

**INCULCATING CONVERSATIONAL SKILLS FOR ENHANCING
COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE**

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Abstract

This article is aimed at helping the English language teachers and learners in introducing the nuances to inculcate conversation skills. This will help the English language aspirants develop confidence in speaking. In this article, various stages, elements, techniques and types of conversations are introduced in simple reader friendly conversational tone. In addition to that some basic activities to introduce conversational practice are also provided.

Key words:

Conversational Skills, Techniques to Improve Conversational Skills, Small Talk, Spin the Yarn, Body language

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Introduction

In the present times of the tech-savvy generation, the ever increasing dependence on technology, the age of sound bites, quick blurbs of news 'shots', and friends and acquaintances using social media to spit out short, ambiguous, meaningless/unwanted information about their days and feelings and whatever else pops up in the mind gets unloaded out on the uncaring and overburdened ears of the internet; being a good conversationalist is a rare thing.

The art of being someone who is able to smoothly take transitions keeping a conversation flowing effortlessly and meaningfully forward, understanding another individual's personal likes, dislikes & concerns, maintaining cheerful ambiance, getting to know everything spruced with a bit of laughter and light-heartedness about this person you have met just an hour ago and knowing him/her closely like his or her close family member is what is skilled conversationalist.

It is not easy to become talented at conversation. In fact, it is quite challenging, at times emotionally exhausting, and unceasing work-in-process, even for those who have been focused on improving their conversational aptitudes for years. But it is an important worthwhile skill. Learning to excel in conversation is one of the most excellent, useful, empowering skills you can possibly learn.

Importance of conversational skills for acquiring effective communication skills

A conversation occurs when people talk to each other, like a conversation with your friend about school days or summer vacation etc. Definition of conversation as given in Oxford Dictionary is "a talk, especially an informal one, between two or more people, in which news and ideas are exchanged".

An interaction with a closely dedicated subject or aim is usually not considered as conversation. On close analysis we can understand conversation as that kind of interaction/speech that happens informally, where all the speakers involved are considered equal, with a common idea of maintaining cordial personal and social relationships. Conversations are helpful for the improvement of language and confidence level in speaking with others. They are key to language development, the exchange of thoughts and ideas and listening to each other. We learn by listening to each other's thoughts. The capacity to convey our ideas effectively and efficiently to others increases with practice. I believe that one of the best ways to become a good communicator is through making conversation. Even though many people know how to hold a conversation, only a few are smooth and captivating when they talk.

Techniques and Tips to improve Conversational Skills

A constructive conversation transfers ideas from one mind to another and removes all obstacles from the way. But in this technology dominated times, holding such conversations appears challenging. In the age of 'google', Siri, Alexa and the likes, we have no time and patience to let conversations unfold slowly. Nevertheless, with dedicated efforts and practice one can improve the conversational skills. In this section you will learn about the basic techniques and types of conversations.

When you are talking with others, there are a number of basics in the conversation that commonly appear. Understanding these allows you to better control the conversation and ensure the other person is better able to respond. You can also analyse the other person's speech as they talk and cope with any misuse or mistakes in their structures.

First things first - remember launching a conversation involves a number of steps. To be successful at it, you have to do them all correctly. The first step is often the hardest to understand and that is the right time to *have* a conversation. For this by acquiring the following skill you can benefit greatly:

- Start with a pleasant smile and warm greeting
- Understand the flow and tone of the conversation
- Choose an appropriate statement or phrases to open the dialogue
- Recognize nonverbal cues and tune accordingly

For this you can practice some simple greetings, expressions etc. that can be helpful to make a good beginning. Once you launch and enter a conversation keeps these things in mind:

1. Turn-taking: Conversation can never be one sided. One is required to take turn in conversations. The meaning of turn is the time when a speaker is talking. In communication turn-taking is the skill of knowing when to start and finish a turn in a conversation. It is an important tool required to organise a good conversation or discussion. The end of a turn can be generally understood when there is a drop in the pitch or volume in the speaker's voice at the end of a statement or sentence.

2. Context: Though conversations are not with a specific subject or outcome as aim, while taking part in conversation one should not speak out of context. By not following context, one immediately jumps to say something based on the few words that he or she listens from the other person.

