

## Conversation Activities in English for Academic Purposes

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In this paper I will describe some of the problems a teacher faces in getting intermediate and advanced learners of English to talk. After describing these problems I will describe some teaching techniques we have used at DTEC and try to show how they cope with the problem I first mentioned.

### **Problems in getting students to speak.**

#### 1. Lack of knowledge of the subject.

In a class at DTEC, we have students with varieties of occupations. There may be four agriculturists, two meteorologists, one doctor, one architect, two mathematicians and five nutritionists. These people are specialized in their own fields. If the teacher comes up with this: "Today, let's talk about Rice Promotion. Who wants to give ideas about it first?", The agriculturists may seem to be enthusiastic to talk because they know the subject very well (but whether they will talk is another matter); but the rest of the class may look lost or a little worried because they have a very vague idea about Rice Promotion. Thus, some of the agriculturists might do some talking and the others in the group remain silent. What the teacher gets is a very quiet class, or a class dominated by a few speakers. Clearly there is a need for material that allows each student to participate on an equal basis. Each student needs to have information and ideas that are useful for the rest of the class and that add something new.

#### 2. Difficulties in putting ideas into words in the foreign language.

One of the vital problems for a person speaking a foreign language is that although he wants to speak to convey his own ideas, he is unable to express (clearly) his ideas through foreign words and sentence patterns. In other words, he knows what he wants to say but he cannot say it. If he had 5 points to talk about the subject, he could actually only talk about 2. One reason for this is the fear of making mistakes. In English classes most students have learnt that the way something is said is of more

immediate importance (for the English teacher) than the content or the ideas. This differs from the way in which a child learns its mother tongue. A child is rewarded for the content of its message rather than its form. If a child says "I bringed it for you" he is likely to be rewarded for his good intentions rather than be criticised for his unusual grammar. This is a decision which faces any language teacher who gives students some form of free conversation practice. Should he encourage the students to be creative in their use of language? That is, should he reward them when they express new thoughts in English or should he control them so that they do not make mistakes? Correcting students when they make mistakes might reduce mistakes, but it also reduces the amount of speaking the students do. So, one requirement of material for conversation is that it encourages the students to speak, even at the risk of speaking incorrectly.

Some students are not afraid of making mistakes, but they have difficulty saying what they want to say. Conversation material, then, should also allow students to receive help while they are speaking. In an ordinary conversation, the speakers help each other to continue the conversation. If they do not help each other the conversation dies. Speakers help each other in a variety of ways, by providing ideas that the others can discuss or develop, by using words and phrases that the others can copy, and by encouraging each other to contribute.

3. Lack of involvement with the subject.

Students are often unwilling to talk because they do not feel involved with the topic for discussion. The topic might be interesting enough but the students do not feel strongly enough about it to argue or discuss. Some students are shy. If they can avoid contributing anything then they will avoid it. They may be interested and involved but they are too shy to say their piece. If they are forced to speak, usually they can say something understandable and interesting but they have to be forced each time and most teachers are understandably reluctant to do this.

4. Appropriate student behaviour.

Most Thai students have learned in classes where the appropriate behaviour was silence. In conversation classes silence is not appropriate. In many discussion classes there is usually a noticeable contrast between the silence in the class and the noise and conversation that occurs as soon as the class ends. The students seem to have an idea that, as learners they must learn and the person who teaches is the teacher only. To learn from other students seems inappropriate and inaccurate; that is, they might learn something incorrect from other students. A proper conversation lesson, in their opinion, should consist of dialogues, sentences and phrases that they can learn and memorise and hope to use noe

day in a real situation. It is hard to get them to talk in class where the teacher gives the reason for the lesson as "to practise your English." The students may give the objection that, "Since we do not know English well, how can we practise using it?" It seems to them that they must learn the rules and regulations well and abolish all mistakes before they can sit down and practise them.

We have mentioned the problems a teacher faces in getting the students to speak. Let us look at a conversation exercise that we have used successfully at DTEC and see what features it has that make it a good exercise.

Robert Gibson in the *TESOL Quarterly* of June 1975 described a technique that he called "the Strip Story". This technique is probably familiar to most Peace Corps volunteers. Here is Gibson's description of the technique.

"In preparation for the lesson, the teacher selects a story which has same number of sentences as there are students. Simple sentences can be combined or more complex ones broken up to make the appropriate number of sentences. The sentences are typed with extra space between each sentence. The copy is cut into strips, with one sentence on each strip. In class the sentences are distributed at random to the students, who are then asked to memorize their sentences. No more than a minute is allowed for memorization. Students are not allowed to write anything down or to compare sentences at this time. After the sentences are memorized, the strips are thrown away, the story remaining only in the students' heads. The idea is to have each student become the sole source of one piece of information. Being the only source of his sentence will force the student to speak at least once. Thus everyone is required to participate in order to solve the problem. Next the students are instructed to find out exactly what the story is without writing anything down. Then the teacher sits down and remains silent. This part of the procedure is crucial because if it is not followed, the students will rely on the teacher to do the thinking and speaking. It is probably the most difficult thing in the world for the teacher to do what is necessary here, *nothing*.

