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Quick Reference for Conducting Conversation Sessions

Language Use

Language of interchange is the target language. Tell the students they may ask questions in English during the last 5 minutes of the session if necessary. Then stick to the target language during the session.

Using Correct Body Language

The ability to use correct body language is as important as the ability to speak. Make sure your students know and practice the body language that accompanies their speech production. Personal space, gestures or body postures that indicate respect, and understanding of approved gender interactions are all intertwined with the appropriate vocal utterance. Make students get out of their chairs and act out their role plays.

Use the Vocabulary from the Textbook

Confine your speech to the vocabulary the students are learning and have learned in the past. You need to carefully pay attention to what words they have learned and are assigned for the week. You need to practice ahead of time conforming your own speech to the limitations of their vocabulary. You may be tempted to add new words or use slang. Resist the temptation.

A good conversation session follows the following format:

- Begin with a warmup session. Greet each student as s/he enters the room and make small talk around the group to put everyone at ease and to get the students focused on speaking the target language.
- Begin the actual session with a quick review of material covered during the last session.
- Go next to the material that the students were assigned to prepare for their conversation sessions. They have been told to prepare dialogues or questions or material along those lines.
- Then transition into the material you have prepared to focus on specific structures or vocabulary in the lesson.
- Finally do a cool down exchange so that the students leave the session feeling confident.

If you finish the material you have prepared and the session is not over:

- Use role plays as an extra activity. Students can never do too many of them and they are always different because they are spontaneous.
- Use the dialogues in their textbooks as a point of departure for practicing pronunciation, summarizing, or developing the ebbs and flows of natural speech.
- Begin a group narrative. You make up the first sentence, which can be as simple as “Melissa lives in Casablanca,” and go around the group adding to the story.
- You go around the group giving each student a word that s/he must use in a sentence.

Do not introduce new material or vocabulary.

Do not let the students go early.

Video Examples of Conversation Sessions

Warm-up

Every session starts with a warm up. Conversation partners need to ease students into this the session by asking them questions they can quickly and easily answer. It gives the students confidence, establishes the target language as the norm, and sets the stage for the session.

Warm-up I (Persian)

Skilled conversation partners can take information revealed in the warm-up and integrate it into the lesson. Here the student mentions a “barbecue” and the conversation partner follows up.

Warm-up II (Arabic)

Here is an example of a warm-up in an elementary class.

Warm-up III (Swahili)

In this twist of the warm up, the conversation partner has the students ask questions of her.

Target Language Use (Using the Language the Students are Learning)

The conversation session is designed to be the time when the student is completely immersed in the language, so keeping the session in the target language is essential. This is the one opportunity all week that the student has to practice the language with peers, so no time should be lost in English. Tell students that during the last 5 minutes of the session they may ask questions in English if they still need to and then stick to the target language.

Target Language Use I (Hindi)

Even beginners can learn to respond to classroom commands in the target language.

Target Language Use II (Hindi)

The conversation partner is praising a student in this example. Note how she uses both Hindi and English to make sure the student understands the praise. This kind of response on the part of the conversation partner will raise the student's self-confidence level and make her ready to risk speaking again.

Target Language Use III (Swahili)

Here the conversation partner gives all her instructions in the target language. This is the way sessions should be conducted.

Correcting Errors

One of the more important roles of the conversation session is to give the student the opportunity to practice creating language in the presence of a native speaker who can give immediate feedback. There are instances in which the person serving as the conversation partner is a fellow student, is younger than the person studying the language, or comes from a culture where it is considered rude to correct someone trying to speak a foreign language. It is imperative that the conversation partner set aside these mitigating factors and make certain that students understand that they have made an error and what is the correct word, phrase, or structure.

Correction techniques vary and each conversation partner needs to come up with a system that works and is comfortable for the individual. Correcting a student can be as easy as making a hand gesture and saying the correct word and then making the student repeat it. This method allows the session to continue in the target language with no break into English. Sometimes the error is such that a brief explanation in English is required such as "you said 'kitchen' but you mean 'chicken'" before making the student repeat "chicken" and continuing the conversation.

Remember that the job of the conversation partner is to correct oral errors. Students want to practice and want to be corrected. Letting an error pass does no one any favors.

Correcting Errors I (Hindi)

Note how the conversation partner makes the students repeat and repeat until they get it right:

Correcting Errors II (Hindi)

Students can also critique each other and thus cement what they have learned. Note here how the

group has fun with the student's mistake.

Correcting Errors III (Hindi)

Note how the conversation partner doesn't stop until the student gets the pronunciation right.

