Listening Fluency With Conversational Storytelling

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Abstract

There are at least two main styles of conversation, only one of which is taught in most language classes. The most popular style taught is the interrogative conversation where each partner in a conversation asks and answers questions. The less popular style is called conversational storytelling. This paper discusses the benefits of teaching the latter style.

Interrogative vs Storytelling

Most textbooks for English language learners have question-answer style dialogs. The question-answer style of conversation is popular in part because this style of conversation is easier to teach and grade. The teacher checks that the questions are 'on topic' and the answers follow logically. Also, in situations such as travel abroad, ordering in restaurants, and checking into hotels, the question-answer style is very appropriate.

 However, when the student listens to 'native' speakers of English have a 'normal' conversation, she is struck with the fact that she cannot understand the conversation. While one reason might be the speed native speakers speak and another might be the vocabulary used, a significant problem may be in the flow of conversation. Few conversations in English are of the question-answer type. Although certain activities require a certain amount of interrogative conversations, most conversations are different.

In everyday conversation between native speakers of English, the question-answer style is rarely used. The language learner finds herself lost; she is looking for and waiting for questions and answers. She is looking for both speakers to stay on the same topic. The native speakers, however, are using a different style altogether. They are using Conversational Storytelling.

In conversational storytelling, each speaker tells a short story about an event. The next speaker usually adds his or her story about that event. In fact, one of the best ways to have the other speaker talk about his experiences about the topic is to tell your own experience first.

Even an introductory conversation involving the introduction of a new friend does not follow

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the textbook question-answer style. For example, the new person might say: "Hi, my name's Tom." The listener is then expected to say their own name: "Hi. I'm Jeri."

It may be more advantageous to teach students conversational storytelling instead of the question-answer style, if being able to understand and follow native speaker conversation is one of the goals of an EFL program. The following are one teacher's thoughts on some rules for students to learn to understand and use conversational storytelling.

A Few Simple Rules

1. No (or very few) Questions.

I initially do not allow my students to ask questions. After they are comfortable with a normal conversation without questions I allow a few questions - mainly for clarification. ("What did you say?" "What does that word mean?") The more prevalent interrogational form of conversation is forbidden primarily because it has been practiced by students for so long that they are unaware they are practicing it. The No Questions rule is designed to break them out of the interrogative mode.

2. No Silence.

Students must speak constantly. If there is an uncomfortably long silence someone must say something. In North American conversations, silence is an unwelcome intrusion. More advanced students have the ability to keep the conversational ball rolling; less adept students struggle with words and grammar in their attempts to make the 'perfect' sentence. ('Perfect' meaning, what the textbooks say is good.) However, given practice - including vocabulary - many students can fill a silence.

3. Somewhat Related.

Generally speaking, a native-speaker conversation stays on topic when the topic is set and a decision must be made (Ordering food in a restaurant, asking directions, etc). In a less formal situation the topic is more fluid and changes often and sometimes rapidly. Usually the last sentence spoken by speaker A is commented on by speaker B. This requires students to listen to each other. It also requires students to think as they listen so that they can say something when it is their turn. Silence, as stated before, is forbidden.

4. "I" Sentences.

For the most part, in an informal conversation between native speakers the first word of many sentences is "I." The speaker wants to talk about himself. The speaker also wants to talk about himself as related to the (changing) topic of conversation. Therefore, students are required to begin sentences with "I." This is helpful in eliminating questions and it focuses the students in listening to their partners. As the topic is fluid, they must listen in order to make an "I" statement

somewhat related to what has been said.

Also, I try to teach students that in starting a sentence with "I" they are taking on a heavy responsibility: they must provide all the information the listener needs to understand what the student is saying. (This also helps eliminate questions.) If a student says, "I like soccer," she must continue with more details: "I like soccer because I love running. I played soccer in junior and senior high school and had a great time." The listener is not burdened with the task of digging out more information that a simple statement like "I like soccer," would require. (Questions such as "When did you begin to play soccer?" And "Why do you like it?")

