Teacher’s Strategies in Language Classroom

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Abstract: The article is devoted to the questions connected with language teaching methodology (strategies) that promotes the students’ conversation practice in language classroom. Such problems as setting the stage for conversational practice, conversation practice at various proficiency levels, kinds of conversation groups, native language factors in conversation groups, qualities that make teacher a successful conversation group leader, challenges of conducting conversation practice, motivational factors and research strategies offered by teacher are being considered in the given abstract in details.

Key words: Teacher • Strategies • Foreign language learning • Research activities • Students

INTRODUCTION

Often teachers of English as a foreign or second language still face a situation where students are interested only in learning to read and write the new language and 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.

Within the field of education over the last few decades a gradual but significant shift has taken place, resulting in less emphasis on teachers and teaching and greater stress on learners and learning.

This change has been reflected in various ways in language education and applied linguistics, ranging from the Northeast Conference (1990) entitled «Shifting the Instructional Focus to the Learner» and annual «Learners' Conferences» held in conjunction with the TESL Canada convention since 1991, to key works on «the learner-centred curriculum» [1] and «learner-centredness as language education» [2].


In directing conversation sessions for students of English as a foreign language (EFL) or English as a second language (ESL), the teacher, will help the students move from pseudo-communication, in which their use of English is fictitiously predictable, to communication where they express their personal ideas and needs in the context of reality.

The Main Part: Let's review the language teaching methodology (strategies) that normally prepares the students for conversation practice in language classroom [9].

1. Setting the Stage for Conversational 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.

2. 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. Students must master all of the major patterns first, these teachers contend. Then they 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 students mastery of English patterns - also tend to condition them to regard English as classroom mental gymnastics, rather than as a means of communication.

As a result, the students may reach the intermediate or advanced stage performing satisfactorily in the most intricate exercises but actually dreading situations where they must carry on an elementary conversation. The fact is that language drill has rendered them psychologically unprepared to use their English as a means of communication.

To avoid this distressing situation, 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, teachers can use this pattern in carefully controlled conversation format so that a process approaching conversation may take place.

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

3. 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 one'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.

4. Native language factors in conversation groups.

a) 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 teacher and students speak the same language, teacher may find it helpful to use it occasionally for certain explanations. On the other hand, if teacher does not know the students’ native language, the teacher makes the conversation period more productive because the students and the teacher must use English to communicate.

b) 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 teacher will know all of them. Therefore, teacher conducts the class much as the monolingual teacher does.

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.

5. Qualities that make teacher a successful conversation group leader.

A teacher, who speaks English fluently and who is reasonably inventive, interested in students, friendly, firm and patient should make a fine conversation leader. A teacher with these qualities can serve as a conversation group leader.

6. The challenges of conducting conversation practice.

Directing conversation practice is probably the most demanding of all language teaching activities. It is also one of the most rewarding.

Simply getting conversation practice scheduled in an academic English teaching program can, in itself, be a challenge. EFL/ESL courses are in some instances so concerned with the "pacing" of a class schedule that they expect the teacher to cover an unrealistic number of pages in the text or other material, allowing little or no time for conversation practice.
Once conversation sessions have been scheduled, whether in classes or social gatherings, new challenges confront the conversation leader. The following is a list of major ones, along with suggestions on how to handle them.

- The students have adjusted to a passive role during the manipulative phase of language learning and are unprepared for the active role demanded in conversation practice. (Even though the students may participate conscientiously in oral repetition practice, they are using canned phrases that illustrate abstract situations – not thoughts or ideas of their own. A teacher must guide them out of their dependence on pre-fabricated language material, impressing on them the importance of associating words with thought and action, to create sentences that convey relationship with reality).

- The students (especially if they are adults) is frustrated by having to channel their mind into new, elementary language forms that are so different from those they are accustomed to. (Sometimes this inhibits the students, making them unwilling to express themselves altogether. As a conversation leader, a teacher must be sympathetic to their frustrations and make them feel that what he is saying is a worthwhile step toward fuller expression, even if it must be couched in the simplest forms of English).

- The students do not have sufficient command of English to engage in conversation. They simply are not prepared for this kind of activity and if pushed into it, they will make so many errors that the experience will be counter-productive. (A teacher should never program conversation sessions unless the group is ready for them. It is far preferable to postpone conversation until the students can truly benefit from it).

- The students have not learned how to criticize their performance. Therefore, they make no significant progress in conversation sessions. (Anyone who studies a new language must acquire skill in evaluating his own speech in order to make progress. In conversation practice, the students should be able to recall afterwards not only what they have said, but possible errors in their statements. A way to help is to train to listen carefully to what other students say during the class. Through silently evaluating other peoples’ performance, they should become more aware of their own errors and areas of difficulty).

- The students would like to express themselves in English but are afraid to deviate from the safety of the sentences they have practiced and the words they have memorized. (In this case a teacher helps students by pointing out that with the words and structures they already know, they should be able to think of a way to put them together to express their thoughts. Teacher’s evaluation of the situation will increase their self-confidence and encourage them to solve the problem on their own).

