জার্ণাল অব ইএলটি এ্যান্ড এডুকেশন | JOURNAL OF ELT AND EDUCATION
ISSN: 2618-1290 (Print), 2663-1482 (Online), Volume 5, Issue 3, September 2022, Page: 60-65
Published by, Hello-Teen Society & Center for Academic Research and Development (CARD)

[**Citation:** Ainy, S. (2022). The Nature of Conversation and Speaking Skills. *Journal* of *ELT and Education*, *5*(3), 60-65.]

Analytical Paper

# THE NATURE OF CONVERSATION AND SPEAKING SKILLS

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**Abstract**

This article aims at discussing issues related to spoken skills in order to make a connection between the functions of conversation and the development of speaking skills. It also relates that language is used to establish and maintain social relationships with the purpose of negotiating role-relationships, peer-solidarity, the exchange of turns in a conversation and the saving of face of both speaker and hearer. In this article, the features of conversation, factors that influence conversation, and the strategies of conversation are also discussed briefly.

**Keywords:** Function of conversation, structures and principles of conversation, factors influencing conversation

## 1. Introduction

Speaking – perhaps is the most challenging area that needs attention. Learners may be able to read and write, listen and think, however, may go completely numb and silent when it is his/her turn to speak out. To be able to transfer words verbally keeping the effective communication going is one of the most terrifying and demanding skill that one has to take note of and thereof, master. According to Dornyei and Thurrell (1994), one of the greatest challenges in foreign language teaching is to find effective ways of preparing students for spontaneous conversation that is usually done intuitively and non-systematically.

Pirsig (1976:313) remarks 'the conversation's pace intrigues me. It isn't intended to go anywhere, just fill the time of day…on and on and on … like the rocking of a chair'. This remark seems to be in the context of daily casual conversation, such as, when one chats or narrates something following the stream of consciousness technique. Nevertheless, the common viewpoint of conversation is that it is a structurally organised activity that follows definite rules. Richards and Schmidt (1983) present Hymes' (1972) use of the term 'speech event' for all speaking activities that are directly governed by rules or norms. In fact, Coulthard (1977) points out that according to Hymes (1982) every speech event can be characterised from the point of view of its structure, setting, participants, purposes, key, topic, channel and message form. The term 'conversation' is also used to mean the more general form of talk, or more precisely, 'a face-to-face, oral interaction between two or more participants' (Richards, 1985:2). Nolasco and Arthur (1990:5) define conversation as referring 'to a time when two or more people have the right to talk or listen without having to follow a fixed schedule'.

## 2. The Function of Conversation

The analysis of discourse attempts to investigate what the language is used for. According to Brown and Yule, (1983b) the function which language serves in the expression of 'content' can be termed transactional, and the function involved in expressing social relations and personal attitudes

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can be described as *interactional*. The distinction 'transactional/ interactional' stands in general correspondence to the functional dichotomies - 'representative/expressive', found in Buhler (1934), 'referential/emotive (Jakobson, 1960), and 'ideational/interpersonal' (Halliday, 1970).

### 3.1. The Transactional View

The transactional view of conversation emphasises the communication of information. Lyons (1977:32) suggests that his own interest is in 'the intentional transmission of factual, or propositional, information'. Similarly, Bennett (1976: 5) remarks that 'it seems likely that communication is primarily a matter of a speaker's seeking either to inform a hearer of something or to enjoin some action upon him'. Transactional talk is for getting business done in the world, it is formulaic and formal in tone, conveys 'factual or propositional information' and is 'message oriented'.

### 3.2. The Interactional View

Language is also used to establish and maintain social relationships with the purpose of negotiating role-relationships, peer-solidarity, the exchange of turns in a conversation and the saving of face of both speaker and hearer (Brown and Levinson, 1978). A great deal of everyday human interaction is characterised by primarily interpersonal language. To McCarthy (1991), 'interactional talk, has as its primary functions the lubrications of the social wheels, establishing roles and relationships…, and so on'. In teaching conversation, it is important to pay attention to both of the functions keeping a balance between the activities, developing abilities for both interactional and transactional conversation.

## 4. Features of Conversation

According to Gardner (1984:102) some distinctive features of conversation are as follows:

a) Conversation uses the spoken channel;
b) Topics arise casually during conversation rather than being predetermined;
c) The power relationship between participants tends to be equal, although there may be considerable social distance;
d) The purpose of interaction may be the maintenance of good relations or the transmission of information;
e) Notions of politeness, tact or informativeness are of fundamental importance;
f) Conversational success does not fully depend on linguistic accuracy.

