

Conversation through Dramatic Games

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Abstract:

The need for conversing is always present in the teaching-learning process of EFL. Teachers must be able to help students develop their conversational competence in the target language. This dramatic game means that the participants can improvise dialogues to fit an already described situation and perform it. The teacher should design three stages: play reading, paraphrasing the play, and performing the dramatic game. To simulate real-life situations, students will begin to think in English without noticing it. They cross the bridge and speak easily. It is the teacher who will experiment, try new methods, and be fearless about having fun.

Keywords: dramatic game, conversational skills, interaction process, simulating reality, performing a play, spontaneity, dialogue

Conversation is a pivotal spoken discourse that needs to be practised in the classroom. Teaching intermediate or advanced English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students conversational English is difficult in most cases. Conversing involves far more than a broad knowledge of the language. It has to do not only with words and structures but with the conventions for interaction, the negotiation of meaning, the understanding of social relationships expressed in a foreign tongue, and the options available for formality and informality in speech.

When defining *conversation*, we should start by saying that it is an activity at the upper end of the continuum of oral language, the lower end being formal oral discourse, and the upper end - free and spontaneous speech. It is an unplanned activity of which the main characteristic is

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spontaneity. Unpredictability is frequently observed, and a sense of involvement of both speaker and listener is present (Tannen 2007).

The great variety of topics and the use of fragmented language, with lexis dependent on content, where turn-taking is fast and where posture, gestures, and quality can interfere with meaning, are of significant importance and cannot be overlooked in the conversational event.

Our intention as teachers is to stimulate oral production and lead the students to the understanding of social conventions in dialogues and conversation, and to have them use these in a relaxed atmosphere, where group cohesion has been assumed to have paramount importance. Thus, we may foster not only social but linguistic development. When students collaborate individually and as a group, they create dialogues for situations in which there is a need for communication, discover the affective aspects that colour the language employed by using their imagination and fantasy, and most important of all, practice speaking and conversing.

1. The Act of Conversation

The need for conversing is always present in the teaching-learning process of English as a foreign language. Our students demand activities that will ensure the development of conversational skills, and teachers must be able to develop conversational competence in the target language, which is as important for the student as is grammatical competence.

One of the alternatives can be to rely on the learners' knowledge of conversing in their L1. They are used to interacting and exchanging information in their native language, they know how to negotiate meaning and action in communicating with others. However, there are cross-cultural differences between L1 and L2 that render the activity of conversing in one different from the activity of conversing in the other, and there are norms and conventions that must be identified in one and in the other if we are to consider a speech event as conversation and not merely as talk.

Another alternative is to follow Cook's suggestions in his book *Discourse*. Cook (2004) points out that "there are ways in which the insights of conversation analysis can be exploited in the classroom" (117), as there are phrases, words, expressions, and paralinguistic features associated with

particular turn types that can be taught. More than that, formulaic speech such as greetings, introductions, and farewells can also be made explicit to the student (Cook 2004).

Yet telling someone how to open and close a conversation is not enough either. More often than not we have seen that if a student is given a flow diagram to convert into a dialogue or a piece of conversation, he or she will follow the instructions given, but the result will not qualify as a conversational event, nor will it lead to one, because of the artificiality of the language chosen and because the student does not consider the face-to-face interaction with all that it implies.

We consider that the problem of developing conversational competence has a solution if we take into account the following assumptions:

- Conversation has a specific structure that is different from that of other forms of oral speech, such as interviews, talks, debates, lectures, and so on, and therefore should not be studied and developed in the same way.
- We should speak of stimulating students or participants to converse rather than giving them ready-made formulas.
- We should emphasize the interactional encounter, which is the centre of the conversational process, and stimulate the negotiation between participants on the basis of *chains* of sentences.

These assumptions represent the frame that holds together the design of what we believe that stimulates the students, and they determine the type of activity that will be undertaken.

2. The Dramatic Game

The tool we have used with our students is the Dramatic Game – an activity where the participants can improvise dialogues to fit a situation that is described beforehand, and then perform it. There are two kinds of improvisation, and in both of them the participants act without referring to a script. In the first, the situation is described and analysed with the teacher in a sort of a panel meeting. The story is studied and so are alternatives proposed for the action and the development of the plot. Once it is performed, the teacher corrects language mistakes, and gives suggestions for the performance. Then the scene can be played once more and evaluated again.

