1 Now You're Talking! Practising Conversation in Second Language Learning

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The notion of speaking practice has a long history in second language learning. From the Latin classes in Tudor England, through to the communicative approach of the late twentieth century, practice in language learning was founded on the notion that drilling, repetition, engaging in monologue and dialogue, and the study of supportive texts promoted and reinforced acquisition. Even so, the texts studied often had shortcomings, not least in terms of a mismatch between them and real-life conversations, resulting in a lack of authenticity. However, language teaching materials for speaking gained a considerable boost from the advent of large-scale spoken corpora. The last decade of the twentieth century also saw the notion of authenticity deconstructed, suggesting not only that materials should be derived from authentic sources but that learners need to authenticate the material, i.e. perceive on their own behalf that the material is a genuinely useful and personally significant encounter with the target language that will serve them well in their own contexts of use. This process of learner authentication facilitates more meaningful practice and thus promotes more effective acquisition. In this chapter, we trace the history of methodology as used in conversation and demonstrate what this offers us for methodology in general and speaking practice in particular. We show how material can move from controlled to freer practice and how the plausibility of content and its potential for personalisation can enhance authentication for the learner. We also consider problems of practising conversational language beyond the sentence level and practice in contexts where free variation, flexible word order and pragmatic constraints are the focus, and we discuss both strategy-focused and awareness aims of good practice. We conclude that practice, if properly planned and understood, can considerably enhance learning opportunities and underpin acquisition of everyday conversational skills.

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Introduction

The idea that speaking should be a part of classroom practice is a very old one. The textbooks for learning Latin 500 years ago in the time of King Henry VIII of England, the so-called *Vulgaria*, were concerned, as their name suggests, with ordinary, everyday language, and there is evidence to suggest that classrooms at the time were every bit as lively in terms of speaking practice as many communicative classrooms today (for an extended discussion, see Carter and McCarthy 2015). So in some senses, not much is new. On the other hand, the recording, analysis and understanding of everyday speech has never been more comprehensive, and the most common form of speaking for most human beings, social conversation, has been the subject of intense scrutiny by researchers. It is also often considered an important goal within second and foreign language learning, however imperfect endeavours to achieve that goal may be.

Underlying this chapter is the conviction that *conversation* as a social, multi-party activity, as opposed to *speaking*, which, in the second and foreign language learning context, is a broader and somewhat vaguer notion, often involving monologic talk (e.g. oral examination timed presentations), can and should be taught and learned, a view we share with Slade (1997) and Tsang and Wong (2002). Our position is that the strategies that speakers use to manage and participate in conversations (e.g. turn and topic management, reiterating and clarifying) can be incorporated into materials and that students can acquire both the language and the techniques to accomplish everyday conversation successfully. We believe this can be achieved through a combination of an appropriate methodology and through various types of sustained practice. Here we understand *methodology* to refer to the set of concepts which underlie methods, with *methods* referring to how practice is brought about in the materials and classroom activities. We do not subscribe to the notion that natural conversational language will simply appear or 'be generated' through activities either only loosely based on input material (a criticism mentioned by Shumin 2002) or simply plucked out of the air because the activities seem to be enjoyable or creative, a view often reflecting the triumph of hope over experience.

The Special Nature of Conversation

The introduction above made a separation between *conversation* and *speaking*. There is no doubt that all kinds of speaking activities have a legitimate place in the language classroom, and we have already mentioned oral presentations. We could add to those information-gap activities (Doughty and Pica 1986; Richards 2006: 18), drama activities (Maley and Duff 2005), discussions (Lam and Wong 2000; Green et al. 2002), recall protocols and role plays

(Yuan 2001; Golato 2003), teacher-directed storytelling (Jones 2002), inter-
views with native-speaking informants (Mori 2002), task-based activities (Ellis
2003), as well as pronunciation practice and activities involving repetition and
drilling. Useful as such activities may be as different forms of language
practice, clearly none of those types of speaking is what we would recognise
as social conversation. And yet the 'conversation class' has for many decades
occupied a place in syllabuses around the world; very often such classes
specify no more in the syllabus than a broad topic launched by the teacher
that learners are expected to elaborate on.

