

A CASE STUDY OF CONVERSATION COURSES AT ASSUMPTION UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

This present study describes and analyzes classroom conversations produced by students at Assumption University, in two conversation classes taught by different instructors over a period of six weeks (the duration of the 'Conversation' course). As a point of comparison, the conversation produced in these classes was compared to the findings of recent studies on oral communication in English. Of particular importance are the studies based on spoken corpora such as Eggins and Slade (1997), Biber et al (1999), Thornbury and Slade (2006), and Carter and McCarthy (2006). The data analysis, compares firstly the classroom conversation and what have been identified as characteristics of real conversation, secondly, the vocabulary and grammar used in classroom conversation and real conversation, and thirdly, the classroom conversation in these classes is compared with what we know of the patterns of classroom talk, in particular the Initiation, Response and Feedback (IRF) model.

The findings from this small scale study seem to indicate that the classroom conversations do share many of the characteristics of real conversation, particularly in terms of restricted vocabulary and grammar usage in spite of the artificial environment of the classroom.

Key words: real conversation, vocabulary, grammar, classroom conversation.

Introduction

For people who are learning English as a second language, English speaking skills can not be mastered in the same way as other English skills such as reading and writing. Also, for people who are acquiring English as a second language, the procedure of learning English speaking skills is not the same as for people acquiring their own mother tongue which is a more natural process. Learning to speak means people talking to other people.

Since learning oral English is not easy for students, teaching English speaking is also not an easy task. For teachers, it means teaching students to have a level of articulation by which they can communicate effectively in the target language. Teaching oral English is a comprehensive process where the focus is mainly on pronunciation but it should also include the grammar, vocabulary, and semantics of spoken English. In this study pronunciation as such will not be discussed as we are looking at how classroom conversations is often different from real conversation in people's daily life.

Significance of the study

The purpose of this study was to see if there is a difference in classroom conversation and real conversation and to see if there is a difference between classroom conversation and classroom talk.

Subjects of the study

The subjects of this study are 40 students and two teachers from two different conversation classes in Assumption University. Most of the students are fourth year undergraduate students who have already passed all of the required courses but failed their Final English Oral Test (FEOT). The age range is 21-24 years old. 27 are female and 13 are male.

The two teachers involved are the researcher and a native speaker of English.

Schedule of classroom observation

Two different classes were observed once a week for six weeks. Each time, two classroom conversations were recorded in class and each lasted five minutes. Samples were taken from transcriptions of all these 24 classroom conversation sound recordings to analyze.

Conversation

Thornbury and Slade, 2006 defined conversation as:

... the informal, interactive talk between two or among more people, which happens in real time, is spontaneous, has a largely interpersonal function, and in which participants share symmetrical rights. (Thornbury and Slade, 2006: 25)

Typical characteristics of conversation

Both Thornbury & Slade (2006) and Eggins & Slade (1997) found the following typical characteristics of conversation in real conversational settings.

- It is spoken
- It takes place spontaneously, in real time
- It takes place in a shared context
- It is interactive, jointly constructed
- Its function is primarily interpersonal
- It is informal
- It is the critical site for the negotiation of social identities, so it is an expression of our wishes, feelings, attitudes and judgements.

This case study found out how the classroom conversation in the IELE program at Assumption University reflected the characteristics of real conversation.

(The examples are given below with the bold and italic key words, and in the end of this article readers can find the texts from which the examples come).

Classroom conversation is spoken.

Classroom conversation is a spoken exchange between two or more students where they can express their ideas, feelings, give information, persuade or have a discussion. Classroom conversation is transient and it disappears as soon as students finish talking. Unless you use a sound recorder, it will not be heard again.

Classroom conversation happens in real time.

Classroom conversation happens in students' real life when students meet each other in classroom. It flows freely according to students' different concerns. It might change according to students' needs and it is a reflection of students' real life. It happens in real time in society as students' communicate with other students. The main purpose may be to improve their spoken English but co-incidentally real communication does take place.

Classroom conversation takes place in shared contexts.