Correcting Errors IV (Hindi)

Note how the conversation partner makes the students repeat the correct pronunciation.

Correcting Errors V (Pashto)

Here the conversation partner gives the correction in English thus forcing the student to analyze his error and come up with the correct form.

Correcting Errors VI (Swahili)

Students are reading dialogues from the text with the conversation partner correcting their pronunciation as they read.

Correcting Errors VII (Pashto)

Here is an example of self-correcting. The student makes the utterance and then corrects himself and goes on.

Working in Pairs

Having students work in pairs is one way to ensure that all students are participating at the same time. Listening to and interacting with a native speaker (the conversation partner) is a different exercise than listening to and interacting with a peer. Both are useful exercises.

Working in Pairs I (Turkish)

Here the conversation partner assigns a "conversation" and chooses a pair to improvise it. The rest of the group serves as consultants and decisions are made with input from all. This can be extremely useful. Everyone is involved instead of two acting and the rest watching. Note how the students discuss the register of the improvisation and they ask, "should it be in the formal?" They reason that if one is asking the other's name, then the two don't know each other, and thus the interchange should use formal address.

Working in Pairs II (Turkish)

Here the conversation partner does a picture exercise by dividing the students into pairs. Each student describes the picture to the partner and the two try to determine differences in the pictures among themselves.

Working in Pairs III (Swahili)

Here the conversation partner has students ask questions of each other.

Role Play

Role play is one of the most common and useful components of a conversation session because it puts language in its cultural context. Role plays can always be varied; thus, the possibilities are limitless. There are a variety of ways to initiate a role play. Students can be handed a role play card that outlines the scenario to be played out, or they can be assigned characters (genders, ages, and so forth) and then given a general topic to improvise. Whatever method is chosen, remember that anyone can be any age, any gender, and of any social position, so all possible interactions can be covered.

Role Play I (Arabic)

Here the conversation partner brings a prop – cake – and students take turns acting out the proper way to accept hospitality in the target culture.

Role Play II (Pashto)

The conversation partner and student role play a formal greeting.

Role Play III (Pashto)

The conversation partner and student role play a formal greeting with the male conversation partner taking the role of a female.

Role Play IV (Pashto)

The conversation partner and student role play an informal greeting.

Role Play V (Persian)

Here the conversation partner describes the role play and initially lets the two students interact. Notice how he corrects them at the time of their errors rather than letting them go until the end and making a correction then. Students will learn more and be able to incorporate the correction into the role play if the correction is done immediately. Late in the role play, the conversation partner comes in, playing the part of a waiter.

Role Play VI (Turkish)

In this exercise, the conversation partner has given the students lines and they must combine the lines to make a logical role play.

Role Play VII (Turkish)

The conversation partner gives each student an information cards about a famous Turk. The students then have to take on the role of the person on their card and meet the other “people” while in character.

Role Play VIII (Turkish)

In this role play, students are practicing meeting each other and asking all questions that are appropriate during an initial meeting.

Using Description to Elicit Speech

There is no end to the descriptions students can make up in a conversation session. Description allows students to experiment with a variety of vocabulary, to include their understanding of the target culture in the exercise, and to use their imagination. It is an effective way for the conversation partner to verify that the students have internalized the week's vocabulary, and is an easy exercise to tack on at the end of a session when 5 minutes remain or it can form the core of the session.

Using Description to Elicit Speech I (Pashto)

Here the conversation partner asks the student to describe an imaginary character:

Using Description to Elicit Speech II (Pashto)

Bringing pictures or photos to class – either in paper form or on the computer – is another way of exposing students to the target culture. It is much more effective to have a student use Persian to describe a house in Iran than to try to use Persian to describe a house in Amherst. Here is an example of the conversation partner's using an image on the computer. Note how he continues to press the student to give more information.

Using Description to Elicit Speech III (Arabic)

Here the conversation partner is asking students to describe the weather in Amherst and in other cities. She uses the students' answers to carry questions to other students.

Using Description to Elicit Speech IV (Turkish)

Here the conversation partner hands out pictures to pairs of students who are working together. The students must each describe their picture to their partner and from these descriptions, the students must figure out how the pictures are different.

Using Description to Elicit Speech V (Arabic)

Here the conversation partner has students describe cities they like or do not like. Notice that even though books are open, the exercise is completely extemporaneous.

Questions and Answers

The question-and-answer format encourages extemporaneous speech because conversation partners can always follow up the students' answers. The key for the conversation partner is to formulate questions that cannot be answered with a "yes" or "no" response. It is a good idea to write out the questions in the proper form before the session so that the Q&A exchange goes smoothly.

