

Teaching: The Long Conversation

Scott Thornbury

[After taking the register the teacher starts chatting to students]

T: well then, Jorge . . . did you have a good weekend?

S: yes

T: what did you do?

S: I got married.

T: [smiling] you got married. (0.7) you certainly had a good weekend then. (5.0) [laughter and buzz of conversation]

T: now turn to page 56 in your books. (1.6) you remember last time we were talking about biographies . . . [T checks book and lesson plan while other students talk to Jorge in Spanish about his nuptials.]

Cadorath, J., and Harris, S. (1998). Unplanned classroom language and teacher training. *ELT Journal*, 52, 188-196.

'I will argue that it is, in theory, not possible for teachers to replicate conversation (in its precise sociolinguistic sense) in the classroom as part of a lesson... This is not to suggest that it is impossible for conversation to take place in the classroom, simply that it cannot occur as part of a lesson.'

Seedhouse, P. (1996). 'Classroom interaction: possibilities and impossibilities.' *ELT Journal*, 50/1, pp. 18-19.

“Normal conversation” can only be profitably employed with students who are already fairly proficient in the language and who can converse without making more than an occasional mistake.’

‘If we encourage the student to use normal conversation before he [sic] has been drilled into good habits, we cause him to become a fluent speaker of “pidgin”’.

Palmer, H. (1921). *The oral method of teaching languages*. Heffer: Cambridge , pp. 63 & 121.

THE TEACHING OF
ORAL
ENGLISH

HAROLD E. PALMER

This is my head. That is your head.
Is this my head? Is this your head?
Is this my head or your head?
Is this my head or my foot?

Then

Whose head [hand, arm, nose, etc.] is this?

Then the “series”:

- | | |
|------------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Is this <i>my</i> head? | Yes, it <i>is</i> . |
| 2. Is this <i>your</i> head? | No, it <i>isn't</i> . |
| 3. Whose head is it? | It's <i>your</i> head. |
| 4. Is this <i>my</i> head? | Yes, it <i>is</i> . |
| 5. Is this <i>my</i> hand? | No, it <i>isn't</i> . |
| 6. <i>What</i> is this? | It's <i>your</i> head. |

How many
fingers have I
got?



A

How many
brothers have you
got?



B

(IRF) Initiate – response – follow-up

I → Teacher: How many fingers have I got?

R → Student: Five

F → Teacher: Good



T What're these? (Gestures to trousers).

S: Pants. Clothes.

T: Trousers. Trousers.

S: Trousers. Trousers.

T: Colour?

S: Green.

T: Green, green, OK. Green trousers. Sentence!

S. What colour are you...

T: Not question, sentence!

S: You, you wear wear, you are wearing ...

T. Joe.

S. You are wearing the green trousers.

T: Ok, I'm wearing ... I'm wearing ... green trousers. I'm wearing green trousers.

What's the question? What...?

Ss: ...are you wearing.

T: What're you wearing? What're you wearing? What're you wearing? Everyone.

Ss: What are you wearing?

Nunan, D. (1990). The language teacher as decision maker. A case study. In Brindley, D. (ed.) *The second language curriculum in action*, pp 9-35. Sydney: NCELTR.

“In such an exchange the pupils can only be dependent upon the teacher’s signals: rational thought of their own is unlikely to be rewarded. Such sequences as these are however a normal part of question-and-answer lessons.”

Barnes , D. (1976). *From communication to curriculum*. Harmondsworth: Penguin. 180-181.

‘The language used establishes a pattern of communication which gives [only] the illusion that learning is actually occurring.’

Lundgren (1977) quoted in Cazden, C. B. (2001) *Classroom discourse: The language of teaching and learning*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

The Most Human Human



What Talking With Computers
Teaches Us About What It
Means to Be Alive

Brian Christian

Talk to "Tutor Mike"



Tutor Mike

<https://www.rong-chang.com/tutor.htm>

Mike: Let me ask you a question. How is the job market in your country?

YOU: Not good.

Mike: What's wrong?

YOU: 20 per cent unemployment.

Mike: Can I ask you a question? What do you think is the most dangerous sport?

YOU: Ping pong.

Mike: I think boxing is the most dangerous sport.

YOU: I don't agree

Mike: No problem.

YOU: Have you ever boxed?

Mike: I have no idea.

