above all it offers a rich and varied selection of activities and tasks to draw upon.

It will be welcomed by all teachers interested in developing further the teaching of this important aspect of oral expression.

Alan Maley

Introduction

Foreign language teachers often tend to assume that conversation in the language classroom involves nothing more than putting into practice the grammar and vocabulary skills taught elsewhere in the course. So, the 'conversation class' may turn out to include everything from mechanical drills to task-based problem-solving activities. It is true that both these types of activity may, to some extent at least, help students develop the skill of taking part in conversation. But, if we want to teach conversation well, we need to know something about what native speakers do when they have conversations. This information can then help us to develop appropriate materials and techniques for teaching purposes. In this section therefore, we shall be looking at the characteristics of native-speaker conversation in order to provide a rationale for the practical exercises which follow in the remainder of the book.

What is conversation?

People sometimes use the term 'conversation' to mean any spoken encounter or interaction. In this book however, 'conversation' refers to a time when two or more people have the right to talk or listen without having to follow a fixed schedule, such as an agenda. In conversation everyone can have something to say and anyone can speak at any time. In everyday life we sometimes refer to conversation as 'chat' and the focus of the book is on this type of spoken interaction, rather than on more formal, planned occasions for speaking, such as meetings.

The functions of conversation

The purposes of conversation include the exchange of information; the creation and maintenance of social relationships such as friendship; the negotiation of status and social roles, as well as deciding on and carrying out joint actions. Conversation therefore has many functions, although its primary purpose in our own language is probably social.

The units of conversation

The basic unit of conversation is an exchange. An exchange consists of two moves (an initiating move and a response). Each move can

also be called a turn, and a turn can be taken without using words, e.g. by a nod of the head. So for this dialogue the move and exchange structure can be illustrated in the following way:

A Jane.
B Yes?
A Could I borrow your bike, please?
B Sure, it's in the garage.
A Thanks very much.

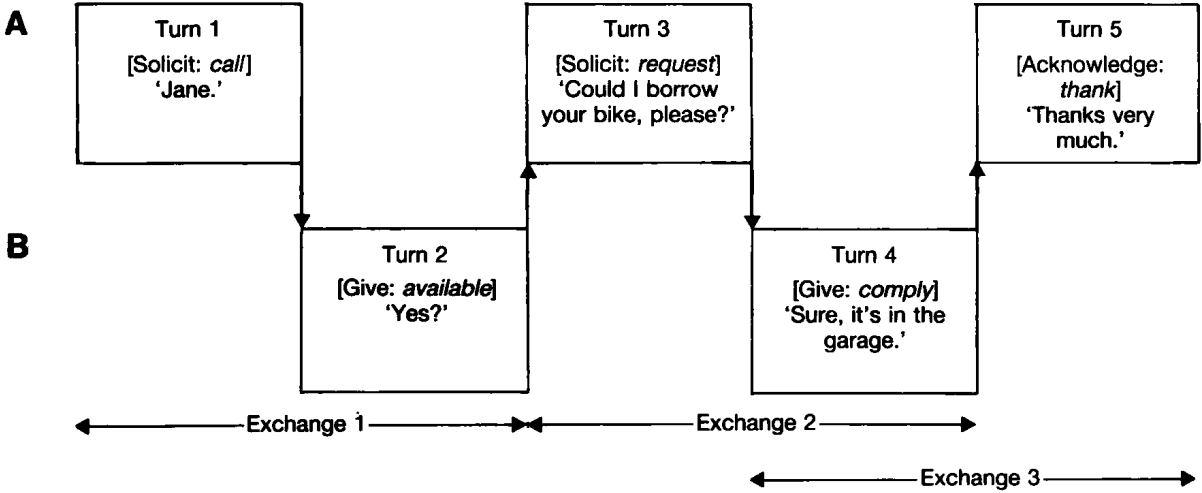


Figure 1 An illustration of move and exchange structure

We can give a function to each move, e.g. request, acknowledge. This may not be easy, and to do so we need to take account of factors such as who the speakers are, where and when the conversation occurs, as well as the position of the move in the stream of speech.

Notice that an exchange, or a series of exchanges, are not necessarily the same thing as a conversation. The following is an example of an exchange:

A Hi!
B Hi!

The second example contains two exchanges, but it is not a conversation because the two speakers want to finish their business as quickly as possible:

A How much are the oranges?
B Eighteen pence each, madam.
A I'll have two, please.
B That's thirty-six pence!

Conversation is open-ended and has the potential to develop in any way. It is possible that the second example could contain a conversation if the speakers decided to talk about the price of oranges. They may do this in order to get a discount, or to develop a social relationship, and the potential is always there in real life. Unfortunately, many students never have the confidence or

opportunity to go beyond simple exchanges like the one above, and one of the main objectives of this book is to introduce exercises which allow students to develop the ability to initiate and sustain conversation.

What do native speakers do in conversation?

Conversation is such a natural part of our lives that many people are not conscious of what happens within it. However, conversation follows certain rules which can be described. For example, when we look at normal conversation we notice that:

- usually only one person speaks at a time;
- the speakers change;
- the length of any contribution varies;
- there are techniques for allowing the other party or parties to speak;
- neither the content nor the amount of what we say is specified in advance.

Conversation analysis seeks to explain how this occurs, and the aim of the sections which follow is to make the readers sensitive to the main issues from a teaching point of view.

The co-operative principle

Normal conversations proceed so smoothly because we co-operate in them. Grice (1975) has described four maxims or principles which develop co-operative behaviour. These are:

The maxim of quality

Make your contribution one that is true. Specifically:

- a. Do not say what you believe to be false.
- b. Do not say anything for which you lack adequate evidence.

The maxim of quantity

Make your contribution just as informative as required and no more.

The maxim of relation

Make your contribution relevant and timely.

The maxim of manner

Avoid obscurity and ambiguity.

Readers will realize that these maxims are often broken and, when this happens, native speakers work harder to get at the underlying meaning, e.g.

A How did you find the play?

B The lighting was good.