3. Variety: Like any other speech activity, conversations should also have variety. Bringing more connected ideas will make the conversation interesting. When one tries to limit to something that is common or known to all, the conversation will neither be interesting nor useful.

How to develop Conversational Skill?

As any other skill, conversational skill can be improved with good exposure and constant practice. To improve your conversational skill, you should participate in conversations as much as possible. Here are a few steps on how to overcome your own agenda and become an active and empathetic listener.

1 Talk slowly: Fluency is appreciable skill. But when you take part in informal conversations, speaking too fast can confuse your listener. S/he may miss out some words/part of the sentence. This will create problems in interesting conversations. So it is always better if you speak at moderate rate or slowly and clearly in conversation.

2 Maintain good eye contact: As conversations are face-to-face it is important to have good eye contact while talking to someone. It is said most of the people have very poor eye contact even though they are in face-to-face conversation. Holding good eye contact will show confidence and interest of a speaker.

3 Pay close attention: People with good conversation skills have a habit paying close attention. Their ability to understand is higher than those with poor conversational skill. They not only talk but also notice and bring positive references in conversation. For example, notice and point out a new trendy outfit/ring/watch etc.; or good voice/accent/pronunciation etc. Thus, such individuals who have this habit of paying close attention are liked by people. They are successful in impressing people in a very elegant manner.

4 Use the suitable words: The ability to talk smoothly has a lot to do with choosing the accurate words to talk and express one's feelings or thoughts. Always work to develop your vocabulary and practice using exact and accurate words.

5 Body language: Look at your speaker/partner in conversation instead of looking away. Show your attention by nodding your head or raising your eyebrows. We should remember that even by listening, we can communicate non-verbally.

6 Practice Objective/Non-Judgmental listening: Let us not forget when we listen we don't have to either agree or disagree. There is no need to agree or disagree of what is being said by the speaker by evaluating the statements being made. Do not forget active presence is more important for successful conversations. A good listener simply receives the message without being judgemental or biased.

7 Paraphrase: Paraphrasing is another powerful way that can help you improve your conversational skill. Simple sentences such as "So you are saying that..." or repeating in your own words what you believe the other person said, are ways to respect the conversation and understand properly. Show your attentiveness using sentences this technique or a contextual remark like "I hope you are impressed with yourself!"

8 Ask questions: A very simple yet powerful technique of improving conversational skills is by asking suitable questions. Ask questions whenever you feel there is need to stress the point or get clarification. Ask open questions such as "How do you interpret this?" This kind of questioning develops a conversation and makes it more interesting. For example, if someone is sharing how they are sad about something, do not add your own similar story. Instead, ask them a linked question to show that you can understand their pain and care about their experience.

Types of Conversations

When talking with someone, it is helpful to know what type of conversation you are in. You can do so based on a conversation's direction of communication (a one-way or two-way street) and its tone/purpose (competitive or cooperative).

Most of the times when people talk and interact with others, they are not concentrating on any end result or outcome. They do not think intentionally about what they are trying to achieve; the kind of conversation they want etc. in conversations. In spite of this being the fact, they do lead the tone and type of conversation. There are different kinds/ types of conversations and the knowledge about this will be helpful to

- work intentionally to create what we want,
- consider what the other person wants, and
- be better conversationists/communicators.

Based on direction and tone, the major types of conversations identified are: debate, dialogue, discourse, and diatribe.

1. **Debate:** Intentionally taking opposites sides. At times the purpose can be of stimulating discussion and thought. It is a competitive conversation. In debates there should be logic and reason.
2. **Argument:** Taking opposite stand simply to contradict for the purpose of winning.
3. **Dialogue:** Two people talking to understand each other, and to create shared meaning, often so that solutions to problems will be acceptable to both parties. **Dialogue** is a cooperative, two-way conversation. The goal is for participants to exchange information and build relationships with one another.
4. **Discussions:** The purpose of discussion is to pool in all the ideas and information to understand the topic of discussion.

How you conduct yourself that is what you say, how you talk in terms of tone, etc. should be based on the type of communication you are involved in. It is important to know which type of conversation you are in, because that determines the purpose of that conversation. If you can identify the purpose, you can take part and speak better.

