

## Students' Views on Teaching Conversation in Iraqi EFL Contexts

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تطلعات الطلاب حول تدريس المحادثة في سياق عراقي لتعلم اللغة الانكليزية كلغة أجنبية

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المخلص:

تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية أولاً إلى تقديم خلفية نظرية مختصرة حول المحادثات بشكل عام، وأساليب تدريس المحادثة، وكيفية تدريس المحادثة. كما تسلط الأضواء على محادثة مسيطر عليها وشبه مسيطر عليها وحرّة. أخيراً، يقدم بعض الاقتراحات لاساتذة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية وكانت مما يجعل المحادثة التعليمية أكثر فائدة. الفرضية هي "تعليم المحادثة لطلاب المرحلة الثانية يطور مهاراتهم في التواصل" هي الشاغل الرئيسي لهذه الورقة. و يهدف إلى التحقق من وجهات نظر الطلاب فيما يتعلق بفصل المحادثة وما إذا كان يطور كفاءتهم في التواصل أم لا. من الجدير بالذكر أن مشاهدة الطلاب تتم ملاحظتها من خلال استبيان يتكون من 12 عنصراً. يتم توزيع العناصر على مستويات مختلفة ويتم تطبيقها على 40 طالباً من كلية الآداب. في القسم الأخير من هذه الورقة، تم تحليل عناصر الاستبيان. اتضح أن الطلاب يتمتعون بقدر كبير من الحرية في فصل المحادثة. كما أنها توفر مجموعة من الاقتراحات الضرورية لتحسين قدراتهم في المحادثة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: محادثة، تدريس المحادثة، مهارات التواصل، السياق

### Abstract

This paper aims first at introducing a brief theoretical background about conversations in general, approaches to conversation teaching, and how conversation should be taught. It also sheds some lights on controlled, semi-controlled and free conversation. Finally, it offers some suggestions for ESL teachers which would make teaching conversation more influential. The hypothesis "Teaching conversation for 2<sup>nd</sup> stage students develops their communicative skills" is the main concern of this paper. It aims at investigating the students' points of view concerning conversation class and whether or not it develops their communicative competence. It is noteworthy that students' view is observed via a questionnaire which consists of 12 items. The items are distributed on different scales and are applied to 40 students from the Faculty of Arts. In the last section of this paper, questionnaire items have been analysed. It turns out that the students seem to enjoy a good extent of freedom in conversation class. They also provide a set of suggestions that are essential to improve conversation lecture.

**Keywords:** conversation ,Teaching conversation, Communicative skills, Context

### 1. Theoretical Background

Conversation is the act of exchanging information, ideas, and feeling via spoken language. It is also a communicative activity in which two or more people are involved. Goffman (1976: 66) defines a conversation as:

.....conversation, restrictively defined, might be identified as the talk occurring when a small number of participants come together and settle into what they perceive to be a

few moments cut off from (or carried on to the side of) instrumental tasks...during which everyone is accorded the right to talk as well as to listen and without reference to a fixed schedule...

Generally speaking, following certain principles would make the conversational act runs normally as well as neatly. Such principles (conversational maxims) are adopted by the linguist Paul Grice (1975:54) which include Maxims of Quantity "say only as much as is necessary", Quality "try to make your contribution one that is true", Relation "be relevant", and Manner "be brief and avoid ambiguity".

Ronald D. Eckard (1981) points out that in order for conversations to be meaningful, speakers must adhere to three principles. Since the word "exchange" is an integral part of any conversation, there must be a sender and a receiver. In other words, a conversation is neither a monologue nor an oral report. If one speaker keeps on sending information without getting a response from the other participant, this act does not constitute a conversation.

In addition, topics that are discussed in a conversation must reflect real-life situations. It is worth keeping in mind that students will not be able to speak spontaneously if they practice drills, i.e. the repetition of certain words, phrases and sentences.