Question and Answers I (Arabic)

Here students are asked which cities they like or do not like.

Question and Answers II (Arabic)

The conversation partner interjects questions and comments to keep the student talking. The conversation partner has honed in on a topic that is of great interest to the student – in this case, music.

Question and Answers III (Arabic)

After a quick warm up, the conversation partner begins asking directed questions.

Question and Answers IV (Hindi)

The conversation partner asks the question and then gives the beginning student quite a while to construct an answer. Time is needed.

Question and Answers V (Hindi)

Students are asking each other questions while the conversation partner interjects necessary correction.

Question and Answers VI (Pashto)

The conversation partner asks the student to describe the weather. Before responding, the student asks a question and once it is answered, he gives his full answer.

Question and Answers VII (Swahili)

The conversation partner tells the students to ask each other questions.

Question and Answers VIII (Swahili)

The conversation partner has the students ask questions of her.

Question and Answers IX (Turkish)

In this advanced Turkish session, the conversation partner is questioning the student about the videos that he has seen. She keeps following up to make certain he has understood everything he has seen and heard.

Discussion

Even students with limited vocabulary can participate in a discussion at a basic level. Discussions force students to make themselves understood by their peers and not just by a sympathetic listener such as the conversation partner.

Discussion I (Arabic)

Here students listen to a song they have not heard before and discuss it.

Discussion II (Persian)

The conversation partner takes a word that the student uses in a response and makes it the core of a discussion. This is a good technique because it takes a topic in which the student has already shown interest and encourages elaboration.

Practicing Numbers

Students always need a lot of practice with numbers and there are a variety of exercises that can be simultaneously fun and educational. As with all constructions, there is no such thing as too much practice.

Practicing Numbers I (Hindi)

Here students are counting by 2s – forward and backward.

Practicing Numbers II (Turkish)

Turkish bingo!

Practicing Numbers III (Turkish)

Counting.

Practicing Numbers IV (Turkish)

Practicing giving phone numbers. This can be cultural as well because students should learn to read the numbers with the pattern of the target culture.

Using the Text

Conversation sessions should take place with the textbook closed or not present at all so that students are not tempted to spend too much time looking at the book and not paying attention to the flow of the session. However, there are a few instances when the conversation partner can use the book to advantage.

Using the Text I (Swahili)

The conversation partner is using the in-text dialogue to help beginning students with their pronunciation and inflection. She has them take parts and read the dialogue as she corrects. This exercise should go smoothly if students have read the dialogues aloud to themselves during their week of preparation.

Using the Text II (Persian)

Here the conversation partner refers to the book as he drills the student.

Culture

Although students are ostensibly studying the target language, they are simultaneously studying how that language interacts with the target culture. Therefore, the conversation partner must always be alert to cultural nuances associated with language. In order for a student to correctly practice a greetings situation, for example, the student must learn and demonstrate understanding of the body language that accompanies the greeting. The words cannot be learned in a vacuum but must be learned in an appropriate cultural context.

Culture I (Arabic)

Here the conversation partner has brought cake to use as a prop. Students are practicing the grammatical construction for accepting an act of hospitality, but the conversation partner is making certain that they also learn the nuances of accompanying behavior in the target culture.

Culture II (Arabic)

Here students are listening to a song and discussing it. This is a listening exercise at the same time that it is a cultural exercise because they are discussing the song and its role in the target culture.

Culture Example II (Swahili)

Eid and Ramadan make up part of the discussion in this Swahili clip.

Conversation Partner Strategies

Getting a student to produce as much language as possible while staying as silent as possible oneself takes practice. Being receptive to what the student is saying silently invites the student to continue speaking. Smiling, nodding, and saying nothing all convey the same message to the student: “yes, you can do it, you’re doing fine, keep speaking.” In eliciting speech production, nothing is as effective as silence. The student will try to fill it and if the conversation is nodding but continues to be silent, the student will keep going. If the student stops, a simple “what else?” can get them going again.

Conversation Partner Strategies I (Arabic)

Note the demeanor of the conversation partner. She nods, smiles, says “ummmm” or “oooo” or “un-huh” and the student keeps on talking. She also gives the students a lot of time to think. She doesn’t rush them.

Conversation Partner Strategies II (Hindi)

Note the amount of time the student takes to respond. The students need time to think.

Conversation Partner Strategies III (Pashto)

The conversation partner wants more information, so he asks “what else do you see?” and the student continues.

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