



CONVERSATION AND DIALOGUES IN ACTION

**Zoltán Dörnyei
and Sarah Thurrell**

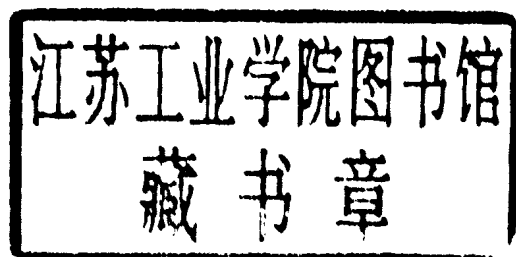


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Conversation and Dialogues in Action

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ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Preface

Within the Language Teaching Methodology Series we have created a special set of books with the *In Action* title. These books are designed to offer teachers material that can be directly used in class. They offer language teachers material which can be adapted with various inputs for their own classroom work. The activities are accessible and user-friendly, with a clear identification of teacher and learner roles, and, above all, they consist of tried and tested tasks. The authors of the books in the *In Action* collection all have considerable practical experience of teaching and of classroom research. It is this combination of principle and practice, available in an easily digestible form for the teacher, which characterises the design of the books.

Conversation and Dialogues in Action is in many ways the classic book in the *In Action* collection: it rediscovers and revitalises a traditional classroom activity, and structures it for classroom use. Developing conversational skills is very often seen as a filler among other more structured activities in class, partly because we have not seen talking as the structured and rule-governed activity it is. Fortunately, through recent work in discourse analysis and pragmatics, descriptions of everyday conversation now abound, including many that are drawn from non-native speaker interactions. What we have largely lacked, however, until this exciting contribution to the series from Zoltan Dornyei and Sarah Thurrell, is a way in which descriptions can be transformed into classroom tasks in a principled way.

This book breaks down conversation into its own grammar, showing how people open and close conversations, take turns at talking, interrupt and reformulate what others say. We use a range of conversational tactics, largely subconsciously, but these characterise perhaps more than any other skill our competence in our own and in a foreign language. But the book is not just about finding out how conversation works; its chief purpose is to help teachers develop that competence in their learners.

The tasks suggest a great range of ways in which learners can work together on conversational tasks in class. After all, conversation is characteristically cooperative; it is a joint and even a group activity! So it offers tremendous potential for reorganising the social structure of the classroom to foster more learner-centered activity.

As General Editor, I hope that the books in the *In Action* collection will continue the success of the Language Teaching Methodology Series in developing the skills and knowledge of the reflective language teacher in the classroom.

Professor Christopher N Candlin
General Editor

Acknowledgements

We would like to say how grateful we are to Isobel Fletcher de Téllez and David Haines from Prentice Hall International: without their faith in us and their encouragement and support — not to mention their inspiring suggestions and comments — **CONVERSATION AND DIALOGUES IN ACTION**, which is partly their own brainchild, might never have been written — at least not by us!

We are also greatly indebted to our Series Editor, Professor Christopher Candlin, for putting us on the right track with regard to the theoretical background and presentation format of the book, and also for his valuable comments on earlier drafts which played a crucial role in shaping the present book.

We would also like to express our warm thanks to Marianne Celce-Murcia, who first introduced us to conversation analysis, and to Lynne Young for her helpful advice.

Special thanks are due to Emese Koppány, Nelli Szakács and Ildikó Szigeti, who piloted the manuscript and gave us detailed feedback on the activities. Their invaluable suggestions resulted in many improvements being made.

Finally, we would like to thank our own students for being ‘guinea-pigs’, knowingly or unknowingly, for the purpose of developing the activities in the book.

Introduction

Even the best language learners often complain that they feel at a loss when meeting native speakers and engaging in real-life **CONVERSATION**.

Nowadays, language teaching coursebooks present a great deal of their new material through **DIALOGUES**.

Modern language teaching theory stresses that learning is fastest through doing. Therefore it is important to let students see the language we teach **IN ACTION**.

CONVERSATION AND DIALOGUES IN ACTION is a collection of communicative activities to teach *conversational skills* in a foreign/second language by exploiting *instructional dialogues*. The ideas in the book can be used to supplement coursebook-based teaching at all levels, or to form the basis of special conversation classes. A unique feature of **CONVERSATION AND DIALOGUES IN ACTION** is that it translates current linguistic theory into practice: the classroom activities offer lifelike practice in the rules of 'conversational grammar' as defined by research in the last decade, and the inputs provide rich and systematic collections of conversational phrases and structures that students need.

