

ISSUES AND TECHNIQUES FOR USING DIALOGS IN TESOL

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ABSTRACT

A common feature of English language learning textbooks is the inclusion of pre-scripted simulated dialogs to introduce and model new language. Despite the drawbacks of simulated dialogs, in that they do not exactly replicate the features real interactions, they continue to be a recurring component of many mass-market ESL/EFL textbooks. Many textbooks feature an example dialog on the first page of each unit as a way of setting the context of the communication and showing how new vocabulary and expressions are used within interactions. Considering this prevalence, this paper looks at issues surrounding dialogs, the differences of authentic and simulated dialogs, using dialogs for listening and speaking skills, common scaffolding steps with dialogs, and finally some less conventional activities and techniques that teachers can use in lessons that contain dialogs.

KEYWORDS: TESOL, dialogs, dialogues, textbook activities, modeling, scaffolding, controlled practice

1. INTRODUCTION

All communication is a dialog between several parties. Whether this is for social cohesion, sharing information, or transactional purposes, language is used to convey messages to others. Even one-sided communication, such as a speech or an announcement, takes into account the audience, and so presumptions about who the audience are and what they need to know influences the content and delivery. A large part of our daily communication is spoken interactions between two or more people, and so example dialogs have become a common feature of textbooks, listening resources, and materials within the TESOL field.

The use of dialogs in TESOL really expanded with the audiolingual approach of the 1950s and 1960s (Blibrough, 2007). Written dialogs were (and still are in many cases) used to display aspects of form and structure. As the communicative approach gained in popularity, dialogs became more mutable and less form-focused. Textbooks and materials put more onus on flexibility and the learner. Hence, written pre-scripted dialogs, when used, became a scaffolding step for role-plays and information gap activities rather than the focal point of the lesson.

A range of dialog styles can be found in TESOL materials. Example dialogs can be a record of a real interaction, for example a video or a transcript from an interview. A simulated dialog is a type of dialog that has been developed by textbook writers or the teacher. A simulated dialog may be created in order

to highlight and practice a specific language point such as a grammar item or a language function. In TESOL materials and textbooks, it appears that simulated dialogs are the most common due to TESOL materials being graded by level and organized by language focus.

The features of real and simulated dialogs can differ. Although dialogs have always had the issue of artificiality vs. authenticity, the use of corpora has improved some of the natural aspects of dialogs developed for TESOL materials. However, for lower-level learners, dialogs may still display artificial features. Furthermore, transcripts of real dialogs would contain all of the features of real spoken interactions, such as false starts and repetitions, which may not provide the best models for controlled speaking practice.

There is also the perspective that dialogs are what happen in the classroom between the teacher and the learners. While I would not argue against this wider scope of the definition of dialogs, this paper will look primarily at pre-scripted dialogs that are common in textbooks and TESOL materials. While it was stated at the beginning of this section that all communication is effectively a dialog between parties, simulated pre-scripted dialogs are the most common to be found in EFL/ESL materials, so it is useful for teachers to have a good understanding and a range of ideas and techniques for their usage. For this reason and the sake of brevity, this paper will limit the focus to simulated pre-scripted dialogs.

2. WHY USE DIALOGS?

As Nolasco & Arthur (2003) note, true communicative competence is likely achieved through natural interaction outside of the classroom, however there is a case to be made for using controlled speaking activities to scaffold students' oral communication skills (Alwahibee, 2019). Dialogs are commonly used for introducing, highlighting, and providing controlled practice of new language for students. As Thornbury (2008) states, introducing a dialog into a lesson allows for a change from a teacher-lead classroom into more student-focused practice.

Dialogs can be used to simulate the common interactions that occur in everyday situations. The characters in the dialog can provide roles for learners to practice these common contexts in the classroom. Roles may include occupations, such as taxi driver, restaurant server, hotel staff, or a doctor. Use of a dialog with occupational roles allows students to easily inhabit these occupations to practice both sides of these transactional interactions. Roles could also be more social, such as a student starting a first day of class, making weekend plans with friends, or apologizing to a friend. In these cases, the dialog allows a non-personal and non-threatening opportunity to inhabit these social interactions.

Dialogs can also allow for the practice of various registers in the classroom with the same set of students comfortably switching between formal and informal speech patterns in a way that might seem unnatural without the use of dialogs. The context provided by the dialog setting provides an easy and convenient opening into new scenes and situations.

