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Conversation as a pedagogical tool : A case for its inclusion in the communication class

Alan Milne*

This paper was originally written as a chapter of a dissertation submitted as part of the MSc programme in TESOL at Aston University, UK, in 2009 (Milne, 2009). The article presented below is a modified version of the original MSc dissertation chapter, amended to be a stand-alone paper. Part of this article was also included in a presentation at the Korean 2011 Winter International Conference on Linguistics organized by The Korean Association for the Study of English Language and Linguistics (KASELL) which is due to be published in the conference proceedings early 2011.

Conversation as a pedagogical tool: Arguments against

There would seem to be little in the way of empirical evidence that supports the use of conversation as a primary means of increasing students' levels of fluency. Indeed there may be a case to suggest that making conversation the primary focus of the communication class is an unattainable goal and ultimately detrimental to students' overall linguistic development.

In this regard, with specific reference to traditional teacher fronted communication classes, Nunan (1987:141), has made reference to evidence which suggests that classes that profess to engage in communicative class activities "…may not in fact be very communicative after all" (ibid: 144) In a similar vein, Seedhouse (1996: 23) has argued that it is impossible both in theory and practice, for teachers to replicate real conversation in a classroom environment as part of a lesson, stating that classroom conversation is "an institutionalised variety of discourse produced by a speech community or communities convened for the institutional purpose of learning English working within particular speech exchange systems suited to that purpose." So that if a teacher asks learners to have a conversation in English, the interaction they subsequently engage in would cease to be part of the lesson and become void of any pedagogical purpose the institution is contracted to serve. According to Seedhouse, for a conversation to be valid in the sense of its recognized register (my term), as free unstructured interaction, "no institutional purposes could shape the discourse"(Seedhouse, 1996: 18), whereby all participants (including the teacher) would need to share equal status with turn-taking and participation rights and have equal responsibility for all aspects of discourse management (ibid); something considered difficult to achieve given that the instruction to have a conversation is "still embedded in the speech event 'lesson'" (Bannink, 2002: 271). So that even if learners are assigned to work in groups, where the interaction would be expected to be more symmetrical (ibid), being asked to have a conversation with a partner with whom they might share no mutual interest, on a topic which is in all

＊ アラン・ミルン
埼玉大学教養学部教授、English teaching

likelihood pre-determined and expected to take place within a set time frame, where participants are expected to share equal floor time, is a false construct and not representative of real conversation which has more fluid boundaries (van Lier: 1989, ibid.)

In essence, "the idea of a conversation having a pedagogical function …"would seem to be "…a contradiction in terms" (Thornbury and Slade, 2006: 243) where, "At best, all that students can learn from this kind of class is fluency...At worst, students spend their class time listening to each other's ungrammatical utterances" (Taylor and Wolfson, 1978: 33). Such an argument would lend credence to the idea that if learners are asked to engage in unstructured free conversation before becoming acquainted with the structural aspects of language, there is a possibility that their language will become prematurely fossilized (Thornbury and Slade, 2006: 236 & 275. Also Plann, 1977 cited in Ellis, 1994: 599). In the case of adult learners, this might mean that they would "simply stop learning when they feel their proficiency is adequate for their purposes" (Selinker, 1972 in Taylor and Wolfson, 1978: 32). Accordingly, it could be considered that "What students need from a conversation class is not the opportunity to speak, but rather, explicit instruction in what Hymes (1972) has called the 'rules for speaking'" (Taylor and Wolfson, 1978: 34).

Given these arguments, efforts to introduce more communicative, student-centred interactions notwithstanding, the traditional classroom environment could not be considered conducive to the production of natural conversation by virtue of the fact that it is a "formal, institutional and asymmetric setting" (Bannink, 2002: 267), intended for structured learning activities which have an observable pedagogical outcome. Nevertheless, "paradoxically, in this setting, the informal, unpredictable spontaneous conversational interactions which should lead to communicative competence of the learners somehow has to be accommodated" (ibid), and it is with a view to resolving such a paradox to which I now turn.

Conversation as a pedagogical tool: A rationale for its inclusion

Of the many problems that are said to conspire to prevent a natural conversation from taking place in the classroom, the most significant is due to the classroom itself, in that it is a contrived construct, and any activities designed to overcome this fact are similarly contrived by a teacher whose involvement in directing and responding to classroom interaction further constrains the potential for authentic dialogue to be generated in a way that is symmetrical and more student centred. Nevertheless, these problems are not insurmountable. Indeed, although Nunan (1987) has been cited previously as expressing doubts about the effectiveness of communicative class activities, he is referring mainly to classes which focus on teacher-to-student/class and student-to-student conversations on language form which presents little opportunity for learners to engage in the kind of communicative activity that would be representative of interaction outside the classroom. In the same paper however, he ultimately advocates resolving this dilemma by having students discuss topics which are relevant to them in their real lives, stating that:

> "when learners' interests are engaged, and when they are able to bring their own background schemata to classroom interactions, these can begin to be truly communicative, even with very basic

learners" (Nunan, 1987:144).

There is an argument therefore, to suggest that class management design in any communication class should have some form of mechanism built in to activities "where participants have to find out what they have in common or where they differ in terms of a specified list of features relating to opinions, biography, pastimes, etc." (McCarthy, 1991: 136).

In other words, if learners are asked to engage in activities which have a "potential for eliciting genuine personal information" (Dörnyei, 2001: 44), where they can share information based on "real-life experiences and preferences"(ibid: 66), or are allowed to participate in tasks in which they 'share personal experiences,' (Willis, 1996:27, in Thornbury and Slade, 2006: 268) the potential for more authentic interaction is greatly increased and is a useful exercise for students to practice more 'interactional, process-oriented' conversational exchanges as opposed to the 'transactional, product-oriented' (ibid: 240) style learning that characterizes communication in the language class.

