Factors to consider when teaching English conversation

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Introduction

In many quarters and at many levels in Japan there is great interest in implementing, providing, and attending courses in English conversation. In the public sector, for instance, the Japanese Ministry of Education has revised its upper secondary-school curriculum guidelines where "oral communication receives greater emphasis by promoting the teaching of spoken English" (Taguchi, 2002: 4). In the private sector, the 10,000 or so *Eikaiwa* (English conversation schools) in Tokyo alone (Wiggins, 1992), and the general education requirement for first and second-year university undergraduates to take at least one foreign language for two years, which typically involves taking English conversation, also bear witness to the high profile accorded to studying this form of English.

But what exactly does an English conversation course look like? Are students presented with model conversations as a means of learning how to converse fluently, handling a different aspect of it in each lesson? Do students use conversational scripts as the basis for practicing new grammatical structures? Or are authentic conversations used to enhance listening skills with the aim of extending communicative competence? This paper sets out to answer these and other pertinent questions on the dynamics of teaching and learning English conversation in a Japanese context. First of all, however, it is necessary to define what is meant by the term 'conversation.' Then, it is possible to go on to discuss the functions

and characteristics of this most basic, but complex form of human communication.

Towards a definition of conversation

Conversation is a phenomenon that has received attention from anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists and linguists. It is the most basic and widespread linguistic means of conducting human affairs and it constantly accompanies our everyday life. Because conversation is so habitual, it is easy to forget its status as a genre, with its own norms and conventions, which are often very different from those used in written language. These characteristics may complicate investigation and make its scientific study particularly challenging. It has been difficult to obtain acoustically clear, natural samples of spontaneous conversation, especially of its more informal varieties.

Indeed, at times, conversation analysts have had to engage in mild forms of subterfuge in order to gather samples of conversational data that have both naturalness of content and acoustic quality. This was the case for David Crystal and Derek Davey in 1975, when they were collecting material for their text *Advanced Conversational English*. Similarly, because access to authentic English conversation, especially in EFL countries, is often difficult, the L1 Spanish speaking participants in one recent research study had to resort to "...clandestinely recording tourists in the town square" (Sayer, 2005: 22).

When samples have been obtained, however, the sheer variety of participants, topics, and social situations that characterize conversation have made it difficult to determine which aspects of the behavior are systematic and rule-bound. Conversation analysis research, nevertheless, has shown that this form of speaking is a highly structured activity in which participants adhere to a set of basic conventions. Thus, although the

term 'conversation' is often loosely applied to any form of spoken encounter or verbal interaction, for the purposes of this paper, it is necessary to be more explicit in its characterization. The sociologist Erving Goffman (1976: 264) describes conversation more restrictedly as:

> ...talk occurring when a small number of participants come together and settle into what they perceive to be a few moments cut off from (or carried to the side of) instrumental tasks; a period of idling felt to be an end in itself, during which everyone is accorded the right to talk as well as to listen and without reference to a fixed schedule;...

Conversation, therefore, may be aptly described as 'idle chat,' which by its very nature is more loosely attached to the world than other types of speech events. Moreover, each participant is given the status of someone whose views on the subject being talked about are to be encouraged and respected. In addition, differences of opinion are treated favorably and impartially, and no final agreement is demanded. Most people spend a great deal of their everyday lives in this type of chat, where the primary concern is to be pleasant to the person with whom you are talking.

Sometimes information-giving language is embedded in such chat. Thus, in the UK for example, a visit to the doctor or the local newsagent may well begin with a greeting followed by comments about the weather or what is happening in the local community. The information-giving element (Goffman's instrumental task, above) is then performed and the encounter finishes up with farewells. Many social interactions seem to consist of very little information-giving/instrumental content. People meeting on a bus or train for the first time, people meeting at parties, and people meeting on holiday will tend to conduct a type of talk where one person offers a topic for comment, responds to the other person if the topic is successful and, if

it is not, another topic is advanced for conversation. Such primarily interpersonal conversations are typically characterized by constantly shifting topics and a great deal of agreement on them.

(1) A: Hi, there.
B: Oh, hello.

(2) A: Ready to order?
B: Erm..what's your special, today?
A: Uh,..it's lasagna and chips.
B: Mmm, no. I'll have a tuna sandwich and coffee, please.
A: OK.

In both (1) and (2) above what is spoken may be loosely referred to as 'conversational,' but neither exchange constitutes a conversation in the more restricted sense, though (1) may have led to one and (2) might have incorporated one alongside the instrumental task.

The anthropologist and sociolinguist Dell Hymes (1972) uses the term "speech event" for activities that are regulated by norms for the use of speech. As speech events, conversations can be contrasted with other types of speech such as lectures, debates, sermons, interviews and board meetings. Each of these is recognized as distinct by virtue of differences in the number of participants involved, as well as through differences in the type and amount of talk expected of the participants. Speech events also have identifiable conventions or routines for initiating, maintaining, and terminating talk, violations of which are noticed and reportable.

The characteristics and conventions of conversation are not wholly unique to English. EFL learners are capable conversationalists in their own language, therefore, they can benefit from lessons involving the transference of unconscious interaction strategies from their L1. Certain conventions of conversation are, however, culturally specific. For instance,

English speakers generally have a "no gap, no overlap" convention, which makes both silence and two people talking at the same time inappropriate. Learners, therefore, need to become aware of what the key conventions of English conversation are and note how they may compare or contrast with those in their own language (Sayer, 2005).

The functions of conversation

The main functions of conversation include: (a) the making and maintenance of social relationships such as friendship; (b) the exchanging of information; (c) the negotiating of status and social roles; and (d) determining and carrying out joint actions. Conversations, therefore, serve a variety of functions; however, in English, "the primary purpose is probably social" (Nolasco and Arthur, 1987: 15).

