Dialogues: Ideal Models for Learning Conversational English

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For decades studies in human development have been conducted to determine the process of language acquisition. Analyzing the stages a child passes through to achieve coherent verbal communication, linguists have considered that dialogue does exist around the age of two years old. At this tender age a child develops grammatical forms that allow him or her to play verbally, appeal socially, and achieve integration into peer or elder’s groups. In opposition to the traditional thesis of child’s egocentric language which supposedly characterizes the speech of those under the age of seven, investigations have proved that there is true communication through dialogue when a child is over two years old. The determination to address someone or answer a verbal solicitation explains why the child engages in dialogues.

Continuing studies on language acquisition support the theory that a Dialogue constitutes the best natural model of language communication. I strongly believe that a dialogue should, thus, be fully utilized in teaching English conversation.

If we introduce and teach sentences in an isolated form, students will not be learning a communication unit. A dialogue is the real social unit of speech because it involves two speakers within a social context. Isolated sentences do not give a lifelike example of natural communicative speech. To illustrate this aspect of language teaching, let me present a few sentences in isolation:

“How are you doing?”
“I heard he was sick.”
“Let’s go and see him.”

Although these sentences have meaning and can be practiced individually for grammatical, vocabulary or idiomatic purposes, they are meaningless if uttered isolatedly. If we incorporate them into a dialogue, however, they will acquire life.

Jane: How are you doing?
Dick: Fine, thanks. By the way, have you seen Jim?
Jane: I heard he was sick.
Dick: Is that so?
Jane: He's been absent from work for a week.
Dick: He may need our help. Let's go and see him.

The static sentences “How are you doing?”, “I heard he was sick.” and “Let’s go and see him.” come to life when placed in the context of an actual dialogue. In a real conversation this exchange of information through words is accompanied by gestures, body movements, change in voice range, all of which make up a concrete moment of communication.
Vocabulary and Grammar

A dialogue can provide a model for several grammatical points. The teacher can thus pick out any phrase or sentence for intensive practice, and any language learning may be applied. The learner, in turn, can practice that structure building or consolidating his or her grammar base.

The exercises provided by the teacher will introduce new vocabulary. A dialogue is again an excellent means to teach a word or idiom because it has a natural context. A word or idiom should never be learned by itself because what comes before or after a vocabulary unit determines its precise meaning.

Besides acquiring vocabulary, the English learner will have the opportunity to learn and practice reaction signals, initiators, facilitators (pause fillers, hesitation devices) that native speakers often use in their daily communication. Words and phrases like “Well,” “Let me see” or “Hmm” dot their speech when they want to gain time to compose their thoughts or reflect. Phrases such as “I see,” “Really?”, “Is that so?”,” How nice!” or “Terrible” connote involvement and interest in the conversation. The agreement interjection “Uh-huh!” or “Oops,” a mild apology, shock or dismay are some of the several grammatical peripheral constructions only a dialogue can show. In the language learning process, it is important that the learner is able to recognize and also use such initiators, reaction signals and expressive vocalizing utterances. A dialogue will also illustrate which kinds of speakers—men, women, children, certain professionals or specific age bracket speakers—commonly use certain interjections in their language, or whether these expressions can be used by anyone.

Oral Production

A dialogue contains natural practice materials in pronunciation of vowels, consonants, diphthongs, stress, intonation, rhythm and different types of junctures. Here lies the opportunity for correction and phonetic drills. Among more advanced learners we often encounter students who speak quite accurate English, show a satisfactory degree of fluency and pronounce the individual sounds and English words nicely but who still sound very “foreign.” They are unable to accurately understand a movie soundtrack because the words are all run together. In English the sound quality of, especially, vowels and certain consonants changes when uttered as part of a continuous stream of words. A dialogue is, once more, a live model of reduced forms (assimilations, coarticulations and glides). Pronunciation problems may be extracted from the dialogue for drilling and a whole set of exercises can be designed for students in general, as well as these advanced learners who did not have sufficient listening and pronunciation practice.

Cultural Insights

Speakers of a language reveal in their communication cultural aspects as they behave and react according to specific behavioral and/or cultural patterns. When learners are exposed to model dialogues, they presumably will not only acquire linguistic skills but also become aware of cultural values that determine certain verbal and physical responses.

Let me exemplify in the following dialogue.
Jane: (reaching out to embrace Helen) Helen, how are you? It's so nice to see you.
Helen: (arms open to welcome Jane's embrace) Hi, Jane. Thanks for coming all the way.
(Jane and Helen embrace and kiss each other on the cheek.)
Jane: I was so happy to hear the wonderful news!
Helen: Thanks for coming to the shower.
Jane: Here. This is my little gift. Hope you like it.
Helen: That's very sweet of you. Thanks.
Jane: I wish you all the happiness in the world.
Helen: Thank you, I know you do. Will you excuse me. Lucy just came in.
Jane: Sure. See you later.

