

Conversation Strategies: Pair and Group Activities for Developing Communicative Competence

Book Information: David Kehe and Peggy Dustin Kehe.

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JALT readers interested in developing student' spoken English will find *Conversation Strategies* very useful. The contents of the book haven't changed much since the first edition and yet it is still a very relevant text for developing conversational ability. It is designed to develop students strategic competence, defined as how to cope in an authentic communicative situation and how to keep the channel of communication open (Canale and Swan, as cited in Hedge, 2000, p. 52). It provides students with the opportunity to practice turn taking and repairing breakdowns in communication. Many textbooks even now overlook the value of strategic competence and few seem to teach it as well as this book does.

Conversation Strategies consists of 26 didactic lessons and three review units. Each lesson follows the same basic plan modeled on the PPP (presentation, practice, and production) format and is based on a functional strategy. Some of these strategies are correcting someone, reconfirming, interruptions, clarification, and keeping or killing a conversation. In the Presentation stage of each lesson the teacher is given a short speech to present to the students. The speech is at the back of the student book and students can refer to it at anytime. Unfortunately it is only provided in English; there is no Japanese translation. However there is a cartoon caption at the beginning of each chapter which provides a visual context of the target language.

During the Practice and Production stages of the lesson, students are first given gap-fill exercises to do individually, which help to further solidify the context of the target language. The individual gap fills also give the teacher a chance to check understanding. Next the students are given a number of controlled task-based drills to finish in pairs. Student A reads a sentence and Student B chooses a response. This is usually done in pairs but sometimes groups of three are used. These controlled drills further reinforce the linguistic context of the language focus of each lesson. Finally, the students are given a

less controlled information gap activity. These activities are nearly all designed for pairs or groups of three. This makes the lessons highly communicative and extremely student centered.

I tried the text several times with four different groups of low-intermediate to high-intermediate 1st- and 2nd-year university classes. Each class had 18 to 33 students and was 90 minutes long. Students' reactions to the text were almost all positive. They felt the class was enjoyable, the target language useful, and liked the way they could speak with other students in English. Nearly all felt they would like to do more of the same kind of activities and most felt the text was just right for their level of English. Smaller classes were able to finish a lesson in 60 minutes while the larger classes needed the full 90 minutes for one lesson. I concluded the book worked well for intermediate learners and is suited to 60-minute classes.

Conversation Strategies has a very plain appearance, quite different to many contemporary glossy textbooks. The target language seems surprisingly simple, the pictures are in black and white and the format of each lesson is extremely basic and repetitive. However, what first appeared as negative factors are in fact positive points. Though the entire book is black and white and the drawings were plain, I felt this helped keep the learners focused on their job rather than being distracted by glossy photos and peripheral images. In addition, the language is so simple that it's often not taught in many current ELT texts or syllabi. Indeed many students informed me after class that these short phrases were valuable and had previously been unknown to them. The simple layout means there is almost no preparation time for the teacher. This makes Conversation Strategies extremely versatile. It can be easily adapted to an existing syllabus and works well as supplementary material. The exercises would work particularly well in preparing students for broader topic-based discussions and teachers involved in this kind of curricula will appreciate the value of this book.

Reference Hedge, T. (2000). *Teaching and learning in the language classroom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Reviewed by Michael O'Connell

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