Alluded to earlier and noted above in points (a) and (b) are two particular purposes of conversation which can be readily distinguished, i.e., those in which the primary purpose is the establishment and maintenance of social relations - the "interactional" function of conversation; and those in which the primary focus is on the exchange of information - the "transactional" function of conversation (Brown and Yule 1983a & 1983b).

Interactional-type conversations focus primarily on the social needs of the participants, whereas with transactional-type conversations the primary focus is on the message. Thus, when used for transactional purposes, the major concern is the transference of information; the main purpose of the speakers is to communicate their message, rather than to be pleasant to the listener. Transactional language, therefore, has been termed "message-oriented," whereas interactional language is more "listener-oriented" (Brown and Yule 1983a).

Transactional spoken language is frequently concerned with getting things done, e.g., a salesman explains how to operate the GPS system in a

new car, a hotel guest complains about a lack of hot water, a doctor explains her diagnosis to a patient, or a reporter interviews an eye-witness of a newsworthy event. In each case, the speakers are mainly concerned with making their message clear, and the listeners must ensure that they have understood correctly, by asking for repetition or clarification if this is necessary. As a consequence, successful transactional speech is often clearer and involves the use of vocabulary that is more specific.

Thus, with transactional uses of language, coherence, clarity, and content are vital. Brown and Yule (1983a) also observe that completion of some type of task often accompanies transactional uses of conversation, such as writing down a message, or carrying out an instruction. Brown et al. (1984: 9) comment that transactional uses of talk often dominate classrooms, as seen in the following vignette:

> Teacher: now + here we have a substance in which heat is moving along the rod from a hot end to a cold end + + can anybody tell me the name we give to such a substance? - a substance in which heat can flow + + nobody can tell me that + well + it's called a conductor + + anybody ever heard of that word before? + good well + I'll put it on the blackboard for you + it's called a conductor + what we are going to do today is to have a look at some conductors.

As mentioned earlier, in many situations such as at the newsagent's or the chemist's shop, both interactional and transactional functions of spoken language may merge. Moreover, at the hospital, for instance, the doctor may first engage in small talk to relax the patient, then switch to transactional talk while asking for a description of the patient's medical problem. It follows then, that effective communication in the classroom should also require the students and teacher to engage in both interactional

and transactional talk. Language in its interactional function is needed in order to interact with the teacher and fellow students while tackling class tasks, and transactional language is needed in order to assimilate new information, acquire new skills, and construct new concepts. Thus, in the EFL classroom the teaching of listening comprehension and conversation skills is fundamentally affected by whether the primary purpose involved is interactional or transactional.

The social basis of conversation

Across cultures, interactional uses of conversation, in which the primary purpose in communicating is social, lie at the very heart of human experience and form an integral part of our daily lives. The emphasis is on creating harmonious interactions between participants rather than on communicating information. The aim of the participants is to make social interaction comfortable and non-threatening and to communicate good will. Although information may be transferred in the process, the accurate and orderly presentation of information is not the main purpose. Greetings, making casual chat, telling jokes, and gossiping are examples of the kind interactional uses of conversation that we may frequently engage in. Moreover, as alluded to earlier, these types of talk are by their nature listener-oriented, as opposed to being message-oriented. Gossip, for instance, may yield fascinating snippets of information, but the main purpose of gossip is to leave the participants feeling slightly superior rather than better informed.

Grice's maxims of cooperative behavior

When people engage in conversation, they bring to the event shared norms and assumptions as well as common expectations about what conversation is, how conversation develops, and the sort of contribution they are each

expected to make. In the process of talking, the participants share common principles of conversation that lead them to interpret each other's utterances as contributing to the conversation. If a participant's contribution does not 'fit in' or coincide with these shared principles, communication may go awry or break down altogether. The following example from Cane (1995: 54) illustrates this point quite humorously:

> Samuel Barclay Beckett was born in a building in Foxrock, Co. Dublin, on a Friday, the day between Thursday and Saturday, in 1906. Every day Samuel's mother, who was somewhat older and taller than her baby son, picked him up in her arms and gave him milk to drink through his mouth and, after a few weeks, food to eat. Samuel continued this practice of eating and drinking, taught to him in early infancy by his mother, virtually every day for the rest of his life. As the years passed by, Samuel grew older and he would get up in the morning and go to bed at night. He used to leave his house each day by opening the front door, stepping through the empty space and then pulling the door closed behind him.

Although the language in Cane's example above is grammatically correct, it contains a number of unusual features. This 'contribution' to a conversation, in the form of biographical details of the Irish writer Samuel Beckett, is deviant because it continually breaks what the philosopher and linguist Paul Grice (1975) termed as the maxims of *quantity* and *relevance*. Grice outlined four "Maxims or Principles of Cooperative Behavior" which speakers normally adhere to in conversation. These may be summarized as follows:

1. Quantity: Say no more or no less than is necessary.
2. Quality: Say what you believe is true.
3. Relevance: Be to the point.
4. Manner: Be clear and brief.

According to Grice, people generally give only relevant information in sociolinguistically 'normal' conversation. If too much extraneous information is given to a listener, we are then deliberately breaking one of the shared rules (maxims) of cooperative conversation. Thus, regarding Beckett's biodata above, because listeners are, presumably, well aware that babies are smaller and younger than their mothers, that people eat, drink, go to bed, and get up every day, etc., it is clearly unnecessary and, indeed, uncooperative to provide this type of information in biographical details. However, as Grice points out, although we take these rules (maxims) to be mutually shared beliefs about how speakers behave in conversation, any or all of them may be violated at a given point in a conversation. Thus, a listener may conclude (correctly or incorrectly) that a speaker has spoken contextually inappropriately, and that the explanation for this violation is that the speaker is being ironic, sarcastic, or is a lunatic.

Conversation normally proceeds on the assumption that speakers are not violating (flouting) these maxims. Listeners may then draw inferences from the literal meaning of what speakers have said and match them with what they have not said (the implications or "implicatures" of the utterance). For example:

A: I need some stamps.
B: Try Patel's.