Classroom conversations usually take some time to develop before taking place in shared contexts which are familiar to all of the participants. Shared contexts maintain the flow of conversation and so (make classroom conversations).

Classroom conversation is interactive

Classroom conversation can be maintained by students showing their interest in what is being talked about. Some degree of accommodation is needed to maintain the interaction. Various techniques can be used to maintain a conversation, some examples are illustrated below.

The following are examples of maintaining the flow of a conversation by asking questions:

(The symbols indicates Text 1 utterance 3 in Group 1)

Text 1:

(3)/ G1: *what kind of eye which you like?*

Text 2:

(7)/ G1: *how long will you die?*

Text 3:

(10)/ G3: and later they go to, to see the... *who is she Na?*

Students also use “wow..., oh, yeah, no, Mm, En, Nn” or simply laugh to show their response, interest or surprise to what has been said, thus maintaining the flow of the conversation.

Text 1: (7)/ Gs: *Wow...*

Text 3: (3)/ G1: *yes,*

Text 4:

(5)/ All: *(laugh)*

Classroom conversation is interpersonal

Classroom conversation as a social phenomenon takes place in the classroom with the aim of improving students' English speaking ability. Human beings are social animals, so it is natural for people to want to communicate. The artificiality of the classroom situation can be overcome to some extent by helping the students to develop their social skills to use them to exercise their interpersonal skills through the target language.

Classroom conversation is informal

Classroom conversation takes place naturally. It is unplanned speech and because classroom conversation can be about anything, and the topics of classroom conversation can be changed at any time, it is free flowing, flexible and informal.

The informality of classroom conversation shows in following examples:

Lexical

Text 1:

(10)/G1: leg? I think before, you didn't tell *before* (“before” is used here to mean “just now”)

22/ B2: yeah, yeah, I look down every time. (“yeah”, is used instead of “yes”)

Text 4::

35/ G1: *yeah*, I need to do more research, need to learn it, and I check this course again, already, (“Yeah” is used instead of “yes”)

Pronunciation

There are a lot of features related to pronunciation, such as intonation, and stress. However, in this case study we are only talking about contracted words which show the informality of classroom conversation compared with the written form.

Text 1:

(6)/ B1: long eye, big and long eye. **It's** quite... and when I see, I will contact her

with my, with my eye too. ("it's" is used instead of "it is")

Text 2:

(1)/ G1: I fear the, the way to death, because everybody **don't** know that the way to death is, ("do't" is used instead of "do not")

Text 3:

(4)/ G2: For the chapter 3, **it's** about the, their destination right? go to.. Por... Porlreath ("it's" is used instead of "it is")

Grammar

A feature of conversation's informal style is the frequent use of stigmatized forms that are often associated with a particular regional variety. (Thornbury & Slade, 2006: 21)

In Thailand, people sometimes use the verb to BE as a lexical verb as if it was an auxiliary together with another lexical verb. The following examples were found in the students conversation.

Text 2:

T2/U(26)/ G3: for me, I think everyone must die, so if I can choose the way to die, I don't want to die from the car accident or the disease, I will choose, I will choose the way to sleep, and die from, and **it's will not suffer** from..

T2/U(22):

(22)/ G4: **it's make** me happy in everyday, that's I have life, I don't fear... the death.

Text 4:

T4/U(29):

(29)/ G1: I.. I think, I must try ...those subject? Yes, I'm, **I'm try**,...

Classroom conversation is expressive of students' identity

Students in the conversation classes often show their likes, dislikes and their attitudes by using evaluative language. Indirectly this is also an expression of their identity.

Text 1:

T1/U(2):

(2)/ B1: my, when I notice the, when I notice the woman, the first thing that I, I *would like* to see is the (“would like” is used to show willingness)

Text 2:

T2/U(1):

(1)/ G1: I *fear* the, the way to death, because everybody don’t know that the way to death is, (“fear” is used to show her emotion, feelings)

Text 3:

T3/U(2):

(2)/ G3: *Talk again?* (asking a question to confirm, showing her doubt)

Conversation in other modes

With advanced technology, people can have conversation in different modes. Conversation is now possible through the telephone, text messaging and emailing.

