Variations on a Theme

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Preface

Most published materials for listening comprehension focus on linguistic content. In contrast to this approach, the materials in this book place the main emphasis on the total context in which verbal interaction occurs.

The dialogues are relatively simple to understand as far as their content of vocabulary and structures is concerned. The listener is thus freed to concern himself with questions of meaning and intention: who is speaking to whom? where? in what circumstances? and why? It is these matters which are crucial for real comprehension, and yet have been thus far neglected.

The dialogues are grouped in sets of three or four, around a common theme (e.g. people waiting for something) and a common language function (e.g. asking whether it is necessary to do something or not). Almost all the dialogues are in some way mysterious or enigmatic, since it is rarely possible to say with certainty who or what is being talked about. This gives students a strong motivation for discussion. Indeed, the problem-solving aspect is one of the most original features of the material.

The language work exercises draw attention to the variety of ways in which an identical message can be expressed. For those who wish to go further, there are production exercises of a more creative kind, including written work, wherever this fits in naturally with the theme of the dialogues.

The aim throughout has been to provide interesting and entertaining material which can be used flexibly to suit different teaching situations. It should be regarded as a bank of resources to be drawn on whenever necessary.

A.M.
A.D.

Introduction

It often happens, during an average working day, that we find ourselves coming in on conversations which do not directly involve or concern us. These may be simple exchanges of greetings – between neighbours in the lift, shop-keeper and customer, colleagues at work – or they may be more structured conversations, such as arguments in the home, discussions on the telephone, instructions at work, etc. Even if we are not immediately involved, we can in mos cases tell what has already been said (and predict what is likely to be said) from basic signals, such as tone of voice, length of pauses, gesture, or choice of words; these are some of the clues to what the speakers are *really* trying to tell each other. In our own language, we pick up these signals almost without thinking; in a foreign tongue, it is more difficult.

In *Variations on a theme*, it is above all *this* skill that we should like to develop: the ability to interpret fragments of speech, to listen for clues in what is said, and develop sensitivity to what is *not* said. For, it seems to us, many dialogues produced specifically for language learning sound 'unreal' not because the language itself is at fault but because too much is being said. If you listen closely to normal speech in your own language you will be struck by how little reference is made to *what* one is talking about, since this is often known to both speakers. This is not to say that we never refer to the topic, but that we do not usually comment on what is self-evident. To take a simple example, you may indeed say to someone: 'His hat is on the chair', but we are *least* likely to say it if the other person knows this. We would simply point, or say 'It's over there.' If, however, we had walked into a room looking for someone, it would have been reasonable to say 'His hat is on the chair', since this would have indicated that the missing person was somewhere in the building.

There seems to be little point, then, in using the dialogue form for teaching the spoken language unless it corresponds as closely as possible to the *way* in which we speak and not just to the words we use. Saying and meaning are not the same: the same form of words can mean different things in different circumstances. What is said

may not be meant, and what is meant may not be said. In these dialogues, therefore, we have tried not to be unnecessarily explicit. Our aim is to imagine that we have broken in on other people's conversations and that we are interested in finding out what they have been talking about or are still discussing. And, to make this 'detective work' more rewarding, we offer in each set of dialogues a number of alternative ways of expressing the same function. Here is an example, in which the key function is *expressing surprise*:

1 A: *They've found it!*
B: *No! Where?*
A: *On top of a six-storey building.*
B: *Impossible!*

2 A: *We know where it is!*
B: *Do you?*
A: *Aren't you pleased?*
B: *Oh, yes . . . Well, where is it?*
A: *Just across the street – on the top floor of that building.*
B: *That's odd.*
A: *Why?*
B: *Because I found it yesterday – in the cellar!*

3 A: *It's turned up at last.*
B: *Yes, I know.*
A: *You know!?*
B: *Yes, it's on top of Broadcasting House.*
A: *But you can't possibly have known. Unless. . . .*
B: *Unless . . .?*

Here we are just as interested in what is *not* said as in what is. We do not know who A and B are, nor do we know what the mysterious 'it' is. But there are indications in the dialogues, which, if we follow them up, will enable us to suggest possible interpretations – our *own* interpretations.

