

Tapping on High School Students' Conception of English Conversation: Survey Results from 2000 NTNU English Camp

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This study explored the conceptions and experience of a group of senior high school students in Taiwan toward English conversation. The results indicated that these high school students mostly upheld impersonal, instrumental type of motivation, were engaged more frequently in non-social, transactional talk situated as much in EFL as in ESL environment, were often deterred from and possibly interfered in their engagement in English conversation by various mental hurdles and psychological noises, and heeded and were equipped with primarily grammatical competence but overlooked and lacked the discourse and strategic competence as two other indispensable components of English conversational competence. Four important pedagogical implications were then drawn to better motivate and prepare learners of this particular age group to take part in English conversation.

Keywords: English conversation, conversational competence, teaching, high school, Taiwan

1. Introduction

English conversation class, which was first incorporated into high school English curriculum as an elective class in Taiwan in 1984, is now rolling into the 16th year in the history of English conversation instruction at the secondary school level. In the course of these 16 years, need analysis and program evaluations were conducted to students and teachers in hope to better the outcome of the instruction (e.g., Chang 1995). This study, based on a survey conducted to a group of high school attendants at a summer English camp organized by the English department of National Taiwan Normal University, signifies another effort in examining the issue. By tapping on these high school students' conception and experience of English conversation, the study aims to devise some pedagogical practices suited to the needs of the learners at this particular educational level. The results of this survey, though based on a rather small number of high school students who for the fact of joining the camp were likely better and more interested in English than their peers, painted nevertheless a

meaningful picture of how high school students possibly perceive and engage themselves in English conversation. As today English conversation is popularly integrated in the English language curriculum in high schools in Taiwan, the findings and their implications warrant the attention of the educators who are dedicated to the study and training of students' oral English, and specifically, conversational competence.

2. Methods

The methodological issues involved in the data-gathering-and-processing endeavor for the study of the high school campers' conception, experience and performance of English conversation can be dissected and addressed in the respects of participants, instrument, data-collection, and data-analysis.

2.1 Participants

Forty-eight, approximately half of the camp participants (i.e., those who were assigned to my section of oral communication class) were asked by the counselor to fill out the questionnaire three days before the class. The participants were either the first-to-second-year or second-to-third-year students enrolled in 30 different high schools in Taipei area. Among them, 9 were boys and 39 were girls. The majority of the participants had studied English for 4 or 5 years since junior high school. Seven participants reported that their English grades in school fell on or above 90, twenty-one, in the range between 80 and 89; fourteen, between 70 and 79; five, between 60 and 69; and one, below 60. Their English grades had certainly indicated their interests and levels of proficiency in English, two of the criteria used for screening the participants as I was informed by one of the camp organizers.

2.2 Instrument

As an attempt to investigate high school students' perception, knowledge, experience, and competence of English conversation and to preclude any preconceived, assumptive notions about their response, a semi-structured, open-ended questionnaire was designed. The first part of the questionnaire aims to solicit information regarding the participants' personal background (including their gender, year in school, number of

years of studying English, and school grade on English). The second part of the questionnaire consists of 10 open-ended questions (see Appendix for the complete version of the questionnaire). The questions are carefully constructed and sequenced to enable the researcher to crosschecking the participants' answers but to prevent the latter from referencing between answers, an undesirable lead-on effect on the participants, when responding to the questionnaire. The first question ("Do you think English conversation competence is important? Do you want to enhance your competence in this respect? Why, or why not?") deals primarily with the participants' motivation to learn English conversation. Related to the first question, the fourth question ("In what circumstances or for what purposes will you engage in English conversation with others?") directs the participants to hypothesize situations in which they would engage in English conversation with others. The second question ("In your own opinion, how capable are you in conversing in English? Please elaborate your answer with some explanation."), by asking the participants to assess and comment on their English conversation ability, is an indirect attempt to get at the participants' conception of English conversational competence. Different from the second question in phrasing, the third question ("To be able to converse with foreigners in English, what qualities does one need to have?") directly explores the issue of how conversational competence was defined by the participants. Both questions five ("Under what circumstances will you hesitate to engage in English conversation with others despite of an opportunity to do so?") and eight ("What difficulties have you ever experienced when conversing with others in English and how did you manage them?") tap on the perceived demotivators or barriers by the participants to take part in English conversation, but question eight also enquires the participants' reactions or reactive measures to those difficult situations. Questions six ("If you can attend an English conversation class, what do you wish to learn?") and seven ("Is English conversation taught in your school? If yes, how is it taught, and what do you think of it?") aim to pursue the participants' expectation for and experience of an English conversation class. Participants' answers to question six also can be used to cross-reference their responses to questions two and three. Finally, questions nine ("Based on your knowledge of