Typical features of real conversation shared in classroom conversation

According to Thornbury & Slade, (2006) and Eggin & Slade, (1997) the real time spontaneity of talk accounts for a number of features that distinguish it from writing. In the case study of classroom conversations discussed here there were many examples of the features that distinguish the spoken form from the written.

Hesitations

Text 1:

(42)/B2: I,.. I like big eye like you,

Text 2:

(18)/ G4: everybody will died, and, and if the time *to die*,.... if the time, if *the time of*...

Text 3:

(10)/ G3: and later they go to, **to see the...** who is she na?

Word repetition**Text 1:**

(12)/ G1 and B1: which is **important** first? **Important** most?

Text 2:

(18)/ G4: everybody will **died**, and, and if the time to **die**,.... if the time, if **the time of...**

Text 3:

(16)/ G3: and I think **Anna, Anna impressed.. impressed** Dla,

False starts**Text 1:**

(2)/ B1: **my**, when I notice the, when I notice the woman,

Text 2:

(8)/ G2: eh, and can, can, **can I**,... I will die by car accident or, or sick

Text 3:

(4)/ G2: For the chapter 3, it's about **the**, their destination right?

Repairs**Text 1:**

(8)/ B1: Because I use my eyes to contact her, and tell her **what.., what.. how** do I feel with her

Text 2:

(22)/ G4: **it must die, I must die, everyone, everybody must die**, but I don't want to suffer from, from

Text 3:

(4)/ G2: For the chapter 3, it's about **the, their destination** right?

Unfinished utterances**Text 1:**

(2)/ B1: ... I see eye first, **because the eye can...**

Text 2:

(3)/ G1: human again, or animal (G2 repeat with her together), or anything but not to be born again like that. And you, **what about..**

Text 3:

(7)/ G1: **they are..**

Ungrammaticality [in terms of written norms]**Text 1:**

(3)/ G1: **what kind of eye which you like?** (Instead of “what kind of eye do you like?”)

Text 2:

(12)/ G2: have a good behavior, you will go to heaven

(G3 repeats with her together), and, **if you bad,**

Text 3:

(1)/ G1: Yes, **talking the book.**

Fillers**Text 2:**

(8)/G2: I don't know where it, my spirit to go, anyway, any... and, **eh...** and I think, oh, my, my, my religion..**eh...**, teach, teach Thai people Buddhist, if, if..

Text 3:

(10)/ G3: and later they go to, to see the.. who is she **na?**

Text 4:

(17)/ G1: because last, last, last semester I got low marks and it is major requirement, yes, and release all I got C-

Borrowing chunks from the previous speaker's utterance**Text 1:**

(6)/ B1: **long eye.** big and **long eye.** It's quite... and when I see, I will contact her with my, with my eye too.

(“long eye” is borrowed from: (5)/ G1: long eye right?)

Text 2:

(10)/ G2: if you **make a good thing**, have, have... (is borrowed from:

(9)/ G3: if **you make good thing**)

Text 3:

(12)/ G3: yes, then Mr. **Dla**, to take the key of the cottage [is borrowed from:
 (11)/ Gs: Jill, Mr. Mr. **Dla, Dla, Dla** (G1 repeats several times), right?]

Utterance launchers

Text 1:

(41)/ G1: no **we know** you are not joking

Text 4:

(10)/ G2: **you mean** that which subject you have to devote or emphasize on,
 right?

Vocabulary in classroom conversation

Vocabulary is defined here as a single word, groups of words (not only lexical items) or items that have a grammatical or a discoursal function.

Corpus Linguistics

In the last twenty years, Corpus studies particularly with reference to spoken language have greatly increased our knowledge of how we use English when we speak.