As you will notice, the characters in these dialogues have no names. This is partly because we wished to avoid 'identifying' them, and partly because people do not, in fact, refer to one another by name as often as text-books would have us think. In order to apologise, Mr Brown and Gary Glitter may both in fact use the same language ('I'm sorry . . .'), but if their names were to appear in the margin, the words would immediately assume the personality of the speaker, and the dialogue would no longer be open-ended.

It is by choice that we have left the dialogues open-ended, because our aim was that they should be used for *discussion* and *interpretation* rather than imitation and reproduction. They are designed to give a sample of what might be *heard* in the language, *not* necessarily of what one might be expected to produce. The question of production will be considered in the section 'How to use the variations'.

Another of our aims was to offer a range of expression in the spoken language. This is why the dialogues are called *Variations on a theme*. As we all know from our own language, the same thing may be said in many different ways, according to our mood, intention, relation to the other speaker, and so on. As native speakers, we often hit instinctively on the best way of expressing ourselves. We know, too, when we may interrupt, when we may leave a sentence unfinished, and when we need to clarify ourselves. We listen to others, and adapt our speech to what they say. In the foreign tongue our range is necessarily more restricted. This, however, is no reason why we should not fully appreciate and understand the language used by a native speaker, even if we might find it hard or even impossible to imitate. Through intelligent listening, too, we may hope gradually to assimilate some of what we hear into our own speech. This is why we have decided to give the texts of the dialogues, in the hope that the students will use the speakers' words to back up their arguments in the discussion rather than parrot them in class repetition exercises.

What are the variations?

For the sake of convenience, one important function has been highlighted in each set of dialogues (a *function* being an operation commonly performed in any language, such as *agreeing* or *disagreeing*, *accepting* or *rejecting* an offer, etc.). Each function is illustrated in three or four ways, and these are the *variations*. For example, under the function of *apologising*, the following expressions – which might be said to transmit the function – occur in the dialogues:

I've come to apologise . . .
Sorry, if I woke you last night.
Please excuse me for disturbing you.
I'd like to apologise . . .
Oh, I'm extremely sorry.
O.K., I'm sorry.

Clearly, it is not necessary for the student to be able to handle actively the entire range of expressions involved in any one function. He should, nevertheless, be able to understand and interpret them. Naturally, although only one function has been selected for detailed treatment, each set of dialogues inevitably contains other functions. It is only for convenience that one has been singled out.

The description of the functions was inspired by the list drawn up by the Council of Europe for *The Threshold Level* and we have used their headings for the different sections.* We have, however, made our own deletions and additions. It would have been impossible to work out all the functions exhaustively. We have tried, however, to select those which appear to be most commonly used, and to illustrate the language most frequently connected with each. A word on this point to language teachers in particular: you will certainly be struck by the fact that material based on functional lines does not follow the structural and grammatical grouping usually imposed by text-books. The above example, for instance, includes a present tense, a present perfect (in form only), two conditional forms, and a 'polite' imperative! Do not feel that this is suddenly too much for you to handle. The dialogues, you will find, have been kept as short as possible and the load of new lexical items is very light. Occasionally, as in unit 2.4, you may strike a word (e.g. 'warped'), which will need explaining before the students listen to the dialogues, but on the whole they should have no trouble with vocabulary. Remember, too, that the student is not necessarily being required to repeat what he hears. These are certainly not dialogues-for-learning-by-heart!