Non-human communication	Human communication
reactive	interactive
unsituated	situated
predictive	creative
scripted	jointly constructed
disembodied	embodied
'narrow band'	'broad band'

“Success depends less on materials, techniques, and linguistic analyses, and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom.”

Stevick, E.W. (1980) *Teaching languages: A way and ways*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House, p 4.

(The central heating boiler has just re-ignited)

Mark: oh popped on

Mother: pardon?

Mark: it popped on

Mother: it popped on?

Mark: yeh

Mother: what did?

Mark: er – fire on

Mother: the fire?

Mark: yeh ... pop the. fire popped it fire

Mother: oh yes. the fire popped on didn't it?

Mark: yeh

Wells, G. (1981) *Learning through interaction: The study of language development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (p. 105).



‘Language learning evolves *out of* learning how to carry on conversations... One learns how to do conversation, one learns how to interact verbally, and out of this interaction syntactic structures are developed.’

Hatch, E. (1978) Discourse analysis and second language acquisition. In Hatch, E. (Ed.) *Second language acquisition: A book of readings*. Rowley, Mass.:Newbury House, p. 404.

‘According to the theory, talk is used to construct knowledge. This is a social, historical process, in the sense that the talk generates its own context and continuity, so that the knowledge that is created carries with it echoes of the conversations in which it was generated.’

Mercer, N. (1995). *The guided construction of knowledge: Talk amongst teachers and learners*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, p. 84.

‘When a teacher and a group of learners are working together, the talk in one lesson can be thought of as one part of a “long conversation” that lasts for the whole of their relationship.’

Mercer, N. (1995). *The guided construction of knowledge: Talk amongst teachers and learners*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, p. 70.





Mikhail Bakhtin

pedagogic dialogue

dialogic pedagogy

[In a dialogic pedagogy] teacher-student communication is seen as a work-in-progress; it is “unfinalised”, in Bakhtin’s terms, each thought being a rejoinder in an unfinalised dialogue ... To affect the developing consciousness of students means to talk with them, to enter into dialogue with them.’

Skidmore, D. 2016. Dialogism and education. In Skidmore, D. & Murakami, K. (Eds.) *Dialogic pedagogy : the importance of dialogue in teaching and learning*. Bristol: Multilingual matters, p. 39.

‘An important characteristic of classrooms is that they have continuity over days, weeks, months and sometimes even years of fairly consistent membership and, perhaps especially in language classrooms, that continuity is constituted in linguistic interaction. Over this time members come to know each other as people, knowing what can and cannot be said; they build up a shared repertoire of routines ... such that they predict the shape, length and purpose of interactional units; they build up a history of shared speech such that a continuity of connexion between utterances may be maintained over extended periods of time ...’

Gieve, S. & Miller, I.K. (2006). What do we mean by ‘quality of classroom life’? In Gieve, S. & Miller, I.K (eds.) *Understanding the language classroom*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan. p. 31-32.

How many
fingers have I
got?



A

How many
brothers have you
got?



B

‘Student’s opportunities to exercise initiative ... or to develop a sense of control and self-regulation (a sense of ownership of the discourse, a sense of being empowered) are extremely restricted in the IRF format.’

Van Lier, L. (2001) Constraints and resources in classroom talk: issues of equality and symmetry. In Candlin, C. and Mercer, N. (eds.) *English language teaching in its social context: A reader*. London: Routledge, p. 96.

T. How many brothers have you got?

S. Five.

T. Five! Wow! Who is the eldest?

S. Waleed.

T. And how old is he?

S. 27.

T. What does he do?

S. He's a ...etc etc



	Conversation	Correction/conversational replay	Instruction
T:	You were delivering mail to the patients?//		
K:	yah//		
T:	how many times did you go//=		
K:	=no no // the I should go but I didn't go//		
T:		I was SUPPOSED to go//	
			that's a good one//. I was SUPPOSED to go [taps table rhythmically while repeating]// everyone
A:			I was SUPPOSED to go//
T:			again//
C+:			I was SUPPOSED to go//.
T:			but I couldn't//. but I couldn't=
C-:			= but I couldn't//
T:			(ev?) again//
A:			but I couldn't//
T:			I was supposed to go but I couldn't// again//
C+:			I was supposed to go but I couldn't//
T:			I was supposed to go but I DIDN'T// you can also say but I DIDN'T//

	Conversation	Correction/conversational replay	Instruction
		uh-huh [rising intonation] // because the baby's sick//	
	aah// is the baby still very sick? // what's the matter//		
K:	(he?) don't know //		
T:	[expressive breath intake indicating possibly surprise, sympathy] oh // (that's a problem then?) //		

Ulichny, P. (1996). 'What's in a methodology?' In Freeman, D. & Richards, J. C. (eds) *Teacher learning in language teaching*. Cambridge University Press.