If B is adhering to the Cooperative Principles, several implicatures arise

from this dialogue. For instance, Patel's must be a place that sells stamps, it must be open (as far as B knows), and it must be nearby. If B is being uncooperative, e.g., if he knows that Patel's has closed for the day, has gone out of business, or is a butcher's shop, he is flouting the maxims of quality and relevance. Deliberate flouting of this kind is uncommon and generally occurs in such cases as joking, sarcasm, or deliberate unpleasantness. More likely is the unintentional flouting of conversational maxims - as would happen if B genuinely did not know that Patel's was closed, and accidentally sent A on a wasted journey to the shop. Moreover, in everyday conversation misunderstandings often occur as speakers make incorrect assumptions about what their listeners know, or indeed need to know. At such points, the conversation can break down and may need to be 'repaired,' with participants questioning, clarifying, and cross-checking. The repairs are made quickly through the use of such phrases as, 'I told you' and 'sorry,' as in the following exchange between two friends:

A: Have you got a 2nd class stamp?
B: No, I told you, I've run out.
A: Oh yes, I'm sorry, I forgot.

Sometimes, however, it happens that the participants do not realize there has been a breakdown or mis-communication and they continue conversing at cross-purposes.

Conversation, then, is essentially a cooperative activity. However, in order for it to be successful, participants also need to feel they are contributing something as well as getting something out of it. Moreover, being a good conversationalist does not merely imply being able to say the right thing at the right time. We also need to listen and respond to other participants, allowing everyone to share the floor and also the opportunity

to develop their own topics. We need to bear in mind other people's feelings and, unless we want to be unpopular, avoid causing offence or raising topics sensitive to others. When all of the working parts have slotted into place and the conversation 'machine' is ticking over smoothly, we have arrived at what the linguist Deborah Tannen describes as "a perfectly tuned conversation [which] is like an artistic experience." Tannen (1984: 152) goes on to eloquently encapsulate the essence of interactional-type conversation thus:

> The satisfaction of shared rhythm, shared appreciation of nuance, mutual understanding that surpasses the meaning of words exchanged, goes beyond the pleasure of having one's message understood. It is a ratification of one's way of being human and proof of the connection to other people. It gives a sense of coherence in the world.

Lakoff's rules of rapport

Although cooperative conversation is quite typically characterized by Grice's maxims, the sociolinguist Robin Lakoff (1973) observes that participants regularly and on purpose avoid saying what they mean in service of the higher goal of politeness. Moreover, people often prefer not to say exactly what they mean in so many words, because they are not concerned solely with the ideas they are expressing. They are also concerned with the effect their words will have on their listener. Thus, they want to ensure that they avoid imposing, and give (or at least seem to give) the listener some choice in the matter being discussed, while at the same time maintaining friendly relations.

Lakoff op. cit. devised a system that represents the logic underlying specific linguistic choices such as the use of indirect language or the preference for particular lexical or syntactic forms. Her system, called the

"Rules of Rapport," includes three principles:

1. Don't Impose; keep your distance
2. Give Options; let the other person have a say
3. Be Friendly; maintain camaraderie

These rules help explain the fact that we often say one thing and mean another. Moreover, they go some of the way towards explaining why in English, one gives orders, makes requests and pleas in the form of elaborate questions, e.g., 'Do you think you could possibly reach that teapot on the top shelf?' or 'If it isn't too much of a bother, could you possibly drop me off at the corner?' Being wordy, these polite forms lessen the impact of the request and give the listener the option of refusal. Furthermore, we might apologize for imposing, e.g., 'I'm sorry to have to ask you again, but do you think you could collect Jimmy from school?' In addition, by being friendly we might do our best to make our listener feel good, e.g., 'Jimmy loves getting a lift in your new car!'

These rules address the *duality* of the human condition, i.e., the need for involvement with others, and the need to preserve our independence as individuals. Our basic needs for both involvement and independence - to be connected and to be separate - do not occur in sequence, but simultaneously. We have to address both needs at once in all we say. This is what Tannen (1986: 34) calls a "double bind" in communication, in which:

> Anything we say to show we are involved with others is in itself a threat to our (and their) individuality. And anything we say to show we are keeping our distance from others is in itself a threat to our (and their) need for involvement.

Thus, it is a double bind in the sense that whatever we do to serve one need results in the violation of the other. Consequently, communication will never be perfect. We must continually strive to balance the need for independence and the need for involvement making adjustments as we thread our way through conversations. With regard to Lakoff's three rules of rapport, therefore, we can see that Rule 1, *Don't Impose*, makes others comfortable by respecting their need for independence; Rule 3, *Be Friendly,* makes others comfortable by respecting their need for involvement; and Rule 2, *Give Options*, provides others with an element of choice, i.e., they may choose to adopt an individualistic, detached attitude, or they may adopt a more concerned, involved approach. Moreover, participants in conversation will vary in terms of which rules they tend to apply, as well as with when and how they apply them.

As a means of exemplifying how these rules work, a simple, but commonplace conversation is now outlined. If, at a friend's house, I am offered something to drink, I may say, 'No thanks,' even though I am thirsty. In some cultures, this is the norm. Then, the offer is made again, and again I refuse. On the third instance, when the speaker insists, I give in and accept a drink. This is a standard routine in many social settings. Moreover, it is polite in terms of Rule 1, *Don't Impose*. Consequently, if this form of politeness is expected, and I accept a drink on the first offer, I may be thought of as too forward - or worse still, desperate for a drink. Conversely, if this form of politeness is *not* expected, and I use it, my refusal may be taken at face value, and I may indeed be desperate for a drink by the time I am asked again!

