



Discourse Analysis and Cultivation of Conversational Competence in English Class

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Abstract

The essay is to discuss in perspective of teaching how to apply the results of Discourse Analysis study to English class to train students for successful communication through taking turns, controlling turns, teaching exchange, organizing transaction, spreading topic and taking into account contextual factors as well in order to cultivate students' conversational competence.

Keywords: Discourse analysis, Conversation, Conversational competence, Cultivation

The purpose of conversation is to exchange information, establish and maintain the relationship between people. The participants in a conversation always follow certain principles to develop towards some general directions. The goal of practical conversation in English class is to train students' language skills according with context to control conversational activities and develop their all-round conversational competence from short-turn to long turn and from transactional turns to intersectional turns, that is, the competence to apply their acquired language knowledge fluently and creatively to the communication with contextual consciousness. The essay is to discuss in perspective of teaching how to apply the results of Discourse Analysis study to English class to train students for successful communication through taking turns, controlling turns, teaching exchange, organizing transaction, spreading topic and taking into account contextual factors as well.

1. Taking Turns

Over these years, some linguists began to pay attention to analysis of language snippets larger than sentences, that is, to study how sentences build the larger and more meaningful units such as paragraphs and conversations. Thus the theory of Discourse Analysis has been created. J. Mch. Sinclair and B. M. Coulthard even discussed the structure and category of class communication to help teachers understand teaching process and evaluate teaching in order to make a further study into the relationship between teaching and learning.

H. Sacks, E. Scheloff, G. Jefferson developed the theory and method of Conversational Analysis, studied mainly the restrictive relation between the sender and receiver and relation between discourse and context. They also explored the principles and criterions that people should follow in communication and deepened the understanding of everyday life communicative speeches and that of rules, applied gradually to English class. H. Sacks thinks that a conversation consists of at least one turn-taking which has related meanings and is the basic structural unit of conversation and turn-taking is the basic element of conversation. In everyday conversations, some language signs are always used to imply that a turn is finished while another is ready to start. The evident problems that the students come across in English conversation is, no clear signs to imply the start and end of a turn, or taking turns in advance, or breaking conversation off. Turn-taking demands that speaker focus on what is going on attentively and adjust anytime his own discourse and predict that of the partner, which can make the conversation go smoothly. In the process, speakers, to some extent, can be thought to be competing each other for turns. Thus it is quite necessary to train the students how to enter turns, take turns, interrupt turns, holding turns, passing turns and withdrawing turns in order to successfully take part in conversational activities. Sacks concluded eight steps which can be applied to English class and has been proved efficient if it is used wisely. They are: (1) pre-planning a turn; (2) taking a turn; (3) interrupting a turn; (4) holding a turn; (5) passing a turn; (6) repairing a turn; (7) upshot; (8) close.

Ethnomethodologist E. A. Schegloff thinks that typical turn includes adjacent pairs, i.e. certain response that one of the speakers would make, such as, greeting---greeting, questioning---answering, complimenting---expressing thanks, etc. Each adjacent pair has two choices: preferred and dispreferred. Such as, invitation---acceptance or refusal, comment---agreement or disagreement, question---expected answer or unexpected one, etc. Generally speaking, in cooperative conversations, the dispreferred is used cautiously because it is high-structuralized dialogic frame and it is often put at the beginning or the end. We can design some brief adjacent pairs for the students to practice everyday

conversational formulae according to different contexts. Consequently, they can cultivate their short-turn conversational competence. For example,

A: Did you do well in your import and export business last year?

B: Yes, we earned \$5,500,000.

A: Oh, congratulations!

B: Thank you.

Apparently, there are two adjacent pairs in the conversation above, that is, question---answer and congratulate---express thanks. But there is a cross-pairs—A’s feedback (Oh, congratulations!) to B’s response (We earned \$5,500,000), which could be called statement---opinion pairs. If the speaker is not aware of it, the conversation will be interrupted after the first pairs, conveying only information without any social function.

Because adjacent pair is very structural conversation, it only fits the beginners in the early stage of their conversational practice. On that basis, students should be encouraged to add some necessary information or even creatively feed back the first part of the adjacent pairs, which can make the turns go on. For example, “Are these cakes fresh?” Besides the answer “Yes, they are.” Creative answer could be “I bought them this morning. Help yourself.”

Sacks, Scheloff, and Terasaki concluded several special sequences applied to turn-taking. They are pre-sequence, insertion-sequence, side-sequence, etc. (1). Pre-sequence is tentative discourse used to arouse the attention of others. It includes pre-request, pre-invitation, pre-statement, pre-disagreement, pre-addition, pre-statement, etc. In English conversational practice, teachers can provide some pre-sequence as models for students to prepare new turns consciously. For example, “we are having a party this afternoon.” (offering invitation), “That’s like what happened to me.”(statement), “I’m afraid, I do not agree with you there.”(disagreement), “ Have you heard the one about...” (telling a story). (2). Insertion-sequence is used to insert another related topic in main conversational sequence and then return to the main topic. (3). Side-sequence is used to insert unrelated topic in main conversational sequence. Insertion-sequence and side-sequence are often used while doubt, addition, correction, giving tips or asking for clarification. Teachers should offer more chances for students to practice the sequences mentioned above. Students could be more active and find conversations more interesting, more informative with better expressing and understanding.