- The students find the unpredictability of statements in conversation sessions unsettling. This makes them increasingly unresponsive. (Unlike language practice in the manipulative phase where the students work with material they expect, conversation practice produces novel speech situations, no matter how closely controlled it is. The conversation leader must help students deal with sentences they do not understand immediately by teaching them to use their powers of inference).

- One or more students dominate the conversation giving other students little opportunity to practice their English. (The situation should be handled firmly. Teacher can tell such students that she/he appreciates their eagerness, but they must give others a chance to talk too. Teacher can also point out that when someone else is speaking, they can benefit by listening carefully and improving their auditory skills).

- Students are too shy and afraid to take part in the conversation session. By remaining silent, they may develop excellent listening comprehension but little ability to express themselves orally. (These students should be helped to overcome their fears to speak. Quite often they are afraid of ‘losing lace’ by making mistakes in English. If teacher explains that they learn by their mistakes and that everyone in the class is apt to make mistakes, the shy students may become more willing to join in the conversation).

- Some students cannot think of anything to say when in the conversation spotlight. Their minds go blank and an embarrassing silence sets in. (Teacher should not allow these silences to go on for any length of time. Not only are they hard on the speaker, who finds no words to express himself, they make the other students uncomfortable too. Teacher must be ready to step in quickly in such situations and prompt the students or direct them some way that allows recovering gracefully and continuing speaking).
Immediate correction of errors that occur during the conversation session may inhibit the students. (Teacher will want to correct errors, but should not interrupt the flow of conversation with constant minor corrections. While teacher can correct a few major mistakes the moment they are made, it is preferable to wait until the students finish a conversational exchange).

The students, when asked to converse, speak so quietly that they can scarcely be heard. (This phenomenon usually reflects the students’ lack of confidence in their English abilities. Teacher encourages students to speak loudly when they are the focus of attention. This in turn, will give them a certain measure of confidence. It will also keep the other students awake and alert).

The students are not interested in the conversation activity a teacher has scheduled. (When a teacher sees that the group is bored or uninterested in one activity, she/he immediately switches to something else. The teacher should know students well enough to anticipate what will or will not interest them, but variety in the conversation session is always a good antidote to slackening interest).

The students are at different proficiency levels. The more advanced students do most of the talking or are bored, while the less advanced students fail to participate. (In these situations it is advisable to divide the class into smaller groups. Assign one advanced student to each group and have him serve as a leader. Leaders should develop conversation according to teacher’s instructions and under teacher’s constant supervision).

The students become so embroiled in a controversial subject that the atmosphere is charged with tensions. (To avoid a predicament of this kind, teacher should be aware of what students feel most strongly about. Most people have deeply ingrained views on politics and religion, so it is usually best to leave these topics out of directed conversation sessions, although they may be appropriate in written compositions. Sometimes, however, it is impossible to foresee what subject will spark an argument. If students do begin to argue, teacher should intervene immediately, calm the speakers and rapidly engage the entire class in a different activity).

The students converse in English for a while, then lapse into their native language. (While it is natural for students to long for (and sometimes not resist) the ease of communication in their mother tongue, teacher must speedily return them to English. Otherwise they waste the valuable time they need for practice in English).

The group is so large-twenty to a hundred students- that guided conversation practice seems almost impossible. (The only way to conduct a worthwhile session under these circumstances is to break the large group up into a number of small groups of six or eight people each, assigning to each group an outstanding student to serve as conversation leader).

7. Motivational factors.

Most students study English because they believe it will benefit them in one way or another. They see English as a means to earn more money, to fulfill certain education requirements, to travel abroad, to gain access to the culture of English-speaking nations, or simply to meet more people. A primary responsibility of the teacher is to revive motivation. Without strong motivation students will fail in their attempt to bridge the gap between the manipulative and the communicative phase of language learning and their hopes of speaking English fluently will never be realized.

Second-language teachers are always looking for better ways to help students. This implies that teachers are involved in educational research. However, since formal research tends to be perceived as a difficult process, many teachers feel that it is out of their reach. Certain aspects need to be clarified in order to overcome this feeling.

The research process is typically described as composed of «stages» (D. Ary, L.C. Jacobs, A. Razavieh, 1979 [4]): defining a problem, analyzing previous studies related to it, selecting a research strategy, selecting or developing appropriate instruments, collecting data, interpreting them and writing the research report.

In doing research, teachers should not only work on each of these stages but should also develop a systematic research attitude of students. We will focus on the definition of the problem, because that is the initial, crucial stage in the research process. To illustrate these aspects, field-specific examples will be used that focus on applications in language teaching and learning. We hope that the information given will help perceive research not as a difficult process but rather as a powerful tool to systematically study and solve some of the problems in day-to-day experience in the field of languages.

The conceptual idea of research follows a model of professional competence and action proposed by Paez-Urdaneta (Figure 1) [14].