The first corpus to collect naturally occurring spoken data on a large scale was the Longman Spoken and Written English Corpus (the LSWE corpus). This corpus became the basis for the *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (Biber et al., 1999).³

Other corpora such as COBUILD, British National Corpus (BNC) and more recently the *Cambridge Grammar of English* (Carter and Mc Carthy 2006) have provided fruitful sources of information about the frequency of individual items (whether of lexis or of grammar), and about an item's typical co-textual environments, including its collocations. Hoey (2005) points out that corpora are not just important for the study of the minutiae of language-they are central to the proper understanding of discourses as a whole.

The examples below show the use of vocabulary in classroom conversation.

Lexical size

Compared with reading and writing, the number of words employed in speaking can be considerably less. Nation (1990); Schmitt (2000) Mc Carthy and Carter (1997) claim that a round figure of about 2000 words will safely cover the everyday core of the language for pedagogical purposes.

This study found out that the number of words students used in their classroom conversation is within this limit.

Lexical density and lexical variety

Lexical density

Repetition, combined with a reliance on a relatively limited number of high frequency words, accounts for the fact that there are typically a lower lexical density and less lexical variety in conversation than in other registers.

Lexical density is a measure of the ratio of the text’s content words to its function words. Content words carry a high information load, such as with nouns, adjectives and lexical verbs. Function words are those that serve mainly a grammatical purpose, such as with articles, auxiliary verbs and prepositions, and inserts, i.e. words like yeah, mm, yuk and so on. Talk is not only produced in real time, but it has to be understood in real time. There is also recourse to the immediate context using deictic words such as here, that, now, and pronouns like I, you, they.

The following are examples of lexical density in this study.

Text	Total words	Content words	Functional words	Lexical density
Text 1	386	142	244	Low
Text 2	471	182	289	Low
Text 3	248	118	130	Relatively Low

Lexical variety

The following are examples of lexical variety in this study.

Text	Total words	Different words type	Examples	Ratio (different words type/ total words)	Lexical variety
Text 1	386	84	“Look” was repeated 7 times	$84/386 = 0.22$	Low
Text 2	471	106	“and” was repeated 20 times	$106/471 = 0.23$	Low
Text 3	248	92	“they” was repeated 6 times	$92/248 = 0.37$	Low

Lexical Frequency

Among the words used in students’ oral communication, some are used more frequently than others. Often this can reflect a limited vocabulary but can at the same time reflect words with a high frequency.

Text 1:

(10)/G1: leg? **I think** before, you didn’t tell..

Text 2:

(4)/ G2: eh. I, **I think** I believe in the past life and in the next, next, next

Text 4:

(11)/ G1: .., **I think** I can not pass in the, in final exam, and.. my grade will not be good, yes...

Discourse markers and other inserts

Classroom conversation comes about because of students’ joint construction in which discourse markers help listeners to know what is the topic, what is going on, what is coming next.

Text 1:

(8)/ B1: **Because** I use my eyes to contact her, and tell her what..., what.. how do I feel with her.

Text 2:

(1)/ G1: I fear the, the way to death, **because** everybody don't know that the way to death is,

Text 3:

(9)/ G2: **Oh**, Stephen very relax on the beach,

The grammar of classroom conversation

The grammar of spoken English has features that are not found in written English but are acceptable as part of spoken grammar. The recognition of the distinctive and systematic nature of spoken grammar has been brought to our attention in works mentioned earlier in particular Biber et al 1999 and more recently Carter and Mc Carthy 2006.

This does not mean that we need to teach separate grammars but we should not assume that if a grammar has been constructed from written texts, it is equally valid for spoken texts. Some forms seem to occur more often in spoken than in the written form and vice versa. Some forms are used differently with different shades of meaning.

The recordings made of the classroom conversations in this study indicate many of the features of the grammar of spoken language.

Complexity

Classroom conversation may seem simplistic in terms of grammar both because of its informal structure and the constraints of real-time production. Halliday (1985) argues that the structure of speech is highly complex mainly because the context of spoken language is always in a state of flux.

“Complexity is achieved not by embedding clauses (finite and non-finite) within a sentence, but through the successive accumulation of individual clauses. The logical connections between the clauses are indicated using discourse markers (but, because, unless, in which case, so etc.)”. (Thornbury and Slade, 2006: 77)

Text 1:

(8)/ B1: **Because I use my eyes** to contact her, and tell her what..., what...
how do I feel with her.