The first time a class does a Strip Story, there are several uncomfortable minutes of silence, coupled with meaningful glances in the direction of the teacher -- who in turn ignores them, except possibly to encourage the students to get up out of their chairs and talk to each other, much as they would at a cocktail party. After this the teacher should really be quiet, listening and observing.

Just how the students go about reconstructing the story varies from class to class. Sometimes a natural leader will emerge, asking questions, suggesting ways of going about it. Other times, each student begins by talking to one other student, gradually including more people until the whole class is involved. Invariably, however, at some time the group will hear all the sentences, typically many

times. After the sentences are heard a few times, the organization of all this disconnected information takes place. With this technique, it is not possible to predict many of the outcomes, or all of the points that will be learned. One thing is certain, however, students teach themselves and each other, faster and more effectively, many of the things that teachers ordinarily have great difficulty teaching.

After a period of time in which all the sentences are organized (and this is normally done by physical positioning of students), the group usually agrees on a given sequence. When they are satisfied, the teacher rejoins the group and asks them to repeat the story in sequence, each person saying his part. It does not matter so much whether the students get the proper sequence or not at this stage."

TESOL QUARTERLY, 9, 2, (1975), 149 - 154.

If you have used the strip story you will know how effective it is in getting every student to speak. Why is the strip story so successful?

The most important reason is because each student is the only source of information for his sentence. Because he is the only one who knows his sentence he is essential for the whole activity. Without him the exercise cannot be done. Because of this every student has an important contribution to make. The material that he has makes him equal to all the other students in his group. Every student cannot avoid participating. Even if he feels unwilling to participate, the others in his group will demand his sentence so that they can do the exercise. As no writing is allowed during the exercise each student is the memory store for his sentence and will be required to repeat it clearly many times. There is no shortage of things for the students to talk about. The students have been presented with a problem. They must put the parts in order. This requires a lot of repetition, discussion and argument. The exercise also allows the students to learn from each other. If a student says his sentence incorrectly, the others will require him to repeat it correctly until they understand it. A student can copy the words and phrases that his partners use when talking about the order of the sentences.

Another version of the Strip Story which produces even more talking, can be made using the Blondie Comic Strip from the Sunday edition of the Bangkok Post. The twelve pictures of the comic strip are cut out and pasted on separate cards. The students work in groups of twelve, one for each picture. Each student has a picture which he describes and the students try to put the pictures in order. They must not show their pictures to each other. This exercise is easy to make and is always amusing. When describing the pictures the students learn new vocabulary from each other.

Let us now look at two other techniques we have found to be successful in getting students to talk.

The map exercise is similar to the strip story in that the information needed to complete the exercise is distributed among the students. This exercise is done in pairs.

Student A has a map of the streets of a town and student B has a similar map. The two maps differ however in that the street and shop names marked on student A's map are not marked on student B's map. But, student B has a list of these names although he does not know where to put each name on his map. The street and shop names marked on student B's map are not marked on student A's map although student A has a list of these names. While doing the exercise, the students do not see each other's maps and lists.

Student A has half of the information and student B has the other half. The two students in each pair must share their information to complete the map. As in the strip story it is interesting to observe the different strategies that the students use to share their information. Some share piece by piece giving one street name in return for another. Others give all their information and then receive all the other's information. In this exercise as in the strip story it is essential that the students do not *see* each other's sheets containing the information. For this reason, when the students sit in pairs they should sit facing each other. In this exercise we have noticed the different ways students describe the information on their sheets. Some students give each block a number and then describe the streets using these numbers. For example, A might say "Michigan Avenue is at the top of blocks 1, 2, and 3." Other students describe in terms of columns and rows, while others use some reference point like Circle Drive or the National Bank and direct their partner from there. Once again, it is best if the teacher does not interfere but leaves the students to work out their own procedure. It is not difficult to see how this technique of dividing the information between the two students in a pair can be adapted for other material. Instead of maps of various sorts, incomplete pictures, or incomplete stories can be used.

The last exercise, Fight for Survival, is different in one important way from the others I have described. The exercise is a ranking or ordering exercise. In this exercise all the students have the same information. Each student is told that his helicopter has crashed near an island. He has managed to swim there and finds that he is the only survivor. He knows that there is a small fishing village at the other end of the island. He must reach this village in order to survive. The only other people on the island are in the fishing village.