Furthermore, speakers from different cultures have to be aware of the assumptions and values of the social context in which a conversation takes place. "Speakers must be aware of both the verbal and the non-verbal signals they are exchanging and how these signals will be interpreted by others" (Ronald D. Eckard, 1981:4).

### **1.2 Direct and Indirect approaches**

Richards (1990:76) argues that there are two approaches through which conversational skills can be taught: indirect approach "in which conversational competence is seen as the product of engaging learners in conversational interaction" such as situational role play, problem-solving tasks, and information-gap exercise. (Zoltan Dornyei, 1994).

The second is the direct approach "involves planning a conversation programme around the specific micro skills, strategies, and processes that are involved in fluent conversation" (ibid.,77). This approach differs from the indirect approach in that it views conversation more systematically. It aims at making students consciously aware of the conversational rules and strategies. Thus, the direct approach provides the learner with specific input: "there are many fixed expressions or conversational routines that crop up constantly in natural conversation" (Zoltan Dornyei, 1994).

### **1.3 How to make teaching conversational skills effective**

Ronald D. Eckard (1981: 22) points out that in order to make sure that teaching conversation helps and enables the learner to make a transition from classroom language to language in the outside world which has got different style and content, it should make a shift from formal or modal language to real language. This kind of transition can be achieved via two steps:

1. It needs to involve a change in the style of the language that is used, I.e. most of ESL textbooks reflect the 'polite' or 'formal' side of language. Teachers, who want their student to communicate in a real-life situation, have to depend on a textbook that focuses on real language.

2. It requires a change in the teaching approach: it has to imply a shift from teacher-centred activities to student-centered activities, i.e. "teachers must help to create a class atmosphere in which the students feel free to express themselves, to make mistake, and to try new structures and new vocabulary". (Ronald D. Eckard,1981:5).

### **1.4 Controlled, semi-controlled, or free conversation**

Ronald D. Eckard(1981: 8) states that the useful technique of teaching conversational skills requires the teacher to construct the speaking activities appropriately. Just as there is a possibility that the conversation is fully controlled by the teacher and thus does not resemble a real communicative act. Additionally, the students are sometimes given the freedom to construct the conversation. Consequently, it may result in producing ungrammatical utterances.

To get rid of these two extremes, teachers have to formulate conversational activities which gives the students an opportunity to participate effectively. Conversational activities are grouped into:

controlled, semi-controlled and free. " The degree of control refers to the amount of structure that the teacher impose on an activity and the number of choices that students are expected to make" (ibid, 1981:17).

Ronald D. Eckard (1981: 17) states the degree of control as follow:

In controlled conversation activities, the directions are very explicit, and the material to be used is presented in the form of script (textbook), thus leaving few choices for the students to make.

In semi controlled conversation, the directions are less explicit, and the material is presented in such a way that students have a number of choices to make as to vocabulary, structure, content, and manner of presentation.

In free conversation, the teacher exerts the less amount of control, gives few if any instructions, and encourages the students their own ideas or opinions about a topic.

### 1.5 Suggestions for ESL teachers

Specialists in Applied Linguistics have proposed a number of strategies that would help teachers to make conversation class much more fruitful. Sze (1995) sheds lights on the fact that the teacher should show the students recordings of unscripted conversations that occur between native speakers in a different social context. If such recordings are not accessible, interviews, forums, as well as phone-in-talk would also be useful. Moreover, students' attention must be drawn on conversational skills such as openings, closings, and turn-taking (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973).

In addition, students need to differentiate between spoken and written language, i.e. conversation is not a matter of reading a written piece of information aloud. Interactional talk may not consist of grammatical complete sentences. Students have to keep in mind that actual conversation is full of false starts, hesitations, fillers, repetition and grammatical deviation. Thus students should concentrate first on producing meaning, then they need to focus on the appropriateness of language. (Sze, 1995).

Ronald D. Eckard (1981) advises ESL teachers to:

- Focus on students' experience and make them feel that it is valid and essential for learning English. Give the students the chance to reflect their experiences in conversations.
- Encourage the students to use conversation for social purposes, for example how to get a driver's license or find good food.
- Bring a native speaker to the classroom to enable the student to get familiar with them.