Text 2:

(1)/ G1: **I fear** the, the way to death, **because** everybody don't know **that**
the way to death is,

Text 3:

(30)/ G1: for the next day, **they had plan** to go to travel around, around...
but Dla ask them to go to the island by the ship, boat, ship, boat?

Heads and tails

According to Thornbury and Slade,
Heads fulfill a discourse function, because one of their roles is to foreground the topical focus of what follows. Tails are more retrospective in use, serving to extend, reinforce, clarify or comment on what the speaker is saying.

For example:

You know how kids (**head**) they always say if they can't get their own way they're going to kill themselves.

He drops them everywhere, terrible (tail).

In the study the following examples of heads and tails were found..

Heads**Text 3:**

(27)/ G2: yes, **Jill is the girlfriend of Dla**, she didn't like the beach, she like London more than...

Text 4:

(42)/ G1: **SPSS, something like that**, yes, I don't like

Tails**Text 1:**

(48)/ B2: white or tan (laugh..) **I like.....** ok, and you

Text 2:

(8)/ G2: eh, and can, can, can I,... I will die by car accident or, or sick, or to a criminal kill me, **something like that**,

Text 3:

(11)/ Gs: Jill, Mr. Mr. Dla, Dla, Dla (G1 repeats several times), **right?**

Grammatical incompleteness

Classroom conversation is often jointly constructed and is often 'ungrammatical' in that utterances are left incomplete or there is grammatical mismatching between the start of an utterance and its completion.

The fact that non-standard forms not only exist but are tolerated by native-speakers suggests that to demand 100% accuracy in speaking activities in the classroom may not be realistic.

Text 1:

(24)/ G1: I think a women **that you...**

Text 2:

(4)/ G2: eh. I, I think I believe in the past life and **in the next, next, next ...**

Text 3:

(7)/ G1: **they are...**

Ellipsis

In oral communication, sometimes, students will omit some words known clearly by both speaking partners in the context in order to avoid making the speech too wordy as in the following examples.

Text 1:

(10)/ G1: leg? I think before, *you didn't tell* (= you didn't tell **us that you like to see girls' legs**)

Text 2:

(8)/ G2: eh, and can, can, can I,... I will die by car accident or, or sick, or to a criminal kill me, something like that, I don't know, but eh.. **I, I fear to,** (= I fear to **die**)

Text 3:

(23)/ G1, 2: yes, yes, and... **Talk about....** girlfriend, right? (= **they** talk about a girlfriend)

Deictic

In classroom conversation, because the speaking partners share a certain context and are face to face, the use of pronominal reference is much more frequent than in written language.

Text 1:

(21)/ Gs: **I** think, **I** think you look **now**,

Text 2:

(10)/ G2: if you make a good thing, have, have..

Text 3:

(12)/ G3: yes, **then** Mr. Dla, to take the key of the cottage

Questions

Students involved in classroom conversation naturally ask questions as part of the interactive dialogue that is going on. Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) identified questions as a major feature in what they called 'adjacency pairs'.

Text 1:

(3)/ G1: **what kind of eye which you like?**

Text 2:

(7)/ G1: **how long will you die?**

Text 3:

(10)/ G3: and later they go to, to see the.. **who is she na?**

Tense and Aspect

Students participating in classroom conversation usually use present tenses more than other kind of tense, this seems to come about because of the 'here and now' situation in conversations. This is shown in the following table.

Text	Present tense (Example)	Past tense (Example)	Future tense (Example)
Text 1	T1/U(8): (8)/ B1: Because <i>I use</i> my eyes to contact her, and <i>tell</i> her what..., what..	T1/U(10): (10)/ G1: leg? I think before, <i>you didn't tell</i> ;	T1/U(20): (20)/ B2: <i>I will look</i> ;
Appearing times in text 1	Almost from begin- ning to the end	3 times	3 times

Modality

This is best understood by taking into account the interpersonal features of the context. By using modality, students indicate their attitudes, judgements with regard to what is being said: something probably happens; should happen, might have happened. Modals whether in the verbs or adjuncts are very common in classroom conversation precisely because of their interpersonal function.