3. AUTHENTIC VS. SIMULATED DIALOGS

As discussed in the introduction section, authentic dialogs could include a video recording or a transcript of real-world interaction. A key factor of authentic dialogs is that they have not been produced specifically for educational purposes. A simulated dialog has been especially created for the purposes of education, often to highlight a specific language form, function, or a set of new expressions. Dialogs can also include features that place them on a cline within these extremes, for example a simulated dialog written with natural-sounding features. Authentic and simulated dialogs each have positive and negative elements in terms of content and usage, which are detailed below.

Despite a trending shift towards using more authentic texts and materials, dialogs used in TESOL materials often remain as unnatural and overly simplified in comparison to real everyday interactions (Nguyen, Tsukima & Lin, 2014). They also feature language and interactions which are quite different from native English speaker discourse (Yu, 2005). As a critique in teacher training courses that I teach, I have played dialog recordings from textbook CDs and asked the class participants to reflect on whether it sounds like a real and natural interaction. When dialogs are analyzed from this perspective, they often fall short of the features that we would find in everyday interactions. Spoken language in everyday life contains features such as false starts, hesitations, repetitions, and incomplete utterances. As noted in Thornbury (2005), spoken discourse will often feature filler expressions such as you know, well, oh, and mmm, as well expressions of vagueness such as sort of, ...or something, ... and stuff. Furthermore, we often use connecting words to help with cohesion at the start of sentences, such as and, but and because, which would be incorrect if transcribed and checked for grammar accuracy. This is not to say that dialogs should feature these characteristics of real interactions. Indeed, simulated dialogs function as a kind of perfected example of spoken discourse without these errors and fillers.

Having stated that, simulated dialogs can appear clunky and mechanical in other ways. In real interactions, we often answer questions with an abbreviated or seemingly disconnected response. However, simulated dialogs often feature the use of full sentences in both questions and answers. Real communication uses referential pronouns to refer back to previous nouns, however simulated dialogs may continue using the noun for clarity. Furthermore, the intonation can seem unnatural and forced in recorded dialogs, due to them being recorded by voice actors. Despite these drawbacks, simulated dialogs are commonly used to model various interactions and contexts, while the usage within the classroom implies that they are an imitation of real-world interactions.

3.1 LIMITATIONS OF USING SIMULATED DIALOGS

Although simulated dialogs are a common feature of TESOL textbooks, there are some limitations that should be understood in their usage. Much like graded readers for literacy development, the language is often simplified and aimed at a specific level of language learner. This has both positive and negative consequences. An advantage is that this provides comprehensible scaffolding and controlled practice

of language at a suitable level for the learner. A disadvantage is that it deprives the learner of exposure to real interaction and spoken discourse.

In my opinion, dialogs should be treated like any other non-authentic pedagogical material. They are suitable for scaffolding, especially for lower-level language learners. However, as learners progress, there should be a greater balance of authentic materials, such as blog posts, TV shows, documentaries, restaurants reviews, and so on. As learners' approach advanced level, dialogs can be attained from authentic sources, such as video recordings of celebrity interviews, so that they contain realistic and natural features of spoken discourse.

4. HOW TO USE DIALOGS

Specific dialog activities and techniques for teaching listening, speaking and grammar will be discussed in a later part of this paper. This section will cover general suggestions taken from various sources relating to the general and common usage of dialogs in the classroom.

Rigg (1976) describes a sequence for using dialogs in the classroom. Interestingly, this sequence does not allow students to read the dialog until they have memorized the dialog. To allow for comprehension, students are given the chance to listen to the dialog several times before moving on to production. Then, the students repeat short segments after the teacher. This is done as a whole class and then with parts of the class. Following this, the teacher and a chosen student take different roles and read the dialog, starting with more proficient students. By this point, students may have memorized most of the dialog and so students are put into pairs for practice while the teacher monitors. It is only at this point that students are given the dialog text to read. Rigg suggests this sequence due to first language pronunciation interference and literacy issues with low-level English learners.

Thornbury (2008) describes another typical sequence for using a dialog. Thornbury suggests using a volunteer student along with the teacher to take roles from the dialog and perform in front of the class. Another student can be selected and roles switched to allow the teacher to model the pronunciation and intonation of the whole dialog while also having students involved and the rest of the class listening. This can then lead to open pair work, which means two students performing the dialog in front of the class. This works as a transition towards closed pair work, which is when pairs of students practice the dialog amongst themselves as the teacher monitors for guidance and correction. Finally, there can be a performance stage when selected pairs perform the dialog in front of the class.

