

Listen actively! You can keep that conversation going!

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Level: High-Intermediate

Time: 45 minutes – 1 hour for each activity, 1 activity per week over 4 weeks

Resources: TV/VCR

Goal: To learn to respond appropriately to maintain a conversation

Description

I used this module of activities in a four-week time period. Together, the four activities move the students from skepticism to awareness and, finally, production so that they actually *feel* how to maintain a conversation.

The warm-up allows the teacher to find out what students already know about conversations in English. Students analyze different aspects of conversations (such as eye contact and use of silence) in five written situations. Students can easily relate to examples like the following: *You are at the Financial Aid office. The secretary is explaining the financial aid application process to you. You look straight at her. You don't say anything. The secretary stops talking. What does the secretary think?* The students might say that the secretary thought that they did not understand or they might also say that nodding one's head shows understanding.

The next situation is the most difficult. *Your sister just had a car accident. Although the accident was minor, you are still worried about her. You are telling the story to your friend. Your friend nods his head while you speak. When you finish explaining the story, he says, "That's too bad." In your opinion, how does your friend feel about your story? How does your friend make you feel?* When I introduced this

situation, almost all of the students reported that they felt that the friend was showing empathy by nodding his head and saying “That’s too bad.” As I tried to explain that we would ask questions to encourage the speaker to go on, students could not begin to understand what I was talking about. One student even said that she did not believe me. At this point, I realized what I had to work on. Most students understood that we nod our heads and that total silence is not an appropriate response. My task turned out to be how to convince the students that they needed to listen actively by responding with questions and repetition in order to maintain a conversation with a native speaker. (See Teacher Resource.)

In the *first awareness activity*, students were given a short clip from the sitcom, *Third Rock From the Sun*. Since the television show’s humor is rather obvious, it was perfect in illustrating what a speaker should not do. The male character was complaining about his shoes and shoe size. Although the female character said, “That’s too bad” (which should mean empathy), her actions showed that she did not care. The situation was so exaggerated that the whole class understood the humor and laughed. Moreover, they saw how the phrase “That’s too bad” (the exact phrase from the *warm-up*) does not necessarily mean empathy.

Since the students had already seen what they should not do, the *second awareness activity* allowed students to see how questions and repetition are used to keep a conversation going. I used a clip from *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*. In the short clip, Leno uses repetition and questions to get an audience member to continue telling his funny story. A transcript of the conversation without punctuation was given to the students. (See Teacher Resource.) They were asked to put in the punctuation and were

surprised to find out that there were 11 questions asked by Leno. When students see the clip, they are able to see how the questions and repetition encouraged the audience member to continue.

The ***production activity*** gives the students structured practice in making their own conversation with the focused appropriate responses—repetition and questions. For this activity, I use a monologue of a boy from the *Oprah Winfrey Show* who was explaining the work he had done to combat violence in his neighborhood. As a preproduction activity, students are given a written copy of the monologue with five sentences missing and they complete the monologue as they are listening. This gives them a physical task to do as they preview the monologue and also checks their understanding of the content. (See Procedure). Students are then asked to produce a dialogue from parts of the monologue. By this time, the students are able to use the strategies of questions and repetition to change the monologue into a conversation.

Procedure

1. *Warm-up:* What students perceive...
 - a. *Analysis:* In pairs/small groups, students are given the written conversation. They begin to analyze the conversations by answering focused questions.
 - b. *Discussion:* As a class, the conversations are further analyzed as opinions are elicited.
2. *Awareness:* What you should not do...
 - a. *Vocabulary in Context:* In pairs/small groups, students are given a copy of the conversation with new vocabulary/slang underlined. They make guesses as to

- what the underlined words mean. The meanings of the vocabulary/slang are discussed together.
- b. *Analysis of the written conversation:* Students identify responses used in the conversation. Students identify the meanings of these responses.
 - c. *Viewing of the video:* Students view the clip (with the written conversation to aid them in comprehension).
 - d. *Analysis of the video:* It is elicited from the students that although one speaker says as s/he should, s/he is not sincere and his/her words do not show empathy.
3. *Awareness:* What you should do...
- a. *Analysis of the content:* In pairs/small groups, students are given the copy of the conversation (with five sentences omitted). Students complete the conversation with the missing sentences (which are on strips of paper).
 - b. *Analysis of the punctuation:* To focus on the use of questions, the written conversation has no punctuation. Students must decide where the periods and question marks belong.
 - c. *Viewing of the video:* Students view the clip (with the written conversation to aid them in comprehension). They see how the conversation is maintained with repetition and questions.
 - d. *Analysis of the video:* Discussion follows as students explain how the conversation is maintained (with questions, repetition, head nodding, etc.).
4. *Production:* How to make the conversation flow

- a. *Analysis of the content:* Students receive the written monologue (with five sentences omitted). Students complete the monologue with the missing sentences (which are on strips of paper).
- b. *Vocabulary in Context:* Students must figure out what a list of words/phrases mean from the context.
- c. *Discussion of Content:* As a class, the monologue is discussed (content, vocabulary).
- d. *Viewing of Clip:* Students view the clip (with their completed monologue to aid them in comprehension). Questions are answered at the end of the clip.
- e. *Application:* In pairs, students are given one section of the monologue. They are to create a dialogue, with the second speaker using appropriate responses to maintain the conversation (i.e. head nodding, questions and repetition).

Rationale

This module of activities tackles the problem that so many of our students have—maintaining a conversation in English. Even with grammatical competence and native-like pronunciation, students still struggle in conversations. When textbooks address active listening, activities tend to focus on asking for clarification. However, as Maynard (1997) points out, this is only one part of active listening. Responses are used to prompt the speaker to continue, show understanding, give support, indicate agreement, show strong emotional response, add or correct the speaker's information, and ask for more information.

To maximize student understanding of these active listening techniques, the four activities need to be taught together. The *warm-up* lets the teacher find out the beliefs and

feelings that the students already have. It also introduces a new perspective on conversations in English to the student. Since this perspective does not focus on an English skill (i.e. grammar) that the students immediately identify with, it is necessary to build awareness. In the *first awareness activity*, the video clip's humor comes from what we should not do in a conversation. As a result, the students can easily analyze it. In the *second awareness activity*, the interaction between a talk show host and the audience member shows the use of questions and repetition in a true conversation. (Because a good talk show host must be a conversationalist, s/he will naturally use questions and repetition to get the other speaker to continue.) After this awareness is built, the students can believe in the techniques and apply them in the *production activity*.

I wanted to teach my students how to continue a conversation. However, it is very difficult to make students believe that their accent, vocabulary or grammatical competence is not the reason that conversations in English tend to stop for them. I knew that in order to accomplish my objective, I had to disguise my lessons in other activities (i.e. listening, vocabulary). It is very important that the students feel like they are learning something concrete (i.e. vocabulary) along with the conversational techniques.

Alternatives and Caveats

When developing these activities, it was difficult finding appropriate video clips to use. When selecting clips, it is important to note that dynamics change when there are more than two speakers. As a result, I only used conversations with two speakers. For EFL instructors, the greatest difficulty will be finding appropriate video to use.

Since I wanted the students to focus on the conversational techniques, I gave the students written conversations first. I did not want them to struggle to understand the

English as they watched the clips. I used these written conversations to work on vocabulary. However, this module of activities can easily be modified and focus on listening. For example, in the *production activity*, students complete the monologue with sentences given to them on strips of paper. This could be changed by having the students fill in those sentences when watching the monologue.

Reference

Maynard, S. K. (1997). Analyzing interactional management in native/non-native English conversation: A case of listener response. *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, 35, 37-60.)