Level

This brings us to the question of level. Although the vocabulary required is relatively restricted, the student working with these dialogues would be expected to have a grasp of all the essential structures of the language. In fact, the so-called 'complex structures' (past conditional, passive using the continuous form, etc.) appear relatively infrequently, since the material was not conceived for the teaching of structures. This means that here, too, the student should have no difficulty in recognising the forms used. Where his problem may arise is in the idiomatic meaning of what is, to him, a familiar structure ('Well I was just wondering . . .' or 'I still seem to remember'). If this is a problem, however, it is one worth facing up to. We have taken care to ensure that the language represents *common*

* See: *The Threshold Level*, by J. A. Van Ek, L. G. Alexander, J. L. M. Trim *et al.*, Council of Europe, 197

rather than *rare* usage, which means that structures used idiomatically will often be self-explanatory in context. It should also not be forgotten that the students will first *hear* the dialogues and that they will initially be reacting to the spoken word.

Who could use the *variations*, then? We feel that they would appeal to adult learners with a 'school' knowledge of English interested in going further with it for some practical purpose. They could also be used by secondary school students in their last two years of learning.

How to use the book

As we have said earlier, these dialogues are intended essentially for *interpretation* and *discussion*. The reason we have not placed great emphasis on imitation and reproduction is that, from experience, we have discovered that students – with certain exceptions – do not easily assume a ready-made role. When the words are not theirs, they become awkward. If, instead of being required to reproduce the words (which have anyway lost their freshness by being fixed), they are able to talk *about* what has been said and to mould this into their own speech by referring back to the original, they will unconsciously reproduce those parts of the dialogue that are necessary for discussion, e.g. 'He wouldn't have said "I beg your pardon" if he had been talking to his sister!'

Although it is not necessary for students to listen to *all* the dialogues before moving on to discussion, we believe it is essential that the initial listening be done without looking at the texts. This is to ensure that the students first discuss what they have *heard*, basing their interpretation on the spoken rather than the written word. The functional framework is not stressed, because we want the student to concentrate on what he hears and understands, not on a particular function or structure.

After each set of dialogues there is an *interpretation* exercise. On the whole, the pattern of questioning does not vary greatly from set to set. Nevertheless, in some dialogues it is easier to decide who is involved than in others. We have tried to bear this in mind. The questions suggested under *interpretation* should be borne in mind while listening, even though they may not be answered until later in group discussion.

Each set of dialogues is also followed by *some useful ways of expressing the function*. These suggestions should be used when students engage in the production exercises involving parallel situations or extending the given dialogues. Clearly the choice of

one rather than another way of expressing a given function will depend upon the contextual feature (role, status etc.) which will have been dealt with during the listening and discussion phase. Every opportunity should be taken for discussing the reasons for choosing a given language form in a specific context.

The *production* exercises should be done only if time permits; they may be done independently, in a later class, if necessary. In these exercises, we have tried to find ways of getting the listener himself to use the language – not necessarily that of the dialogues – which is related to the function in question. For this reason a number of games and expansion exercises have been introduced: these offer the opportunity to move away from the constraints of the dialogues towards a freer and more individual use of the language. *Written* exercises have been introduced only where they seemed to stem naturally from the dialogue material.

The Appendix at the back is supplementary material intended mainly for use by the teacher. The *possible interpretations* are in no way 'solutions'; they are ideas which the students might like to consider once they have arrived at their own conclusions. There is no single 'correct' interpretation for any of the dialogues and we have deliberately given our own suggestions in an order which does not follow that of the dialogues, so as to dissuade the student from merely turning to the suggestions and expanding them. We hope that people using the book will have sufficient confidence in their own interpretations not to be tempted to search for a 'right answer'. In these exercises, everyone has a right to his own opinion, as long as he is prepared to justify it to his colleagues.

Before using the dialogues, please remember that this is *not* a course book and that it does not offer a graded study programme. It is material to be used in conjunction with course work, and so we suggest that you do not try more than one or two sets of dialogues at a time. We also suggest that, as the units are not arranged in a graded sequence, you should feel free to use them in any order which is convenient. They should certainly not be worked through exhaustively from beginning to end.

Practical suggestions

Although several dialogues are presented in each unit, experience has shown that students cannot cope with more than one at a time. We therefore suggest you try any of the following strategies, although in our experience the first has proved to be the most effective.