Both Rigg and Thornbury describe a logical sequence that involves scaffolding and sequencing to help students achieve mastery of the new language. It is likely that most teachers organize the steps of dialog usage in a way similar to this as it logically moves more responsibility from the teacher to the students. Rigg focuses more on listening skills and memorization in the beginning parts of the sequence, whereas the sequence described by Thornbury puts more focus on reaching the performance

stage at the end of the sequence. These differences could be related to the general ability of the students that the sequence is designed for, as Rigg describes the teaching of low-level learners.

While the sequences included here illustrate common ways of using dialogs in the classroom, a later section in this paper will present some more varied techniques and activities that can be incorporated with dialog usage.

4.1 DIALOGS FOR LISTENING

“Input before output” is a common adage within language education training, and rightly so. We need to hear or read new language first in order to incorporate it into our interlanguage and gradually assimilate it fully. Textbooks and activity books which are sequenced according to learner progression will often start with language input such as a recording, a text or teacher talk. Dialogs are one of the common types of language input. Indeed, the majority of textbooks will have a dialog combined with listening activities on the first page of each unit, often followed by vocabulary examples, speaking, and then perhaps reading and writing.

Example dialogs used for listening can provide a way of setting the context of communication. The context may relate to a place, such as a restaurant or bank. It may relate to the speakers, such as family members or business partners. It may relate to register, such as formal or informal. Furthermore, context can relate to the situation and language function, such as making a complaint or apologizing. Used as input, dialogs allow for an introduction of these aspects in a way that is interconnected and meaningful.

Another less common use for dialogs is providing a model of language for communication to be used in the classroom, rather than mainly for out-of-class communication. For example, a dialog could provide a model for a debate or discussion that will be completed as part of the lesson. This may have the ultimate objective of improving general language ability, however the immediate objective is to prepare learners for a class activity.

4.2 DIALOGS FOR SPEAKING

Dialogs provide an opportunity to find and practice adjacency pairs in spoken discourse. Adjacency pairs are two utterances spoken successively by different speakers in which the second utterance is related to the first utterance. Some examples of these are Greeting-Greeting, Call-Answer, Question-Answer (Nolasco & Arthur, 2003). Here are some examples:

Greeting-Greeting

A: Hello!

B: Hi!

Call-Answer

A: Dinner's ready!

B: Coming!

Question-Answer

A: Is this yours?

B: No.

As you can see from these examples, the second utterance is prompted by the first and there is a certain amount of predictability, both in terms of the type of utterance that comes second and the words or expression that may be used. Even if the response is changed, it is unlikely to change the type of adjacency pair. In some cases, the second utterance would change the type of adjacency pair. As noted by Nolasco & Arthur (2003), a complaint may lead to an apology or a justification. Any of these first utterances may lead to a clarification request.

5. DIALOG ACTIVITIES

This section will include several activities that can be utilized in a range of teaching contexts. These activities extend beyond the basic scaffolded use of dialogs discussed in section 4 of this paper. The activities included here offer a range of skills work and focus on varied aspects of dialogs.

5.1 TEXT CODING

Text coding is a simple and flexible technique that can be used with any level of student to teach and focus on many aspects of vocabulary, grammar, comprehension, pronunciation, and more. This technique emerged from literacy teaching, but it is equally useful in listening practice and with written dialogs. In literacy teaching, the symbols used in text coding are often related to reading strategies such as connect, predict, infer, question, and evaluate. However, these strategies are equally applicable to practicing listening skills.

Essentially, text coding involves the use of pre-planned symbols to mark parts of a text in order to show understanding and record features of various aspects of the text. The symbols are usually added to the text above a word or expression, perhaps also with underlining of words to highlight a specific part. Text coding can be done before, during or after listening to a dialog. The symbols can be prepared and planned by the teacher, or the students can create and share their own symbols to apply to the text. There are no set rules with text coding, and so each class and context can develop an exclusive set of codes depending on the objectives and needs of the students. Along with the codes, students can add notes and questions in their native language or English depending on their level. As with many techniques, the teacher may have to model and provide examples several times to help students understand the process before asking them to do the text coding.

Here are some common text codes used in literacy teaching. Note that these are not fixed and there are many variations of these common symbols.

√= I agree or I know this

✗= I disagree or I didn't know this

★= This is a key point or important

? = I have a question about this

! = This is new or surprising

☺ = This makes me happy

☹ = This makes me sad

P = Prediction

C = Connection

To illustrate the use of text coding, below are a few examples with these existing codes and newly created codes. Here is a dialog taken from a textbook for young learners, English Bus 6, Unit 1.

A: Can you come to my house today?

B: What day is it today?

A: It's Thursday.

B: Thursday?

A: Sorry, I can't. I have guitar class.

B: What about Saturday?

A: That sounds good.

