

TALK AND LISTEN

by Richard Via

ESL teachers have an opportunity to make use of an effective technique that professional actors use to enhance a conversation class. Actors use the technique to develop a conversational tone and to learn their lines. In the theatre the technique has no name, but I have dubbed it, "Talk and Listen," for that is what the method calls for.

There are many values in using the "Talk and Listen" system with ESL learners. It can train students to listen; it can help them learn dialogues; it can help them develop a conversational tone (talking rather than reciting); and not last (for there are still others) nor least--"talk and listen" is fun.

To discuss this a little further let me make a few observations. A good actor, like a good conversationalist, must be a good listener. By listening an actor can judge how he/she needs to respond. The way something is said to a performer, or anyone, affects the way the other performer responds. For a language learner the same holds true. Listening provides the language learner with added opportunity to pick up a needed word or phrase to use in his /her reply.

By talking to an actor, rather than reading, the actor or conversationalist becomes more interesting--the difference between reading and talking is tremendous. Yet in most classroom situations dialogues are read aloud rather than spoken as conversation.

All too often students are asked to memorize a dialogue and recite it in class. This seems to work well in the classroom and the student receives an A. But in the real world these rote recitations cause the student to fail. The words come tumbling out, with no thought behind them, because that is the way it was memorized.

A sad but frequent consequence of this

is that the speaker is not understood by the listener, and thus there is no communication, no exchange of information. This isn't a problem in a classroom where dialogues are memorized because it isn't necessary to listen, nor is it necessary to communicate. The cue for the listener to begin speaking is the silence, not the message of the first speaker. In other cases the dialogue comes to a dead end because the listener, who had never learned the dialogue replies with a sentence, which is logical and appropriate, but original. This new sentence leaves the memorizer in a bewildered state unable to reply. A in the class, F outside. With "talk and listen" students are trained to talk and listen and talk.

Perhaps the best way to start students on the "talk and listen" system is to use Talk and Listen Cards. Choose or write a simple dialogue, of six to eight lines. Put the lines that A speaks on one card and those of B on another.

A: Why do you always do that?

A: - - - - -

B: - - - - -

B: Do what?

A: You know. What you're doing now.

A: - - - - -

B: - - - - -

B: Why? Does it bother you?

A: Oh no, not at all.

A: - - - - -

B: - - - - -

B: Then why did you ask?

Since A speaks first, A reads his/her first line to himself/herself. B does not look at his/her card yet, but waits for A to speak to him/her. A then makes eye contact with B and says the line to B. When A has finished speaking, B then reads the first line on his/her card to himself/herself, then says it to A. The entire dialogue is done this way. Students

may refer to their cards as often as necessary, but whenever someone is speaking there must be eye contact. Students should not be reading their lines planning how to say the line, they should be listening to the speaker. A proper response can be given only by listening. When using a dialogue from a textbook or play, students should be careful not to read the line that is being spoken to them. In most cases students who read the line spoken to them hear their own "inner voice" with its interpretation louder than the real voice of the speaker.

If you should note that students are making eye contact, but not listening, put two sets of dialogues on the cards. This will require listening to elicit a sensible dialogue.

A. It was good to see you yesterday.

or

Did you know I was going to Detroit?

B. No, I didn't.

or

It was good to see you too.

A. Yeah, I'm going to Detroit.

or

It was a good party, wasn't it.

B. Oh, it was okay.

or

For how long?

A. Permanently. I'm moving there.

or

Are you going to the picnic Saturday?

B. Oh, not on a vacation?

or

I'm not sure.

A. It should be fun.

or

No. I'll miss this place.

B. We'll miss you too.

or

Well, I'll try to go.

Once the students have learned to use the cards, there are other things you may do that are both fun and effective. Speaking the lines in different natural tones or speeds will show how language can be changed in meaning or feeling. The greatest change and the most fun occurs when the circumstances surrounding the situation are given. By this I mean the who, where, what, when, anything that might control the way the sentences

would be spoken. Every dialogue changes according to these circumstances yet rarely do teachers think to add them.

In the first dialogue how would the lines be spoken if:

-A and B are a married couple watching T.V. B keeps changing channels.

-A and B are parent and child. B, the child is biting his/her fingernails.

-A and B are lovers. B is stroking A's hair.

The dialogues for Talk and Listen may be written by the teacher, taken from textbook dialogues or selected from suitable plays. The class may be divided into pairs using different cards or the same cards with each pair deciding on the given circumstances. After they have worked on them they could be presented in front of the class for all to enjoy. More than likely after working on them they will know the lines and not need the cards. In case they have not learned them, let them refer to the cards rather than memorize the lines.