Some points which may seem fairly obvious need, nonetheless, to be made
and borne in mind when discussing the notion of practice in relation to
conversation. Conversation is a social act, it involves more than one partici-
pant, it takes place in real time and, in the case of everyday informal talk, it is
unpredictable. In the real sense of the word, conversation is creative, in that the
product we observe post facto is a jointly constructed process where no party
can be sure of the precise nature of the next move as the conversation unfolds
(for a broader discussion of creativity in everyday conversation, see Atkins and
Carter 2012). Conversation is quintessentially co-constructed (Clancy and
McCarthy 2015). Elsewhere, McCarthy (2010) has argued that conversation
also meets the demands of creating and maintaining 'flow', and more specific-
ally, 'confluence', that is to say, a perception of a jointly produced fluency over
and above that achieved by any individual speaker. We also know that
conversation is subject to conventions of turn-taking (Sacks et al. 1974) and
that strategies are exercised by all parties in terms of appropriate openings
and closings, management of topics and, above all, management of the inter-
action and the state of play in terms of shared knowledge and the relationship
among participants. Conversation analysts have long recognised most of these
features as central (for a useful summary, see Sidnell 2010). Such features
necessarily involve particular linguistic repertoires, raising the question of how
feasible it is to incorporate them into the syllabus and, in the present case, what
can meaningfully and usefully be practised, and how?

The above is the broader picture as regards conversation. It is also clear from
corpus linguistic investigations that a specific linguistic repertoire is associated
with it, in the sense of lexis and syntax, which, we argue, is a crucial element in
what Hinkel (2006: 115) refers to as 'a sufficient lexico-grammatical repertoire
for meaningful communication to take place'. Buttery and McCarthy (2012)
have demonstrated the existence of a set of vocabulary with a high frequency
of occurrence in spoken interaction, which distinguishes it from writing,
although there is considerable overlap between the vocabulary found in both
modes (for further discussion of the vocabulary of conversation, see
also McCarten 2007). Even more notable in recent years has been the recogni-
tion of a grammar of speaking and in particular a grammar of conversation

(Carter and McCarthy 1995; Biber et al. 1999; Leech 2000; Rühlemann 2006; Carter and McCarthy 2015).

Both the lexicon and the grammar of conversation are characterised by their focus on successful interaction and the relationship between speakers and listeners, as opposed to acting merely in support of message topic and content. A further, related insight from corpus linguistics has been the growing evidence of the ubiquity of chunks in conversational language. Chunks, or formulaic utterances, lexical bundles, clusters, prefabricated items, as they are variously known (Wray 2000; Schmitt 2004; Biber 2009; Martinez and Schmitt 2012), have been claimed to account for up to and exceeding a half of the linguistic material in conversational transcripts (Erman and Warren 2000). Chunks are, of their nature, a fusion of lexis and grammar; such that what we might teach and practise for the purposes of fostering natural conversation should better be termed the lexico-grammar of conversation. The fact that chunks are all-pervasive, pre-fabricated and automatically retrieved (i.e. not assembled at the time of utterance) has implications for practice in relation to the development of fluency (Hunston 2002; McCarthy 2010). Automaticity has long been recognised as a significant factor in second language acquisition (Gatbonton and Segalowitz 1988; DeKeyser 2010), and there can be no doubt that chunks make a major contribution to the production of fluent strings of speech and interaction.

The insights discussed above have come mostly from the analysis of spoken corpora, a resource not available to the present authors when we began teaching conversation classes 40 or more years ago. Now we find it hard to attach much credibility to conversation classes, speaking syllabuses and materials for the teaching of speaking that fail to take into account the insights from corpora which tell us how the delicate fabric of successful conversation is woven. But it behoves us to lay out how such insights can be (and have been) translated into teaching materials and into the types of practice which will best lead to consolidation of the input and to acquisition of the skills and linguistic repertoires involved in conversational interaction. This we undertake in the following sections.

The Special Nature of Methodology for the Teaching of Conversation

In the previous sections, we claimed that conversation was, in a sense, special within the general notion of 'speaking'. Following from this is the attention to appropriate methodology which the teaching of conversation calls for. The present authors worked for many years within the traditional PPP paradigm of Presentation–Practice–Production (Richards 2006: 7) (a paradigm also discussed in Chapters 2 and 5). The input, typically sentences chosen as epitomes of a target structure or lexical item(s), was presented to the class and then drilled to a satisfactory level of accuracy

before being produced in controlled or freer activities. Tsang and Wong (2002) comment on such preoccupation with form and lack of attention to conversational processes and refer to these as the 'counterproductive aspects of a traditional conversation class' (p. 213).

