

## **Teaching Conversational Language and the Challenges - Some Crucial Areas**

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### **Abstract**

Teaching and learning process of English as a Second Language (ESL) conversation for the non-native learners particularly in classrooms is one of the toughest tasks for the teachers. Especially in our Sri Lankan context, learners play passive role at school level programmes for more or less twelve years; due to this long experience, they are unable to become active role players during ESL learning; transforming an adult learner into active role player is important in ESL classrooms to master all the four skills and it is really a great challenge to the teachers. Amongst four language skills, conversational skill is unlike learning grammar rules or learning vocabulary where a learner can learn by reading a good grammar rule book; learning and practising authentic conversational skill is still cumbersome and tough and most of the time unpleasant mission in ESL classrooms; the real time conversational situation cannot be brought into the classroom; in front of the speaker there is other person who waits for the correct and meaningful response; the speaker has no time to think or check with the dictionary for his response; the speaker is expected to respond immediately and instantaneously; these problems can be solved with adequate practice and confidence building. In order to provide part of the solution I have attempted to present some important observations relevant to conversational language teaching and learning. The chief aim of this article is to establish better awareness among spoken language teachers and learners.

**Keywords:** ESL, language mannerism, formal/informal meaning, authentic situation, language etiquettes

### **1. Introduction**

Generally, written language is ruled governed and most of the scholars declare that spoken language is not ruled governed; however, in case of a spoken language, there are lot of unwritten rules speakers have to consider to maintain socio-cultural tradition/norms of the

particular speech community; recognizing and teaching these unwritten rules with authentic spoken situations are very essential elements to teach conversations; these unwritten rules are sometimes called social ethics or language mannerism. Associating and presenting social ethics with a particular language require great effort and conscious practice; these appropriate social ethics can be generally classified into social and official norms. Since most of the official and social norms are captured and picked up naturally by the speakers in the authentic spoken situations within the particular speech community, teaching spoken language in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms requires effective pre-planning and conscious practices. On the other hand, creating original and authentic situations in ESL classrooms to teach appropriate spoken style is also impossible to the teachers; in the meantime, learners have less opportunity to pick up the appropriate spoken form by observation and participation naturally and learners have less or no chance to rehearse the spoken form outside the classrooms. In order to observe and recognize the interior aspects of the spoken form of a language I'm planning to briefly discuss formal and informal language styles, different spoken language etiquettes, conventional and non-conventional meanings, learners' issues, teachers' roles and external factors.

## 2. Formal and Informal Features

Very much like written form of a language, spoken structure also consists of formal and informal features; recognizing and using appropriately these styles become compulsory for effective communicational situations.

To understand best I present some important formal and informal features and styles of spoken language below.

**Table 1.1 Formal and informal features and styles**

	<b>Formal</b>	<b>Informal</b>
01.	Proper structure and rule governed	No need
02.	Associated with norms and etiquette	Not necessary
03.	Appropriate vocabulary/terms	Acceptable words
04.	Sometimes written documents are used	Not written
05.	Early preparation/practice is required	Instant/on the spot
06.	Moderate/average speech rate with clear pronunciation	Irregular speech rate/repetition/pauses
07.	Appropriate and limited physical	Unlimited physical and non-verbal

	expressions	expressions
08.	Timeframe	No time limit
09.	Systematic turns	Irregular turns
10.	No interruption	Interruption is always possible
11.	Codeswitching/codemixing/borrowings is not generally accepted	Codeswitching/codemixing/borrowings is quite natural
12.	Formal features are essential	Informal language features are accommodated
13.	Repetition and correction are undesired	Repetition and correction are accepted
14.	More transactional oriented	More interactional oriented
15.	Hypothesis testing is not accepted	Hypothesis testing is accepted
16.	Jokes/double meaning/meaningless words are not included	Jokes/double meaning/meaningless words can be included

In addition to above data, various etiquettes and relevant information are presented in the table 2.2. These data are also supposed to enhance teachers' knowledge relevant to language choice for teaching input; in this situation, however, I do not attempt to interpret diglossic situations.

**Table 1.2 Spoken language etiquettes**

	Types	Formal	Informal	Formal situation	Informal situation
01.	Motherese/modified talk etiquette		√		- Conversations with babies - Montessori/primary level school teaching
02.	Telephone etiquette	√	√	Official dealing	Domestic/friendly conversations
03.	Interview etiquette	√		Official dealing	
04.	Presentation etiquette	√		Official/academic situation	
05.	Courts/legal etiquette	√		Legal matters	

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 16:8 August 2016

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06.	Family etiquette		√		Family affairs
07.	Lecture delivery etiquette	√		Lecture hall	
08.	Church language etiquette	√		Prayer/sermon	
09.	Business language etiquette	√	√	Business dealings	
10.	Advertisement language etiquette		√		Sales promotion
11.	Report language etiquette	√		Presentation/reporting situations	
12.	Casual conversation etiquette		√		Family/friendship domains
13.	Gossip language		√		
14.	Lovers' language		√		Lovers' conversation
15.	Classroom etiquette	√		Teaching situation	
16.	News etiquette	√		News reading	

### 3. Conventional and Non-conventional/Environmental Meanings

A speaker of any language has to be informed about the differences between formal and informal meanings of the words and sentences. A speaker has the responsibility of choosing appropriate words or styles according to the situation. Because speaking styles vary across speakers and circumstances. Therefore, identification of meaning of relevant utterances becomes vital. In order to recognize the differences in meaning, I attempt to classify those elements under two headings: conventional and non-conventional.