The island has many thickly-forested mountains. It is difficult but not impossible to cross it. Fortunately, for the survivor and the language teacher,

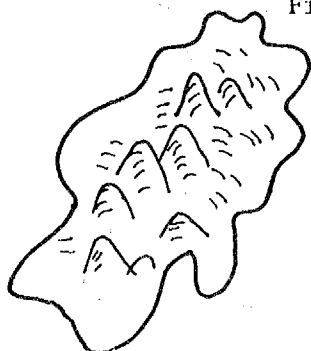
there are twenty items washed up on the shore in good condition. The survivor must choose ten of these twenty and then arrange them in order of importance. After each student does this for about five minutes, the students form small groups of about four people. Everybody in the group must reach agreement on the items and their order. The students must not do this by voting but by arguing and convincing. This is the main difference between this exercise and the preceding ones. In the strip story and map exercises there was one correct answer. In a ranking exercise, the answer depends on the opinions of those doing the exercise so there is no one correct answer. Each person's opinion is as good as another's as long as he can justify it, and in this exercise he is always required by the other students to justify it. The rule during this exercise and the others described is "Speak English". We have had no difficulty in encouraging our students to do this. Usually when the teacher slips quietly from the classroom at the end of the period, the argument still continues fiercely in English.

The organization of the work is important in this exercise. The individual work at the beginning helps the student form his opinions. Once he has these opinions, he must next defend them in his small group and must give and take with the other members of the group. Once each group has its own opinion the next step is for the whole class to reach agreement on the choice and ranking. This can be done using a fishbowl arrangement. One member from each group comes to the middle of the room where there are chairs for one member from each group. These representatives then argue with the other representatives to convince them to accept their choice and ranking. If a member of a small group does not think that his member is presenting the group's opinions well he taps his representative on the shoulder and takes his place. The success of the fishbowl arrangement depends on the class. We have also tried making the final class discussion a general free-for-all argument and this has been successful too. The ranking exercise always results in lively and amusing classes. Students have almost fought over whether half a bottle of whisky will be more useful than a pair of gumboots. The arguments that students give to justify their choices are usually ingenious. For example a penknife is useful if you meet a tiger because you can use the knife to commit suicide.

The techniques described here are all communication exercises. That is they place more emphasis on successful communication of ideas than on correct grammar. In the terms of these exercises, if the students can successfully communicate an idea even in 'bad' English then the teacher is satisfied. Usually teachers in English-speaking universities are satisfied with this too. Students who study English for Academic Purposes are intelligent, skilled adults. Exercises like the ones I have described take account of this intelligence and skill.

## FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL

Fishing Village



10 miles

You are in a helicopter which crashes near a remote island. You swim to safety but you are the only survivor. You know that there is a small fishing village at the opposite end of the island, which you must reach if you want to stay alive. There are no other people on the island.

The island, with many mountains and thick forest and bush, is difficult but not impossible to cross.

When you swim ashore you are wearing:

1. a shirt.
2. a pair of trousers.
3. a pair of underpants.
4. a pair of socks. You have no shoes.

Washed up on the beach around you are twenty items. You can only take **TEN** of these items with you on your walk across the island.

- |                                    |                                       |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| a wristwatch                       | a small bandage                       |
| twenty matches and a matchbox      | a small pair of scissors              |
| a shoulder bag made of cloth       | a plastic bag 1 metre square          |
| a small note pad                   | a wool blanket                        |
| a hand mirror                      | a transistor radio with new batteries |
| a penknife with two blades         | a pistol with five bullets            |
| a pair of rubber sandals           | a straw hat                           |
| a pair of gumboots                 | a felt* hat, cowboy style             |
| a coil of thin wire, 3 ms. long.   | half a bottle of whisky               |
| a ball of thin string, 6 ms. long. | binoculars in a leather case          |

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\*from *Communication Activities for Language Learning* by Tan Thomas.  
English Language Institute, Victoria University of Wellington New Zealand (Price \$ 2 plus postage)

Instructions:

1. Choose TEN of the twenty items which you think are necessary for your survival.
2. Rank these ten items in order of importance 1 to 10.

Work order:

1. Individual work Five minutes
2. Work in small groups. The members of each group must work together to produce one list of items and one rank for each group. 20 mins.
3. One member of each group is chosen as a delegate to the Fishbowl. If one member does not like the way his group delegate is arguing, he taps him on the shoulder and takes his place.

The Fishbowl must reach agreement in the same way as the small groups. There are also two places in the Fishbowl for any members of the class who want to join the discussion. They also obey the shoulder tap rule. 20 mins.