

Abstract

With the emphasis on the practical use of English in China, conversation has become more and more important to help college students to improve their speaking skills. In Chinese universities, conversation based on the English textbooks is often used in oral English teaching. However, the question is whether conversation in the textbooks reflects real conversation.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the real function of textbook conversation for students, how it works, and how much it reflects real conversation. The subjects of this study are nine conversations extracted from three college textbooks published and used widely in China, which represent different levels of English. The sample data is chosen at random from the textbooks. The principles of data analysis are based on the findings of recent studies on oral communication, in particular on Thornbury and Slade's research in 2006.

The findings of this study showed that there exist differences between conversation occurring in the textbook and real conversation. The probable reason for this is that the texts look as if they are 'scripts' specially prepared in advance, thus they do not reflect the frequency of features such as word repetition, false starts, and the periods of long silence that can occur in real conversation. However, the lexis and grammar of casual conversation is in general a reasonable reflection of how language is used in these informal contexts.