Alternatively, I may also say in response to an offer, 'Oh, I'll have whatever you're having.' This is polite in terms of Rule 2, *Give Options*, i.e., the person making the offer may decide what to give me. This is fine, but if I am still expected to refuse the first offer, I may be regarded as too

pushy. If, on the other hand, the setting calls for a more casual, relaxed approach, i.e., the application of Rule 3, *Be Friendly*, the above response may be regarded as bland or feeble, and the thought, 'Doesn't he know what he wants?' may be going through my host's mind.

Performing Rule 3-type politeness (*Be Friendly*), I might respond to an initial offer of something to drink by saying, e.g., 'Yes, please. I'll have a scotch on the rocks.' Alternatively, I may not wait to be offered, but instead ask straight off, 'Have you got any scotch?' or even go directly to the drinks cabinet and help myself before being asked. If my behavior is appropriate, it will reinforce our rapport, because we both generally prefer to be casual and informal: it gives the message that we are close friends. In describing his "Banter Principle," the linguist Geoffrey Leech (1983:144) concurs with the above:

> ...the more intimate the relationship, the less important it is to be polite. Hence, lack of politeness in itself can become a sign of intimacy;...[Moreover,] the ability to be impolite to someone in jest helps to establish and maintain such a familiar relationship.

If, however, this brand of politeness is inappropriate in that it does not fit the occasion, or gel with the company gathered there, one's way of being friendly might be considered offensive. Indeed, it could trigger the end of an acquaintanceship that had, up until then, the potential of developing into a close friendship. In all probability, though, a *faux pas* such as this would most likely be forgiven, unless of course the offender continued incessantly with the same or similar instances of social assertiveness.

Howard Mohr, creator of *Minnesota Language Systems*, details the basics of how to use key polite forms of a mid-western variety of American English. Among the lessons in this tongue-in-cheek cultural guide,

students learn how to refuse food three times before accepting it, find out how to reduce anxiety with the all-purpose response "it could be worse," and gain knowledge of the proper way of accepting a gift from a Minnesotan, i.e., never call it a gift. With regard to expressions of hospitality, students are instructed "never accept a little lunch or food of any kind until the third offer, and then [accept it] reluctantly...And if a Minnesotan does not make the offer three times, it is not serious." To illustrate this, Mohr (1987) sets out the following dialog:

A: Do you want a cup of coffee before you go?
B: No, I wouldn't want to put you out. I'll get by.
A: Are you sure? I just made a fresh pot.
B: You didn't have to go and do that.
A: How about one small cup?
B: Well, if it's going to hurt your feelings, but don't fill it full.

Judging by this skit, it seems that in Minnesota Lakoff's Rule 1, *Don't Impose*, takes precedence!

Lakoff's three rules of rapport are not actually rules as such; they are more akin to senses we have of the natural, most appropriate way to speak in a given situation. Our use of these rules, however, is not unconscious. If asked why we said one thing rather than another, we are likely to explain that we spoke in that particular way to be 'pleasant,' or 'friendly,' or 'considerate.' Accordingly, such forms of politeness, which take into account the effect on others of what we say, are a fundamental and indispensable element of the social basis of conversational English.

These rules, or senses of politeness, moreover, are not mutually exclusive, i.e., we do not choose one and ignore the others. Rather, we try

to maintain a balance by being appropriately friendly without imposing, and by keeping our distance without appearing aloof. And although negotiating the offer of a drink may seem a trivial matter, the importance of such fleeting interactions should not be underestimated. The way we talk in such everyday encounters is part of what constitutes our self-image; it is on the basis of such mundane encounters that others form impressions of our character.

Leech's principles of good communicative behavior

Politeness principles also feature prominently in the work of Geoffrey Leech. By building on the speech act theory of linguists John Austin (1962) and John Searle (1975), and in combination with Paul Grice's (1975) cooperative principles, Leech outlined a set of rhetorical principles which he claims socially constrain communicative behavior but, "do not provide the main motivation for talking, except in the case of 'purely social' utterances such as greetings and thanks" (Leech, 1983: 16-17).

In discussing language in terms of communicative goals and principles of "good communicative behavior," he outlines (within the bounds of interpersonal rhetoric and subsumed under his Politeness Principle) maxims of tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement and sympathy. These six maxims are exemplified and set out below. In each case, the first example is the preferred/more polite choice and supports that particular maxim.

1. Tact maxim: Minimize cost to other. Maximize benefit to other.
   Could you possibly put my suitcase in the car?
   Put my suitcase in the car.

2. Generosity Maxim: Minimize benefit to self. Maximize cost to self.

You must join us for Christmas dinner.

We must join you for Christmas dinner.

3. Approbation Maxim: Minimize dispraise of other.

Maximize praise of other.

There is certainly a lot of headroom in your new car.

Your new car looks like a tea chest on wheels.

4. Modesty Maxim: Minimize praise of self. Maximize dispraise of self.

I look awful in those photographs.

I look great in those photographs.

5. Agreement Maxim: Minimize disagreement between self and other.

Maximize agreement between self and other.

A: Liverpool FC will win the European Cup.

B: Yes, you're probably right.

C: The weather's fabulous, isn't it?

D: No, it's terrible.

6. Sympathy Maxim: Minimize antipathy between self and other.

Maximize sympathy between self and other.

I was very sorry to hear that your dog Rover was run over by a car.

(or the more tactful, 'I was very sorry to hear about Rover').

I was very happy to hear that your dog Rover was run over by a car.

In discussing these maxims, Leech emphasizes that indirectness of utterance is a tact marker, and that tact is one of the most important aspects of politeness in conversational English. This assertion coincides with the importance Lakoff places on our senses of politeness with respect to the most natural, and most appropriate way to speak in a given situation.

In order to avoid direct speech in utterances, Leech says that speakers

often resort to the use of "hedged performatives;" i.e., we make use of a hinting strategy by, for instance, seeking conversational cooperation, or permission, to soften the blow, so to speak, when eliciting information from a listener. Thus, depending on the context, 'May I ask if that's a wedding ring you're wearing?' may be more tactful than, 'Are you married?' A similar strategy is used when advice is offered with an expression such as, 'Could I suggest...?' In effect, such expressions counteract the possibility of our assumed 'superior' knowledge causing an imposition. Thus, it corresponds directly with Lakoff's Rule 1: *Don't impose*.