2. Teaching Exchange

Exchange is the basic unit of conversation. Exchange in class conversations generally includes two steps: initiation and answer. Sinclair, Coulthard, and Edmondson studied and analyzed the models of class conversations and drew a conclusion that conversational structural system model is made up of act, move, exchange, transaction and interaction. An act is a language action. A move is formed by one or more than one acts. It has complete meaning and function which is like a turn. An exchange is composed of more than two moves (initiation and response). Transaction is formed by exchanges while interaction by transaction. Class conversational model is formed by act, move, exchange, transaction and lecture. The “Three-Move Exchange” they created is typical class conversational structure between teacher and students, including teacher’s initiation, students’ response and teacher’s follow-up.

Teaching is spread in a series of initiation-response-follow-up. The present problem is that the roles of teachers and students play are too much fixed. Teachers always control initiation and follow-up while students most of time are restricted to response. The conversations in real world need continuous response whereas active initiation and follow-up are demanded in more cases, which will benefit both the participants. Another difference between class conversation and everyday conversation lies in that teacher’s follow-up attaches more importance to quality of discourse expressed for accuracy and preciseness while common speakers pay more attention to the content expressed for substantiation and novelty.

Besides the part of initiation in exchange training, teachers can also design functional activities to train students’ skill of follow-up and response to different discourses. The following is a conversational sample designed to train students’ response competence to the case in which the required information is not available.

A: Well, what happened in this country in the last six days?

B: I really can’t tell you. I haven’t read any newspapers.

A: Wasn’t there a big event in politics?

B: Yes, it turned out the Democrats got a new leader.

A: Oh, I see, that interesting. Can you tell me more about it?

B: Awfully sorry. I heard it over the radio, but I was too tired and I don’t remember.

A: Doesn’t matter. What about Manchester United’s game?

B: Sorry, I'm not interested in football.

A initiated B to tell what happened in the last six days. B didn't know and explained. No matter what point of view A initiated from, B's response was negative and reason must be given, which made the conversation complete turns.

By understanding the concept of exchange, students will cultivate reciprocity and interactivity, that is, exchange each other ideas and maintain the relationship with others, which the conversation avoids developing into one direction to monologue of teachers and a few talkative students.

3. Organizing Transaction

Transaction is part of a conversation which can achieve certain communicative functions or topics. One or more transactions form an interaction activity. Transaction possesses its specific function and topics. Class conversation, business conversation, telephone conversation, etc can be divided into several transactions according to different purpose and development, such as lecture transaction, business transaction, telephone transaction, etc. therefore, it's very important for the students to distinguish transaction and sentences made off and cuff. In order to cultivate the consciousness of transaction, what the teachers should do at least is to mark the lecture transactions in class in clear language to make the tasks of different parts of a conversation clear. This framing move make the lecture transactions clear in order to let students understand how the class is going. What the teachers should do the following is to design and organize all kinds of conversational activities that need several exchanges to finish, cultivating, and training students' ability to divide and build transactions themselves. There are two ways suggested: 1. one certain assignment is given to students to design and discuss the steps of each stage, such as the vivid conversational situation scenes in arranging a room, welcoming foreign guests, holding business talks, etc. 2. A transaction without beginning and end is given to the students to add the possible and suitable beginning and ends. In addition, students can be divided into groups or pairs to play roles in telephone conversation, visiting conversation and business conversation, etc. for more complicated transaction training, students could narrate or comment according to different structures of text, such as, narrate (personal experience, tales, and jokes, etc), descript(subjects), exposit(how to operate), persuade(not smoking) and argue.

4. Spreading Topics

Conversational topic is the theme of speech action. Conversation is a process in which a topic begins, spreads, ends and even new topic involves. A series of main topics and sub-topics make conversation related and coherent. The relevance is one of the cooperative principles that speakers should follow. Brown and Yule thought that, as a dynamic process, the topics of conversation include common topics and personal topics of the participants who spread the topics surrounding the common topics and express their own points of view and attitude. Thus, many sub-topics derive from main topics and more related sub-topics derive from sub-topics. Teachers should initiate the students through mind map to provide possible topics that can be derived from before doing conversational practice, which can enrich topic, make it coherent and avoid closing turns hastily.

5. Contextual Consciousness

Production and development of discourse is restricted by context while discourse creates new contexts. Context is knowledge beyond language including scene and background. The former generally includes time, place, topics, and relationship between the participants. The latter includes social rules in a certain culture, general knowledge of the world, mutual understanding of the participants, etc. as to the students, what is important is not to judge true or false but to pass information accurately and effectively. For example, "I am a man. My wife is a woman." There are no structural mistakes at all in the two sentences. But when it is used in such a context as self-introduction, it is meaningless and loses the function to pass information because it is common sense that husband is a man while wife is a woman. Therefore it's necessary to train students to take into account the factor of context when choosing topics and making sentences. In scene conversation and role-play, teachers should give correct language tips to students, guiding them to predict discourse of the partner according to context information and hold turns in with discourse suitable to the context.

In a word, in English class, real communicative scenes and necessity should be provided as many as possible for students to learn to communicate in communication. Meanwhile, teachers should apply useful theories of Discourse Analysis to English class conversational practice and cultivate students' all-round and flexible conversational competence.

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