

TEACHING NOTES

Training Students to be Active in Conversation

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I had several classes from Marge Terdal when getting my master's degree from Portland State University. In addition to teaching me a great deal about applied linguistics, she influenced me to have high standards and to be reflective about my own teaching. She was always willing to help those who wanted to do a little extra.

Research by Long (1981) and Holmen (1985) has shown that language learners (LLs) are often passive in conversation with native speakers (NSs) of English. These studies have suggested that in NS-LL conversation LLs rarely ask questions or initiate topic moves. Furthermore, topics in NS-LL conversation are frequently dealt with quickly and superficially. This is because LLs seldom respond to NS statements and often respond to NS questions as simply as possible. Being passive may cause LLs to appear uninterested in others, boring, and less fluent than they really are. This seriously harms their chances of developing interpersonal relationships with NSs.

The Training

The training described here is an 8-hour curriculum that I created with the intent of leading students to be more active in conversation. To my knowledge, a course with this intent has not been used before. However, some of the activities in the training were found in teacher resource books and were created with the stated intent of improving LLs' communicative competence. **Portions of the training are explained below** (for the complete curriculum, see <http://web.pdx.edu/~caleb/lit.html>).

Introduction

The first step in the training is for the students to realize that LLs are often passive in conversation. In the teacher resource book *Conversation*, Nolasco and Arthur (1987) suggest showing LLs a dialogue where one speaker is passive. The goal is for the students to notice characteristics of the passive speaker such as those mentioned above. These characteristics are written down and used as the focus for the subsequent training.

The second part of the awareness training is to help the LLs realize that being passive could harm their ability to form personal relationships in English. Some of the consequences of being passive are elicited by looking at the above-mentioned dialogue where one speaker is passive. The aim is for the students to realize that asking questions shows interest, answering an array of questions is not particularly fun, continuing a topic shows fluency, and initiating topic

moves allows the students to talk about what they are willing and able to discuss. These advantages are written down and reviewed throughout the training. They are key to the whole program because they motivate the LLs to take the training and conversation activities seriously.

After the awareness training, the class moves on to four focuses aiming to lead students to become more active in conversation. The areas are asking questions, elaborating and holding the floor, initiating topic moves, and turn taking.

Asking Questions

As noted above, LLs do not ask many questions to NSs in conversation. The focus on asking questions starts off with the class reviewing the importance of questions in conversation. The LLs then move on to activities where the students practice asking questions in social settings that they are likely to encounter in America. One activity involves the students bringing some photographs or a picture album to class. In pairs, one partner is required to ask three questions per picture.

Another activity is called "the question game." In this activity, the teacher says a sentence like "I just bought a new car." The students, who are divided into two teams, are given thirty seconds to think of as many follow-up questions as possible, such as "How much did it cost?" or "What did you do with your old car?" The teams are given a point for each question.

In "two truths, one lie" (Roemer, 2000), the students write down two truths and one lie about themselves. All the students (in groups or as a class) ask questions to try to find out which one they think is a lie. This and other activities are used in order for the students to practice asking questions and, more important, to develop an active mind set in English.

Elaborating and Keeping the Floor

The next focus is on elaborating and keeping the floor. As mentioned above, LLs often reply to NS questions in a minimal

fashion. One reason for this is that some cultures have different attitudes toward silence. In American English, if an LL is quiet (perhaps trying to think of a word in English), an American will likely seize the turn or *ask* another question. The students discuss this phenomenon and suggest fillers (*well, um, or let me see*) they might use to keep their turn when searching for what to say. The class then does activities in which they use the fillers and try to hold the floor. In one activity, students in groups of three are asked a question. They have to answer the question and "hold the floor" as long as possible. Their turn is timed. If the student pauses for one second without a filler, the group says *stop* and the length of the answer is recorded. The other group members then have a chance to see if they can keep their turn for a longer period of time.

The class also practices elaborating instead of responding as simply as possible. In one activity, students are asked a yes-no question, but the students cannot respond *yes* or *no*. Instead, they have to reply with three sentences. For example if a student is asked if she can swim, she could respond "Well, I like swimming, but I rarely have time. In my country I like swimming in the ocean. But I went to the Oregon coast and the water was freezing!"

Initiating Topic Moves

The next focus is on selecting or changing the topic. The class first reviews the importance of selecting a topic they are interested in and capable of discussing. Next, the students brainstorm topics they are comfortable talking about. The instructor then tries to elicit lexical phrases that the LLs can *use* to initiate a topic move such as *by the way, that reminds me, or guess what*. That is followed with some structured dialogues and communicative activities where they practice selecting or changing the topic. One example is "Judo" (Domyei & Thurrell, 1991). The students are given a certain topic, such as judo. In pairs, one partner is asked a question, and he or she has to change the subject to judo (or the current topic) no matter how strange!

Taking Turns

The last focus is on taking turns. The LLs are first reminded of their tendency to wait for an NS question before they speak. The instructor then introduces turn-taking signals in American English. Speakers may signal the end of their turn by doing one or more of the following: relaxing their hands, looking at their interlocutor, changing their intonation, decreasing the pitch at the end of a grammatical clause, drawing on the final syllable, or laughing (Duncan & Fiske, 1977). The class then practices recognizing the signals. In one activity, groups are given a topic. Each member thinks of one comment to say. When the activity is started, every member has to speak. The order of who speaks first, second, third (and so on) is recorded. Whoever speaks first wins. Whoever speaks next gets second place, and so on. The students need to watch for turn signals of the current speaker and then aggressively take the floor before the other group members.

Conclusion

I have tried this training or portions of it in several classes. The activities are student centered, and the class often gets excited and noisy. Most important, the students take activities seriously because they are reminded of the importance of being active throughout the course. A research project I completed in 2001 showed that the curriculum did help LLs become more active in conversation with NSs in four out of five measures (Prichard, 2001).

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