## 2. Data Analysis

**Table (1): Percentage of students' answers to each question**

Q No.	Answer	Rate	Answer	Rate	Answer	Rate	Answer	Rate	Answer	Rate
1	Fluency	72.5%	Correctness	27.5%						
2	Great extent	70%	Limited extent	39%						
3	Always	42%	Usually	57%	Never	1%				
5	A	15%	B	10%	C	75%				
6	Yes	55%	No	45%						
7	1	2.5%	2	10%	3	57%	4	15%	5	12%
8	Always	27.5%	Sometimes	55%	Never	17.5%				
9										
10	Strongly agree	62%	Agree	30%	Undecided	7.5%	Disagree	0%	Strongly disagree	0%
11	Strongly agree	67%	Agree	25%	Undecided	7.5%	Disagree	0%	Strongly disagree	0%

Q No.	Answer	Rate	Answer	Rate	Answer	Rate	Answer	Rate	Answer	Rate
12										

### 2.1. Close-ended questions

The first statement in the questionnaire has been answered by 40 students. 72.5% of them select communication and fluency. It is a high percentage and indicates that the teacher wants the students to speak English without paying extra attention to grammar. It is noteworthy that focusing on grammar would make the students busy with constructing grammatically correct sentences rather than speaking. On the other hand, 27.5% of the respondents state the teacher concentrates on correctness. The last percentage indicates that grammar plays a secondary role in conversation class.

The second question is about whether conversation lecture reflects the students' real-life situations. 70% of the students have responded that conversation lectures resemble activities in the real world. As it has been pointed out in the theoretical background that for a conversation lecture to be useful, it must be a reflection of students' real-life. Conversation lecture thus becomes an integral part of students' life. Moreover, such activity enables them to use the language in the society and with other people. 30% of the students have pointed out that conversation lecture represents their social activities but to a limited extent.

Let's consider the ways the students' response to the 3<sup>rd</sup> question. 42% of them say that they always feel free in expressing their opinions in conversation class. On the contrary, 57% of them state that they sometimes express their points of view freely. There might be reasons for this high percentage. Students don't feel free to express their opinions because the topics in the book are of no interest, time limitation, or issues related to students themselves such as shyness.

'Who speaks the most during the lecture?', 55% of the respondents say that it is the teacher who dominates and controls the interaction. 45% of them state that the students speak the most during conversation lecture. These percentages demonstrate that the teacher has dominance over the interaction; however, students play a notable role in conversational activities.

Furthermore, the students have been given the opportunity to evaluate their participation in conversation class. The majority of them (57%) give 3 scores for their participation. Such percentage shows that students are neither passive receivers nor fully interactive in conversation class.

Students have also been asked whether or not they memorize questions and responses before taking part in a conversation. 27.5% of the students always memorize certain expressions before being involved in a conversation. Memorization might entail that the students are not fluent enough to construct sentences other than those in the book. In addition, they want to avoid making grammatical mistakes that's why they memorize well-formed expressions.

A couple of questions have also been raised to know if students consider "pair work" and "group discussion" as beneficial activities in classroom. 67% of the students have agreed that such activities play a significant role in improving their communication skills.

### 2.2. Open-ended Questions

A number of subjective question is stated to let the students express their opinions concerning certain aspects of teaching conversation. I will mention the students' exact answers and put them between two quotations in order to be recognized.

One of these subjective questions is "how does your teacher react when you commit grammatical mistakes?". Some of the answers to this question are: "she correct our fault nicely", "she correct it for me and cultivates to keep on", "the teacher supports our ideas if they are true or not", and "it's totally fine, she corrects me with a smile". Other answers are similar to the aforementioned ones. It is quite obvious that the teacher deals kindly with students' grammatical mistakes. Students' opinion here seems to correlate with their assumption that the teacher focuses more on fluency. I also ask them to state how the teacher's reaction affects their learning process. 75% of them points out that their teacher always reacts in a way that encourages them to make good achievements in conversation.