English conversation, what are the characteristics regarding the structure of English conversation, and what skills or strategies can be utilized in the course of a conversation?”) and ten (“For each of the following situations, script a structurally complete English conversation: 1) You chat with a classmate of yours on the first day of school after summer vacation, and 2) you have a conversation with a camp member sitting beside you whom you first meet during the break.”) are to assess the participants’ knowledge of the discourse structure and features of English conversation and their paper-and-pencil performance of two complete English conversations. To facilitate the participants’ response, all the questions are written in Chinese, and the participants were instructed to answer all questions but Question 10 in Chinese should they wish.

2.3 Data collection

The questionnaires were distributed and later collected as a whole by a student counselor on the second day of the camp to maximize the returning rate. For the number and nature of the questions in the questionnaire, the student counselor was instructed to allocate at least twenty minutes for the participants’ completion of the questionnaire. To prevent perfunctory or unclear responses from the participants, they were also encouraged by the student counselor to answer in as much detail as possible. As a result, most of the answers on the returned questionnaires were clear and detailed enough to be coded and analyzed, and very few questions were left unanswered.

2.4 Data analysis

Content-analysis was used to analyze the data. Participants’ responses to each question were first jotted down. Next, general categories were extracted from those responses to each question. The responses were then read and re-read in the coding process so as to be grouped and tallied under the general categories. Participants’ responses to questions with a similar inquiry (e.g., question 1 and 4; question 2, 3, and 6; question 5 and 8; and question 9 and 10) were also cross-referenced as a way of checking the consistency and validity of the answers.

3. Results

Analysis showed that participants' answers were highly consistent and correlated within the clusters of questions identified above, a fact that confirms the reliability of the data. To strive a parsimonious report, the results are organized into the following categories: motivation to learn English conversation, conversation contexts, perceived English conversation competence, conversation barriers, and knowledge and performance of English conversation.

3.1 Motivation to learn English conversation

All forty-eight participants posited that English conversational competence is important and that they would like to enhance their own ability in this respect. Regarding their motivations to acquire such competence, among the three types of motivation identified by Mihaljević (cited in Djigunović 1998)--affective motivation, pragmatic- communicative motivation, and integrative motivation--the majority of the responses fell in the category of pragmatic-communicative motivation, i.e., motivation that concerns the instrumental and professional value of the ability and the status of English being a language of international communication. It was shown by the fact that most commonly mentioned responses included: "English is an international language," "One will use English when going abroad," "English enables one to communicate with people from other countries," and "English is part of our everyday life." A small number of responses, by their displaying the participants' wish to learn English conversation because they had a liking for the language (e.g., "I'm interested in English," "English is a graceful/nice-sounding language," "Being able to speak English fluently is an admirable ability," and "Being able to speak multiple languages is a great accomplishment") belonged to affective motivation. No integrative motivations were noted as no responses connoted the participants' wish to be integrated into an English speaking linguistic and cultural community. Provided that the participants were situated in contexts where English is used as a foreign rather than second language and thus there was no immediate need to bind with English-speaking natives or blend into the English-speaking society, this result was not surprising.

3.2 Conversation contexts

The conversation contexts identified by the participants as the ones in which they could see themselves engaged in English conversation were largely non-social in nature. In these contexts there was clearly an instrumental goal or task to be achieved via English conversation, such as giving direction/instruction to expatriate foreigners, going/traveling abroad (including shopping, asking for direction, talking to the flight attendants on the airplane, etc.), attending English class or doing English assignment (such as interviewing foreigners), practicing English with classmates, and talking on the phone to the Filipino maid who works at a friend's home. In other words, most participants did not or could not picture themselves engaged with foreigners in social settings or for social purposes; only one participant stated going to a party as a possible conversation context, and five other participants (all of whom were female) mentioned the idea of chatting with foreign neighbors, or making friends with foreigners.