Some important activities useful in developing conversational skills

1. Role play or Situational dialogues

Role-play is any speaking activity when you either put yourself into somebody else's shoes, or when you stay in your own shoes but put yourself into an imaginary situation. While playing this activity, one can hone conversational skills as role plays perfect their functional/contextual language use.

Role plays are interesting as learners have the scope to 'become/act' anyone they like the President, the Queen, a millionaire, a pop star the choice is limitless. In a role play, apart from role of imagined characters such as manager, teacher, mother, friend, and classmate etc., there is also a prescribed situation within which the various characters will interact. The situation provides the boundaries and guides how the characters should behave within the role play. It is most useful to help you prepare for unfamiliar or difficult situations. For example, you can use it to practice interviews, meetings etc. Functional language useful for healthy conversational situations can be practiced through role-plays. Example situations are : 'With the Bank Manager'; 'At the Airport'; 'At the restaurant', 'Checking in at the airport', 'Looking for lost property'

By acting in some given specific circumstances, you can explore how other people are likely to behave or react. Preparing for a situation of role-play, you get experience and self-confidence to handle similar situations in real life. Thus, role plays provide situations that will help you perform better in real life conversational situations of similar or related kind.

2. Spin the yarn:

Storytelling is considered as an inseparable part of formative years for childhood days or during primary education. This valuable art involves use of facial expressions, voice modulations and body movements so as to make the story reach out the clearly to the audience. Spin the yarn is similar to storytelling and many use these two expressions synonymously. But I consider it as a modified version of storytelling as it can be a group activity where whoever takes turn gives his or her twist to the tale. Any topic or take away statement should be made by the moderator and then one after the other at any appropriate point others can continue. It is like a relay race.

Tips to help you play this activity:

- 1) Love the story you are telling: You should care about the characters and the story unfolding around them so that your audience will care to lend their ears to you!
- 2) Adapt your story to your changing audience: Tell the stories they will engage your listeners.
- 3) Connect with your audience: Have good eye contact with different members of the audience. Remember-eye contact and energy are important for being heard.
- 4) Use different visuals: If possible, use props and different visuals like puppets in storytelling. Some people are good at listening and others enjoy visual feasts! Another advantage of props is they can help you to make up for vocabulary!
- 5) Use different voices: If you are twisting it with different characters in turns, try to use different voices.
- 6) Don't drag and make the story too long.
- 7) Repeat: The technique of repetition can be helpful to bring in more dramatic impact on the listeners.
- 8) Use humour.
- 9) Enjoy yourself: Though you are telling the stories to your audience, but you have to enjoy storytelling, too.

Major advantages are:

- ✓ Inspires purposeful talking, and not just about the story there are many games you can play
- ✓ Raises the enthusiasm for reading texts to find stories, reread them, etc
- ✓ Initiates writing because children will quickly want to write stories and tell them
- ✓ Enhances the community connect
- ✓ Improves listening skills
- ✓ Gives a motivating reason for English language learners to speak and write English

3. Small talk

Small talk is an informal type of discourse that does not cover any functional topics of conversation or any transactions that need to be addressed. The ability to conduct small talk is a social skill; hence, small talk is some type of social communication. When you meet some strangers on any occasions like while traveling, in a movie theater, waiting for the bus/train, waiting halls etc. it is always good to exchange pleasantries by wishing them the day. It is not required that always the other person/persons should take the initiative. Rather, if you are enthusiastic to improve your

communication skills and social skills, these kinds of interactions that are also called as small talks can be very helpful to you. It is important for you as a learner to make use of any opportunity to speak in your target language (language that you aim to learn). When you come across people who are strangers to you, there is a great advantage as you can be very comfortable to speak out without any inhibitions.

Conclusion

Conversational skills do not improve just like that. It takes time, practice and the ability to learn at a rapid rate from your own experiences. Conversational ability boosts confidence in using English in various communication situations, both formal and informal. Conversation is interactive communication between two or more people. The development of conversational skills and etiquette is an important part of socialization. To attain ability to converse fluently in a variety of situations requires, good range of vocabulary, knowledge of grammar and also presence of mind to know what to say to whom and when. In short, proficiency in conversations includes knowledge not only of the language but also exposure, experience and presence of mind. Thus through participation in conversations, one gets acquainted with social and cultural norms and the ability to respond appropriately in a variety of situations.

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