**Table 2.1 Variation in meanings**

Conventional meaning	Non-conventional meaning
Dictionary/real	Never find in dictionaries
Limited with formal style	Unlimited informal style
Universal/widely accepted	Regional/locally accepted
Formal learning via books	Informal learning by experience
Background knowledge is no need	Background knowledge is needed

Mostly associated with native variety	Mostly associated with non-native varieties
Easy to familiarize	Time is needed to familiarize
No change	Changes occur

Dramatic acting in classrooms, watching movies and dramas may offer the opportunity to observe how different circumstances require different language styles and vocabularies. In the next section, I attempt to present some important roles and responsibilities of a teacher in spoken language classrooms.

#### 4. Learners' Issues

Generally learners are unable speak English language due to several reasons, particularly in our context. I have presented some major reasons below:

- Recognizing reasonably proper sound system of English language with acceptable pronunciation practice is essential; in most of the schools it does not happen
- In the school curriculum spoken skill is not considered as an important skill
- Spoken skill is not taught by properly trained teachers
- Lack of environmental support to apply and rehearse spoken form by the learners
- Learners have inadequate knowledge to overcome the issues of fear and shyness which are considered as the primary affective filters
- Lack of encouragement from the educated and experienced members
- Limited vocabulary stock to use for common or specific utterances
- Inadequate managing strategies
- Thinking of grammar rules and compose utterances
- No opportunity to participate actively in real life conversational situation
- Unaware of the benefits of spoken skill

#### 5. Teachers' Roles in Classrooms

To promote spoken ability of the learners in the classroom, teachers' roles play significant part; most of the language curricula do not specify the detailed roles. Some of them are presented here.

- Teachers have to establish maximum varieties of opportunities in the classroom to provide wide range of contextual spoken forms
- Make each student involve in assortment of spoken activities to increase students' participation rate
- Teachers have to supply numerous inputs to focus conventional and environmental meanings
- Since spoken language is strongly associated with physical gestures, teachers have to present appropriate gestures in the classroom.
- Teachers are supposed to ask eliciting and encouraging questions:

**Examples:**

What do you mean?

What did you say?

Ok, Ok then, then what?

Ok, what is next?

Ok, continue....

Really, what else?

You are right..... that's right ..... um ... um.... then what?

- Teachers are advised not to correct pronunciation mistakes of the students in front of others particularly in the classroom; this attempt may discourage the learner. Indicate constructive gestures when commenting on learners' responses. In the current tendency, scholars suggest that teachers can provide written convincing feedback.
- Before initiate the spoken activities in the classroom, teachers have to clearly explain the situations with appropriate vocabulary; introducing relevant vocabulary with situations may be an ideal step. Since conventional meaning differs from contextual meaning, as mentioned in the table 1.2.1, teachers have to explain different contexts and situational meanings with examples.
- At the beginning teachers have to encourage minimal responses of the learners while they ask eliciting questions; some example for minimal responses are: "ok", "right", "sure", "all right" and "is it".
- Teachers are expected to introduce the context very clearly with appropriate topics.

### **For the Day-to-day General Communication**

Greetings, apologies, compliments, invitations, acceptance, denials and other relevant functions which are influenced by day-to-day social and cultural etiquettes.

### **For the Business Communication**

(Mostly business dealings are not associated with personal feelings; this is the major difference between social/general communication and business communication).

Enquiries, making orders, talking to customers and suppliers, talking to business delegates and office staff and conducting the meetings, varieties telephone conversations, business visit conversation (international/national), interview questions/discussions, agreeing/disagreeing, seminars on varieties of topics, reporting and so on.

## **6. External Factors and Performance of Spoken Skill**

There are a lot of external factors which play important role to promote learners' spoken skill; if those factors are inadequate or not available, learners' and educators simply will ignore the spoken skill in schools or other ESL teaching institutions. I present a number of major external factors which influence learners' and educational agencies' motivational level relevant to spoken skill either directly or indirectly; the proficiency level of spoken skill will generally be affected,

- if priority and emphasis are not presented on the spoken skill in the national curriculum.
- if employers do not consider spoken ability as an additional qualification.
- if spoken English is not necessary for the day-to-day communication.
- if no opportunity is available to rehearse/practice/test the hypothesis.
- if public examination system does not emphasize spoken skills.
- if learners do not like to participate actively and practise in ESL classrooms.

## **7. Conclusion**

Until now we discussed important aspects such as formal and informal language styles, different spoken language etiquettes, conventional and non-conventional meanings,

learners' issues, teachers' roles and external factors. I very firmly believe these information will help teachers and stakeholders to understand the nature of the spoken language and the challenges of teaching it in ESL classrooms.

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### Further Readings

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