3.3 Perceived English conversational competence

More than half of the participants (26 to be exact) deemed "courage" as an essential attribute to acquire to be able to converse with others in English. The second most commonly mentioned quality was listening comprehension, which appeared 19 times. Ranked the third highest was oral English proficiency (with nine participants specifying "high" oral English proficiency" or "fluent spoken English"). Ten participants considered "basic conversation ability" as a must to take part in English conversation. Vocabulary (including the term "vocabulary" and more elaborated comments like "knowing enough vocabulary" "acquiring the commonly used vocabulary"), grammar (including the term "grammar" and such statements as "accurate grammar" "sentence structure"), and pronunciation (e.g., "correct pronunciation") were noted 8, 6, and 5 times respectively. Other qualities that were mentioned sparsely by the participants included: self-confidence (3 times), eloquence (2 times), the ability to converse or initiate a conversation with strangers (2 times), rich body language (2 times), the ability to respond or reply quickly (1 time), smiling (1 time), and humor (1 time).

3.4 Conversation barriers

Here conversation barriers refer to both factors that deterred participants from

dialoguing with foreigners and difficulties participants indeed experienced during their conversation with foreigners. Responses, such as vocabulary, listening comprehension, and psychological barriers, which participants perceived as essential qualities of English conversation competence, appeared often again in the participants' answers as deterring factors. Specifically, being afraid of saying something wrong" (which in turn was resulted from such fears or concerns as "cannot make oneself understood," "offends others," "causes misunderstanding," "makes oneself the laughing stuck," "incurs in others contempt for Chinese people") was noted 13 times. 9 participants attributed their hesitance to partake in English conversation to "lack of self-confidence," and 9 participants, "lack of vocabulary." For 6 participants their shyness had led to withdraw from dialoguing with others in English. 5 participants deemed not knowing what to say, how to initiate a conversation, or how to interject a comment as deterrent to their participating in English conversation, and 5 participants stated that they halted because of the presence of another or more interlocutors at the scene (e.g., "when there are too many people present," "when there are Chinese around who do not speak English," "when there are other foreigners present," and "when people around me can speak good English"). 4 participants attributed their reluctance to poor listening comprehension or the fear of not comprehending the other due to the person's fast speaking rate.

With regard to the barriers actually experienced, vocabulary problems (e.g., "not knowing the word," "not having the English equivalent for the idea"), replacing some psychological barriers since one already marched "in" the conversation, were referred most frequently, altogether for 20 times. Related to the problems incurred by vocabulary was the inability to express or fully express oneself. Difficulties experienced with listening comprehension were the far second, noted 9 times. The other sporadically occurred responses included: "grammatical mistakes," "pronunciation errors," "seldom using complete sentences," "often responding with 'yes,' 'no,' or 'I don't know,'" "not knowing what to say," "having embarrassing silence," and "stuttering." Overall, factors coded as perceived deterrent correspond to those coded as experienced difficulties.

3.5 Knowledge and performance of English conversation

Participants' answers to the question, "What are the characteristics regarding the structure of English conversation?" revealed among one-third of the participants an awareness of the linguistic structure of English conversation. Among these responses, comments about the syntactic feature of the message occurring in conversation, such as simplicity of grammar, short sentences, or less strict enforcement on grammatical rules, were noted 11 times; and statements on its lexical feature, i.e., use of simple words or slang, 3 times. On the other hand, features concerning the discourse structure of English conversation were left unmentioned. When answering the question concerned with conversational skills or strategies ("What skills or strategies can be utilized in the course of a conversation?"), 10 participants referred to the use of nonverbal messages like facial expressions and body language; and 9 participants, adoption of appropriate intonation. Interestingly enough, a number of useful reactive measures some participants stated that they employed when encountering difficulties in English conversation, such as using synonyms, speaking in circumlocution, and soliciting help from others, did not appear in the answers and thus were not perceived as conversational skills or strategies. It is worth noting that some answers were completely off the mark, stating in fact what English conversation is not (e.g., "difficult syntactic structure" "complete sentences," "well-organized content," and "reasoning ability"), some answers were too vague or unclear to be coded meaningful (e.g., "fluent," "simple," "lively," "used in everyday life," and "communication skills,"), and 5 participants stated that they did not know the answer or left the question unanswered, all of which speak for the fact that the majority of the participants lack adequate knowledge of the discourse structure and communicative strategies concerning English conversation.