Conversation and conversational skills

Many people believe that informal everyday conversation is random and unstructured. This is, in fact, far from true. Although conversation may take many forms and the speakers and situations vary widely, all conversation follows certain patterns. There are, for example, subtle rules determining who speaks and when and for how long. Thanks to these rules, the participants in a conversation take turns with astonishing precision: there is hardly any overlap or simultaneous talk.

There are also rituals and set formulae for starting or closing a conversation and for changing the subject; there are conventions prescribing how to interrupt and how to hold the floor, and even determining what style is most appropriate in a given situation. These conventions are fairly strong and consistent within a given culture: when someone breaks them, people can tell immediately that something has gone wrong.

The analysis of the rules that govern conversation has been of major interest to linguists over the last two decades. Now we know that conversation is a highly organised activity which requires definite skills on the part of the speakers. Learners may be familiar with the grammar of a language, may know a vast amount of vocabulary,

and can still 'fail', that is, let themselves down in real conversation. Speaking skills are not enough: spontaneous, on-line interaction in a social setting, with partners to listen and react to, requires additional competence. CONVERSATION AND DIALOGUES IN ACTION aims to develop this competence.

How to teach conversational skills

Can conversational skills be taught specifically? Or do they come automatically with exposure to the target language? In the last fifteen years, teaching experts have tended to favour the latter hypothesis. It was assumed that conversational skills could be acquired through doing communicative activities such as situational role-plays, problem-solving tasks and information-gap exercises. While these certainly do help students to become better conversationalists, it has been suggested recently that traditional communicative activities could be combined to better effect with a *more direct approach* to the teaching of conversational skills.

This direct approach would involve fostering the students' awareness of conversation and increasing their sensitivity to the underlying processes. In other words, if learners are conscious of the strategies they could use and the pitfalls they should avoid, and if they have a wide repertoire of set expressions and conversational formulae on hand, they are likely to make much faster progress towards becoming relaxed and polished conversationalists. CONVERSATION AND DIALOGUES IN ACTION has been written to provide material for this more direct method of teaching conversational skills.

Teaching dialogues: Why and how?

If we wish to develop language learners' communicative competence in foreign or second languages, we need to present language material which can be readily used in communication. And even though textbook dialogues are often only simplistic and contrived imitations of real-life conversation, they do provide the learners with basic communicative experiences, for the following reasons:

- They offer a functional, situational presentation of the new material, illustrating its communicative role.
- They allow for timesaving, intensive practice by highlighting and clarifying certain items.
- They *seem* more authentic because they introduce different speakers, different styles of speaking and different conversational topics, and therefore students typically find them more lively and more interesting than narrative texts.
- They lend themselves to further, less structured exploitation.

For these reasons, current language teaching textbooks and other teaching materials are based, to a considerable extent, on dialogues, and therefore a lot of what is happening in the language classroom nowadays is centred around instructional dialogues.

CONVERSATION AND DIALOGUES IN ACTION aims to bring these dialogues to life and bridge the gap between textbook-bound, contrived classroom talk and real conversation. The teaching principle of the book is to provide structured guidelines (as well as actual language input) to depart from the instructional texts which function as raw material, and to take learners towards spontaneous and creative communication.

Teachers who do not have a prescribed lesson-to-lesson syllabus or a compulsory coursebook can also use the book by finding, inventing, or even recording dialogues to provide the starting point, or by getting their students to produce role-play sketches which can be further elaborated on in these activities.

The structure of the book

CONVERSATION AND DIALOGUES IN ACTION is divided into four main sections:

- Section I:** Conversational rules and structure
- Section II:** Conversational strategies
- Section III:** Functions and meanings in conversation
- Section IV:** Social and cultural contexts

Each section focuses on a different aspect of conversation and is introduced by a short text which summarises the issues dealt with and the topic areas the activities tackle. The following is a very brief summary of the main themes of the sections:

Section I is centred around **Conversational rules and structures**, that is, how conversation is organised, and what prevents conversations from continually breaking down into a chaos of interruptions and simultaneous talk. Among others, there are activities to teach students how to start and keep up informal conversation (**1 Relax and chat**), how to change the subject smoothly (**2 By the way, that reminds me**), how to break into a conversation politely (**3 Sorry to interrupt**) and how to bring a conversation tactfully to a close (**10 It was nice talking to you**).

Section II focuses on **Conversational strategies**, that is, ways and means of helping speakers to overcome communication breakdowns, to deal with trouble spots, and to enhance fluency. Students can learn, among other things, how to gain time by using fillers and hesitation devices (**11 Buying time: fillers**), how to ask for repetition in order to clarify meaning (**12 Pardon?**), how to paraphrase when they don't remember a word (**17 The thing you open bottles with**), and how to make their narrative style more dynamic (**20 You'll never believe this!**).

