

## Application of a Discourse Approach to Speaking in Teaching of Conversation

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**Abstract:** In this essay the author attempts to put forward an innovative teaching mode in the course of “English Conversation” for sophomore English majors in China. In this mode an authentic conversation is used as the teaching material and the theoretic aspects of Conversation Analysis (CA) are applied for the teaching of the course. This mode can be carried out by English teachers as a teaching experiment and then the teaching effects can be measured through comparison with the traditional teaching mode in which no authentic teaching materials are used.

**Key words:** conversation analysis; application; English majors; assessment

### 1. Background Theory

Traditional concern of language learning is within the range of words, clauses and sentences. A static and decontextualized view of language is adopted to treat language teaching and practice. Emphasis is laid upon the form of language, but not on its use in a context (McCarthy and Carter, 1994:1-2).

Beginning in 1960s and 1970s and based on different disciplines, including linguistics, semiotics, psychology and sociology, a new perspective of looking at and analyzing language was employed by linguists, i.e., discourse analysis. Discourse analysis focuses on the study of the relationship between language and contexts. It mainly studies language in use. Now discourse analysis has become an important discipline in Applied Linguistics. It has found its “unity in the description of language above the sentence and on interest in the contexts and cultural influences which affect language in use” (McCarthy, 1991:1-3).

Discourse analysis is concerned with a lot more than linguistic forms. “It takes us into the social and cultural settings of language use to help us understand particular language choices.” (Paltridge, 2000:3) It deals with both written and spoken language.

After finding the disadvantages in the traditional way of analyzing and teaching language, linguists and language educators shifted their attention to the research of both written and spoken discourse, especially spoken language. Spoken discourse has been attracting more and more attention from language researchers and is approached from different perspectives with different emphases. This essay mainly draws on the theoretic aspects of treating spoken discourse from these approaches. These approaches can be described as follows:

#### (1) Systemic-functional Linguistics

It highlights the socially functional nature of language and emphasizes relationships between text and the register variables that motivate lexicogrammatical choice and the differences between conversational and written

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language (Burns, Joyce and Gollin, 1996:2; Buns, 1998:107-108).

(2) Exchange Structure Analysis

This approach provides a framework for analyzing the dynamic moves made by speakers during interactions. By taking a bottom-up approach, it is concerned with the move by move organization of conversation and how the moves are organized and executed. (Pedler, 1992, cited in Burns et al, 1996:15).

(3) Conversation Analysis

It typically uses audiotapes or videotapes of people's interactions as data to analyze the micro mechanics of conversation: opening and closing, adjacency pairs, preference organization, turn taking, topic management and repair (Paltridge, 2000:85-97).

(4) Pragmatics

This approach focuses on analyzing the relationship between language and context, and involves analyzing the meanings and intentions of speakers within the particular social setting of the language interaction (Paltridge, 2000, p. 5; Burns et al, 1996:21).

(5) Critical Discourse Analysis

This approach analyzes the relationship between language, ideology and power. "Structures, functions, and forms of language are analyzed from the perspective of how they contribute to or uphold particular ideological positions, or serve to maintain differences in power created by social history or status (Burns, 1998:112).

Linguists and analysts look at spoken discourse from different perspectives as described above with their own particular interests and emphases. In this essay we discuss how we can apply the conversation analysis (CA) in the teaching of speaking.

Conversation analysis originated in the field of sociology with the examination of telephone calls to a suicide prevention center in Los Angeles. Conversation analysis has its own analyzing system for spoken discourse examination although we can find some researching overlap among the different approaches within discourse analysis. The different aspects conversation analysis concerns can be described as follows:

(1) Openings and Closings

This is about how speakers open and end a conversation in different situations and what types of utterance pairs are used.

(2) Adjacency Pairs

It means that in two utterances produced by two successive speakers the second one is the response to the first one. The relation types of speakers and conversation principles can be observed by using adjacency pairs.

(3) Preference Organization

This aspect is concerned with whether the response to the first pair part is an acceptance or rejection. Reasons for acceptance and rejection can be analyzed and different accepting or rejecting strategies can be examined and applied in communication by language learners.

(4) Insertion Sequences

It happens when a question is not immediately followed by a response but by another adjacency pair, i.e., another question and a response.

(5) Turn Taking

This is what conversation analysts are most interested in. the general rule in a conversation is that one person speaks at a time. Then how to get the turn, keep the turn and end a turn can determine whether the conversation can undergo smoothly or not. Learners can benefit a lot from analyzing and practicing the strategies used in turn

taking.

#### (6) Topic Management

Topic management mainly deals with choosing appropriate topics and changing topics from one to another. This aspect is extremely important to foreign language learners. Speakers need to be culturally conscious in order to keep a conversation going without hindrance.