5. Storytelling.

Many native speaker-like conversations are essentially shared storytelling. Speaker A tells her story about where she was on September 11th and Speaker B tells his Sept. 11th story. Bob Jones calls this Conversational Storytelling and has said that the best way to get another person to tell a story about any subject is to tell your own story first. Students need practice in storytelling. They have, in my experience, not yet grasped the beginning-middle-end of a story in a conversational setting. Nor, perhaps because of their training in interrogational conversation, do they believe they can speak for more than one sentence. After some practice, though, many students are more eager to speak longer.

Another aspect of storytelling is the evaluation. In the evaluation, the speaker makes a comment on what he has just said. Evaluations can be as simple as "And I never went back to that restaurant," or, "Don't you think that was strange?" EFL students often fail to add the evaluation.

6. Endless.

Because of the fluid topic and reaction to the last sentence spoken, a native speaker-like conversation is, essentially, endless. Unlike an interrogational conversation, which has a direct goal (ordering a meal in a restaurant, for example), a native speaker-like conversation has no goal; the journey is the purpose. In fact, teaching how to end a conversation is almost never taught in the interrogative style because the end is obvious. (The needed information is extracted.) At first, students don't understand that in conversational storytelling the goal is the purpose and will stop after only a few sentences. With practice, however, they learn how to keep a conversation going.

7. Implicature.

Although it is not stressed, a lot of "questions" in conversational storytelling are not easily identified as questions. They are implied. For example, the question, "Do you have the time?" is not answered with "Yes," or "No." The implied question is "What time is it?" Similarly, a statement such as "I like to eat pizza," can be the implied question: "Do you want to eat pizza with me?" It can also be an implied request: "Please ask me to go eat pizza with you." This is difficult for language learners to understand. I do not stress it in my classes because of this difficulty.

However, I do make students aware that it exists and they should be on alert for it in conversations.

Teaching The Rules

Starting simple, I write rules 1, 2, 3, and 4 (No questions, no silences, somehow related, "I" sentences) on the board and show a couple of example conversations. I contrast a native speaker-like conversation with an interrogational conversation. I then explain why the students will no longer be using the interrogational conversation model. I explain that while they may be able to follow an NHK conversation or a textbook conversation they may find themselves baffled when they listen to two native speakers having a conversation. I say that they have trouble with native speakers speaking because of the structure of the native speakers' conversation: no questions, no silences, somehow related, and the "I" word. They are probably expecting to hear the interrogational conversation model but get something much more fluid. Students then practice a native speaker conversation on a topic I give them.

Usually it takes several practice sessions before the students are comfortable with a non-interrogational model of conversation. I must frequently remind them of the four rules written on the board. The most frequently violated rule is the No Questions rule. Students begin with one partner and practice for 10 to 15 minutes. They change partners and practice again; one student retains his topic, the other must change her topic to the new partner's topic. In a 90-minute class one student has about 6~8 partners to practice new topics. As they speak and practice the new model of conversation, I listen to each pair. I frequently stop a pair and ask them to begin from the beginning. When they violate a rule, I stop them, explain their infraction, and have them begin again.

For students to become comfortable with the native speaker-like conversation requires practice. I think in about 4-6 class sessions most students are comfortable with not asking questions, with starting sentences with "I." and the changeable topics. When most students are able to have a conversation using the new model, I begin putting them in groups of three. I explain that there is no order in who speaks and that a random order is better than, ABC, ABC, ABC. This is not a stringent rule and I don't point out any violations. Students practice in groups of three for a few sessions (sometimes as much as 5) before I explain rules 5 and 6 (Endless and Storytelling.) Perhaps because I explain storytelling last, the students are less comfortable with it.

Testing and Grading

Testing takes two forms: in-class informal conversations and in-office "test-like" conversations. In in-class testing, I observe student conversations. While students are speaking in pairs or threes, I will stop them at random and have them start from the beginning. After a few minutes or until they make too many errors in vocabulary, grammar, or the rules of the conversation, I stop them. I have discovered that when the "No silence" rule is broken it is more

often than not because the students don't have the vocabulary to continue. I then give them the words they need and have them practice again. I go to another pair or set of triplets and test them.

The in-office test is held in my office. Two or three students come in. I give them a topic and they are required to a) follow the rules and b) speak for at least ten minutes. There is no difference in my grading between this test and the classroom test. The purpose is to give the students the impression that it is more important and this makes them do their best - which is often very good.