The three Ps are a tried-and-tested formula. Yet they exhibit troublesome flaws in regard to the teaching of social conversation. Firstly, conversation cannot be presented in exemplary sentences and can only be illustrated through extended texts, either in the form of concocted dialogues, edited conversational transcripts or raw, unedited ones. Artificially created dialogues have been compared with naturally occurring talk and often been found wanting (Burns, Gollin and Joyce 1997; Carter 1998; Gilmore 2004). The unpredictability of real conversation also means that target items may occur only here and there, or only once or twice in the chosen conversation; therefore, the methodology calls for measures to draw attention to the target items. Practice, needless to say, will be quite different from the practising of sentence-based material. Furthermore, the target items, if they are strategies in the broader sense, that is to say not necessarily lexico-grammatical items, may not be visible or apparent at all to the learner. Finally, the types of production need, as best as possible, to mirror what conversation is really like. All of this does not necessarily imply always presenting entire conversations (it is often difficult in any case to define what a 'complete' conversation is) or requiring learners to reproduce them. However, conversational extracts need to be long enough to illustrate the unfolding of the strategy, to enable the process of authentication referred to earlier and to give learners enough context to practise the strategy naturally.

For this reason, it can be suggested that to better practise conversation, we adhere to a different set of methodological concepts, better termed as the three Is: Illustration–Interaction–Induction (Carter and McCarthy 1995), as summarised in Table 1.1

The second stage, interaction, is the hub around which the whole process of teaching conversation revolves. It is the crucial practice stage where two aspects of knowledge and skill are honed: noticing and awareness of the target features and knowledge of their nature and use. Language awareness as an integral feature of language learning has been promoted by a number of scholars over the last couple of decades (Van Lier 1998; Clennell 1999; O'Keeffe and Farr 2003). In particular, Hughes (2002: 59–61) argues that a language-awareness-based methodology should be judged not by the quantity of speech produced by learners but by the depth of understanding achieved of why speakers routinely make the choices we observe them making in natural settings. This does not imply that the stages of the method are viewed as purely receptive; the very act of interacting with and practising the target elements is in itself conducive to better inductive skills and increased awareness.

Table 1.1 *The stages of Illustration–Interaction–Induction*

Illustration	Conversational extracts are chosen to exemplify a given feature *in context*, supported by corpus evidence, even if the extracts are edited versions of original corpus texts. A single sentence or series of sentences will never truly suffice. These exemplifications can be exploited in any number of tried-and-tested ways in the standard ELT activity repertoire (e.g. listening and answering comprehension questions about content).
Interaction	This is itself a form of practice. The practice generated is aimed at fostering the habit of interacting with texts, noticing and apprehending key features and using them in the contexts in which they normally occur. Noticing has for a long while been considered within second language acquisition studies to be a key step in the acquisition process (Schmidt 1990, 1993). See Chapter 2 (this volume) for further discussion of this phenomenon.
Induction	The practice of awareness skills offers a critical support for this stage, which is a process of incorporating new knowledge into existing knowledge and apprehending underlying principles, whether those principles be formal rules of lexico-grammar or socioculturally determined conventions of conversational behaviour.

Categorising Items and Skills to Be Taught and Practised

Although we suggest that conversational skill encompasses two aspects, what we termed the broader picture of turn-taking, topic management, openings, closing, etc. alongside the specific linguistic repertoires of the lexicon and grammar of speaking, the two should be seen as complementary and working in harmony to create interaction. That said, many common strategies may be described as techniques for which there is no identifiable set of target language items. Their linguistic realisation depends entirely on the content and topic of the conversation, for example, asking a follow-up question, checking understanding or reacting to what is said by using a word from the previous speaker's turn (*A: She works as a stress counsellor. B: A stress counsellor?*).

However, many conversation strategies are often realised through particular grammatical conventions, or involve particular vocabulary items, or both. In some senses this facilitates practice, since what teachers and learners are most familiar with as material for practice are grammatical configurations and lexical combinations. Conventionally, as mentioned earlier, in the conversation class, practice is often carried out as freer speaking on topics generated by the syllabus, by a unit or text in the coursebook, by the socially sensitive teacher or by the students themselves. Freer speaking is difficult if there has not been sufficient preparation or, we argue, insufficient practice taking the students from controlled activities to more open-ended scenarios.