In the field of language teaching, the researcher may be a teacher any educational level, a student-teacher, a teacher trainer, or an educational administrator or exactly a student. The events that he/she confronts in the language space constitute what we would call «real-life» problem. The researcher examines these events and then approaches them from a professional point of view (so-called problem space,) and defines a special research problem in operational terms and selects a strategy to study the problem as a research task (Figure 1) [14].

**Competence and Action:** Most research develops as a combination of parallel and sequential stages. For example, defining the problem may go along with selecting the strategy. Figure 2 shows a diagram representing both the sequential and parallel modes. In this example (Figure 2) a two-month research project is represented [14].

Stages 1 through 3 occur partially in a parallel way; stages 4 through 6 develop sequentially. Stage 7 occurs simultaneously with stages 4 through 6 because the researcher chose to start writing his/her report rather soon.

**The Initial Stage:** Defining a problem. The stage of defining a problem is a crucial one, since it will give form and focus to the study. In our example, the focus of the study would probably be a documentary one. We conduct this process from the standpoint of language teachers, which determines the problem space of our students. In other words, we identify problems by looking at these events through the eyes of our professional competence (2. Analyzing previous studies).

Our studies and experience can thus lead us to state questions that represent appropriate research problems in the field of language teaching.

**Selecting Research Strategy:** There are many research strategies, each fitting different research purposes. A number of them are presented here to help to understand the possibilities available.

*Follow-up studies* are carried out to test the results of a treatment, usually to evaluate the success of a program. An example of this is a study of fourth-year university students who were trained in English pronunciation during their first university year to see whether their linguistic awareness shows any difference from that of students who were not trained.

*Trend studies* describe the rate and direction of changes in order to predict situations. A quantitative description of the academic performance of language graduates in the past 10 years may allow a researcher to give a qualitative prediction of the academic performance of future students. An important aspect of trend studies is that short-term analyses are more reliable than long-term ones and therefore lend themselves to more sensible predictions.

*Developmental studies* describe growth or change patterns throughout time. They should not be confused with historical research, which is done after things happened. Developmental research is regularly planned ahead to observe growth or change patterns in the subjects. It is closely related to developmental psychology and so it may resort to methods and instruments typical of psychology, such as personality inventories, vocational tests and tests of verbal skills.

*A survey* is a close examination of a phenomenon that is usually based on a research instrument called a questionnaire. In fact, many researchers use the terms survey and questionnaire interchangeably, sometimes to refer to the study, sometimes to the instrument. Any census-like study or opinion poll about the effectiveness of a teaching methodology falls in this category. A survey can be very quantitative in the processing of the data gathered through the questionnaire.
However, the most interesting part of such a study is what the researcher can make out of these data and their observed or expected correlations.

A case study aims at an intense description of a given social unit (an individual, a community, an institution). Many of us are acquainted with studies reporting a single student's acquisition of English through the period of several years. Studies of this type, which share some characteristics with developmental ones, have contributed interesting data for a number of theories related to language teaching.

A field study describes a given phenomenon in the natural environment where it takes place. In this sense, much of the research done in language teaching is of this type, since it draws on observations that take place in the classroom.

An example of this might be a study of the types of oral mistakes made by students when they have to give a formal speech in English in front of the class. The description of students' mistakes will have both quantitative data (error frequency) and qualitative information (error analysis).

Selecting/Developing Instruments: A viable research strategy would start by studying books and journal articles dealing with different types of tests and their applications to various purposes. This analysis would mostly be documentary.

We would take notes, analyze theories and synthesize our own ideas based on the methodical sources. We may need to get some of our colleagues' opinions.

Collecting Data: Our professional competence gives us the opportunity to bring about new information through research. We just need to see the events in our environment space as possible research problems and then find plausible answers for our queries. Such answers may mean the introduction of positive changes in our work. Our professional action will thus contribute to the improvement of education and instruction and, in the process, to our own growth as professionals (6. Interpreting data).

Writing the Research Report: Ideally, research is done to be reported and published. The latter can be done in professional journals. Students can report their studies in the form of presentations. These events provide opportunities to learn about the strengths and weaknesses of their research strategies, to identify new problems worth studying systematically, to draw tentative research plans, to make contacts with people who can help them at certain stages and to gauge the public's acceptance of different types of report presentations.

CONCLUSION

So, teaching students who have a limited understanding of the English language can be a daunting task. Since ESL students speak a different language at home, some of them do not know the meanings of English words and phrases and it can be difficult for teachers to communicate with them. Nevertheless, teachers can exercise more patience and try to find the right ways to help their students become more proficient in the language. Here are a number of effective teacher's strategies for teaching ESL in language classroom:

1. Understand the importance and impact of teacher/learner interaction in creating a supportive environment for purposeful learning; identify categories of teacher language or “teacher talk” in classroom instruction; identify common problems or concerns for each category of teacher talk; identify classroom strategies that encourage effective, meaningful interactions; practice the identified strategies in at least three application activities; reflect on personal teacher talk to acknowledge strengths and identify areas of needed improvement and etc.

REFERENCES