Grading criteria for both tests is global. I listen, I observe, I grade. I think most teachers can tell a 'good' conversation over a 'bad' conversation even if they can't assign a number. I use, however, a ten-point scale with ten being the best. I observe if the six rules are adhered to; I listen to the rhythm of the speeches and the conversation; I listen for grammar errors and vocabulary mistakes. I note which person is speaking the most, which person makes the fewest errors, which person speaks the least, and which person controls the conversation by a) changing topics and/or b) filling in silent spots. At the end of a ten-minute conversation I can globally assign a number to all members of the conversation.

Examples of Different Models of Conversations.

The following two conversations follow different models. The first follows the interrogational model; the second uses the conversational storytelling model. The results of both conversations are the same except that in the second conversation, there are no questions.

Interrogational Conversation
    A   Where are you from?
    B   I'm from Saitama. And you?
    A   I'm from Fukushima. Can you ski?
    B   Yes, I can. I ski every winter. Can you ski?
    A   Yes, I can. Why don't we go skiing this winter?
    B   Okay. Where shall we go?
    A   Why don't we go to Seymour?
    B   I heard that is a good ski area. When should we meet?
    A   How about next Saturday at 8:00 AM?
    B   Okay.

Conversational Storytelling with Implied Questions
    A   I'm from Fukushima. (Implied question being: Where are you from?)
    B   I'm from Saitama.
    A   Nice day. I love the winter. I go skiing every winter. (Implied: Do you ski?)

B   Me, too. I ski in Nagano whenever I have the chance.

A   I've only skied in Nagano once. Usually I ski in Ishikawa.

B   I've heard there are some good ski areas here. (Implied: Where are the good ski areas?)

A   Seymour is the best, I think.

B   I'd like to give it a try. (Implied: Ask me to go skiing.)

A   Let's go next Saturday. I usually leave at 8:00. I'll pick you up.

B   Thanks.

This is not a completely accurate picture of a native speaker-like conversation. It is more direct, has a goal, and the topic is stagnant. But it highlights some differences with the interrogational model: no questions, "I" sentences, and many implied questions.

Interrogational Conversation about Movies.

A   Do you like James Bond?

B   Yes, I do.

A   Do you want to see the new James Bond movie with me?

B   Yes. What day shall meet?

A   Do you want to go to the movies next Friday?

B   That would be good. What time shall we meet?

A   How about 6:00?

B   That sounds good.

Direct, to the point, almost every sentence is a question.

Conversational Storytelling about Movies.

A   The new James Bond movie opened last week. I want to see it because I think Pierce Bronson is a terrific actor. (Implied: "Let's go to the movies.)

B   I think he uses too much comedy in James Bond. He smirks too much for my taste. I liked him in "Mrs. Doubtfire," though.

A   I don't like Robin Williams that much. He's funny and he does funny stuff, but he grates on my nerves after awhile.

B   Steve Martin used to grate on my nerves. Then he started making semi-serious movies and I got to like him. Maybe he grew up. I really liked "Bowfinger".

A   I don't really like comedies. Action movies are more my cup of tea.

B   Let's go see the new James Bond movie next week, then.

The topic is movies and it stays pretty much on topic but not nearly as much as the interrogational model. Notice the longer speeches in conversational storytelling. It is easy to see why students can't follow native speakers even if they can do all the exercises in a language

textbook.

Topics can be as broad as "Japan" and as specific as "raamen." Since conversational storytelling has a fairly fluid topic, any topic I give the students can be easily changed into a topic they want to talk about. I have given the topic "soccer" to two students with no interest in soccer. Within a few sentences they had changed the topic to shopping. This is perfectly legitimate in conversational storytelling. Again, as topics are fluid, clever students with the linguistic confidence can change topics to suit their own desires.

Conclusion

By teaching conversational storytelling we are giving our students yet another weapon in their assault on mastering a foreign language. With conversational storytelling they may be able to more accurately follow native-speaker conversations. By the way, one informant has told me that the conversational storytelling model of discourse is common in Japanese, too. Any tool students can acquire in their quest is a valuable tool and learning different styles of conversation can only aid them on their road to success.

References

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