Analysis of the conversations the participants scripted for two different scenarios revealed again their insufficient knowledge about the discourse structure and other discourse features of English conversation. Despite the instruction of constructing a "complete" English conversation, only 3 participants scripted a conversation with clear opening (including greeting and conversation opener), business, and closing (including

pre-closing and closing). The conversations written by the other participants either contained no or an incomplete greeting or were lack of closing. In addition to the absence of certain stages of English conversation, other discourse features that help contribute to the flow of the conversation, such as listener expressions and conversation openers, were not heeded by some participants. When the scripted conversations were compared between the two scenarios, evidently participants had significantly more difficulty in constructing a dialogue with a stranger than with an acquaintance, though these two roles as how they were depicted in the scenarios likely share similar demographic and social background. This could be evidenced by the misuse or misplace of such first-time-meeting greeting expressions as “nice to meet you” and “you too”, inappropriate or awkward approaches to initiate the conversation, improper questions addressed to the interlocutor, and a misunderstanding-prone remark attached after merely a few verbal exchanges which directly states one’s wish to “become good friends” or “make friends” with the interlocutor.

4. Discussion

A number of important messages and implications for English conversation instruction for high school students’ can be drawn from the results of the study; they concern topics of learner motivation, conversational context, mental barriers, and conceptualization of English conversational competence.

4.1 Learner motivations and English conversation

First, learner motivations need be capitalized in a way to optimize their impacts on the learning of and engagement in English conversation. As suggested by the study that high school students in Taiwan uphold primarily pragmatic-communicative type of motivations, the task faced by high school English teachers is to know how to utilize such incentives in the course of teaching. Those concrete pragmatic goals that learners intend to accomplish via English conversation, such as giving/asking for direction, and completing business deals, should be reflected in the dialogues chosen for classroom practice. Those specifically spelled communicative goals like chatting or making friends with foreigners, because of their lower likelihood to be realized

particularly in EFL settings, can be perhaps incorporated into the instruction by building them on pragmatic motifs. That is, a conversation can be initiated for a specific pragmatic purpose but later evolves into a friendly talk driven by an interpersonal communicative motivation. Having these two goals enacted in the actual dialogue, a scenario may go like this: the learner first gives direction to a foreigner and then when leading the way chats a bit with the person about his or her stay in Taiwan, or the learner buys a souvenir off a native-speaker and later moves on to enquire about the local weather or tourist attractions. By detecting and differentiating learners' motivation, the instructor can then encourage those who are motivated by a specific instrumental goal to venture on in the same conversation by switching to a communicative incentive and remind those who are driven by a socially-oriented communicative purpose to create and embark on contacts that are characterized by a clear pragmatic goal and infiltrate the contacts with an interpersonal communicative goal.

To capitalize on learners' motivation in the instruction of English conversation, those motivations must be personalized by being connected to the learner's life. In other words, learners have to be able to pinpoint how exactly the ability to converse in English matters to them personally. In view of this assertion, pragmatic-communicative motivations like "English is an international language," "English is the means of communication," "English is part of our life," or "English conversation ability will come in handy in the future" are too general to function as an effective motivator and thus need to be modified. To do so, learners should be asked to plant the word "I" into the statement to visualize how English conversation works for themselves. Personal situations or experience can be solicited by the instructor and integrated into the forming of a motivation specific to the individual learner. Thus, "English is part of our life" now may become "English is part of my life, for I sometimes have to talk to the Filipino maid."

