

CONVERSATIONS AND DIALOGUES

by Jack Wigfield

Many ESL textbooks include dialogues which seem to fall roughly into four classes:

A. Non-classroom situations;

- 1: Is this the supermarket?
- 2: Yes, it is.
- 1: Where's the meat section?
- 2: Over there.

B. Role playing:

- 1: Can I help you?
- 2: Yes. Are you a doctor?
- 1: No. I'm a nurse.
- 2: I'd like to see a doctor.
- 1: Do you have an appointment?
etc.

C. Falsified classroom situations:

- (On a sunny day)
- 1: How's the weather?
 - 2: It's raining.

D. Register violation:

- 1: Are you going to take the freeway?
- 2: Yes.
- 1: Do be careful.

(Person 1 should be specified as female since the "do" command form is seldom used in male speech.)

These dialogues all violate the increasing belief by some language teachers that people can learn a second language in a classroom much the same natural way that they do outside the classroom in communities throughout the world where adult bilingualism is a common phenomenon. Some language teachers now feel that language input in the form of a stream of speech directed at an adult in an actual situation with occasional cognitive help as to what linguistic system this language uses in that situation makes the development of a second language possible, less of an ordeal,

and can help bridge the gap between communicative competence and knowledge of the code, two factors which in Upshur's words "... do not go hand in hand." (Upshur, 1974)

Dialogues, with all their faults, seem to be the most fruitful type of language learning exposure for adult early beginners. But these drill dialogues must lead to something usable in the classroom or they defeat their purpose and are comparable to pattern practice drills. This article proposes a pre-drill dialogue called a "conversation" as a means to move closer to a natural situation and to go beyond the dialogue into real communication.

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Conversations precede drill dialogues. They grow out of drill dialogues. As time goes on, they become more complicated and more varied. For example:

First Week:

- Drill Dialogue:**
- 1: Hello. How are you?
 - 2: Fine. How are you?
 - 1: Fine.

Second Week:

- Conversation:**
- 1: Hello. How are you?
 - 2: Fine. How are you?
 - 1: Fine.

- Drill Dialogue:**
- 2: What's that?
 - 1: It's a pen.

Third Week:

- Conversation:**
- 1: Hi. How are you?
 2: Fine. How are you?
 1: So-so. What's that?
 2: Where?
 1: There.
 (Points to a map)
 2: I don't know.
 1: It's a map.
 2: Oh.

- Drill Dialogue:**
- 1: Say. How's the weather?
 2: It's rainy. (Actually it's sunny.)

Fourth Week:

- Conversation:**
- 1: Hi. How's the weather?
 2: Sunny. (actually sunny)
 1: What's new?
 2: Nothing special.
 1: Where are you going?
 2: Now?
 1: No. After class.
 2: I don't know.

- Drill Dialogue**
- 1: Say. How did you come to school today?
 2: I came by bus. (actually he walked.)

Conversations are marked by certain features such as "say", "hey", "you know" which commonly divide initial small talk from major topics or abrupt changes in topic.

- 1: Hi.
 2: Hi.
 1: How's the weather?
 2: Cloudy.
 1: Say. Who's that?
 etc.

Conversations are marked by deletions.

- 1: Hi.
 2: Hi.
 1: My name is Joe. What's yours.
 2: Luzviminda. (*My name is Luzviminda.)
 1: Say. Who's that?
 etc.

Conversations are marked by veracity:

(Drill Dialogue on a rainy day.)

- 1: How's the weather?
 2: It's sunny.

(Same day)

- 1: Hi.
 2: Hi. How's the weather?
 1: (Turning to look out the window.)
 It's raining.
 2: Say. Who's that?
 etc.

Conversations are marked by a disallowance of role playing:

- 1: Hello.
 2: Hi.
 1: *This is Safeway. Can I help you?*
- The conversation short circuits at this point.

Conversations are marked by interaction signals that indicate degrees of interest and understanding.

- 1: It's sunny today.
 2: Uhuh.
 1: I came by bus today.
 2: Oh.
 1: Say. Who's that?
 etc.

Conversations are marked by signals like "nevermind" that allow a graceful acceptable termination of a difficult situation:

- 1: It's sunny today.
 2: What?
 1: Sunny. It's sunny.
 2: I don't understand.
 1: No clouds. Sun. Sunny. See?
 2: Spell it.
 1: Nevermind.
 2: Say. Who's that?
 etc.

Conversations are marked by various register constraints:

- 1: Hi.
 2: Hi.
 1: What's the weather forecast?
 2: For tomorrow?
 1: Yeah.
 2: Partly cloudy. (Radio/meteorology "field")
 1: How is it now?
 2: A little cloudy. (Everyday speech)
 1: Say. Who's that?
 etc.

(continued on page 11)

CONVERSATIONS

(continued from page 7)

Conversations are marked by forms developed outside class:

- 1: How's everything, man?
- 2: What?
- 1: Nevermind. Say. . . Who's that?
- etc.

Conversations are marked by acceptable evasions:

- 1: Hi.
- 2: Hi.
- 1: What's new?
- 2: Nothing special.
- 1: Say. . . Who's that?
- etc.

Conversations are marked by correct persuppositions or presuppositions which can be questioned:

(Drill Dialogue)

- 1: Machu Pichu is beautiful
- 2: When did you go there?
- 1: Last year.
- 2: Did you like Peru?
- 1: Sure.

(Occurring in a conversation)

- 1: Hi.
- 2: Hi.

- 1: You know, Machu Pichu is beautiful.
- 2: Who's she?
- 1: No. It's a place.
- 2: Where?
- 1: Peru.
- 2: Are you from Peru?
- 1: Yeah.
- 2: Tell me about Michi Pichu.
- 1: Machu Pichu. Sorry, my English isn't good enough. Say. . . who's that?
- etc.

As time goes on, the conversations take on a more important role, and the early adult beginner begins to see the drill dialogue in its true perspective: a device to keep him exposed to the language, to keep the teacher from misinforming and boring him with a lot of technical grammatical explanations, and to give him a model of pronunciation and reaction.

Upshur, John, unpublished paper given at TESOL Convention, Denver, 1974.

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