But what exactly is it that needs to be practised and how can the material be organised?

McCarten (2007, 2010), McCarthy and McCarten (2010, 2012) categorise conversational strategies and the lexical and grammatical items used to realise them for the purposes of building a pedagogic syllabus into four main areas, which are listed with examples below.

1 **Managing the conversation as a whole** includes starting and ending conversations, changing topics, revisiting earlier topics, etc. Conversation practice is not just practice in talking *about* one's job, one's holidays, one's family, etc., it is also a question of practising the *organisation* of such talk in interaction.

2 **Constructing your own turn** includes features such as taking time to think, hedging, and expressing attitude and stance. It also includes the linear assembling of spoken utterances in real time and strategies such as elaboration and reiteration. Most crucially, it involves linking one's turn to the previous speaker's turn to create continuity and confluence and, to that end, paying careful attention to how one opens one's turn (Tao 2003; McCarthy 2010; Evison 2013). Practising such linking will be important and should by no means be seen as a skill to be reserved for the advanced levels. Even the most elementary-level conversation can and should be linked cohesively and coherently, one turn to another, to be considered a successful act of communication rather than a succession, however accurate, of lexico-grammatical constructions. For example, the use of *Well* to answer a *yes–no* question in a non-*yes–no* fashion, or simply to take time to think, can easily be illustrated and practised at early elementary level.

3 **(Good) listenership**, as described by McCarthy (2002, 2003), involves responding appropriately to show both understanding and engagement. Central to conversation is the quick alternation of roles – speakers become listeners and vice versa. How one behaves as a listener, what one does and says, is just as important as what happens when one is the speaker. This will be a significant feature of practice.

4 **Taking account of others** refers to the language choices speakers make depending on who their interlocutors are: friends and family or strangers, peers and equals or superiors, and this category addresses issues of formality, politeness and the projection of new and shared knowledge. Choices have to be made in real time, requiring considerable skill and, once again, practice.

In terms of linguistic components, the language required to realise many strategies can include single-word discourse markers as well as chunks or fixed expressions of varying length, and it is often possible to identify or create a coherent if not closed set of linguistic items that can realise a particular discourse strategy (a feature reported on in the early seminal work on discourse

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Conversation strategy	Possible lexical realisations
Managing the conversation	
• Referring back to an earlier comment	*As I said, As I was saying, As you were saying*
• Ending a conversation	*Well, anyway, Better go, Gotta run.*
Constructing your own turn	
• Taking time to think of an answer to a question	*Well, Um, Uh. Let me think, Let's see*
• Elaboration	*I mean, in other words* *And another thing is, What's more*
Listenership	
• Responding to news or information	*Wonderful!,* expressions with *That's + adjective* (*That's great/crazy/good/*etc.)
• Showing understanding	*I see, Uh huh, Right*
Taking account of others	
• Projecting shared understanding	Use of vague category markers: *... and things (like that), and that kind of stuff*
• Telling new information	*You see, What happened was*

Figure 1.1 Examples of conversation strategy types and possible lexical realisations

analysis by Sinclair and Coulthard 1975). Examples (not an exhaustive list) of strategies within each category above and attested lexico-grammatical realisations, derived from corpus evidence, are given in Figure 1.1

Depending on the level of students, any set of items can be reduced or expanded accordingly. For example, 'taking time to think' can be taught with a simple use of *Well* or *Um.* Responding to news with *That's ...* can be expanded with the addition of a wide range of positive adjectives (*cool*, *lovely*, *awesome*, etc.), and can be contrasted with reactions to negative news (*That's awful/dreadful/so sad*, etc.); single-word exclamatives can also be added (e.g. *Wow! Gosh!*, etc.)

Other strategies may involve the use of grammatical structures, examples of which are presented in Hughes and McCarthy (1998), depending on the

context of the conversations and relationships of speakers. For example, *Taking account of others* (see Figure 1.1) may involve the strategic use of a past tense form of a verb when asking a favour politely of a boss or professor – as opposed to a close friend or spouse, e.g. ***I was wondering** if **I could** ask you a question* (see Carter and McCarthy 2006: 604 for further examples). Forms like these can be viewed either as aspects of grammatical choice or as lexico-grammatical chunks. Either way, the goal of practice is to move ultimately to a level of automaticity that is the hallmark of fluency.