Face

The concept of 'face' is also of fundamental concern to those interacting socially in conversational English. Conversation can be considered as a kind of 'work' that is done in order for the speaker and listener to maintain face, and to respect the face put forward by others. Goffman (1976) referred to this behavior as "face work." For instance, a foreman who sees a laborer sweating profusely as he toils under a heavy burden may remark sympathetically, 'It's hard work.' Similarly, a person waiting at a bus stop in a heavy downpour may comment to another person waiting there, 'Will it ever stop?' In both cases, the speaker's primary purpose is not to inform or annoy the listener by stating the obvious, but to be *identified* with the concerns of the other person. In this respect, these comments are a type of *phatic* language, i.e., language used more for the purpose of establishing a positive atmosphere or maintaining social contact, than for exchanging information or ideas; such comments may act as form of a 'social lubricant.' One of the rules of face work is that it should elicit agreement, hence the importance of small talk on 'safe' topics, such as the weather, the unreliability of the buses, and so on. Agreement, therefore, creates harmony and

diminishes the possibility of threatening the participants' face.

It follows then that one of the problems we might experience in saying, 'No' to a request may be ascribed to the feeling that in refusing we cause an affront to the other's face. The extreme form of request-type face loss is probably that experienced by the beggar who sits silently with head bowed before a container of some kind, or with a hand out-stretched and eyes averted so as not to affront the faces of passers-by, or further diminish his or her own face when refused or ignored.

If a conversation is to reach a mutually acceptable conclusion, then causing overt loss of face is counter-productive and indirectness is employed to avoid this. It enables participants to 'hide behind' the literal meaning of what is said and saves face if their comments, opinions, or desires are not favorably received. It is also the case that in situations in which there is the highest risk to face, there will be correspondingly less choice of conventionally appropriate linguistic behavior. In less formal situations, where there is less risk, the language options are wider. A good example of the high-risk category is social introductions, where the introducer has the responsibility of guaranteeing the social integrity and worth of both the participants and those he or she is introducing. The conventional style, e.g., 'May I introduce Mr John Smith, Senior Financial Market Analyst at HSBC,...' is typical of formal situations; whereas in more relaxed settings, society is less prescriptive and, 'Do you know John, he works in the city?' would consequently be deemed appropriate. Accordingly, there is a direct relationship between formality, politeness, and face.

In addition, levels of formality, politeness, and appropriacy are all concepts which, when applied to conversational behavior, are open to various interpretations from one culture to the next. And although there are some elements of conversation that are universal, there are clearly others that are culturally specific, such as the type and amount of eye

contact expected.

Silence

Both verbal and non-verbal aspects of conversation may differ across cultures. For instance, silence in an English conversation may well indicate that something has gone awry, giving rise to thoughts such as 'Does the other person not like me?' 'Was it something I said?' 'Why am I being ignored?' The ambivalence of the term, *a pregnant pause*, and the common perception of silence in mid-dialogue as 'heavy' or 'uncomfortable' also testify to how silence is often viewed in English conversation. Thus, when there is silence, there can be tension until the 'gap' is filled with talk - usually phatic talk. A scene from Quentin Tarantino's film *Pulp Fiction* - the winner of the *Palme d'Or* at the 1994 Cannes Film Festival - usefully illustrates some commonly held perceptions of silence in conversational English.

> [Mia and Vincent are sitting at a table in a 1950s 'theme' restaurant in present-day Los Angeles. This is the first time they have been out together. After an interval of silence.....]
>
> Mia: Don't you hate that?
> Vincent: Hate what?
> Mia: Uncomfortable silences. Why do you feel it's necessary to yak about bull**** in order to be comfortable?
> Vincent: I don't know. That's a good question.
> Mia: That's when you know you've found somebody really special - when you can just shut up for a minute and comfortably share silence.
> Vincent: Well, I don't think we're quite there yet, but don't feel bad we just met each other.

Mia: Tell you what, I'm going to go to the bathroom and powder my nose. You sit here and think of something to say.
Vincent: I'll do that.

[Later, Mia returns and they exchange views on the food and the table service. Then,...]

Mia: So did you think of something to say?
Vincent: Actually I did. However, you seem like a really nice person and I don't want to offend you.
Mia: Ohh + this doesn't sound like the usual, mindless, boring getting-to-know-you chit-chat. That sounds like you actually have something to say.
Vincent: Well + well, I do.

Evidently, Mia places a much higher value on silence than would normally be accorded in situations when two people are first becoming acquainted. If provided with a choice between engaging in small talk and sitting in silence, it seems she would prefer to sit in silence. In contrast to most native speakers of English, she considers silence a better indication of rapport than small talk. Moreover, her distaste for small talk is further exemplified by her telling Vincent to "think of something to say" while she visits the bathroom. Here she is indicating that she is only interested in engaging in transactional talk. Basically she means, if you can't think of any message-oriented talk, then don't talk at all.

It also follows that, on her return from the bathroom, the opinions they exchanged on the food and service are not regarded by her as valuable talk. So when Vincent indicates that he has some 'real content' to share with her, she reacts very enthusiastically by saying, "this doesn't sound

like...boring getting-to-know-you chit-chat," (i.e., interactional, listener-oriented talk) "that sounds like you actually have something to say" (i.e., transactional, message-oriented talk).

