

Introduction: An Overview of Teaching Second Language Conversation

Teaching a Conversation Course in Ecuador Teenagers; Private High School Mary Goodman

I was an EFL Instructor for more than 20 years in Guayaquil, Ecuador, the most populous and famous port city in the country. During these years, I had a variety of experiences both as teacher and academic director. I worked with many teachers in different schools as I taught a variety of EFL subjects, including Conversation (Listening/Speaking), Grammar, Reading/Writing, Pronunciation, and Video. I know that I am the teacher that I am today because I had the opportunity to teach a range of students in terms of age (Junior High to Adult/Professional), level of English (absolute beginners through TOEFL® Preparation), class size (from 1 to 40), and gender (coeducational versus all-boys' classes).

While I had a variety of experiences teaching Conversation classes, one particular Conversation course will forever remain in my memory. During my time at the all-boys' School of the Espiritu Santo Educational Center, I had to teach 39 very unruly eleventh grade boys after their previous teacher had quit mid-year because she could no longer put up with the discipline issues. Until that time, I had had the luxury of teaching smaller-sized classes with mostly adults where discipline was not really a major issue. Even though the students' level of English ranged from basic to intermediate, I had to make it work; I could not be another teacher who gave up on those boys. I had to quickly analyze what the previous teacher had been doing wrong (in part,

following the textbook like a compulsory guidebook—which it was not) so I wouldn't fall into her problems with keeping their attention, which in turn created the discipline problems in her classroom.

One problem was that the students had different levels of interest in English, and few cared for the stale topics that had been used for class discussion. Students—regardless of their age—always do better when they are working on something that is meaningful to them. To gauge their interests, I gave the students an “Interest Inventory” of possible topics of conversation and had them add some additional ones. As a result, I immediately cut out of the syllabus those topics that the students felt were too boring or not appealing.

People need to be doing things. An active learner is a productive learner. In this case, more importantly, an active learner is so engaged that misbehaving or other discipline issues are decreased. How did I accomplish this important goal? I got the students more involved by assigning them research about a particular athlete or singer (or whatever topic they were interested in) and having them present this information to the class in oral reports. Here, I allowed them to use a few index cards with notes on them, but they were not allowed to “read” from a paper. The remaining students had to listen to their classmate's oral report, take notes, make up questions, and grade the oral report (so I was not the only one awarding a grade). This kept the other students involved and focused. I also tried, whenever possible, to make the activities light and fun, keeping in mind that my audience involved eleventh grade boys who would rather be outside playing soccer or flirting with some girl than trying to learn English, the latter seen as a pointless goal at that point in their life.

My general advice to anyone teaching EFL to a large class is to keep the students' discipline issues in check by keeping them busy with active and engaging pair work or small group work (up to three students). Dealing with forty students is tough. Dealing with twenty pairs or thirteen groups of three suddenly made the classroom more manageable. I found that groups of five or more were not effective because one or two students would actually do the work while the others sat around or conversed in Spanish. Thus, grouping does have a limit, and two or three seems to be a good limit. It is important to avoid putting best friends together in pairs; likewise, it is important to try to see that pairings are rotated every so often so learners can work with different people.

Another piece of advice I'd offer is that the type of activity that really engages the students in real, life-like, conversational activities depends very much on their English level. An ESL or EFL teacher shouldn't expect to be able to do debates or commentaries about current events in a classroom where the level of English is basic. Starting out with many visual activities such as Sequence Pictures, Look Again Pictures (find the differences in the pictures), Information Gap and Jigsaw activities, as well as Board Games, Skits, Songs (cloze or fill in the blanks), Games (Taboo, Twenty Questions, "The 10,000 Dollar Pyramid," "Jeopardy," etc.), in addition to teaching about natural disasters (hurricanes, floods, etc.), holidays, proverbs, idioms, phrasal verbs, and discussions about heroes, UFOs, superstitions, customs and traditions all helped to keep my students' interest level high, which in turn helped eliminate many of the discipline problems. The answer for teachers is not any one set of certain activities but rather an eclectic set based on the teacher's and students' personalities and goals.