Section III concentrates on **Functions and meanings in conversation**, that is, message and purpose. Several of the activities deal with the main language functions of conversation (**22 Questions and answers**, **23 Oh yes, I agree**, etc.), offering an array of function-specific expressions and structures. Students are also made aware

that different language forms can have the same meaning (**26 Change without changing**), that the literal meaning of certain structures is not the same as the real meaning (**27 What they say and what they mean**), and that one sentence can have several meanings (**28 Paranoia or a hidden meaning in everything**).

Section IV leads into broader issues by focusing on how **Social and cultural contexts** affect conversation. Some of the issues tackled are, for example, how a person's status and personality is reflected in conversation (**30 Who is the new one?**), the main features of politeness (**32 Let's not be so polite!**), and when and how to use formal and informal style (**33 Formal—informal**). Attention is also drawn to the fact that different cultures have different conversational customs; language learners often face communication difficulties because of differing cultural backgrounds; therefore a sensitivity to crosscultural issues is a prerequisite of becoming an efficient conversationalist (**36 Cultural differences and taboos, 37 Visitor from Mars**).

The activities

Although the activities are divided into four sections, they all exist independently of each other (which means, for example, that an activity from the end of the book can easily be done without first going through the ones before it). These activities are presented in a 'recipe' format and are introduced by four headings:

Level	recommended level of language proficiency needed; we have distinguished three levels: elementary, intermediate and advanced.
Purpose	the teaching purpose of the activity, i.e., the conversational issue the activity tackles.
Dialogue type	what kind of dialogue can best be used as the starting point of the activity.
In this activity	a brief description of what students do in the activity.

Then comes the actual activity, which includes **Preparation** (for the teacher) and **In class** stages, both of which are broken down into step-by-step instructions.

The majority of the activities contain **Sample dialogues** to illustrate the task and **INPUTS** of expressions/phrases to teach to the students (see **E. List of input boxes of conversational phrases** in the Indexes). Note that the structures listed in these inputs are written in an economical format, e.g., '*Could/Can/Would you repeat that (for me), please?*', which is, in fact, three different expressions in one, and each

of them has two possible variations depending on whether the optional *'for me'* is used. We believe that this format may be confusing for students and we therefore suggest that you select *some* phrases from the lists and introduce the structures in their complete form, e.g., *'Would you repeat that please?'*, *'Could you repeat that for me, please?'*, etc.

Each activity is followed by **Follow-up options** (providing further exploitation of the material), one or two **Variations** (offering alternative activities focusing on the same theme), and **Links** (pointing out other related activities in the book which would logically follow on from the one in question).

At the end of each activity is a **Teacher's diary**, which contains questions addressed to you, the teacher, in order to provide a framework to evaluate

- how the activity went;
- what the student's reactions were and why;
- which parts turned out to be too difficult or too easy;
- how the student's first language and cultural background influenced the activity, etc.

We would like to encourage you to spend some time reflecting on the classroom activities in this way, perhaps even to take notes, and this could be taken further and turned into a kind of action research. The results could then be used to give added direction to your teaching and to your students' learning.

How to use the book

CONVERSATION AND DIALOGUES IN ACTION can be used in different ways, depending on whether you (the teacher) follow a coursebook or not.

1 Using the book to supplement your coursebook

Since the activities in the book have been designed to be used with instructional dialogues, CONVERSATION AND DIALOGUES IN ACTION makes it possible to include conversation practice in the lessons while closely following the course syllabus and the official coursebook. This is something which, as teachers know, is usually quite difficult to organise. By using the **Indexes** at the back of the book, you can select tasks that best emphasise or compliment the teaching point of the unit/dialogue you are working with. Or you can select an activity which would work well with the topic of the current textbook dialogue.

There are five indexes to help you:

- A. The teaching purpose of the activities (in order of appearance in the book)
- B. Short summaries of the activities (in alphabetical order)
- C. Activities by language proficiency level
- D. Subject index
- E. List of input boxes of conversational phrases

2 Using the book for conversation classes without a set coursebook

If you are relatively free to write your own syllabus and you do not use a set coursebook, **CONVERSATION AND DIALOGUES IN ACTION** can be used to structure conversation classes in two ways:

Using the **Indexes** (see above), you can select an activity you want your students to do, then find (e.g., in coursebooks and supplementary materials), write or record a dialogue which can function as the starting point. In order to facilitate this approach, we have described at the beginning of each activity under **Dialogue type** what kind of dialogue best lends itself to that activity.

You can combine the activities in the book with situational role-plays: choose a role-play situation which suits the activity you want to do and get your students to act it out. They have then created the dialogue which becomes the basis of the conversation activity.