From the descriptive work of a number of scholars studying spoken language (e.g., Labov, 1972; Goffman, 1981) the following features of spoken language can be extracted:

a) The syntax of spoken language is typically much less structured than that of written language.
   - It contains many incomplete sentences, often simply sequences of phrases
   - It typically contains rather little sub-ordination
b) The largely paratactically organised chunks (i.e., the relationship between ideas signalled by position rather than direct grammatical linkage) are related by such connectors as: *and, but, then* and, more rarely, *if*
c) It is rare to find more than two premodifying adjectives and there is a strong tendency to structure short chunks of speech
d) Active constructions with indeterminate group agents are noticeable
e) In chat about the immediate environment the speaker may rely on gaze direction to supply a referent
f) Expressions can be replaced or refined as the conversation proceeds
g) A good deal of rather generalized vocabulary is used: *a lot of, got, do, thing,* etc.
h) Same syntactic forms are repeated several times over
i) A large number of prefabricated 'fillers' (*well, erm, I think, you know,* etc.) are produced.

In conversation therefore, overall effect is of information produced in a much less dense manner than in written language (Brown & Yule, 1983b).

## 5. Factors Influencing Conversation: Processing and Reciprocity Conditions

Processing and reciprocity conditions are two main factors that influence conversation.

*Processing conditions* enable one to deal with a given topic while being listened to, to make sure of its reception by the hearer and to undertake active, public 'repair', if necessary (Brown & Yule, 1983a). Bygate (1987: 117) defines 'repair' as 'correction by a speaker of his own or an interlocutor's production mistakes'.

The *reciprocity condition*s of speech refer to the relation between the speaker and listener in the process of speech (Widdowson, 1978). The speaker will often have to adjust his or her vocabulary or message to take the listener into account and also to participate actively in the interlocutor's message - asking questions, reacting and so on. Reciprocal activity crucially affects the sorts of decisions that are likely to be made.

## 6. The Principles of Conversation

According to Nunan (1995), conversation is a collaborative process. The evidence for this is the normal conversation that proceeds smoothly because of the cooperation between the speakers (Nolasco & Arthur, 1990). Without following the general rules and principles it is difficult to carry on any interaction.

### 6.1. Cooperative Principles

The *Cooperative principle* that Grice (1975: 45) advocates is: 'Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged'. The conversational conventions, or maxims, which support the principle are known as the quality, quantity, relation and maxims of manner.

### 6.2. The Politeness Principle

Lakoff (1973) formulated the principle of politeness presented by Cook (1996: 33), which includes the following maxims: 'don't impose', 'give options' and 'make your receiver feel good'.

Brown and Levinson (1987) base the concept of politeness on a notion of *face*. *Face*, according to Goffman (1967), is a property negotiated by interactants as social beings. It relates to the public self-images and consists of two associated aspects:

- Positive face: Positive face is our need for our actions and wants to be desirable to other people as well as to ourselves (Brown & Levinson, 1987).
- Negative face: Negative face is the wish that our actions should be unimpeded by others (Lazar, 1993).

Politeness is a universal phenomenon that affects linguistic and other social behaviour. However, Cook (1996: 33) notes that: 'Politeness and truth are often mutually incompatible…. These conflicting demands of the two principles are something of which people are consciously aware'.

### 6.3. Knowledge of the World

In a conversation the hearer needs to utilise his knowledge of the world and his past experience of similar events in interpreting the language. According to de Beaugrande (1980: 30), 'the question of how people know what is going on in a text is a special case of the question of how people know what is going on in the world at all'. And through literature knowledge of the world can definitely be increased.

## 7. Structure of Conversation – Notion of Topic and Turn-taking

Topics can be the reason for talk or they can arise because people are already talking. Usually, conversation involves a number of topics. In McCarthy's opinion (1991:132) a topic is 'a subject matter for a speech event', and Bygate (1987:117) defines a topic as 'the subject of a conversational exchange'. There are informal ways of expressing the topic, even in conversational discourse. Sometimes choosing a topic might be difficult. Coulthard (1977:99) argues that, 'some topics are not relevant to

particular conversation…and the suitability of other topics depends on the person one is talking to…'. But Hatch (1978) opines that learner should be exposed to a wide range of topics which will stimulate discussion.

An interesting approach to the problem of the social meaning of conversation is offered by the analysis of *turn-taking*. The most influential work in this area is reported in Sacks *et al.* (1974), and Schegloff and Sacks (1973). Establishing their viewpoint on the model of discourse analysis of Coulthard, (1977), Nolasco and Arthur (1990) consider an *exchange* to be the basic unit of conversation. An exchange consists of two moves (an initiating moves and a response) and each move can be called a 'turn'.

Bygate (1987:117) defines a turn as: 'a piece of spoken language delivered by a single person without interruption by another speaker'. The speaker needs to know how to negotiate a conversation through handling turn-taking. In some cultures, it is usual for there to be a lengthy background explanation before the point is reached, whereas in other cultures it is expected that the speaker will get to the point more quickly. These significant cultural differences can also be pointed out to the learner.