The last major advice I offer is that it is important to keep in mind that a conversation topic or activity that worked really well with one age group or gender does not necessarily work well with those from another. Many activities that worked well with my adult students just didn't fly with this group. I found that as soon I gave the eleventh-grade boys a Student Interest Inventory and tailored the conversation course more to their interests than to the topics that the book dealt with, I was better able to get the students involved, keep their interest, and maintain discipline.

Why should we be so concerned with the teaching of conversation in an English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom? Though there are clearly many different answers, two big answers are at the forefront. The first focuses on the learner, and the second on the teacher.

Conversation Class from the Learner's Point of View

Knowing a language involves many different things, but when people say, "I know French," first and foremost they mean they can *speak* French. They may be able to read French and they may even have some writing ability in French, but when people—including our learners—refer

to “second language ability,” their primary goal seems to be speaking. In fact, I cannot imagine the average learner saying, “I want to learn to read Russian” or “I really want to learn to write Turkish.” Almost all of my ESL/EFL students dream of the day when they can finally say, “I *speak* English well.”

In a very general usage of the word *speaking*, we can see that speaking a language clearly entails many different aspects. It is important for all teachers of speaking or conversation to remember that the aspects deemed more important depend entirely upon the learner’s ultimate purpose in learning to speak English. Thus, you need to know why your learners want to speak English. Is it for business? Business dealings with native speakers? Business dealings with native speakers face to face? Over the phone or via a computer? Is it for conversation? Conversation on the job, as with a tour leader? Is it conversation to be able to communicate at the bank or supermarket?

In conducting this needs assessment of your learners, you will find the answers to these and similar questions that will help you determine what *speaking English* means to your learners. As you consider these answers, you will have a better idea of what to focus on in what you teach or practice with your learners in this English communication class. For example:

- You might focus on *fluency*. Does the speaker stop frequently to search for words? (See Appendix A.) Does the speaker use words that accurately reflect his or her actual social level? (Adults want to sound as intelligent in their second language as they do in their first language.)
- You might focus on *pronunciation*. (See Appendix B.) Does the speaker have a marked accent that inhibits communication?
- You might focus on *language accuracy*, specifically *grammar*. (See Appendix C.) Does the speaker make so many errors or such serious errors that communication is hindered or even impeded?
- You might focus on *listening ability*. The two are inextricably linked. It is not possible to have a conversation without good listening ability. Without a certain level of listening, a conversation would quickly deteriorate into a series of unconnected questions or statements.

Which Name? Conversation or Discussion or Oral Fluency or Speaking?

The fact that conversation can focus on such vastly different aspects as fluency or grammar or listening ability is a clear indication of the broad scope that it encompasses. In fact, most conversation classes will encompass all of these aspects in varying amounts at different times. Thus, it should come as no surprise that even the name for this class can vary. While the most widely used name for this type of language class is probably *conversation*, others tend to refer to it as speaking, discussion, or oral communication. Though there can be certain distinctions, all of these terms are used interchangeably in this work, as they are in most teachers' vocabulary.

Again, it is important to ask yourself (and remind yourself constantly as you plan for this class), "Why are my students coming to this class?" The learners' language needs are the number one driving force behind what you do in this class.

Conversation Class from the Teacher's Point of View

Learners want to learn how to speak a language, and a good program curriculum is based on learners' needs. Therefore, it is only logical that speaking features prominently in almost all language programs, regardless of learner proficiency level, learner age (e.g., children versus adults), or type of course (intensive versus non-intensive). Thus, to be the most effective teacher that you can be, it behooves you to know as much as possible about teaching speaking. Teaching conversation involves much more than merely tossing out a topic to your class for discussion.

In addition to teachers responding to learners' needs, teachers who want to land the best teaching jobs need to show that they can teach speaking classes and teach them well. It is not at all uncommon for teaching job announcements to list "ability to teach conversation" as a major requirement for a position. The ability to teach conversation is especially important in EFL teaching jobs.

Here are four sample job advertisements offered to show employers' desire for teachers who know what they are doing in the teaching of conversation. Notice how—in general—the ESL jobs tend to require all skills, including speaking, while the EFL positions often emphasize conversation over other skills.