Text 1:

(2)/ B1: ... I see eye first, because the eye *can*...

Text 2:

(8)/ G2: eh, and *can, can, can* I,... I *will* die by car accident or,

Text 4:

(10)/ G2: you mean that which subject you *have to* devote or emphasize on, right?

Conclusion

The difference between classroom talk, real conversation and classroom conversation have been summarized as follows by Thornbury & Slade, 2006: 240.

Classroom talk	Real conversation	Classroom conversation
1: Product-oriented (to attain a pre-selected pedagogical goal.)	Process-oriented (to construct and maintain interpersonal relationships.)	Both product-oriented and process-oriented.
2: Transactional (the transmission of subject-matter knowledge.)	Interactional (there may be some transmission of information but this is secondary to simply verbal interaction: joking, comforting etc.)	Interactional (classroom conversation is about building a rapport as well as perhaps some transmission of information)
3: Asymmetrical (the speaker's rights are unevenly distributed, with the teacher asking the majority of questions.)	Symmetrical (The speakers rights are more evenly distributed.)	Symmetrical (The speakers rights are more evenly distributed.)
4: Teacher-led (the teacher asks the questions.)	Jointly constructed (the talk is collaborative.)	Jointly constructed (the talk is collaborative.)
5: Topicalization by teacher (topics introduced by the teacher.)	Topicalization shared (speakers free to take turns and introduce topics of their own choice.)	Topicalization shared (speakers free to take turns and introduce topics of their own choice.)
6: Display questions (questions appear in classroom talk, usually raised by the teacher.)	Referential questions (questions arise from the persons involved because of the different topics addressed.)	Referential questions (questions arise from the persons involved because of the different topics addressed.)
7: IRF sequence predominate (Initiation from the teacher, followed by response and feedback from the teacher)	Adjacency pairs "chat-and-chunk" (talk is collaborative with speakers free to take turns and to introduce topics of their own.)	Adjacency pairs "chat-and-chunk" (talk is collaborative with speakers free to take turns and to introduce topics of their own.)
8: Turns nominated (it is the teacher who nominates the students to speak.)	Turn self-selected (a person is free to join in or change the subject of the conversation.)	Turn self-selected (a person is free to join in or change the subject of the conversation.)

Classroom talk	Real conversation	Classroom conversation
9: Other repair (It is normally the teacher who will correct the students.)	Self-repair (Although in conversation a person can be corrected by someone else, speakers usually correct themselves.)	Self-repair (in classroom conversation students will either correct themselves or be corrected by other students.)
10: Low contingency (Classroom talk is not normally anchored in the 'here and now' of all the participants and doesn't set up expectations of what is going to happen next)	High contingency (turn taking depends a great deal of what the other person has said.)	High contingency (to produce natural conversation in the classroom can be difficult at the situation is still artificial.)

Traditionally, as Nunan (1987) pointed out, studies of classroom interaction have been characterized as being dominated by teacher-led interaction, consisting of largely IRF (Initiation from teachers -Response from students -Feedback from teachers) sequences. Van Lier (2001) summed up the difference between classroom talk and real conversation when he observed that students' opportunities to exercise initiatives or to develop a sense of control and self-regulation are extremely restricted in the IRF format.

However, there are indications from this study that when the classroom is set up for conversation, real conversation can be produced. Students who attended the conversation course in the Institute of English Language Education (IELE) at Assumption University were gradually producing language that was near to if not actually like real conversation. Their spoken English improved naturally in an environment that was not stressful. They also made friends and enjoyed taking to each other. In other words, in spite of the artificiality of the classroom real conversation was produced.

It is often said that 'the proof is in the pudding', the fact that most students after this six week conversation course were able to pass the oral test required at the IELE is in some ways testament to the success of the programme overall.

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