A Choose one dialogue to concentrate on.

i) Play it once, without any introduction or any instructions, other than to listen carefully.

ii) After the students have listened, there are certain general questions you might ask (and these are common to any of the dialogues), e.g.

How many speakers/people are involved?
How old are they?
Are they strangers/close friends? Do they seem to like each other? Does it matter?
Can you tell where they might be: *inside* – a small, private/large, public room; *outside* – in the country/a city/a street/etc.?
Have you any idea what they might be talking about?
Did any single word strike you as being important? (e.g. was it repeated?)
Can you remember any phrases from the dialogue?

These will only be immediate impressions. The class should be asked simply to offer their suggestions, but not to elaborate on them. Discussion is undesirable at this stage because it will inhibit fuller exchange of opinion in groups later on.

iii) Now divide the class into groups (of three to five per group). Tell them that the dialogue will be played twice more and that they should listen to decide whether their first impressions are justified.
Allow a maximum of ten minutes for this.
There are now two possible ways of continuing:

a) each group nominates a spokesman to give its version of the facts to the whole class,

b) alternatively, stage a) can be omitted and you pass straight on to a further playing of the dialogue. This time, the groups will be able to follow the text and will be looking for the answers to the questions in the book. When answers have been found, each group sends a spokesman to another group to present and defend his own group's solutions.

Another worthwhile way of building on this part of the activity (especially if [illegible] solution) is to ask each student individually to write out his own explanation as briefly as possible. Students may then

exchange their written versions, and, if they wish, discuss them orally.

iv) Play the same dialogue again. This time ask the students (who will have the text before them) to note the phrases or sentences which express the key function, e.g. in *Asking about agreement or disagreement*

Don't you think?
Don't you agree?
Really?
I think . . . don't you? etc.

Ask the students if they can think of other ways of expressing the same function. Some ideas are given after the exercises accompanying each set of dialogues, but these are by no means exhaustive.

v) You can now proceed with the *production* and, where relevant, the *writing* exercises.

B Follow the instructions for A i, ii, iii, but do this for *all* the dialogues in the unit. (This is a strategy which requires much more time than is usually available.)

You would then move on to A iv, i.e. a comparison of the exponents of the key function in each of the dialogues.

C A somewhat different approach to the dialogues is the following in which the emphasis is on the situational elements rather than the variations in the expression of the key function.

In this case, you follow steps i and ii of A for *each* of the dialogues in the unit. Discussion then centres on what distinguishes the situation in each of the dialogues from the others.

The *production* exercises vary, but the general pattern is to move from extension of the dialogues to personal adaptation of the idea (or function). Clearly, it is up to you to introduce any ideas of your own at this point. For some of the production exercises certain materials may be needed, e.g. pictures. Before trying out the exercises, be certain that you have what you need.

In *writing*, which often overlaps with *production*, we have tried to give exercises in which it would be meaningful to write. For example, in the unit on *stating logical conclusions* 'Imagine you are the person A and B were waiting for. You do not meet them. Write a note in which you explain why you were late; apologise or blame, depending on whose fault it was that you were late.' As far as possible, the written exercises serve a purpose which is not merely

that of description. What the students put down on paper is meant to be *read*, and it is therefore important that they should actually read each other's writing.

Make sure that enough time is left at the end for the recording to be played once again. The students will then have the opportunity of hearing the dialogues with their own interpretations in mind. At this stage, but *not* before, they might like to compare their own interpretations with those given as suggestions in the Appendix.

In conclusion, we recommend that you treat the *variations* rather like medicine – to be taken in small doses only! Although we have deliberately not stressed the possibilities of dramatisation and performance, these should not be precluded. The dialogues are, on the whole, very sparse. If the students are interested, they should be encouraged to flesh them out and present their own versions to each other, preferably as pair to pair rather than group to group.

We hope you will find the material helpful in linking two skills that are too often kept apart – listening comprehension and oral production.