As writer and director of a number of other exceptional films, including *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *Kill Bill* (2004), Tarantino has been critically acclaimed as one of the most visionary filmmakers of our time. His distinctive blend of sadism, comic-book violence, consumerist trivia, and very good, but strong dialogue has, it seems, created its own genre. He has a highly astute sense of how innately comical most conversations are; comical because they are full of repetitions, senseless slang expressions, wildly ungrammatical slips, trivia, inconsequentialities and so on. He has exploited the almost abstract, game-like nature of fast-paced conversation. In addition, he knows that our capacity in conversation for saying nothing at pedantic length (i.e., the interactional function) accentuates this game-like quality. Tarantino's characters wring their trivial topics, e.g., the difference between a pot-belly and a tummy (*Pulp Fiction*), for all their comic value.

Although film dialogs are scripted and thus are not authentic samples of naturally occurring language, elements of English conversational language and behavior can be highlighted through their use in the classroom. These elements will in turn transfer to students' emerging conversational competence in 'authentic' interactions in the target language community.

With regard to the matter of silence, Japanese speakers, in contrast to most English speakers, often regard silence as a desirable feature of conversation. Thus, when little or nothing is said between participants it indicates harmony, not discord. Indeed, it may contribute to the success and enjoyment of the interaction. Therefore, if a participant consciously tries to fill the silences with talk, this may be construed as an attempt to

cover up something. Such cross-cultural points should be borne in mind when interactions occur between speakers from different language backgrounds.

Other cross-cultural contrasts

Other aspects of conversation that differ across cultures might include acceptable topics, conversational styles of men and women, conversational styles of the young and the elderly, politeness formulae, backchannel, and the expression of speech-act functions (e.g., giving advice, complaining). If the primary purpose of a conversation is to build good relationships, then care must be taken as an innocent remark at an inappropriate time, or an 'improper' move may be significant, not just by signaling the wrong meaning, but perhaps by causing offence, too. The following quotation, cited in Tannen (1984:vii), encapsulates this point:

> A pause in the wrong place, an intonation misunderstood, and a whole conversation went awry.
>
> -E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India*

Communication problems such as those mentioned above, however, are not limited to conversations involving non-native speakers. They also occur between native speakers of English who do not share the same culture, for example, between Americans and Irish people, or between Americans and Australians. When this happens, the cause of the problem is difficult to determine, as language usage is not generally considered to be at fault. The linguist George Renwick (1983) has explored the area of communication breakdown between Americans and Australians, and although his research deals mainly with male subjects, he makes some very significant observations. Renwick claims, for example (cited in Smith, 1987: 2):

> Americans tend to like people who agree with them. Australians are more apt to be interested in a person who disagrees with them; disagreement is a basis for a lively conversation. Americans assume that if someone agrees with them, that person likes them; disagreement implies rejection. Australians assume that someone's disagreement with them has little to do with that person's attitude toward them. Disagreement, in fact, can indicate real interest and respect.

Renwick argues that Americans may not always find they like Australians very much, and may feel rejected by them. Moreover, while the American is seeking a topic to chat about, the Australian is seeking a partner to spar with. Thus, the American finds the Australian intrusive, and the Australian finds the American boring. In addition to this, unaware that he is making matters worse, the Australian often becomes more assertive as he tries his best to elicit some definite opinions or other tangible responses from the American. Unfortunately, this behavior makes the American more inclined to withdraw from the encounter. Differences in language code are not generally held responsible for these frustrations; the guilty party in such cases is more likely to be conflicting cultural assumptions about appropriate conversational behavior.

Similarly, with respect to the structuring of information in transactional talk and argument, there are at times conflicting expectations across cultures. This is the case between Japanese and Westerners, for example. The linguist Reiko Naotsuka (1978) observes that while Japanese often approach a subject in a spiral way, Westerners use more linear, straight-line logic. This often gives rise to problems when, for instance, Japanese businessmen try to explain things to Americans. The Japanese will tend to consider every conceivable fact and idea, many of which may seem irrelevant from a Western point of view, before focusing on the subject.

After hearing only the first few sentences, their American counterparts will complain of their irrelevance, then take the conversational floor away from the Japanese and try to 'get to the point' in ways more logical to themselves.

It would seem, therefore, that Grice's conversational maxims are not transferable across cultures. For example, due to the spiral/linear dichotomy, what is relevant in the boardroom to a Japanese executive may be entirely different to what his American opposite number believes is relevant. Similarly, in terms of the maxim of manner, a contribution should be perspicuous, orderly and brief, avoiding obscurity and ambiguity, conditions which would seem to fly in the face of the Japanese approach to the structuring of information.

Having now discussed key aspects of the nature of this multi-faceted means of communication, it is now time to consider some of the most important dimensions of conversation from the point of view of pedagogy. Thus, classroom implications are examined in the following section.

Implications for successful classroom instruction

When approaching the task of encouraging Japanese EFL learners to speak out in the classroom, teachers may find it worthwhile identifying those L1 contexts in which learners feel the most comfortable talking, and note how language is used in such situations. By simulating these settings in the classroom, it should be possible to produce the conditions in which students will speak English without the risk of being regarded as exhibitionists by peers. The combination of promoting conversational interaction in the EFL classroom and simultaneously accommodating Japanese communicative style would seem to be the most logical and practical path to follow. Miller (1995:46) emphasizes this point thus:

> If teachers identified communicative styles and tendencies prevalent among Japanese learners and viewed them as "point of origin," and then identified aspects of western communicative style that they would like learners to assimilate and viewed those as "target destination," then steps could be designed to help learners gradually move from one point toward the other during their study.

Courses designed according to this model would take into account key aspects of Japanese communicative style in early lessons, and lead to the assimilation of western communicative styles in later lessons. The terminal objective of such courses would be for learners to communicate appropriately in settings which call for familiarity with western socio-cultural norms, such as when conversing socially with native speakers of English from western countries. However, one must be aware that western norms do not always blend with the use of English. In other words, a western communicative style may be inappropriate when English is being spoken as an international language (EIL) between non-westerners, for instance.

Broadly speaking, there are two main approaches to the teaching of conversation in EFL programs: (1) an indirect approach, in which conversational competence is viewed as the result of engaging learners in conversational interaction; and (2) a direct approach, in which teachers are involved in planning a conversation program around specific micro-skills, strategies, and processes that are the substance of fluent conversation (Richards, 1990).