The setting of this dialogue is a bridal shower. A brief explanation of what a shower is like in the American society, this custom and how it is held, should be interesting and instructive for the student. The exchange of kisses on the cheek particularly common between western women and some men and women constitutes rather unusual body language behavior for the Japanese. The congratulatory expression “I wish you all the happiness in the world” illustrates the habitual usage of this sentence when addressing future brides. And to the future groom we would say “Congratulations!”, before or after the wedding.

A dialogue like the one that follows provides students with insight into the lifestyle in the United States.
A. Guess what! Professor Carter invited me over for dinner.
B. How nice! When are you visiting her?
A. Saturday. But what do you do when you're invited to someone's home here in the States?
B. Oh, we usually bring a small gift.
A. Like what? In Japan we bring some confectionery or cake.
B. Well, some flowers or a bottle of wine is more common here.
A. I see. And can I bring a friend along?
B. I think you should call first and ask if it's all right.
A. O.K., I’ll do that.

In this dialogue, Speaker A is unaware of visiting customs in the United States. Speaker B clarifies and provides information.

When a dialogue does not model or allude to aspects of culture, it can be used as means to show the gestures, body movements, and distances maintained by native speakers. After explaining their importance in interpersonal communication, these non-verbal motions should be role-played.

The range of cultural topics is not limited to differences. It is important that we do not forget to make students aware that there is basic accord among human beings. People all over the world share many similar feelings, values and customs. The mode of expression may differ, though.

Selecting or Composing a Dialogue

a. Natural Language
When selecting a model dialogue, it is of primary importance to look for naturalness. One still comes across dialogues in textbooks that do not reflect natural English speech. Here is an example:

- A. What would you like to drink?
- B. I would like a cup of coffee.
- C. I would like a cup of coffee, too.
- A. Would you like milk and sugar?
- B. I would not like any sugar.
- C. Neither milk nor sugar in my coffee, please.

The “unnaturalness” of this dialogue comes, firstly, from the absence of contractions such as I’d or wouldn’t, which are commonly used by native speakers. The repetition of the structure “I would like,” “I would not like” is far from being naturally conversational English. The usage of “neither . . . nor,” although excellent from a grammatical standpoint, sounds very artificial and calculated in this context. The phrase “Neither milk nor sugar in my coffee” might be taken for affected speech.

If rewritten appropriately to conform to the real situation, the dialogue would read:

- A. What would you like to drink?
- B. I’d like a cup of coffee, please.
- C. The same for me.
- A. Would you like milk and sugar?
  or Milk and sugar? (a more informal variation)
- B. No sugar, please.
- C. Just black for me.

This same dialogue could be rewritten in other linguistic varieties to simulate a more formal or informal situation. A dialogue must embody natural speech whatever the situation is. A wrongly selected or contrived dialogue will only delay and impair the learning process of a student.

b. Format

The selection of a dialogue should be determined after testing the students’ language proficiency. The dialogue can then be chosen to include suitable elements in terms of language and content. Three important points should be considered when adopting or creating a dialogue: length, speech act balance and ending. I have seen textbook dialogues so long that one could call them playlets, even though they are presented as dialogues. These materials can never be assigned for memorization. A well-balanced model dialogue is when one speaker does not do all the talking. Both speakers or three, in case, should have the opportunity to express themselves. The ending of a dialogue should be a real ending. Quite often, I have come across dialogues in textbooks lacking balance with an inappropriate close. Native speakers sometimes try to finish a conversation uttering a short response or at times saying nothing. This, although natural, is not recommended as a strategy example for students of English.

Note the following examples. A natural piece of conversation can be as brief as:

- A. Hi!
B. Hi!
Or slightly longer:
A. Well, would you like to go to the beach next Saturday? You can bring a friend if you wish.
B. Yeah. Sounds good.
A. Great!

Longer dialogues, consisting of three or four exchanges, sound more complete and are still manageable. That is why they are often found in the most recent coursebooks. Notice the following dialogue:
A. Have you moved to your new apartment yet, Bill?
B. Yes, we moved in a month ago.
A. How do you like it?
B. There's plenty of room and the apartment gets a lot of sunshine.
A. Yeah? What's the neighborhood like? Is it quiet?
B. Yes, the neighbors are very considerate and there's a beautiful park nearby.
A. It sure sounds nice.
B. Yes, it is. Why don't you come over this weekend, George?
A. I'd like to. I'll call you on Friday night.

Besides being brief, well-balanced and having an appropriate closing, this dialogue is natural. It can be memorized quite comfortably. Students may use their real names instead of those of the characters in the dialogue. Or the dialogue can be manipulated through question and answer practice using the content of the dialogue for more real questions. The student will then answer based on the real world. The teacher might ask questions like:

Do you live in a house or apartment?
How long have you lived there?
How big is it?
Does it have a yard or playground?
Is there anything you don't like about it?
What are your neighbors like?
Are there many older people living there?
What's the transportation like?
What is it you don't like about the neighborhood?