### 7.1. Long Turn and Short Turn

Brown and Yule (1983a:27) suggest that it is possible to distinguish between 'short speaking turns' and 'long speaking turns':

- 'A short turn consists of only one or two utterances'. Here the wording and the subject matter tend to be worked out extempore as the speaking proceeds.
- 'A long turn consists of a string of utterances which may last for a long time and look like a monologue.' 'Long turns' tend to be more prepared.

Nevertheless, in teaching it is important to pay attention not only to short turns but also to long turns, so that the students are given a chance to express themselves fully.

### 7.2. Adjacency pairs

There are some easily identifiable regularities in the ordering of a two-turn units described as *adjacency pairs*. Pairs of utterances in talk are often mutually dependent; a most obvious example is that a question predicts an answer, and that an answer presupposes a question (McCarthy,1991). However, Schegloff (1972) suggests that the adjacency pair structure can be disrupted by an 'insertion sequence' which delays the answer-part to one question-part of a pair until another answer to a different question has been provided. For example, some interrogative forms may function as both answers and questions.

### 7.3. Openings and Closings

Casual conversations have recognisable beginnings when people talk face-to face. A greeting (even if only a paralinguistic one such as a wave or smile) signals the opening of an encounter and may be followed by exchanges which establish or confirm social relations. And closing indicates that the speakers think the conversation ought to come to an end. According to Richards and Schmidt (1983), both openings and closings demand the co-ordination of the participants in the conversation.

## 8. Production Skills and Interactional Skills

Bygate (1987) suggests four main ways in which speakers can *facilitate* the production of speech: simplifying structures, ellipses, formulaic expressions and fillers and hesitation devices.

Because planning time is limited, speakers also often need to change or *compensate* what they have already said. Compensation features include self-correction, false starts, repetition and rephrasing. All of these features may facilitate the learners' oral production and also help *sound normal* in their use of the foreign language.

What one says to somebody depends not only on what has already been said but also on what one wants to get out of the conversation – this procedure involves interactional skills. According to Morrow (1981:63), 'The strategies and tactics involved in using language this way is of fundamental

importance in communication'. It can be useful to think of the communication of meaning as depending on two kinds of skills - routines and negotiation skills.

In many circumstances speakers organize what they have to communicate into typical kinds of message and so deal with recurring cognitive problems. These have been called 'routines' (Widdowson, 1983). Examples of routines include story-telling or joke-telling, descriptions or comparisons and instructions.

There is also the area of skill involved in getting through the routines on specific occasions, so that understanding is achieved. The *Negotiation of meaning* is the skill of communicating ideas clearly that includes the way participants signal understanding during an exchange in order to bridge up the opinion-gap which inspires the expression of genuine feeling.

**9. Conversation as Speech Event**

When we say things, we also perform *acts* by saying what we do. By observing the speech acts which different people perform, things about them and their relations with others can be inferred. Speech act theory originated in Austin's (1962) observation that while sentences can often be used to report states of affairs, they can also be treated as the performance of an act. It is possible to suggest that in uttering any sentence a speaker could be seen to have performed some act, or, to be precise, an *illocutionary act*. In uttering a sentence, a speaker also performs a *perlocutionary* act that can be described in terms of the effect which the illocutionary act, on the particular occasion of its use, has on the hearer. Speech acts, like other acts, change the world we inhabit.

**10. Strategies of Conversation**

The communication strategies (used by the learners while dealing with communicative problems) categorised by Bygate (1987) are:

- Achievement strategies: Guessing strategies, Paraphrase strategies, Co-operative strategies
- Reduction strategies: Avoidance strategies

According to Dornyei and Thurrell (1994) these strategies are necessary means to deal with 'trouble spots' in communication.

**11. Stream of Consciousness Technique**

Conversation, however, is not always as rule-governed as implied above. The term 'stream of consciousness' was coined by the philosopher William James (1890) to describe the free association of ideas and impressions in the mind and to portray the free flow of thought. When we talk casually, we go to and fro, relying on our memory, which does not always follow a chronological order. Therefore, becoming acquainted with the stream of consciousness technique might help the learner to talk about something without always thinking whether the references to time in the narration are followed in an orderly manner. Nevertheless, in conversation the speaker may also suffer from the disadvantage of exposing his own feelings.

**12. Conclusion**

Success in conversation does not depend only on linguistic accuracy; speakers also need to be fluent when expressing themselves. According to Byrne (1976:9), fluency is 'the ability to express oneself intelligibly, reasonably, accurately and without too much hesitation' According to Richards (1990:75), fluency is an important dimension of conversation as it '…reflects the assumptions that speakers set out to produce discourse that is comprehensible, easy to follow, and free from errors and breakdown in communication …'.

In real life, this is not to suggest that learners need a precise grasp of the technical nuances of conversation which have been identified above (although teachers would certainly benefit from such an understanding) nevertheless, knowledge about the conversational traits would positively help a speaker to express and converse better.

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