

# From Pattern Practice To Conversational English

BY ROBERT G. BANDER

Few assignments require more flexibility and imagination than a course in conversational English for students of English as a second language. Materials for teaching English conversation are scarce and generally limited in scope. Topics for discussion are hard to choose. All too readily, the teacher, or one or two more advanced students, comes to dominate the discussion. Student shyness must be overcome; lack of student preparation must be compensated for; boredom must be put to rout.

Fledgling teachers of conversation, in their search for instructional materials, often begin by introducing books of readings. The problem here is that readings are frequently too long to be treated in class and too difficult to be read at home. The conversation period easily falls into a teacher-dominated one. A second, and better, approach is dialogues. However, memorization of dialogues may take longer than the interest they arouse can be maintained. In

role. As in most of the previously-mentioned activities, there is no assurance that such visual aids will generate discussion.

Where, then, is the teacher of conversational English to turn? First of all, the instructor must realize that it is unrealistic to expect students to jump from controlled drill activities directly into free conversation. Instead, the teacher should block out a series of sequential exercises in limited response situations. In this way, he will more surely bridge this crucial gap between pattern practice and conversational English, extending the students' experience and bolstering their confidence in a controlled conversation situation.

## Basic Steps

The best first step for the instructor is to give students practice in answering questions with increasingly complex responses. First answers should be in short forms ("Yes, I did," "Yesterday," "At five o'clock"). Then whole sentence answers should be encouraged. After a time, students will move on to replying with a subject-verb pattern, plus another sentence giving additional information. This stage is followed by one in which the answer consists of three parts: a reply to the question; an additional statement; and a question directed back to the original interrogator. Working on such three-step answers seems to be one of the best ways of moving toward free conversation. It is essential at this stage that the student learn to add something more and to turn the conversation back to the other person with a question. Otherwise the conversational situation comes to resemble a cross-examination -- the teacher asking the questions, the student replying with a monosyllable, the teacher asking again.

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any case, students are not really producing their own. Short dialogues that can be quickly memorized are the best of this kind of activity. A third commonly followed practice, oral reports, is often the most deadly. Students tend not to know how to organize, and they don't know when to stop their monologues. Still another approach--classroom pictures used to stimulate conversation -- usually results in an illustrated talk on vocabulary by the instructor. Finally, movies and slides generally last too long, shifting the student into a passive

The next sequential step focuses upon the progression from the student answering questions to his asking them. At first, the instructor will have to write questions on slips of paper to give to students, who then vocalize the questions. Later students can be expected to formulate their own questions. Additional activities in this area include the teacher reading a brief selection and then asking for questions to bring out more facts, or a student acting as a reporter or "man in the street" television interviewer asking other students questions.

## **Suggested Sequence**

Conversational English activities, of course, should be arranged in order of increasing difficulty. Here is a suggested sequential series of methods: period one, answering questions; period two, asking questions; period three, students spontaneously questioning the teacher; period four, answering the questions with two complete, logical ideas followed by a question; period five, unprompted conversation, with questions produced by the students; period six, oral reports on articles, followed by questions; period seven, round table discussion; period eight, retelling the facts of an article or story read aloud by the teacher; period nine, extemporaneous speaking; period ten, role playing, ranging from the simple (a boy late for a date) to the more complex (a murder investigation and trial). In the more advanced stages of conversation, stories can provide much material for practice in speaking. Students can paraphrase a story told by their instructor; they can supply the ending to an unfinished story; they can take turns adding episodes in a serial story. Note, however, that each of these developmental activities is repeated several times and that the ten conversational periods mentioned above will cover several months of class work.

## **The Importance of Planning**

In order to produce successful conversation periods, planning is most important. Alternate activities should be prepared in case the plan