4.2 Context and English conversation

Based on the nature of the conversation contexts specified by the participants of the study, two considerations need be heeded when the teaching material is being put

together for learners of a similar demographic background. First, the teaching material can contain a diversity of non-social contexts to better meet the needs of high school students and reflect their experience as language learners in an EFL environment. Thus, rather than practicing primarily interactional talks which are likely to take place at a social gathering or for the purpose to relate, learners can be introduced, as a starting point, to transactional talks which usually unfold at business transactions or contacts (e.g., at a store/restaurant, on the airplane) characterized by a non-social purpose (e.g., giving/asking for direction, taking language lessons, calling in a local English-speaking radio station, talking on the phone to a friend's Filipino maid). As the conversations in those non-social contexts are covered and thus learners' basic needs are met, social talks can then be instructed.

As a good number of the contexts where high school students may dialogue in English are in fact situated in an EFL environment, the conversation teaching materials for these learners should pay heed to their source culture as much as to the target cultures (Chang, 2000; Chiu, 1997). Thus, when introducing conversations involved in direction-giving situations, for example, the instructor should have learners practice not only asking for direction when touring in an English-speaking country but also giving direction to sojourning foreigners in learners' native country. And when studying social talks, learners can role-play conversations not just with native-speakers in and about the target cultures but also with their foreign neighbors/teachers or even their fellow classmates (for fun or for practice as some participants claimed) in and about their home culture. In view of this principle, textbooks or teaching materials based solely on learners' source culture or on the target culture may not be the best choice.

4.3 Mental barriers and English conversation

One of the most significant findings of the study is that some mental hurdles clearly enter into and interferes with the participants' engagement in English conversation. This is evidenced by the fact that the mental quality of courage and such psychological barriers as the fear of making wrong/inappropriate/incomprehensible remarks and lack of self-confidence are prevalently and repeatedly noted in the participants' responses.

Though these mental qualities and barriers reportedly functioned primarily as deterrent that precludes the participants from venturing into an English conversation, their effects on the participants' performance in the course of a conversation cannot be ruled out. In other words, how these mental barriers may also turn into "psychological noise" that can lead to interference or distortion in the coding and decoding of messages during a conversation need be attended as well.

The heed paid by the high school students to these psychological obstacles speaks not only of the widespread and profound impacts they have on the language learners of this age group, but of the necessity of helping these learners tackle them in the conversation instruction. To amend the fact that foreign-language programs or texts often focus more on the cognitive aspects of language and involve in a much lesser degree the learner's affects and attitudes (Djigunović 1998), conversation instructors should attend equally to learners' psychological and affective states and conceive measures and techniques that can effectively control or reduce these counterproductive mental forces. Some suggestions are put forth in my article, "No more English-savvy dummies or fluent fools: A communicative approach to teaching English conversation" (Chang 2000). The guideline of "conversation as a form of interpersonal communication" which was advocated in that article was aimed at changing or modifying learners' psychological stance toward their undertaking of English conversation. When learners understand that conversation (in whatever language), by definition, means relatively informal social interaction in which messages are constructed and negotiated under the collaborative management of all parties involved (McLaughlin 1984), it is hoped that they will deem English conversation, instead of as engagement in some linguistic performance all by themselves, as participation in a process of interpersonal communication with at least one other person, and recognize the goal of conversation being, rather than producing flawless linguistic output, sharing of meaning and mutual understanding. This orientation helps learners become more aware of their interlocutor and the role the person plays in the success of their interaction. Such awareness can, in turn, foster in learners a less intimidated or more relaxed mental stance before or during their

dialoguing in English (Chang 1997).

To alleviate these psychological blocks, learners can also be taught communication strategies and discourse markers to prevent and repair conversational problems that they fear for (more discussion on communication strategies and discourse markers is presented in the following section, “English conversational competence”). For example, lack of confidence over one’s lexical ability can be dealt and mollified by acquisition of the communication strategy “paraphrasing,” which includes approximation, word coinage and circumlocution. The fear of making a remark that is offensive or may incur one’s loss of face can be eased by the usage of disclaimers, a type of discourse marker that aims to ensure that one’s message will be understood and will not reflect negatively on you. These communication strategies and discourse markers, for the purpose they come to exist, can turn what is originally being feared for into a moment of skill exercising, and when maneuvered properly and adroitly, they can transform learners from an at-one’s-wits-end problem-evader to a resourceful trouble-shooter.