What we have called good listenership is an area of particular significance in relation to practice. The cognitive demands of speaking in class are often so great that students have little time to think about appropriate responses to their partners' utterances and focus understandably on their role as possible or certain next speaker. And yet the evidence of spoken corpora as regards conversation is that listeners are anything but passive receptors who simply process incoming messages for comprehension. This is a basic human behaviour common to all languages, though there may be cultural differences in styles of response (e.g. on Spanish response tokens, see Amador Moreno et al. 2013). McCarthy (2002, 2003) identified a core list of common non-minimal response tokens in English used by listeners to show simultaneously comprehension and engagement and to contribute to the flow of the conversation. These response tokens represent a mezzanine level between simple back-channel utterances encouraging the current speaker to continue such as *mm*, *uhuh*, *yeah* (see Gardner 1997) and extended, content-rich turns as the listener assumes the role of speaker. Non-minimal tokens include common adjectives and adverbs such as *good*, *fine*, *right*, *definitely* and *absolutely* and show engagement without taking over the floor. Practice in the non-minimal response tokens can be given from the earliest stages of learning, for example, basic lexical items such as *Good, Great!* and simple phrases such as *That's nice/awful.* Developing automaticity through such practice lowers the cognitive stress levels of taking the turn. It not only acts as a spur to richer, more natural and fluent interaction but also functions as a monitoring system for the teacher. If the students are proffering inappropriate responses, then the chances are that there is a comprehension problem somewhere that needs addressing. Thus, systematic practice in good listenership can provide useful evidence of 'listening comprehension' as well. In the world outside of the classroom, we show we have understood not by answering comprehension questions but by responding appropriately, and good practice in the classroom can reflect those natural conditions more effectively. Finally, listener behaviour illustrates the fact that in typical conversations, all speaker turns apart from the very first opening one are responses to previous utterances (see Tao 2003 on the functions of turn-openings). One could, hopefully without too great a risk of

oversimplification, state that the teaching of conversation is the teaching of how to respond, and therefore that appropriate response should be a recurring, core feature of practice in the conversation class.

Differences between Traditional Practice and Practising Conversation

Traditionally, practice exercise types for grammar and vocabulary mostly rely on the fact that specific target items can be said to be correct or incorrect in terms of formal lexico-grammatical rules. For example, very often only one form of a grammatical paradigm is correct, as in the case of third-person singular simple present verbs, and there are spelling rules and irregular forms to learn for plural nouns. Word order issues when taught and practised are often somewhat rigidly defined, such as interrogative forms with auxiliary *do/ does/did*, etc., or the placement of adverbs in relation to verbs and their objects.

The practice of many of the items which realise conversation strategies cannot rely on such formal constraints. They often take the form of fixed expressions such as *at the end of the day* (used to conclude or summarise), *I guess so* (used to converge, accept or agree) or *If I remember rightly* (used to hedge an assertion) and cannot be said to belong to a paradigm (e.g. as a convergent non-minimal response, the form is always *I guess so*, not *He/She guesses so*). Others such as the vague category markers are semi-fixed, such as *and all that kind of thing/sort of thing/sort of stuff*, and speakers have a freer choice as to which version to use. Equally, in relation to conventional sentence syntax, spoken language often displays freer word order, so an item like *you know*, *I guess*, or *I suppose* can occur almost anywhere in an utterance, and the verbs lose their written-language requirement of an obligatory object. Similarly, common adverbs such as *still*, *even*, *probably*, *definitely* often occur utterance-final in conversation (e.g. *I can't find my keys still. / I don't know whether they have a passport even*). Final position is not obligatory, but in writing it is extremely rare and is likely to be marked down in formal written examinations. Consequently, typical practice activities that ask students to put an item in the correct place in a sentence are difficult, if not impossible, to create for natural conversation.

Speaking and Writing: Uneasy Companions

Many of the most popular coursebooks over recent years have tended to use predominantly written texts as presentation vehicles and as a starting point for both writing and speaking practice. As a result, the models of grammar taught have tended to be based on written rather than the spoken norms identified by