In the other type of improvisation, time for preparation is limited to five minutes and then performers act it out, inventing the dialogue as they proceed. This is the true dramatic game. The actors do what they think best and enjoy their experience. The teacher does not interfere in any way and the spectators, who are the rest of the participating group, can give their opinion only at the end of the performance. The scene cannot be done over again, as another interpretation of the situation would be another improvisation, a new one altogether. Thus, it is a unique experience for both actors and spectators.

If we want students to play the Dramatic Game, we must introduce them to free spontaneous work little by little. If we do not supply them with appropriate warm-up sessions, the participants will not be able to fight their own natural inhibitions, so they will not learn how to extend their abilities gradually. We must get them to relax and gain some practice in dramatics, so that they will become more self-confident and less reluctant to enter the game.

3. Experiencing the Dramatic Game

We have designed a scheme for EFL students taking into account that the dramatic game has to be preceded by warm up activities in order to ensure good results; we should design a three-stage treatment: (1) play reading, (2) paraphrasing the play read, (3) performing the dramatic game.

3.1. Play Reading

We may use a short play that takes no longer than 15 minutes. The teacher becomes the director or coordinator of the reading of this play and of the performance. The students are the actors. There is no producer, no stage setting, and the amount of the theatrical sophistication is reduced to a minimum. The students read the play, so they are able to describe the plot, the action, and the personality of the characters, and to suggest what they would do if they had to perform each of the parts. The teacher asks the students to observe the author's stage directions, but does not insist that they follow them if they do not feel at ease with them.

How can we relate play reading to the conversational act? We look at conversation from the point of view of the connections between utterances

and interaction and the way in which meanings are communicated and interpreted in conversation through the adjacency pairs (Richards and Schmidt 2014). Adjacency pairs are utterances produced by two successive participants, which are made up of two parts: the second utterance is related to the first as a necessary follow-up, as in the question-and-answer relationship. If one speaker asks a question, the second must give an answer. If the second speaker does not respond, there is something amiss, and it has to be filled in by an explanation.

We have to analyse many other important instances in the play: the beginning of the different scenes, how they are closed, the way in which the topic of each scene depends on the person who is talking, the characters' short or long replies, the cultural norms present in the interaction of participants, the language used, fillers and pauses, and so on.

The next step is performing the play. The students do not have to memorize their lines, they may have their scripts with them and look at the words when necessary. In this way, the mere repetition of learnt-by-heart dialogue is avoided and the emphasis is placed on the way the words relate to the behaviour of the characters. Gradually, the students become involved in the activity, and they realize why pauses, silences and fillers are relevant to their discourse. They can eventually control their movements, use facial and bodily gestures to convey meaning.

Reading and performing a play are meant to be a step toward fostering a climate of confidence among the students, engendering group cohesion. The teacher can go on to the second stage if he/ she finds out that the students have overcome some of the difficulties they have at the beginning and that they are confident enough to start creating their own short sketches.

We find it advisable to handle a script first and use it in as many sessions as possible so as to encourage students to attempt the improvisations later on. We do not have to force the participants beyond their capabilities, and we must always remember that the dramatic activity is a means of developing the conversational skills.

3.2. Paraphrasing the Play Read

Paraphrasing the play means that students have to work without a script and they have to 'invent' the text they have just performed. They

already know the outline of the plot, the succession of events, the characteristics of the different roles, the possibilities of dialogue, and so on. We may ask them to use their own words as much as possible and not to deviate from the sequence of events.

At the beginning the students seem to be unable to speak, they cannot put together their own words and fit them to the action of the play they are inventing. They consider that this activity puts them a limit in their verbal expression, making them lose confidence in their ability to invent and perform. We may divide the play into short scenes and do them one by one, giving the students time to concentrate on the words they are going to use and on the action that has to be developed.

In order to paraphrase the play, we think it would be better to go back to play reading. The participants want to meet the challenge and go on with the exercise. Therefore, we should encourage them to do what they can: this means that some parts of the action are skipped, that the lines, in general, lose the vitality they have in the original play, and that the characters look somewhat less amusing. Soon, the students begin to grasp that lines are appeals for action and that the dialogue works in the same way as a conversation. By imagining that the characters are talking to each other, rather than actors performing a play written by somebody else, the students are able to use their own language without being aided by the script.

