
How to Exploit Dialogue in English Language Teaching

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Language carries not only functional meaning but also social meaning (Littlewood : 1981). Therefore, in foreign language learning, learners have to pay attention to the interaction part as well as the transaction part of the language. To communicate effectively requires more than mastery of the language skills, therefore, other communicative abilities should also be taught to the learners if meaningful communication is the learning purpose. To do this, learners must be exposed to language approximate to the kind of communication situation encountered outside the classroom. This kind of language is best represented in the form of dialogue. This paper will discuss the exploitation of dialogue in the four skill areas in English language teaching.

Language carries not only functional meaning but also social meaning (Littlewood : 1981). Therefore, in foreign language learning, learners have to pay attention to the interaction as well as the transaction (giving information) of the language in order to be able to use language correctly and appropriately. Since the ability to communicate effectively requires more than mastery of language skills, other communicative abilities should also be acquired if meaningful communication is the learning purpose. To be able to acquire these, learners must be exposed to language approximate to the kind of communication situation encountered outside the classroom, where language is not only a functional instrument, but also a form of social behaviour. This kind of language is best represented in the form of dialogue.

Since dialogue is the speaking mode of the language, its content is less complex than the written form. Therefore, it is quite suitable to use dialogue to illustrate to the foreign language learner how language is used in communication. Considering dialogue as useful only in teaching speaking skills, however, is underestimating its value. Actually, dialogue can be exploited in all four skills, even though more activities can be done in speaking areas.

Before continuing a discussion of how to exploit dialogues, let's consider the nature of dialogue used in the language classroom. If the purpose in using dialogue is to expose students to real-life communication, then the following dialogue is not suitable since this dialogue does not represent real-life usage of language, but is written for language presentation. In other words, it is not an example of realistic spoken English.

- Suda : Well, this is our living-room.
Aporn : It is very comfortable. It is more comfortable than our living-room.
Suda : This is the dining-room.
Aporn : It is a large room. It is larger than our dining-room.
Suda : And this is our kitchen.
Aporn : It is a modern kitchen.
Suda : It is new too. I like it very much.
Now, let's look at another kind of dialogue.

- A : Excuse me. Uh...uh...Have you got a light?
 B : I'm sorry...what'd you say?
 A : Matches?
 B : Oh! I'm sorry. I don't smoke.
 A : Thanks anyway, good-bye.
 B : Bye.

This dialogue is more authentic, or at least simulated-authentic. The speakers sound like native speaker and behave in the same way: they pause, repeat and rephrase, etc.

In brief, when dialogue is used for language teaching, one should consider whether or not it really represents communication occurring outside the class.

What can be done with dialogue?

As previously mentioned, dialogue can be used to demonstrate learners' use of language in all four skills. Let's start with the receptive skills: listening and reading. In *listening*, apart from checking learners' understanding of the dialogue through question and answer or information transfer activities, more should be done with dialogue. Since using language appropriately is the purpose of learning the language, students should be made aware of this appropriateness. After listening to the dialogue, learners should be asked to identify the speakers. If possible, they should personify them --- give details of the physical appearance and biographical information of the speakers, such as giving the age, the marital status, personal characteristics, etc. Then, learners should be asked to give the setting -- where are the speakers?, in what situation are they? The purpose of the dialogue could also be elicited from learners by asking questions such as: is he trying to explain or make an excuse? Complain or order? Then, the channel of speaking could be identified --- are the words said face-to-face or over the telephone? Lastly, the topic of the dialogue could be checked --- what is the talk about? A lecture or a party? Plays or films? What this does is to have learners contextualize the dialogue. Contextualization is the fastest and easiest way to highlight the social setting of language use.* Learners will be familiarized with how language is used in real life. They will be attuned to the pronunciation, intonation, stress and pace of the real language.

Contextualization could also be done when dialogue is used in *reading*. After the learners' contextualization, they could be asked to dramatize the dialogue. The dramatic reading of dialogue requires that learners pay close attention to pace, stress, pronunciation and intonation. This could be done by giving a scrambled dialogue and asking them to rearrange it into proper order. In doing this, learners have to use the text clues which show how one line relates to another in the dialogue to make a complete unit of language. For example, look at the following scrambled dialogue :

- Pun : Sure, the monsoon's passed, Chiang Mai should be back to normal in a few days.
 Besides, I don't mind flooding. It may make Chiang Mai more interesting.
 Jim : I don't know. I'm afraid of the flood.
 It would be awful if you have to travel to Chiang Mai and are forced to stay
 in a hotel for 3 days. So, you still want to go?
 Pun : Hello, Jim. Are you still looking forward to going to Chiang Mai next week?