One more subjective question is " how many times has your teacher left the lecture to do something else?". Students' answers vary; some say that it never happened before, others mention that the teacher left the lecture for a number of times. Surprisingly, when I read all the answers, it turns out that some lectures are missing because the teacher was sick.

The students have provided intelligent and interesting answers to the final question; " if you were the teacher, what would you do to make the conversation lecture more useful?". They suggest the following ideas:

- "listening course" is what our lecture lacks. Listening to native speakers in conversation lecture will improve our speaking skills. Moreover, some of us especially "girls" suffer from shyness and it is the teacher who is responsible for encouraging these students to be involved in classroom interaction.
  - Topics discussed in conversation lecture would be more interesting if it is represented by games.
  - My speaking skills would definitely be improved if I had the opportunity to interact with native speakers.
- Interaction with native speakers would enable them to pronounce words correctly, obtain new vocabularies, and learn new ways of constructing sentences.
- Vocabularies must be translated into Arabic language in order to be understood.
- Translating sentences or phrases into mother tongue language would draw students' attention away from English language. Instead of trying to understand English sentences as they are, they would depend more on translation.
- A single topic sometimes cannot be covered in one lecture so conversation lecture needs more time to be beneficial. If I were the teacher I would let the students practice speaking skills for hours.
  - Conversing should not be limited to classroom. It would be useful if we had the chance to use English language outside the classroom and use it for the purpose of interaction with other students in the college.
  - Topics of conversation class need to be more realistic i.e., they must represent the norms and habits of our society.

### 3. Conclusions

The majority of students have agreed that pair work and group discussion are essential activities in classroom. This is a clear indication that the teacher has adopted the indirect approach of teaching conversation.

Moreover, conversation in classroom has been classified into three types controlled, semi-controlled and free conversation. Teaching conversation for 2<sup>nd</sup> stage seems to have characteristics of both semi-controlled and free conversation. It is semi-controlled in the sense that 57% of students have pointed out that they sometimes express their opinions. On the other hand, it is considered a free conversation because students' ideas have always been supported by the teacher.

Students state that their teacher reacts normally toward grammatical mistakes and tries to kindly correct them. Here the teacher's reaction seems to correlate with Ronald D. Eckard (1981:5) who argues that "teacher must help to create a class atmosphere in which the students feel free to express themselves, to make mistakes, and to try new structures and new vocabulary".

Finally, students have suggested ideas to improve teaching conversation. Their suggestions are interestingly similar to Ronald's advises that have been addressed for ESL teachers. For instance, they both emphasise that students should be encouraged to use English language outside the class and for social purposes. In addition, they agree that there should be contact with native speakers.

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#### Appendix:

#### 4.Questionnaire items

1. The teacher in your class focuses on

Communication and Fluency	Correctness
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2. To what extent do you think conversational activities reflect your real-life situations?

Great extent	Limited extent
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3. In conversation class, I ..... express my opinions and thoughts freely.  
(always, usually, never)

4. How does your teacher react when you commit a grammatical mistake in conversation?

5. Depending on your answer to the previous question, the teacher's reaction:

a. Make you less interested in conversation class.

b. Does not affect you.

c. Encourage you to make good achievements in conversation.

6. The one who speaks the most during the conversation lecture is the teacher.

Yes No

7. From 1 to 5, evaluate your participation in the conversation lecture.

1 2 3 4 5

8. I [ always, sometimes, never] memorize questions and responses before taking a part in conversations.

9. How many times have your teacher left the lecture to do something else?

10. Pair Work (participating in a dialogue or doing exercises in pairs) is a funny activity to use in English speaking class.

A. Strongly agree. B. Agree. C. Undecided. D. Disagree. E. Strongly disagree.

11. Discussion (discussing a topic in a group) improves the students' speaking skills.

A. Strongly agree. B. Agree. C. Undecided. D. Disagree. E. Strongly disagree.

12. If you were the teacher, what would you do to make the conversation lecture more useful?