‘The role of the teacher is central to co-constructing a dialogue in which learning opportunities are maximised through the use of specific interactional strategies to scaffold, shape and clarify learner contributions.’

Walsh, S. (2006) *Investigating classroom discourse*. London: Routledge, p. 157.

Instructional conversation

‘The task of schooling can be seen as one of creating and supporting instructional conversations... The concept itself contains a paradox: “Instruction” and “conversation” appear contrary, the one implying authority and planning, the other equality and responsiveness. The task of teaching is to resolve this paradox. To most truly teach, one must converse; to truly converse is to teach.’

Tharp, R.G., & Gallimore, R. (1988). *Rousing Minds to Life: Teaching, Learning, and Schooling in Social Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.p. 111)

Teaching	Conversation
transactional	interactional
asymmetrical	symmetrical
teacher-led	jointly constructed
topicalization by teacher	topicalization shared
display questions	referential questions
turns nominated	turns self-selected
other repair	self repair
low contingency	high contingency

“The classroom may be viewed as an ecological environment in which ‘lesson’ and ‘conversation’ are relational to each other, needing one another for ecological balance.”

Bannink, A. (2002) Negotiating the paradoxes of spontaneous talk in advanced L2 classes. In Kramsch, C. (ed.) *Language acquisition and language socialization*. London: Continuum, 266-88, p. 285

‘Conversation should be studied in much more detail as a potential source of rich learning opportunities.’

Nakahama, Y., Tyler, A. and van Lier, L. (2001). Negotiation of meaning in conversational and informational gap activities: A comparative discourse analysis. *TESOL Quarterly*, 35, 377-406 (p. 401)



How to create the conditions for a 'long conversation':

1. Ask 'real questions'

‘Keep the number of display questions to a minimum. The more genuine the requests for information, the more natural the discourse.’

Kramsch, C. (1985). Classroom interaction and discourse options. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 7, 169-183

Pay attention to the message of students' utterances rather than to the form in which they are cast (...). Keep your comments for later.

Make extensive use of natural feedback (“hmm,/interesting/I thought so too”) rather than evaluating and judging every student utterance following its delivery (“fine/good”). Do not overpraise.

Kramsch, C. (1985). Classroom interaction and discourse options. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 7, 169-183

How to create the conditions for a 'long conversation':

1. Ask 'real questions'
2. Allow 'wait time'

[In a study of four ESL classrooms in Canada] ‘two of the most striking figures of this analysis were that (1) teachers asked almost all the questions and (2) students were rarely given sufficient time to formulate their answers...’

White, J. & Lightbown, P.M. 1984. Asking and answering in ESL classrooms. *Canadian Modern Language Review*. 40, p.228)

How to create the conditions for a 'long conversation':

1. Ask 'real questions'
2. Allow 'wait time'
3. Encourage learners to ask questions

‘As far as we know from observational studies in classrooms, students ask remarkably few questions, and even fewer in search of knowledge.’

Dillon, J.T. 1988. The remedial status of student questioning. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 20/3, p.197.

How to create the conditions for a ‘long conversation’:

1. Ask ‘real questions’
2. Allow ‘wait time’
3. Encourage learners to ask questions
4. Value learner-initiated talk

‘Opportunities for giving learners control of the discourse will arise naturally in the course of a language lesson. The extent to which teachers grasp these opportunities ... may well prove more crucial for creating the optimal conditions for acquisition to take place than any planned decisions they make.’

Ellis, R. (1998). ‘Discourse control and the acquisition-rich classroom.’ In Renandya, W. & Jacobs, G. (eds) *Learners and language learning*. Anthology series 39. Singapore: RELC, p. 166.