4.4 English conversational competence

The issue of English conversation instruction ultimately comes down to the construct “English conversational competence” and the question of what it consists of. Before the discussion proceeds to what components of competence need be added or emphasized in conversation instruction to high school learners, it is helpful to first examine how the participants perceived the construct.

Judging from the qualities deemed by the participants as indispensable to one’s partaking in English conversation, it is the component of grammatical competence, i.e., the “knowledge of lexical items and of rules of morphology, syntax, sentence-grammar semantics, and phonology” (Canale & Swain 1980, p. 29) that received the most attention. Being the building blocks of any oral message, the linguistic code of a language is fundamental and imperative in one’s acquisition of English conversational competence. However, competence entailed in English conversation, because of the interactive mode and sociolinguistic features of a conversation, does go beyond the grammatical component.

The components of communicative competence defined by Canale & Swain (1980) and later by Canale (1983)--grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence--provide helpful insight on the make-up of English conversational competence. That is, to converse capably in a language, one has to have the knowledge of the grammatical system of the language, the discourse structure and features of conversation practiced in that language, sociolinguistic rules specific to the culture in which the language is spoken, and communication strategies to amend communication or attain effectively a communicative goal the conversation is set out for. To adequately prepare high school learners on a mundane but intricate and volatile communication activity as conversation, English conversation pedagogy ought to encompass instruction on all four competence-components.

The discussion follows focuses on the discourse and strategic competence of English conversation for three reasons. First, the analysis of the participants' knowledge of English conversation and its actualization in dialogues suggested short of training received in the aspect of discourse structure and communication strategies. Second, the mental obstacle prevalently experienced by the participants can be dealt by imparting to them a variety of communication strategies, as indicated earlier. Third, a survey of high school English textbooks and commercially available English conversation materials reveal a lopsided focus among the four competence-components, with primal emphasis on grammatical competence and some attention to sociolinguistic competence, but little discussion about the discourse features common to or communication strategies conducive of English conversation.

Discourse competence when applied to English conversation constitutes the knowledge of English conversation structure or process as well as common discourse markers. The discourse structure of English conversation can be divided into as few as three stages--opening, business, and closing--and as many as five stages--opening, feedforward, business, preclosing, and closing--depending on the nature and purpose of the conversation. Conversation that is transactional in nature may contain only opening, business and closing; however, conversation that is interactional in nature can

be more elaborate and characterized by all five steps. A conversation with these stages in place may well go by unchecked, but a conversation with its expected stages missing will surely incur negative reactions in the interlocutors. For that reason, the idea of process and its stages need be made explicit in the conversation instruction.

Compared with conversation process, the concept of discourse markers, or some books refer to as “conversation gambits” (Keller & Warner 1976, 1988), is even more novel to the local learners. These myriad discourse markers can be categorized generally into openers, links, and responders (Keller & Warner 1976, 1988). Openers can be used to open/initiate a conversation (which is termed “conversational opener” by McClure [1996]), to change the subject or introduce a new topic (which is referred to as feedforward by DeVito [1992]), or to serve a particular discourse function or enact a speech act (e.g., interrupt, solicit information, recount an unpleasant news/thought [for which disclaimers are used], offer a suggestion/personal opinion, just to name a few). Links, which one uses to help listeners follow his/her train of thoughts or reasoning process when presenting views and arguments, encompass remarks and phrases used to, again to just list a few, emphasize a point, add things, correct oneself, paraphrase/reiterate a point, state one’s arguments and counter-arguments, and finish a story. As how smoothly a conversation flows also hinges on what and how one responds to the foregoing message, responders are another type of discourse markers to acquire. With these responders, one can effectively convey one’s emotions (such as surprise, disbelief, anger, sympathy), polite interest (for the purpose to maintain the conversation), and agreement/disagreement. Responders can also help one clarify or check information, pace a conversation, and avoid silence in conversation (which some books refer to as “conversation fillers”). It should be noted that responders in conversation, for its nature of being listener expressions, often are terse (e.g., “Right,” “Exactly,” “Really,” “What,” “Of course,” and “Go on”) and do not have to be verbal, meaning that vocalic cues like “u-huh” or such nonverbal behaviors as head nods, eye contact, direct shoulder and head orientation, and the like (Grove 1991) will do at times. These particularly brief verbal and nonverbal listener expressions, or “back-channeling cues,” short and content-wise insignificant as they are, can function effectively to

express one's agreement/disagreement, indicate the degree of one's involvement with the speaker, give the speaker pacing cues, or ask for clarification.

