

Dynamic Dialogues

Susan Zimmerman de Guzman

Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey.
Campus Estado de Mexico

PAUL: How long have you been here, Tom?

TOM: For about three months.

PAUL: Don't you miss England?

TOM: Sometimes I miss my family, but living in another country's a fantastic experience.

PAUL: How do you like New York?

Tony: I think it's terrific. It's like a lot of small cities all together--Chinatown, Little Italy, Greenwich Village.... There's so much to do!

Ever since the Audio-lingual Method hit the scene, dialogues have been a fact of life in language classrooms. At their best, dialogues give students a chance to experience functional language in a contextual setting by presenting an interesting "real-life" conversation. At worst, dialogues are stilted, artificial interchanges of the structures on tap for the day's lesson. In either case, dialogues have become a part of the daily routine in today's English class.

The question is, how can we make the best use of dialogues without falling back on the usual "listen and repeat" patterns of teacher-student parroting? Must we forever rely on the technique of assigning student roles for group or pair practice, which invariably results in wrenchingly monotone and outrageously-pronounced renditions of the conversation for all to hear and hopefully not to imitate?

For one thing we can steer away occasionally from the notion of dialogues merely as oral practice exercises. The truth is,

dialogues can be used successfully for listening, reading and writing practice in addition to pronunciation and presentation work. Moreover, dialogues can form the basis of change-of pace activities in classroom in the form of games, challenges and communicative activities. Here are some ideas:

The Disappearing Dialogue

This activity is useful for students who are having a difficult time integrating all the "bits and pieces" of various structures into one coherent conversation.

1. Choose a shortened form of your textbook dialogue, no more than eight lines or make up your own version utilizing the important structures of the lesson.

2. Print the conversation on the board in an easy-to-read writing and give the students THREE MINUTES to memorize it. Students MAY NOT write any of the dialogue on paper.

3. Assign students roles and have them read the dialogue off the board. After each complete reading, erase several key words (about one per line) from the board so that the students have to rely more and more on their memory. Continue to erase a few words each time until NO words remain on the board, only the names of the speakers and the punctuation marks.

4. HINT: Choose the slower students to participate earlier on so that they have the confidence to keep on with the game. Be spontaneous with your selection of participants each round but try to arrange competitive students against each other so that the game remains lively. Also, as you erase, choose words that are related in structure or meaning, such as all modal auxiliaries one time, possessive pronouns another, so that students are unconsciously learning parts of speech at the same time.

Reading Practice

There are several ways you can use dialogues for reading practice, but you must be sure to utilize these techniques as the initial approach to the dialogue, and not as a follow-up, in order to insure strategies are correctly applied.

1. PREDICTION PRACTICE

If your dialogue has accompanying pictures and a title, have students cover the text and guess about the content of the dialogue BEFORE they begin to read. Write their predictions on the board. Then have students read the dialogue; afterwards discuss how accurate their ideas were.

2. COMPREHENSION SKIMMING

If your text includes comprehension questions about the dialogue, have students look at them BEFORE reading. Ask students to read quickly, looking specifically for the answers to the questions. Give them a time limit if necessary, to keep them from the temptation of stewing over each word.

3. SUMMARY READING

Ask students to read and find the MAIN IDEA of the dialogue. Since some dialogues simply string together the day's grammatical structures, the teacher needs to check first if this is a valid exercise for a specific dialogue. Make sure there is an answer to the question "What is this conversation about?" before you try this.

Writing Practice

1. After students have studied the dialogue and the structures in the text, have them work in pairs (or groups if there are more than two roles) writing down the conversation instead of speaking it. Tell students they may not speak, but if

they see errors in their partner's work, they should circle or underline them for revision, perhaps as a homework assignment. They should respond with a large written ? if they don't understand the previous sentence and pass it back to their partner for rewrite.

2. A variation of this is to assign roles and describe a similar but not exactly the same situation for students to do as a written role-play. You may wish to give the first sentence.

3. Another variation is to have each student write down the first sentence of a dialogue (following the model in the textbook) and pass the paper to the right for the next student's response, continuing until the conversation is complete.

Listening Practice

1. Before you have your students listen to the dialogue for the first time, have them study the comprehension questions accompanying the text (or make up your own). Have them CLOSE THEIR BOOKS, listen to the text (on tape or read by you) and answer the questions. If they can't answer the questions, have them listen again.

2. DICTATION--Dictation is a fairly mundane activity, but at least it makes more sense in the contextual setting of a complete dialogue and really DOES help students internalize written and oral production. Make sure you reduce or condense your text's dialogue before you begin to avoid overly complicated structures and non-sequiturs, or just to keep from going on for too long and boring students.

Paralinguistic Practice

One thing that seems counterproductive about oral dialogue practice is that even in group or pair work students are sitting in their seats with their hands firmly grasped around their

books. Hopefully, the idea of dialogues is to present grammar structures in a natural setting, and *natural* in any language includes the appropriate body language and sentence intonation which are an integral part of any real conversation. Here are some activities for use when students are ready to work on their own in pairs or groups according to roles and after they have had the opportunity to hear the conversation on tape or to see it acted out by their teacher.

1. Introduce the idea of body language to the students and act out the conversation with the necessary gestures. Play the tape (or read the conversation) and have students *silently* act along. After students have been assigned their roles, have them do the conversation in body language only, from the beginning to the end, as if miming it.

2. Emphasize intonation and natural vocal expression when you present the conversation. Then repeat the conversation in a monotone to call students' attention to the necessity for verbal paralinguistic cues. Finally, have students repeat after you as you "read" the dialogue using "dadadadada (etc.)" in place of words, but with the correct syllabification and intonation, for example:

How are you? (da da da?)

Fine, thanks, and you? (da da, da da?)

Have students work in groups and pairs using this technique, emphasizing sentence intonation and verbal expression.

3. Have students act out the dialogue using only body language and "dada" intonation!

Across the River

This is a simple little technique for livening up the dull routine of practicing the dialogue in groups or pairs, plus it has the advantage of making shy or soft-spoken students speak up for once!

When students are ready to practice their roles, assign students who are across the room or at least two meters apart to work together without changing seats. All students should practice at the same time. The noise level for this activity is VERY high, but for some reason it generates a lot of enjoyment and insures that students are speaking loud enough to be heard correctly, and are listening carefully enough to know when to respond. And as I tell my students, it's good practice for going to crowded noisy discotheques and picking up attractive foreigners!

Dialogue Challenge

Give students two minutes to memorize a reduced version (about eight lines) of a two-person dialogue. (NO writing allowed.) Divide them into two teams. One student from each team takes a role and they perform the conversation; as soon as one student makes ANY mistake, he is eliminated and the dialogue begins again from the beginning, but now the remaining student takes the OTHER role. The game continues until one pair does the conversation perfectly. Give one penalty point per team for each mistake. The team with the lowest score wins. You can repeat with the same dialogue or a new one until all students have a chance to participate.