NOTE: *If you use printed dialogues, most activities will work better if the students are already familiar with the text, e.g., they have covered the new grammar points or vocabulary.*

Further reading and teaching resources

Background reading

Brown, G. and Yule, G.: *Teaching the Spoken Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

A thorough and clear theoretical introduction to the features of spoken English, written in an accessible style. It also covers the practical implications of the theory described, with separate chapters devoted to the teaching and assessment of oral production and listening comprehension.

Cook, G.: *Discourse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

This concise and easy-to-read book gives an excellent summary of the complete theory of discourse analysis (including conversation analysis), and is geared to the practising teacher. If you only have time to read one book on the theoretical background, then we would say this is it!

David Crystal: *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

This encyclopedia covers all aspects of language and language use, not just conversation. However, it provides such excellent (and short!) summaries of every topic that it is a real treasure-trove for the overburdened language teacher. A special feature is the rich selection of interesting examples to illustrate the theoretical points.

Richards, J. C.: *Con conversationally speaking: approaches to the teaching of conversation*. In: Richards, J. C.: *The Language Teaching Matrix*, 1990, pp. 67–86.

Jack C. Richards was one of the pioneers of applying conversation analysis to language teaching and has played an important part in establishing a more systematic approach to communicative teaching. This paper summarises the theory of conversation analysis from a practical perspective. Incredibly instructive in only 19 pages!

Robinson, G. L. N.: *Crosscultural Understanding*. Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall, 1988.

'How can a person from one culture understand someone from another?' In order to answer this question, the author examines issues like what culture is; what the effects of cultural experiences are; how negative cultural perceptions can be modified and positive impressions facilitated, etc. We become familiar with psychological, anthropological and ethnographical theories, which are made lifelike by accounts of the author's rich personal experiences, both in crosscultural communication and language teaching.

Scarcella, R. C., Andersen, E. S. and Krashen, S. D. (eds.): *Developing Communicative Competence in a Second Language*. New York: Newbury House, 1990.

This book is a collection of nineteen research articles on various aspects of teaching and acquiring communicative competence, with separate chapters examining sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competencies. The range of topics is impressive and the final five studies specifically address the teaching of communication in the classroom. Contributors include some of the most wellknown North-American and Dutch applied linguists.

Smith, L. E. (ed.): *Discourse Across Cultures; Strategies in World Englishes*. Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall, 1987.

This edited volume consists of thirteen articles centred around crosscultural communication and English as an international language. The wide selection of topics covered ranges from Japanese-American cultural differences to cultural barriers in the language classroom. Contributors include world experts such as Christopher Candlin, Braj and Yamuna Kachru, Elaine Tarone, Henry Widdowson and George Yule.

Tarone, E. and Yule, G.: *Focus on the Language Learner*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

This well structured and informative book gives a clear overview of what language knowledge involves (including concise and highly readable summaries of the components of communicative competence!), what the language learner's needs are, and finally how to carry out research on the learner.

Teaching resources

Blundell, J., Higgins, J. and Middlemiss, N.: *Function in English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982.

An extremely rich resource book containing over 3000 different English structures divided into 140 functional, social and communicative categories. What is more, the structures are also classified according to how formal they are, and there are practice exercises.

Golebiowska, A.: *Getting Students to Talk*. Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall, 1990.

This book kills as many as three birds with one stone: Firstly, it sets out systematic guidelines for classroom management in a communicative class, secondly it contains a nice collection of role-plays, simulations and discussion activities, and thirdly (very rare in such recipe books) it provides detailed language input for each activity, consisting of useful structures and conversational formulae. Just what a practising teacher needs!

Jones, L.: *Functions of English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

A classic which has come out in two editions and many printings. A functional course (containing chapters on conversation techniques, narrative techniques and dialogue handling) with a lot of cassette recordings and communicative tasks.

Keller, E. and Taba-Warner, S.: *Gambits; Conversational Tools*; Vol. I: *Openers*, Vol. II: *Links*, Vol. III: *Responders, Closers & Inventory*. Ottawa: Public Commission of Canada, 1976, 1979.

(Now also published by Hove: Language Teaching Publications, under the title of *Conversation Gambits*.)

These three slim volumes contain a wealth of useful conversational phrases and routines, organised along the main aspects of conversational functions. The phrases are accompanied by highly imaginative and well structured communicative ideas, suggesting how students can put them into practice. *Gambits* is an invaluable asset to the conversational class.

Nolasco, R. and Arthur, L.: *Conversation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987.

A very rich collection of communicative activities, explicitly based on the theory of conversational analysis. Clear presentation, lots of practical advice, a great deal of materials to photocopy (legally!) for the students — all in all, this book is a must for the communicative teacher.

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SECTION I

CONVERSATIONAL RULES AND STRUCTURE