These discourse markers, for their primal functions to open, link, and respond, can work to mitigate or dismiss learners' fear or concern over certain problematic scenarios in a conversation. The knowledge of conversation openers, for example, can help dismiss one's hesitation to initiate a conversation. Using disclaimers prior to questions or remarks of which one is not sure of its appropriateness can help tackle one's fear of making inappropriate or face losing remarks. The concern about not comprehending the message can be relaxed by mastery of information-clarifying responders. And for the apprehension over not knowing what to say or how to maintain a conversation, listener expressions, particularly back-channeling cues, are the "wonder tools" to be equipped in language learners' survival kit.

Strategic competence or mastery of communication strategies, for its context-reduced and topic-free nature, is of great help to learners' conduction of conversations on a variety of topics in a wide range of situations. Different from discourse markers, which refer to certain words or phrases used to accomplish specific discourse functions, communication strategies are defined as "potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal" (Faerch & Kasper 1983, p. 36). These communication strategies executed via verbal or nonverbal mechanisms include paraphrase, borrowing, appeal for assistance, mime, and avoidance (Tarone 1981). The strategy of paraphrase can be further categorized into approximation (meaning use of a single target language vocabulary item or structure which shares enough semantic features in communication with the desired item to satisfy the speaker), word coinage (meaning making up a new word in order to communicate a desired concept), and circumlocution (meaning describing the characteristics or elements of the object or action instead of using the appropriate target language item or structure). Borrowing, as a communication strategy, refers to literal translation, or translating word for word from the native language, and language switch, i.e., using the native language term without bothering to translate. Appeal to assistance means asking, normally the

authority, for the correct term. Mime, as the name suggests, is a communication strategy where one uses nonverbal messages in place of a lexical item or action. Finally, the strategy of avoidance includes topic avoidance (i.e., not to talk about concepts for which the target language term or structure is not known) and message abandonment (meaning quitting in mid-utterance of a concept for unable to continue). These communication strategies, for their function of assisting language users to explore and employ alternative measures or resources in their message production, can help language learners overcome the mental or communication barriers incurred by their deficiency in grammatical, and particularly lexical, competence.

In addition to those general communication strategies, English conversation instruction should encompass strategies pertaining specifically to managing English conversation, or conversational strategies. Plans and approaches to initiate, regulate, or close a conversation (DeVito 1992) can be imparted and practiced in conversation class. Take strategies to initiate an interactional talk, particularly with a stranger, as an example; one can employ one or a combination of the following approaches: self-references (making a comment about oneself, e.g., "Hi, my name is Joe Blake"), other-references (remarking about the other person, e.g., "so, you like the book?"), relational references (stating about a joint endeavor or activity, e.g., "Do you mind if I join you?"), and context-references (commenting about the physical or temporal dimension of the context, e.g., "Don't we have a nice weather today?" or "Do you have the time?"). Strategies can also be taught about the employment of nonverbal mechanism to maintain, yield, request or deny conversational turns. For instance, to maintain the speaker role, one can resort to a repertoire of nonverbal messages, such as audibly inhaling, continuing a gesture/gestures, avoiding eye contact, sustaining the intonation pattern, and vocalizing pauses (er, umm). And to deny a conversational turn, one can avoid eye contact with the speaker who wishes to yield the speaker role, or by engaging in some behavior that is incompatible with speaking like coughing or blowing one's nose. Closing a conversation, as challenging as opening one, also calls for strategies to ensure its effectiveness and propriety. To bow out a conversation, one can directly state the desire to end the conversation, summarize the conversation so as

to bring it to a close, state one's enjoyment of the conversation and/or wish for future interaction, or give the person a good wish for the future.

The two types of communication strategies--general communication strategies and conversational strategies—are equally useful but to different purposes. General communication strategies are largely reactive and compensatory in nature, whereas conversational strategies can be preemptive and preventive of problems. When going hand in hand, they may enable language learners to march in and out English conversation with less frustration and more satisfaction.