How to create the conditions for a ‘long conversation’:

1. Ask ‘real questions’
2. Allow ‘wait time’
3. Encourage learners to ask questions
4. Value learner-initiated talk
5. Personalize the lesson content
6. Institute learner presentations/performances
7. Organize ‘talking circles’

‘The talking circle is a total group activity what generally takes place at the beginning of the 45-min conversational English class. Almost every day, teacher and students gather in the talking circle to share and discuss experiences, anecdotes, news, special events, introduce the weekly theme, and the like. Although the teacher might open the discussion by suggesting a general topic, the overriding assumption is that the talking circle provides a place and an audience for students to discuss anything of interest to them.’

Ernst, G. (1994) “Talking Circle”: Conversation and negotiation in the ESL Classroom. *TESOL Quarterly*, 28

How to create the conditions for a ‘long conversation’:

1. Ask ‘real questions’
2. Allow ‘wait time’
3. Encourage learners to ask questions
4. Value learner-initiated talk
5. Personalize the lesson content
6. Institute learner presentations/performances
7. Organize ‘talking circles’
8. Share your own ‘story’

more common -

I enjoy more when a teacher sits down in front of us and explains a real thing that happened to him/her and then he asks us for similar situations that we can have gone through.

Actually, I think that playing roles and people involved in movies didn't work very well today, at least in the area I was in. Perhaps it was our fault, we didn't contribute all that well and

I enjoy more when a teacher sits down in front of us and explains a real thing that happened to him/her and then he asks us for similar situations that we have gone through.

How to create the conditions for a ‘long conversation’:

1. Ask ‘real questions’
2. Allow ‘wait time’
3. Encourage learners to ask questions
4. Value learner-initiated talk
5. Personalize the lesson content
6. Institute learner presentations/performances
7. Organize ‘talking circles’
8. Share your own ‘story’
9. Remove the classroom walls!

“I asked the children to show me what they wanted to know about, and gradually introduced English through their responses. ...We did our math and science in the bush by estimating how many kernels we could get from an ear of corn. We checked with the villagers where and how far apart we should plant them, and how big an area we would need to clear ...”

Wade, E.J. (1992). *Teaching without Textbooks: accelerative learning in the language classroom*. Victoria, Australia: CIS Educational.



<http://languagelearninginthewild.com/>

‘Learners first prepared for interactions in real-life service encounters, then participated in the encounters and videorecorded them in pairs, and later reflected on their classroom experiences back in the classroom.’

Lilja, N. & Piirainen-Marsh, A. (2019) ‘Connecting the language classroom and *the Wild*: Re-enactments of language use experiences.’ *Applied Linguistics*, 40/4, p. 595.

How to create the conditions for a ‘long conversation’:

1. Ask ‘real questions’
2. Allow ‘wait time’
3. Encourage learners to ask questions
4. Value learner-initiated talk
5. Personalize the lesson content
6. Institute learner presentations/performances
7. Organize ‘talking circles’
8. Share your own ‘story’
9. Remove the classroom walls!
10. Be spontaneous!

‘Successful teaching necessarily involves an element of improvisation.’

Skidmore, D. 2016. Dialogism and education. In Skidmore, D. & Murakami, K. (Eds.) *Dialogic pedagogy : the importance of dialogue in teaching and learning*. Bristol: Multilingual matters, p. 36.

"A dialogic pedagogy is unlike traditional pedagogy... it sets new goals for teachers - poetic, psychological, political goals that ... do not constitute any easy-to-follow method. .. Such a pedagogy should better be described, not as a blueprint for how to *teach* foreign languages, but as another way of *being* a language teacher."

Kramsch, C. 1993. *Context and Culture in Language teaching*, Oxford University Press, p. 31.



Thanks!

www.scottthornbury.com

‘Conversation may not be perfect as a means of information exchange, but when engaged in collaboratively, it can be an effective medium for learning and teaching. In any case, since there is no better alternative, we must do the best we can.’

Wells, G. (1987). *The meaning makers: Children learning language and using language to learn*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, p. 218.

‘Conversation may not be perfect as a means of information exchange, but when engaged in collaboratively, it can be an effective medium for learning and teaching. In any case, since there is no better alternative, we must do the best we can.’

Wells, G. (1987). *The meaning makers: Children learning language and using language to learn*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, p. 218.

‘Curriculum innovation ... can only come about through a fundamental change in the way educators and students interact with one another ... Reform thus occurs from the bottom up, one pedagogical action at a time.’

van Lier, L. (1996) *Interaction in the language curriculum: awareness, autonomy & authenticity*. Harlow: Longman, p. 158