"Hello", "sure", "I don't know" are used as text clues in reorganizing the dialogue. However, in a scrambled dialogue such as :

- (a) I'm in the bath!
 (b) O.K. I'll get it.
 (c) Doorbell!

there are no obvious text clues. Learners have to use knowledge of the world and their experience in order to reorder the dialogue. When learners work on these exercises (with more lines), they make use of not only their linguistic competence but their communicative competence as well.

This ordering exercise could also be done by giving each student in a group a strip of the dialogue. They have to read their line and memorize it; then, the group must determine the correct order of all the pieces to form a coherent dialogue.

Now, let's continue with the productive skills: writing and speaking. Even though it is not realistic to write dialogue, dialogue could also play a role in *writing* skills, mainly for variety in writing exercises. Learners could be asked to complete one half of the conversation, such as:

Booking a room

- Receptionist : Good morning, May I help you, sir?
 Mr. Barnes :
 Receptionist : I'm sorry, sir. We don't have a single room available at the present.
 Mr. Barnes :
 Receptionist : Yes, we've got a very nice double.
 It overlooks the sea.
 Mr. Barnes :
 Receptionist : Yes, all the rooms have a shower.
 Mr. Barnes :
 Receptionist : \$ 40.00 a night, sir.
 Mr. Barnes :
 Receptionist : No, I'm afraid breakfast is extra.
 Mr. Barnes :
 Receptionist : Check-out time is before 12.00 o'clock, sir. Shall I ask someone to take your cases up to your room, sir?
 Mr. Barnes :

To make learners more aware of the social meaning, learners should be asked to play certain types of persons, or to portray a particular attitude. For example, learners are told that Mr. Barnes is a fussy, moody old man or that he is a very gentle man, etc.

Learners could also be provided with a descriptive text such as the instructions on how to use the washing machine or, perhaps, a police report. Then, they are asked to transfer this descriptive text into a dialogue such as a conversation between a talkative young salesman and a cautious housewife on how to use the washing machine or a dialogue between a policeman and a victim about a robbery. Or this could be done vice-versa: that is, learners are given the dialogue, which they have to convert into a descriptive piece of writing.

Speaking is an area in which dialogue plays an important role. Here, learners must attempt to communicate in ways that are not only functionally effective, but which also conform to social conventions. This could range from a very controlled activity to a rather creative one.

In a controlled activity, learners could be asked to perform a memorized dialogue. A script which is not too long is given out and learners have to practise it before acting it out, trying to depend as little as possible on the script. Learners could be given the opportunity to choose between the different register of the language, e.g. being aggressive and rude or being normally polite, etc. Then, they should be able to sound rude, polite, etc, as appropriate. By doing this, learners will learn to adapt the language they use to the personality and attitude of the speakers.

Moving slightly away from strict control, the following type of exercise provides more interesting interaction between learners.

Dialogue Sheet

Speaker A

Speaker B

A : Good evening. May I help you, sir ?	A :
B :	B : Yes, please. I would like to have a single room.
A : I'm sorry, sir. We don't have a single room available at the present.	A :
B :	B : Do you have any double room, then ?
A : Yes, we've got a very nice double. It overlooks the sea.	A :
B :	B : Does it have a shower ?
A : Yes, all our rooms have a shower.	A :
B :	B : How much does it cost ?
A : \$ 40.00 a night, sir.	A :
B :	B : Is breakfast included ?
A : No, I'm afraid that's extra.	A :
B :	B : What's the check-out time ?
A : It's before 12.00 o'clock, sir, shall I ask someone to take your cases up to your room ?	A : Yes, please.

Here, learners work in pairs, and each person has his own dialogue sheet. Speaker A glances quickly at his part, then speaks it and speaker B does the same. Both speakers have to make eye-contact while they are speaking. Therefore, this type of exercise is quite different from a dialogue for memorization ; it is a dialogue with parts, as in a mini-play.

Role-play is a creative activity where learners can simulate real communication. Different types of role-play can be used in speaking lessons depending on the stage and level of the students.

a. Role-playing controlled through cues and information

Learners are provided with cue-cards giving the language functions they must perform -- how they actually word them is up to them. Their relationship with the other person is specified. However, each learner should not know the role of the other learner with whom he should communicate.