Anyway, the group should get more experience in guided improvisations before tackling the dramatic game. We may ask them if they can enact the final scene in a different way. The students rearrange the play so they can realize that it is necessary to add scenes because there is a need to produce new dialogues. Even if this activity may prove time-consuming, it holds their interest and they are to understand how the exercise can develop their verbal and non-verbal expression of English.

3.3. Performing the Dramatic Game

In the third stage of our treatment, we can practise a freer form of improvisation – the dramatic game. The students have to prepare a short sketch, thus they have no script to hold onto and no lines to remember. We have given them slips of paper that outline a situation or some sort of a conflict, that is, a summary of a brief story. We have to make sure that the

kinds of situations selected are familiar to the participants, because the topic should not be outside the students' everyday experience if the improvisation is to be a useful dramatic vehicle. A student has the possibility to select one of the situations and read it to find out what he/ she is expected to do. Besides, he/ she has to select the partner or partners who is or are going to perform with him/ her.

If we have a slip of paper like this:

People involved: 2 characters

Situation: A man and his wife are watching TV. They see on the screen a number that has won an enormous amount of money in the lottery. The wife says that the number corresponds to the ticket she has bought. Both are thrilled and start planning what to do with the money. She wants something he detests, and he likes what she loathes. They bicker. When she takes the ticket out of her handbag she finds that it is a week old and does not correspond to the lottery in question.

When the participants know the topic and the context towards which they must build a little sketch, it is easier to invent the lines and words, but, by keeping to the story and trying to develop it, the participants may forget the drama of the event. The improvisation itself is not supposed to be a work of art, and if the characters are simplified, the conflict is reduced to external action and the words used have little dramatic effect, but the exercise is still valid for our purposes.

As we want to have our students interact, converse, and perform, we may change the contents of the slip of paper. We may keep the number of characters and the situation, but limit this last aspect in the following way:

People involved: 2 characters

Situation: A man and his wife are watching TV. On the screen they see a number that has won an enormous amount of money in the state lottery. What do they do?

This is an improvisation of a more demanding character. We think it is not recommendable to start with open-ended activities of this sort, until we have tried the type of improvisation illustrated by our first example. Anyway, this one has proved a good way to find out how the students are able to create the sketch and reach a decision about characters, plot development, and appropriate lines to fit the action.

4. Simulating Reality with Dramatic Games

Having used theatre techniques as training tools for teachers, we have noticed that there is sometimes a fear of the words *theatre* and *drama*. Some students and teachers feel that there is something special about these words and what they seem to represent. They will have to perform and be exposed. If the fear level is high in our class, we may forget the words *drama* or *theatre* and use instead *simulating reality*.

Almost every English textbook contains dialogues about real-life situations. However, when students read them, and even try to act them out, they appear to be stilted and restricted. For instance, there is a dialogue about a scene in an airport. Instead of using just what is in the book, we may try developing an improvisation using the same grammar structures and vocabulary that the lesson teaches. Students, and the teacher, can choose who they want to be: the ticket sellers, baggage handlers, hotel reservation clerks, travellers, etc. Then, they choose what they are doing (the action), like carrying a suitcase, writing a receipt, making a phone call, losing their baggage or passport, etc. The location of the scene is already dictated by the lesson in the book: at the airport.

In simulating real-life situations (playing dramatic games), students will begin to think in English without noticing it. We do not have to correct a student during one of these exercises, but only afterwards.

In all language learning exercises, you have to *cross the bridge* in order to feel really good about your progress. The bridge is the crossover between the left side of the brain and the right side, between the analytical/critical side and the creative side. When a student is more advanced and has crossed over the bridge, he can use both sides of his brain at the same time. But at first, new learners are stuck on the analytical side and need to be convinced, tricked, or blasted onto the creative side.

While learning English, the crossover also represents the difference between going slowly and worrying about grammar and vocabulary mistakes and going quickly – concentrating on the internal goal of each game without stopping to analyse or correct until afterwards (Tannen 2007). The use of physical action and movement has proved to be the best, quickest, and funniest way to cross the bridge. But many students, as well as

teachers, are somehow conditioned to be afraid of fun and they sometimes feel that they cannot be learning if they are having fun. Because of this, it is important that the teacher should write down the structure of each game they are to do, and the grammar and vocabulary that will be exercised during each activity.