#### (7) Repair

Repair means that when a speaker has said something wrong or improper, he/she makes a correction. It includes self-repair and other-repair. Self-repair means a speaker corrects his/her own improper words while other-repair means correcting the other/another speaker's mistakes.

This essay aims to apply conversation analysis in the teaching of speaking. A specific speaking teaching task is presented with classroom activities and measures of assessment. The teaching material comes from a published transcription of an authentic conversation.

## 2. Course Outline

### 2.1 Course Name

*English Conversation*

### 2.2 Course Background

This is an essential language skill course for sophomore English majors (four year undergraduate students). Besides this speaking course, the learners also have other courses like *English Listening*, *English Reading*, *Writing*, *Essential English*, *English Phonetics* and *English Grammar*.

All the micro skill and integrated courses aim to build a solid storage of essential language knowledge and train the basic skills for the learners and prepare them for the learning of the major courses, such as *English Linguistics*, *British Literature*, *American Literature* and *English Teaching Methodology* when they enter higher grades.

### 2.3 Student Background

The students are sophomore English majors (one class consisting of about 35 students) having reached the intermediate level. Their vocabulary is 4000-5000. After one year of training in speaking in the major, they can express themselves about everyday lives and simple social affairs. Of course they need further training.

Most of the materials in their textbooks are scripted ones, rarely authentic ones. The learners usually cannot apply well what they learn in class in practical use owing to lack of authentic language input and proper practice.

### 2.4 Learning Environment

English is learned as a foreign language. Although there are several foreign teachers teaching them *English Conversation*, students have few opportunities to speak English besides doing it in class time. Radio and TV stations usually don't provide programs of authentic conversations. In English films, the language is usually not authentic and they are generally too hard for these students to understand. Although Internet video chatting is possible for the students, they seldom have opportunities to do that because of access obstacles, economic conditions, technical difficulties and other reasons.

### 2.5 Course Objectives

These students are English majors in a teachers college, so they are highly demanded in their speaking competence. At the end of the second year, their speaking should reach band 4. At this level, they should be able

to communicate with speakers from English speaking countries in ordinary social situations and express ideas correctly with natural pronunciation and intonation and appropriate language without serious grammatical errors. (*English Teaching Syllabus for English Majors in Institutions of Higher Learning*, 2000:8)

## 2.6 Strategies to be Trained

All the strategies used in oral communication including initiating, topic management, turn taking, repair, etc. Another important strategy is how to keep the conversation going by expressing in other ways when certain words or terms don't come to mind.

## 2.7 Teaching Aids

Multi-media classroom, in which PPT can be showed. A digital recorder is needed for recording the students' conversations.

## 2.8 Transcription of an Authentic Conversation

The current teaching material comes from a reference book. It is an authentic conversation. The recording of the material is supposed to be available.

Speakers and setting

<S 01> customer: female (24)

<S 02> customer: female (24)

<S 03> female waitress: (20s)

Two old school friends from South Wakes meet up to have lunch in London, in a very informal restaurant, the type that serves hamburgers and other fast-food. At the start of the extract, they are looking at the menu. While they are discussing what to choose, the waitress comes up and stands silently, waiting for them to order.

1	<S 01>	I'm gonna have er ... an Old Timer with cheese. I am
2	<S 02>	What's that?
3	<S 01>	The Old Timer burger, but I'm gonna have cheese with it
4	<S 02>	Oh right, I'm gonna have, I think I'm gonna have a
5		veggy one with barbecue sauce on it
6	<S 01>	Mm, are you gonna have a starter, what you gonna have?
7	<S 02>	Yeah ... I'm trying not
8		To have nachos [5 secs]
9	<S 02>	I'm either gonna have nachos, buffalo wings or potato
10		skins
11	[11 secs]	
12	<S 01>	I'm gonna have the deep fried mushrooms, you like
13		Mushrooms don't you?
14	[3 secs]	
15	<S 02>	I'm gonna have to have nachos, I'm addicted to it ...
16		I want, they don't do cider, and I don't want a beer, [<S 03>Hi]
17		Don't do cider, do you?
18	<S 03>	Sorry
19	<S 02>	Don't do cider
20	<S 03>	No
21	<S 01>	I'll have the deep fried mushrooms with erm, an Old
22		Timer burger, can I have cheese on it?
23	<S 03>	What cheese?
24	<S 01>	What's the difference?
25	<S 03>	Swiss, Monterrey Jack is an American cheese [inaudible] how would
26		you like it cooked?
27	<S 01>	Erm well done
28	<S 03>	Yes
29	<S 02>	Can I have the, er, nachos and, erm, I was wondering
30		whether to have a veggy burger or the normal burger, erm, are the