C. Content

Lately printed course and conversational textbooks have proved that basic survival skills are what students expect to learn in a second or foreign language course. Situational and conversational topics are the best. For example, situational topics could be: addressing people, telephoning, ordering a meal; and conversational topics might be: hobbies / interests, school, and work.

A cultural insight can be blended into the dialogue and thereby enrich the content. For example, a student might like to know what the city bus system is like in the United States, Australia or another English speaking country. It might be interesting and informative to mention that these
countries do not have the recorded bus stop announcement system common in Japanese city buses. Whenever a dialogue has implicit or explicit cultural overtones, the teacher should point that out and make it come alive through explanation and/or audiovisual aids. Different cultures may enjoy common conversation topics in everyday-life communications. A native speaker is usually aware of what he or she can and cannot talk about. "Taboo" subjects differ from culture to culture and person to person. A foreign language learner may be unaware of what is or is not talked about. Thus, the teacher has to alert students to the potential problem.

The language people use in everyday-life communication includes interpersonal functions. These functions are expressions, indispensable linguistic tools for greetings and farewells, apologizing and forgiving, expressing impatience and anger, for example. A dialogue introduces these functions and permits the student to practice the real interaction that takes place among individuals. The introduction of a function triggers a clarification of the register or style being used as determined by the person to whom one is speaking and the situation in which the conversation is taking place. Explanations of the appropriateness of a particular function and presentation of the opposite style level will expand the student's conversational repertoire. The learner will thus acquire the formal and a more informal or colloquial way of expressing the same function.

Notice this dialogue in informal register.

A. Hey, Dave. Got a nice backpack. Real nice.
B. Thanks.
A. Where d'you get it? Always wanted one like this.
B. Down at Pearl Mall.
A. Uh-huh! Sorry, gotta go. Catch you later.
B. Okay-dokey.

If rewritten in a more formal style, the expressions will change to:

A. Hello, Dave. You have a very nice backpack. It's really nice.
B. Thank you.
A. Would you mind telling me where you bought it? I've been looking for one like this for a long time.
B. It's from a store down at Pearl Mall.
A. I see. I'm afraid I have to be going now. I'll talk to you later.
B. All right.

Inherent Potential

A dialogue presents a wide array of language teaching potential and cores to develop self-expression. It is natural, for example, to present a grammatical point through a dialogue in young teen-age classes, while using colorful visual aids to attract their attention and motivate them. Young people sometimes are disaffected by a more formal approach. The instructor's choice of approach is made in terms of the learner's age, language competence and interest. An adult student, as opposed to a child or teenager, may not be content with only closely monitored practice, manipulating pieces of language as when doing pattern drills. Adults want more freedom and are happier working with dialogues that give opportunities for their own kind of creative communic-
tion. The hope is that when saying dialogue lines, an older student will grow confident in the knowledge that he or she is using expressions commonly employed by English speakers. This activity encourages the learner to express himself or herself freely in actual settings in the future.

Language practice may range from pattern drills to reading and memorization for presentation. Using the students' names in the dialogues will unconsciously create a simulated lifelike situation. All these exercises should not end by themselves but cater to further exploitation. Heading toward a more communicative stage, reality-based exercises are formulated. The teacher can ask questions about the student's actual life and the student would ask the teacher questions. This practice may develop into the questioning of classmates. Following this start toward free expression, the teacher can request the student to add one more exchange to the dialogue, triggering imaginative expression. It is hard to define whether this exercise is completely manipulative or partially communicative, but, there is little doubt that it challenges the student to develop skills and confidence. The teacher can encourage more able beginners and all students at intermediate and advanced levels to paraphrase a given utterance in the dialogue. This activity may be expanded later to the whole dialogue. Role-playing, paraphrasing and using kinesic motions are the closest steps to free expression. As students gradually acquire language mastery, they are expected to create their own individual dialogue within different socio-cultural contexts. A further step will be the use of a dialogue merely to stimulate free conversation.

Finally, one must admit that not all students reach this final stage of English mastery. Some never have the confidence or opportunity to go much beyond the stage of memorizing a few exchanges. It is immensely rewarding, however, to see a well-composed model dialogue encourage shy students to become open and throw themselves into acting roles, something they never dreamed would happen at the start. Extensive practice will build self-confidence. Even a rather introverted but diligent individual may become fluent or gain at least a satisfactory command of conversational English.

I attempted to show in this article the importance of dialogues as language-teaching devices. Linguists have proved that dialogue models are the way people naturally learn their own language and how to communicate in it; but the acquisition process of a second or foreign language is no different in this sense. Therefore, conversational English should also be learned naturally using dialogue models. The best example of real interpersonal oral exchange is, consequently, a dialogue. I have mentioned just a handful of learning activities a dialogue offers. The number of exercises we can create for different learning goals is countless. Intensive and extensive practice through dialogues will not only help learners acquire accurate control of necessary language skills, but will equip them with the tools they will need to communicate effectively in conversation.

Bibliography