When trying to speak, most students have typical worries, like: What if my vocabulary or grammar is not as good as his or hers? What if I cannot think of anything to say? What if I cannot find the proper word? What if I look silly or sound dumb? What if the teacher and everyone in the class are judging me? What if I am judging everyone else? In short...what if I fail?

It is our responsibility as teachers to convince the students that they cannot fail. If they try to keep their focus on the goal of each game activity, they cannot fail. As their teachers, we should try to keep their focus on the action of the game more than on the words. Thus, the words will come naturally. What is the worst thing that can happen? Aside from refusing to do a game (which will not happen if the teacher is confident and enthusiastic), we may suppose they get frustrated, and stutter, and stop, and have to do some mime or physical action to communicate what they want to say. Another student will frequently jump in and say the actual words they are trying to find (as in the charades). It is great, because we all help each other, and everybody learns.

5. The Relationship of Action to Speaking in Real Life

We find it natural to move while speaking and to speak while moving. In real life, in our own native languages, if a second person is with us, probably 90% of the time everyone does some movement or action at the same time that they are speaking. Because our bodies are moveable, and because we take them with us everywhere we go, some kind of action will almost always be linked with speech.

So, we often find ourselves asking students: What is the action in this situation? What are you doing? What is he doing? What could you or he be doing? What action is logical to the situation? (Or if we want to try for humour: what action is illogical to the situation?). This also gets them

thinking about action instead of words, even though they are using words to describe the actions.

Actions are always the *-ing* form of a verb plus an object. Like painting a wall, rowing a boat, eating a hamburger, etc. They must be physical, and, in the world of theatre, we call these actions *business*, and if you go to see a play that has good actions or business along with the dialogue, you are pleased and satisfied even if you may not know why. This is because actions and speaking go together naturally in real life. There is nothing new, mysterious, or magic about this idea, and deep down, everybody knows it. It does not take any special talent to connect actions with speaking, but it does take crossing the bridge.

As teachers speak in English to EFL students, they act out and do mime for many explanations of notions the students do not understand. They are not afraid to have fun, because good fun is always highly organized. Everything seems to be a balance of discipline and freedom – the strict, disciplined structure of a game activity and the freedom, creativity, and fun that develop within the structure.

Many students arrive at an advanced level of English where they can read, write, and listen effectively, but they are still afraid to speak. Usually, this is because they have had teachers who were afraid to speak. Pronunciation is another great fear, and there are many game activities that focus only on pronunciation. Some students are crossing the bridge and losing their fear of speaking quite easily, and, for other students, it takes longer, relying upon their previous English-language training. Everything depends on the willingness of the teacher to experiment, to be open to trying new methods, to create new structures and to be fearless about having fun. Crossing the bridge to thinking in English is clearly worth the effort.

Conclusion

Playing dramatic games is a language-learning conversational activity in which each student takes a distinct role with specific purposes, and then interacts with the other students in the class so as to complete common goals.

When we start practicing conversation through dramatic games, we are impatient to see how it will work, but impatience can be the most

dangerous attitude for the teacher. He/ she has to allow students to get involved in a process which, for some is difficult to understand, and, for others, produces dread and inhibitions. The teacher must break the ice gently and rely on the capacity that young learners have to adapt, some more quickly than others.

The teacher must know how to plan the activities, what to do first, and how to lead the students into performing. This does not mean that teachers must be actors, or even directors. If they have attended a course in dramatics or consulted a theatre craft manual, so much the better, but what is required is class experience and how to manage groups of students. The teacher's class experience is especially valuable, and so is the teacher's interest in activating the language class, in making it livelier and more participative.

The students grow more confident in their speaking ability and more motivated to improve after participating in dramatic games. They are able to observe successful communication strategies used by classmates or to receive their direct suggestions. Dramatic games can be valuable components to the oral training class, as they provide extensive and spontaneous speaking practice on challenging topics.

The dramatic game is one of the many techniques that can be used to foster participation in speaking and conversing. Courses and manuals are helpful, but it is the teacher's common sense that must be relied on and the knowledge he/ she has of the interaction process when people decide to communicate with one another.

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