31		veggy burgers nice?
32	<S 03>	Yeah they're okay, they're not made on the premises though
33	<S 02>	All right I'll have, er, I'll hve a normal burger then, with
34		barbecued beans
35	<S 03>	How would you like it cooked?
36	<S 02>	Erm medium
37	<S 03>	And drinks
38	<S 02>	Er, d'you have, er have you got pineapple juice?
39	<S 03>	[nods her head]
40	<S 02>	Can I have pineapple juice mixed with white wine?
41		Mixed together
42	<S 03>	White wine
43	<S 02>	Yeah, in a big glass with loads of ice
44	<S 01>	[laughs] erm, can I have, erm, mineral water, sparking one?
45	<S 03>	Okay
46	<S 01>	Thanks

(Carter and McCarthy, 1997:97-99)

### 3. Classroom activities

#### Step 1

Students work in pairs of four or five to discuss the differences between spoken text and written text. This discussion can help students become more conscious of the characteristics of spoken English. Then when they come to practise their oral English, what they produce will not be too bookish.

After students' discussion, teacher summarizes the differences between spoken and written English and the characteristics of spoken English by showing students some specific examples in PPT. (for references, see Burns et al, 1998:49-59)

#### Step 2

Students listen to the recording of the authentic conversation. This step aims to let the students get the main idea of the conversation. The recording can be played twice according to student's understanding rate. Students are required to answer several questions concerning the overall meaning.

#### Step 3

Copies of the transcription (in its transcription form with transcribing symbols) are given to each student. Then the teacher explains the meanings and implications of the transcribing symbols and gives a brief introduction of the theoretic frame of conversation analysis to the students. After that students themselves can try to analyse the transcription in terms of types of interaction, sequences and the related aspects of conversation analysis discussed above. Finally the teacher brings what the students have presented to a summary. By using the commentary from the reference book *Exploring Spoken English* (Carter and McCarthy, 1997:99-102). In the explanation, teacher should highlight the most important places as far as the typical aspects, such as topic initiating, turn taking and repair are concerned. The teacher should also try his/her best to let the students leave in their minds a deep impression of the strategies employed by the speakers. The major language problems (vocabulary and grammar) should be solved in this step.

#### Step 4

Students listen to the recording another time to enhance their sensitivity to the features of real spoken discourse and deepen their understanding of the conversation. At this stage, the teacher should direct the students to consider what they should do in similar situations. Consciousness of this role imagination or role substitution is

very important for adult learners of a foreign language.

### Step 5

Students are divided into pairs to prepare a conversation based on the situation of ordering food in a restaurant. The transcription of the model conversation and the aspects of conversation analysis and related strategies which have been discussed can be used as help during the preparation. At this time the teacher should go around the classroom to monitor and guide the students in their preparation. Any problems students encounter (vocabulary and structures) must be solved by the teacher immediately.

### Step 6

Some pairs of students are required to perform their conversations. While the students are presenting their conversation, the teacher can use a digital recorder to record what the students say for later transcription and analysis. After some presentations, one or two recorded conversations made by the students are chosen for the students to transcribe and analyze in terms of the major aspects involved in conversation analysis. By doing this work, the students can make a comparison between their conversations with the example. The teacher can point out the problems in the students' conversations. Through practice and analysis, the students' sense of speaking English should be strengthened.

If time permits, students can be encouraged to make more conversations based on similar situations, such as buying stamps at a post office, opening a bank account at a bank and make a hotel reservation.

## 4. Assessment

The purpose of the assessment is to check the effectiveness of the teaching and especially the strategies the students employ in their conversations.

The teacher prepares some topics or situations and prints them on different pieces of paper. Students are divided into pairs and each pair draws a topic or a situation and goes to the appointed places to prepare. After preparation, students are asked to perform their dialogs pair by pair. Two teachers are needed to judge the speakers' oral presentations. Students' speaking competence is judged according to the following numerical type scale:

Adequacy of participation

Maintenance of interaction

6	5	4	3	2	1
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Initiative, expansiveness

6	5	4	3	2	1
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Quality of ideas

Maturity and quality of thought

6	5	4	3	2	1
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Interpersonal skills

Engagement, rapport

6	5	4	3	2	1
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Nonverbal behavior

6	5	4	3	2	1
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Coherence and expression

Clarity of ideas

6	5	4	3	2	1
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Cohesion and coherence

6	5	4	3	2	1
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Register and tone

Level of formality	6	5	4	3	2	1
Politeness	6	5	4	3	2	1
Directness	6	5	4	3	2	1
Tone of voice	6	5	4	3	2	1

Language

Range of structure and vocabulary	6	5	4	3	2	1
Breadth and precision	6	5	4	3	2	1
Accuracy	6	5	4	3	2	1

Production

Pronunciation	6	5	4	3	2	1
Intonation, stress and rhythm	6	5	4	3	2	1
Voice quality	6	5	4	3	2	1

(Adapted from Grove and Brown, 2001)

The time limit for each presentation is fixed. The average of the two teachers' scores is used as the result for each student.

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