As for the argument by Taylor and Wolfson, that more structured language instruction is preferential to actual conversation; while there is no question that an understanding of rules for speaking have their place in the language syllabus, Taylor and Wolfson's comments refer to L2 learners studying within the target language community which is not really applicable to many language learners in a mono-lingual environment such as Japan for whom a focus on form may be better taught after having had a chance to develop some elements of fluency with a language they have seldom had the opportunity to use in its conversational form and where "the baseline for meaningful communication in this setting is seen as 'doing conversation'"(van Lier 1996, cited in Bannink, 2002: 266).

With regard to the danger of fossilization occurring in classes which do focus a large proportion of class time on peer to peer interaction, a study by Porter (1986), revealed that in general "learners do not appear to be duly disadvantaged by exposure to deviant input from other learners" (in Ellis, 1994: 599) with only 3% of student errors reproduced from inaccurate peer correction (ibid. Also cited in Kramsch, 1985: 179). In essence, "The fear that errors will be transferred from one student to another if they are not immediately corrected by the teacher is an unwarranted behaviourist view of language" (Kramsch, 1985: 179). Moreover, far from being detrimental to the development of language proficiency, van Lier (1996: 193) suggests that "it may be beneficial for learners to interact with learners who have a lower level of proficiency, since this encourages the creation of different kinds of contingencies and discourse management strategies".

Although it must be noted that Kramsch cautions that in some cases, learners may feel inhibited by the presence of more proficient speakers in any group (1985: 179), or that there may also be a group dynamic where there is the possibility that higher level speakers might feel held back if they are working in groups with learners with lower level language skills, the evidence suggests that on the whole, 'interaction between learners in group work is better than with teachers' (Ellis, 1994: 598-99) in that 'when learners control the discourse, quantity and quality of talk increases and learning opportunities are maximized' (Ellis, 1998 in Thornbury and Slade, 2006: 309) due to the fact that learners will be able to actively negotiate interactions

with their interlocutor. A point emphasised by Dat (2003: 382), who argues that:

> “Conversational strategies must be incorporated in teaching materials because they are essential tools to serve the communication of meanings. One method to do so is by designing tasks for learners to act upon their interlocutor’s speech rather than merely concentrating on their own”.

With regard to the generation of conversational topics, there is also evidence to suggest that student centred interaction may be more beneficial than teacher led discussion given that ‘students try to overcome communication problems better if they have control over the topic’ (Ernst, 1994: 316) and that in one particular study reported by Slimani (2001: 297), it was found that ‘Topics raised by classmates created a greater sense of students having learned something than by topics raised by the teacher’, essentially confirming observations by Jones (2003), that “Students can define their own content and goals and still learn a great deal” (in Thornbury and Slade, 2006: 317) when they have the chance to use language “in contexts where there is a press on their linguistic resources” (Gibbons, 2001: 260-261). In this sense, it could be considered that it is possible and perhaps preferable to have some conversational element built into to a pedagogy centred on a methodology which will “take students’ interlanguage as a starting point and seek to build on that rather than on language imposed from the outside” (Prodromou, 1997: 20 in Thornbury and Slade, 2006: 101) where “language learning evolves out of learning how to carry out conversations” (Hatch, 1978, ibid: 267).

Ultimately, whether or not a symmetrical conversation akin to the informal register of interaction that takes place between individuals outside the classroom is in any way achievable within an institutional environment, or whether any such interaction can labelled ‘conversation’ and still retain any pedagogical validity, might arguably depend on how the teacher and/or the learners perceive a conversation’s relevance to the teaching aims and learning goals of the class as a whole. For example, if a needs analysis revealed that a particular group of learners wanted to improve conversational fluency and general communicative abilities, then there would have to be an underlying assumption on the part of both the learners and the teacher, that the class would be organized in a manner conducive to realizing these learning objectives where the teacher is entrusted to ensure the social reality of the classroom can be exploited as something positive “as a resource for the teaching of language” (Breen, 2001 (a): 122), and where all parties bring to the class a “willingness and capacity to suspend disbelief, to participate in simulated communication within classroom-specific interaction” (ibid: 129). In essence, rather than serving to constrain the pedagogical options available to the teacher, the classroom may be better regarded “as an ecological environment in which ‘lesson and conversation’ are relational to each other” (Bannink, 2002: 285) where “learners need to be active practitioners within the discourse of the learning context in which they find themselves” (Breen, 2001(b): 309). If conversational development is a motivating factor for students in their participation in a communication class offered by a particular institution, then the students, by electing to take the class, and the institution, by offering the subject, could be considered to have empowered the teacher to fulfil the contractual obligation of

shaping discourse by whatever means deemed appropriate to achieve students' learning goals and in whatever way the teacher chooses to negotiate the syllabus. If a measurable learning outcome by whatever means takes place in an institutional setting, then it could be argued that this can be due to nothing other than the result of a pedagogical process.

In conclusion, if the motivation of students participating in an English communication class is primarily to increase conversational fluency, then there would be a mutual understanding between learners and the teacher that this will form the core of the class structure and that the teacher will be empowered to enable this process by whatever means. It may never be perfect, but the classroom could be considered an environment conducive to opportunities for interaction that students may never have had the chance to exploit fully as a functional means of communication given that language proficiency in the Japanese education system is aimed primarily at passing paper based exams for entry to institutes of higher learning. In short, in a mono-linguistic society such as Japan, the classroom may be the only location where real communication can take place if classroom management is set up to facilitate this important and necessary learner need.

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