The indirect approach: Teaching conversation through interactive tasks

Second language acquisition researchers maintain that learners acquire language through conversational involvement. Essentially, in using conversation to interact with others, learners gradually acquire the competence that underlies the ability to use the target language. The conversation class should, therefore, provide opportunities for learners to engage in natural interaction through communicative tasks and activities. In practice, this entails the use of pair-work and group-work activities that involve learners in information sharing and negotiation of meaning. The emphasis is on using language to complete a task, rather than on practicing language for its own sake; thus, "interaction as the key to improving EFL learners' speaking abilities" (Shumin, 2002: 208).

It should be borne in mind, however, that classroom tasks need to provide an adequate balance of two important purposes of conversation: (a) the social-interactional function, i.e., when the primary purpose is to establish and maintain good social relations; and (b) the transactional function, i.e., when the primary purpose is the transfer of information.

Social-interactional (casual) conversations, as we have seen, are quite distinct in both form and function. The emphasis is on creating harmonious interactions between participants, rather than on accurately communicating information. The goal is to make social interaction comfortable and communicate good will. Examples of social-interactional conversations are, greetings, small talk, casual 'chat' used to pass the time with friends, telling anecdotes, gossiping, giving compliments, and so on. Much of our daily conversation is interactional.

In transactional conversations the focus is on the message, e.g., when giving/receiving directions to a location, or giving/following instructions on how to do a task. Accurate and coherent communication of the message is important, as well as confirmation that the message has been

understood. Approaches to the teaching of both listening comprehension and conversation are fundamentally affected by whether the primary purposes involved are interactional or transactional.

Some examples of what may constitute a course in the approach advocated above may serve to illustrate concepts. Pairwork and groupwork, initially with tightly controlled tasks, would be deployed as effective ways of structuring activities as well as a practical means of managing students in large classes. Thus, at the initial stage, the use of pre-communicative activities may be appropriate. These provide controlled practice of formal aspects of conversation and include drills, dialogs, and other exercises where minimal learner input is required. A little later on, teachers could introduce communicative activities which, being learner-centered, require and depend on learner input. Generally, communicative activities are of two types: (i) social-interactional activities; and (ii) functional-transactional activities, reflecting the two main purposes of conversation (Littlewood, 1984). During these activities, it is useful to assign group members specific roles such as *captain* (to coordinate the activity), *secretary* (to record group decisions), and *spokesperson* (to report back to the teacher and class). Because the *spokesperson* is representing the group, there would be minimal individual risk involved. Grammar, vocabulary and communication games combining intra-group cooperation with inter-group competition - where students are permitted, and indeed required, to carry out consensus checks with team-mates before answering for their group - should also be an integral part of classroom interaction. Textbooks and resource books for engaging learners in such types of conversational interaction using an indirect approach are many, but some of the most useful include those listed below in Figure 1.

Castle, et al. (2000)	*New Headway Teacher's Resource Book*
Doff, et al. (1991)	*Language in Use Pre-Intermediate*
Frank, et al. (1982)	*Challenge to Think*
Furr (2007)	*Reading Circles: Teacher's Handbook*
Golebiowska, (1990)	*Getting Students to Talk*
Hadfield (1996)	*Communication Games*
Helgesen et al. (2004)	*English Firsthand New Gold*
Klippel, (1984)	*Keep Talking: Communicative Fluency Activities*
Soars, et al. (2003)	*New Headway Intermediate*
Ur, (1981)	*Discussions that Work*
Wallwork (1997)	*Discussions A-Z Intermediate*
Watcyn-Jones (1984)	*Pair Work*
Wingate (1993)	*Getting Beginners to Talk*

Figure 1 Textbooks and resource books that take an indirect approach

Many of the activities in these valuable texts and resource books are founded on the principles of message-oriented communication, learner-centeredness, cooperation and empathy. Two key devices that help form the framework of these activities are: *information gap,* and *opinion gap*. Information-gap exercises force learners to exchange information in order to find a solution, e.g., to re-construct a text, solve a puzzle or jigsaw task. Opinion gaps are created by exercises that include controversial texts or thought-provoking ideas, and which require the learners to describe and perhaps defend their views on these ideas. Examples of opinion-gap activities are: ranking exercises, values clarification exercises, and thinking creatively. Other types of opinion-gap activity may include discussion games that stimulate learners' interests and imaginations and involve them in thinking about their own values and priorities (Klippel, 1984).

Conversation topics early on in a course might be non-contentious, for instance, talking about eating, homes, holidays and festivals, etc., whereas later on, topics might be more controversial, e.g., talking about age, marriage, religious beliefs, etc., about which students would be expected to give opinions. In early lessons, students might also prepare speech notes, and have the teacher go over their grammar before making oral presentations. As time went on, opportunities for more spontaneous and unrehearsed speaking could be introduced. In this way, a smooth progression could be made from the formalized speechmaking that students are used to in their L1, to the more spontaneous conversational style valued in the West. Initially, there might be a set speaking order and participation might have to be requested, whereas in later lessons, volunteer participation, including questions and feedback about the teacher's and other students' comments could be fostered. Moreover, groups might discuss issues and report a consensus in early lessons, whereas open-class discussions might become possible later on via training and practice. Thus, the combination of teaching strategies that draw on the dynamics of the Japanese classroom with strategies that promote a western style of interaction is at core of this approach.

Accordingly, fundamental to successful classroom interaction as well as to narrowing the cultural gap that sometimes causes frustration is an appropriate cross-cultural awareness, held by both teacher and learner, of contrasts in communicative style. Many seasoned instructors successfully use such 'culturally informed' approaches. Their classes are evidence that communicative methods which are coordinated and referenced to the key features of both Japanese and western socio-cultural norms can be attractive and beneficial to Japanese students.