Position 1 (intensive English program, ESL):

Minimum requirements include: (1) M.A. in TESL or related field; (2) at least 3 years ESL teaching experience in intensive English programs, specialized English courses for international professionals, or equivalent; (3) demonstrated ability to teach a variety of ESL courses, levels, and skills; and (4) native fluency/command of standard English

Notes: "a variety of courses" will certainly include conversation, oral communication, or discussion

Position 2 (community college, ESL):

Duties: Teach lecture and laboratory sections at the intermediate level; evaluate and advise students; develop curricula; serve on committees as assigned.

Notes: "lecture and laboratory sections" is a phrase that most likely refers to a class in which students practice listening (and some speaking) to improve their ability to comprehend lectures on academic topics

Position 3 (language school, EFL):

Wanted: a British EFL teacher aged 28 at least to give English conversation courses. Our language institute is located in the north of France. It is a town very close to famous cities (such as Reims, Nancy, and Paris). Ability to teach all language skills, with emphasis on speaking.

Notes: "conversation courses" is clearly indicated; many EFL jobs list job information not allowed in the U.S. and other countries (e.g., age, gender)

Position 4 (various, EFL):

English teaching jobs in Asia and Africa. NO Experience needed! Casual conversational classes held in group discussion type environment. Class sizes can vary from small (3 to 6 students) to large (20 to 30). Teaching hours: usually 4 to 6 hrs a day. Operation hours: 8AM–9PM, must be flexible Mon–Sun.

Notes: "conversation classes" is clearly indicated; the term "casual" means that these students focus more on face-to-face language practice rather than academic English

Most EFL jobs involve a good deal of speaking or conversation classes. Even in programs that work with integrated skills, speaking features prominently. In these cases, you will certainly need to be able to teach a speaking class or the speaking component of that course. While this chapter presents both the learners' and the teacher's viewpoint of what speaking is, in a really good match of learners and teacher, both viewpoints overlap considerably—or at least they should. The rest of the chapters in this book aim to help teachers figure out what learners need and what specific classroom activities can help with those needs in an efficient, effective, and fun manner—because certainly learning a language is supposed to be a fun activity.

The Organization of This Book

First and foremost, this book is designed to be accessible. It is meant to help teachers improve their ability to teach not merely good but rather outstanding conversation or speaking courses. Every chapter has been written with the teacher in mind.

Chapter 1 covers five factors that are fundamental to a successful conversation class: the learner, the curriculum, the topic, the two “languages,” and the task. Each of these factors begins with a description or definition. Following this introductory information, there is a section called In the Real World, in which I discuss relevant classroom examples that I have experienced. Finally, I discuss the factor and offer practical application ideas for your teaching.

Chapter 2 presents research on many aspects of conversation or speaking. This chapter explains six key terms through definitions and examples: *fluency*, *accuracy*, *interlanguage*, *comprehensible input*, *negotiation of meaning*, and *pushed output*. The next section shows teachers how to move from a general topic to a specific speaking task, which is the most important component of a speaking lesson. A substantial part of this chapter is dedicated to research on three key factors in designing an effective task: (1) *the flow of information*, (2) *a planning component*, and (3) *the solution to the task*. This is followed by examples of speaking tasks and an annotated bibliography of selected works.

Conversation classes vary tremendously. In Chapter 3, twenty teachers recount what it was like to teach conversation in different countries. These accounts offer important, meaningful information about the students in

these specific teaching contexts. Areas represented include North America (Canada, Mexico, United States), South America (Brazil, Chile), Europe (Germany, Portugal), Asia (China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam), and the Middle East (Qatar, United Arab Emirates). Children's and adult classes as well as academic and general conversation classes are featured.

Chapter 4 includes detailed instructions for using twenty activities that I have used successfully in conversation classes in an ESL setting, an EFL setting, or both. Information for each activity is organized as follows: title, description, materials needed, preparation steps, in-class procedure, caveats and further suggestions, an actual example, and the source. Rather than being a list of potentially good activities, these twenty activities are ones that I myself have taught. I know that they meet the criteria for a successful task and are adaptable to a variety of teaching settings.

While Chapter 4 contains twenty good activities, Chapter 5 details ten activities that did not work well. Most of these unsuccessful tasks took place in classes that I have observed over the years in my position as supervisor, coordinator, or principal. It is important to study both successful and unsuccessful class tasks to help us understand why some tasks are inherently better than others.

Finally, five appendixes offer invaluable information on vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, lesson plans, and additional teaching resources.