5. Suggestions for future studies

A number of suggestions can be made about future studies on the subject of high school learners' need for and conception of English conversation and the corresponding pedagogy. First, to rectify the problems concerning the size and constitution of the sample, studies should be conducted with a much larger sample size that consists of high school students randomly selected from different geographic areas of Taiwan. A contrastive analysis can then be conducted to discern any significant difference between students of different genders, residencies, and levels of scholastic achievement in English. Based on the findings of the more extensive studies, scaled measures can be constructed for follow-ups on more focused inquiries. Future studies can also ascertain via ethnographic methods the outcome of a pedagogy that adopts the suggestions advocated by this study and compare it with that of a different instructional approach.

6. Conclusion

This study, mini-scaled as it is, has shed light on the conception and experience of high school students, particularly those who were equipped with higher levels of interest and proficiency in English. Based on the findings of the study concerning topics like motivation, conversation context, conversation barriers, perceived construct of conversational competence, and knowledge and performance of English conversation, a number of pedagogical implications can be drawn. First,

pragmatic-communicative motivations commonly held by high school learners need be acknowledged and personalized to be better capitalized. Second, dialogues practiced in class should contain both social (interactional) and nonsocial (transactional) contexts and be situated in ESL as well as EFL environment. Third, high school learners' affects and mentality regarding engagement in English conversation need be ascertained and dealt actively and explicitly to dissipate their unwillingness or hesitation to dialogue in English. Fourth, the construct of English conversational competence, which foregrounds many of the pedagogical decisions, should be expanded to include, in addition to the grammatical and sociolinguistic components, the discourse and strategic components. The most important message this study, from its outset to its completion, intends to convey is perhaps a paradoxical truth about teaching of conversation: To adequately prepare learners for an oral activity that is as mundane, casual, and spontaneous as conversation (in whatever language) calls for instruction that is professional, systematic, and contrived. Hopefully this study has made some contribution to and will generate more dialogue about conversation instruction in the field of second/foreign language research and teaching.

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[Received 23 February 2001;
revision received 2 May 2001;
accepted 17 May 2001]

APPENDIX

為能針對同學的需求及疑問來安排研習營中的英語會話課程，煩請撥冗回答下列問題。每個問題沒有所謂的「正確答案」，請就你個人的想法及經驗，盡可能地詳細回答（可用中文），謝謝你的合作。

師大英語系 常紹如老師 敬啓

年級：____ 一升二，____ 二升三，____ 高中畢業 性別：____ 男，____ 女
在校英文成績：____ 90 以上(含 90)，____ 89 - 80，____ 79 - 70，____ 69 - 60，
____ 60 以下
修習英文年限：____ 年

1. 你覺得英語會話能力重要嗎？你想加強自己在這方面的能力嗎？為什麼想不想？

2. 你對自己英語會話能力的評估(例如「能力佳」「能力尚可」「能力差」，並請說明為何如此評估，如陳述「好在那裡」、「差在那裡」、「那些地方差強人意」等)。

3. 能夠和外籍人士用英語進行對話，個人所需具備的條件或能力有那些？

4. 你可以想見自己在何種情況或目的下，用英語和他人對話？

5. 有那些原因會讓自己在有英語會話的機會時，裹足不前？

6. 若有機會上英語會話課，你希望自己能在那些方面有所斬獲？

7. 在你所就讀的學校，自己是否有機會接觸英語會話課程？是何種形式的課程安排(例如上英語課時老師順帶教授，有專門的英語會話課程，有英語會話的社團，或其他形式[請描述])？此會話課所使用的教材(如書名)及內容為何？多以何種教學活動進行？你覺得自己在該課上的學習效果如何？請解釋為何效果不錯或不彰的原因。

8. 在你和他人用英語對話的經驗中，曾遭遇到什麼樣的困難？ 你如何處理？
9. 就你對英語會話的認識與瞭解，英語會話在結構上有那些特色？在過程中可能運用到那些技巧？
10. 依照下列情況，編寫一段完整的英語會話。
- 1) 暑假結束返校上課第一天，你和班上一位同學間的對話。
 - 2) 研習營下課時，你和坐在你身旁一位初次謀面的學員之間的對話。
- (請在背面繼續書寫。)