The direct approach: A focus on formal features of conversation

In addition to the indirect approach to teaching conversation outlined above which, while accommodating Japanese conversational style is focused on using communicative activities to generate conversational interaction, a direct approach which addresses specific aspects of conversational interaction and management would also prove appropriate. A balanced form of instruction would therefore be achieved by recognizing that although communicative tasks focus on the interactional and transactional uses of conversation and provide useful language learning opportunities, methodology should also directly address the nature and formal features of conversation. These include: turn-taking strategies; topic behavior; routines for opening, closing and interrupting; repair strategies; appropriate styles of speaking; simplifications in rapid colloquial speech; and conversational grammar and lexis. In order to pursue this goal, suitable published materials for the explicit teaching of conversational skills, strategies and structural features are necessary. Some of the most useful materials are listed in Figure 2 below.

Carter, et al. (1997)	*Exploring Spoken English*
Crystal et al. (1975)	*Advanced Conversational English*
Dornyei, et al. (1992)	*Conversations and Dialogues in Action*
Geddes, et al. (1991)	*Advanced Conversation*
Keller, et al. (1988)	*Conversation Gambits*
Morrow (1978)	*Advanced Conversational English Workbook*
Nolasco, et al. (1987)	*Conversation*
Viney, et al. (1996)	*Handshake*

Figure 2 Textbooks and resource books that take a direct approach

When engaged in the process of developing and deploying classroom materials and activities, it is important for teachers to monitor their use to determine which aspects of conversation they practice in reality. For instance, which topics and transactions have been selected and performed satisfactorily? Are social-interactional uses of conversation covered adequately? And so on.

Outlined in Appendix 1 is a role-play based conversation lesson for intermediate-level students (Richards, 1990: 82-84). After this lesson was conducted, data were collected on the types of conversational interaction and discourse learners produced when engaged in the role-play tasks. It was found that learners used many forms of transactional and interactional conversation, e.g., repairs (of grammar, vocabulary and appropriateness), requests for clarification, short and long turns, openings and closings, topic control, and the use of polite forms.

Conclusion

This exploratory study of the nature of conversation has led me to a greater appreciation of key aspects of this multi-faceted and complex form of human communication. Its functions are numerous, but interactional and transactional uses come to the fore. Its social foundations run deep in that it assists us in presenting an image of ourselves to others, it helps us cooperate with one another and negotiate meanings, and we can manipulate it to either enhance or diminish the level of rapport. In addition, by adjusting our communicative behavior to particular situations, it allows us to express ourselves with a degree of modesty and generosity, tact and diplomacy, empathy and sympathy.

The latter stages of this study focused on Japan, where I endeavored to identify the contexts within which Japanese learners feel the most comfortable talking, as well as how language is used in those settings.

Alluded to were the dominant behavioral patterns of Japanese college students, such as a predilection for not asking questions, nor volunteering answers, and the habit of conferring with others when requested to respond to the teacher, i.e., a predisposition for a non-interactive, passive role and teacher-led lessons, all of which present the conversation teacher with a challenging assignment. This behavior was found to reflect Japanese socio-cultural and socio-pragmatic norms which are fostered in early education and further ingrained in high school (Miller, 1995). An awareness and acceptance of these differences is essential if the conversation teacher is to be successful.

Finally, two complementary approaches to teaching English conversation were advocated: an indirect approach which utilizes communicative activities to generate conversational interaction; and a direct approach which addresses specific aspects of conversational management. A balance of both approaches would seem to be the best option. Ultimately, if learners are pressed to get their meanings across in order to fulfill an engaging and challenging communicative task, they will have to use any/all the English knowledge and skill they possess. Fostering this flexibility in the foreign language classroom is fundamental to attaining an adequate degree of conversational competence.

Appendix 1

A role-play based conversation lesson plan for intermediate-level students (Richards, 1990: 82-84)

1. Learners first take part in a preliminary activity that introduces the topic and the situation, and provides some background information. Such activities include brainstorming, ranking exercises, and problem-solving tasks. For example, as preparation for a role play on renting an apartment, students first interview each other about their accommodation and living arrangements. They also perform a ranking task in which they list the things that would most influence their choice of an apartment. The focus is on thinking about a topic, generating vocabulary and related language, and developing expectations about the topic. This activity prepares learners for a role-play task by establishing a schema for the situation.
2. Students then practice a dialogue on the topic (e.g., a conversation between a person looking for an apartment and a landlord). This serves to model the kind of transaction the learner will have to perform in the role-play task, and provides examples of the kind of language that could be used to carry out the transaction.
3. Learners perform a role play, using role cards. Students practice the role play several times, in different roles and with different partners. For example:

   Student A (Caller)
   You want to rent an apartment. You saw this advertisement in the newspaper.
   George Street
   Large modern apartment
   Only $600 a month
   Tel. 789–6445
   Call to find out more about the apartment. Ask about these things:
   the bedrooms — the neighborhood
   the view — nearby transportation
   the furniture — nearby shopping
   the floor it's on
   Ask anything else you want to know.
   Find out when you can come and see it.

   Student B (Landlord)
   You have an apartment to rent. You placed this advertisement in the newspaper.
   George Street
   Large modern apartment
   Only $600 a month
   Tel. 789–6445
   A person telephones to ask about the apartment. Answer the person's questions. (See Richards and Hull 1987.)
4. Learners then listen to recordings of native speakers performing the same role play from the same role-play cues. By having learners listen to NS versions of the tasks they have just practiced, students are able to compare differences between the ways they expressed particular functions and meanings and the ways native speakers performed. Although the NS versions are more complex than the student versions, they are comprehensible because of the preparatory activities the students have completed, and they can be used for follow-up and feedback activities.
5. Feedback and follow-up activities consist of listening for specific conversational and grammatical forms (idioms, routines, structures) used by the native speakers in their versions of the role plays, as well as listening for meaning.

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