Example 1 :

Cued sheet for A

Cued sheet for B

(B is a stranger)

(A is a stranger)

A : Get B's attention. Ask him for something.	A :
B :	B : You don't hear very well. Ask A to repeat.
A : Repeat question.	A :
B :	B : Answer A.
A : Thank B.	A :
	B : End conversation.

Example 2 :

Student A : You arrive at a hotel one evening. You meet the receptionist and :

Ask if there is a room vacant.

Ask the price, including breakfast.

Say how many nights you would like to stay.

Ask what time breakfast is served.

Student B : You are the receptionist of a hotel. You have many single and double rooms vacant for tonight.

The prices are : US\$ 50 for the single room, US\$ 70 for the double room. Breakfast is US\$ 3 extra per person. Breakfast time is 7.00-9.00 a.m.

b. Role-playing controlled through situation and goals

This is a looser structure for a role-play which gives learners greater responsibility for creating the interaction themselves. Role cards are given to learners. These role cards may be used on their own or in conjunction with a text, cartoon, map or menu, etc.

Example 1 : Role card

Mr. Ward

You booked a single room in this hotel by telex two days ago. You've travelled from Singapore for a meeting which starts early tomorrow morning. You're very tired and all you want to do is check into your room and get to sleep.

Hotel Receptionist

You can't find this gentleman's name on the guest reservation list. All the rooms are booked. You feel sorry for him.

From these role cards, a conversation between Mr. Ward and the hotel receptionist could be created.

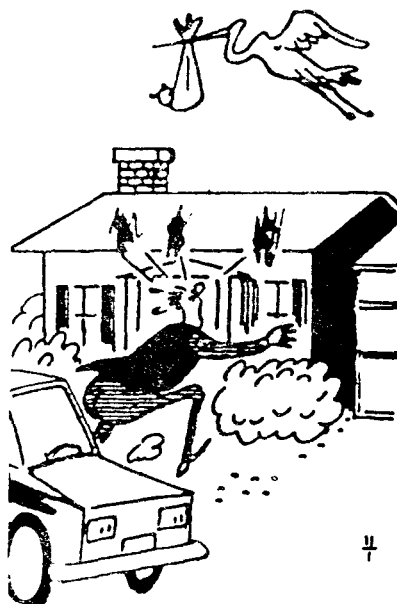
Example 2 : Newspaper article

THERE'S A UFO IN MY BED

John Haan who lives in Fort Walton Beach, Florida, went into his bedroom after breakfast on Wednesday to find the window broken and a piece of warm metal sizzling on his bed. Assuming that the three kilo lump was a piece of a sputnik of a miniature UFO, John rang the nearest Air Force Base to report.
Bangkok Post (1987)

From this article, learners could be asked to make a telephone conversation involving John ringing the Air Force to report the incident and making arrangements for taking a piece of the UFO to be checked.

Example 3 : Cartoon



From this cartoon, a telephone conversation between the man and the police could be created concerning the stork and the baby.

Apart from its usefulness in providing learners an opportunity to use language in all four skills, dialogue could also be used to introduce new language. In introducing the new language, either its function or structure, dialogue could be used to make language presentation more realistic, interesting and communicative. If the teacher teaches the “present continuous form” of which the function is to show an action happening at the moment of speaking, by saying “I am walking to the door” while actually walking to the door, he demonstrates no communicative purpose. On the other hand, teachers could present the “ing form” and its function in a dialogue that learners have to read or listen to. Then, comprehension could be elicited by an information transfer exercise. For example, learners could be asked to listen to the following dialogue between a teacher and a student, and then be asked to complete the table showing who is doing what.

A teacher is looking for his students to help him set up the stage for a school play. He meets John and asks him about other students.

Name	Action
1. John	
2. Tom	
3. Bob	
4. Mary	
5. Pamela	

Tapescript

Teacher : What are you doing at the moment, John ?

John : I'm helping Tom prepare the costumes.

Teacher : Where's Bob, then ?

John : He's running errands for Mr. Buckley.

Teacher : Well, what about Mary ?

John : She's working with the actors.

Teacher : And Pamela ?

John : She's working on the lights.

Teacher : Oh, well, I guess I have to set up the stage by myself, then.

By doing this, students are introduced to new language in comprehensible and realistic input.

In conclusion, dialogue is one interesting way to create more varied forms of interaction in the classroom. More importantly, it can be used to demonstrate to learners how language is used in real-life communication and can give learners an opportunity to use language for communicative purposes.

Reference

Littlewood, W. (1981). *Communicative language teaching*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.

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