With this dialog we could use the happy and sad text codes to show parts of the dialog that are joyful and unfortunate. Here is an example:

A: Can you come to my house today?

B: What day is it today?

A: It's Thursday.

B: Thursday?



A: Sorry, I can't. I have guitar class.

B: What about Saturday?



A: That sounds good.

A: Sorry, I can't. I have guitar class.

B: What about Saturday?

A: That sounds good.

Text coding also works with texts for intermediate and advanced level learners. Again, the code can be created by the teacher or the learner specifically to match the context of the text. The following dialog is taken from Speak Now 3, Unit 7. The conversation takes place in a hotel with a guest calling reception to let them know about some problems with the hotel room. The dialog contain several problems and solutions, and so this code has been created:

P = Problem

S = Solution

Here is the dialog after text coding. The problems and solutions have also been numbered.

Hotel clerk: Front desk. How can I help you?

Guest: Hi, I just checked in. There are some problems with my room.

Hotel clerk: Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. What are the problems?

P1

Guest: Well, first the bedside lamp isn't working at all.

S1

Hotel clerk: It may need a new lightbulb.

P2

Guest: That's what I thought. And the faucet in the bathroom is leaking.

S2

Hotel clerk: OK. I'll get someone to come and look at it right away.

P3

Guest: Thank you. And one more thing. There are no towels in the bathroom.

S3

Hotel clerk: I'll ask housekeeping to send some right now.

Guest: Great. I really appreciate it.

Hotel clerk: Thank you for your patience.

Text coding is a flexible teaching strategy that can be used in many ways with students from beginner to advanced level. The codes can focus on comprehension and meaning, or other aspects such as pronunciation. Once the class understands the basic premise of text coding, it becomes easier to introduce new codes. These new codes can be added to a database of codes that the class can revisit as new dialogs are introduced in the course materials.

5.2 RUNNING DICTATION

This is an active game generally suitable for elementary to young-adult students who are beginner to lower-intermediate level. This game includes all language skills from listening to writing and it involves memorizing language. There are no special materials needed for this game, it is a competitive team game, and the length and difficulty of the game varies depending on the text. It can be played with any text, such as a story, but here it will be described using a written dialog.

For this game, we need one or several dialogs that are approximately the same length. The easiest option in many circumstances would be to use the textbook. This could be done as a review game using dialogs from units that have previously been covered. The teacher places the dialog text or texts at the far end of the room or perhaps in the hallway. Students in pairs decide who will be the writer and who will be the runner. The writer will stay in their chair with a paper and pen/pencil. The runner must go to the dialog texts, read and remember a portion of it, and then return to the writer to relay the information. The writer listens and writes down the text from the runner. This continues until the runner has relayed to whole text to the writer. The team that completes this first is the winner, although it's good to let all teams complete the task until stopping the game. After completing the game, the teams can read the whole dialog to the class to check for accuracy.

Having done this activity with many groups of language learners and language teachers, I have found that this game is fun, fast-paced, motivating, and thoroughly involves everyone's attention. It encourages all language skills from reading and speaking by the runner, to the writer listening and writing. It also encourages memorization of the language. However, keep in mind that this activity does not involve or include meaning and context, so the lesson would need other steps and activities (such as text coding) to focus on these areas of the language.

5.3 MODIFICATION

A pre-scripted dialog may become repetitive after a few practice sessions and so adding some variation to the practice may help to keep it fresh and keep the students involved. Bilbrough (2007) suggests a variety of modifications that can be made to dialogs.

- Change the audience (perform the dialog to different pairs or groups)
- Change the style (perform the dialog so that it is whispered or shouted, or as if they are very tired, or very old etc.)

- Change the context (perform the dialog whilst walking down the street, eating breakfast or passing a ball to each other etc.)
- Increase the challenge (try to perform the dialog without looking at the text, or very quickly, or without looking at each other etc.)
- Modify the contents (perform the dialog with one or two changes in the lines)
- Expand out (perform the dialog to include a few lines that came before or after it)

There is a wealth of possibilities here using this list as a starting point for ideas. The first option “changing the audience” reminds me of the classroom organisation technique that takes a cue from speed dating. In speed dating, participants sit in concentric circles with an outer and inner rim. Pairs meet for a short amount of time to have a conversation, and then when the allotted time is completed one of the concentric circles switches to the next partners. This is done until the circle has rotated through all of the partners. This technique has been used successfully in language classes to maximize the amount of partners and vary the interactions. This technique could be used with dialogs to give multiple practice opportunities, perhaps also varying one other factor from the list above such as “modify the contents” or “increase the challenge.” Each pair could have slightly different instructions so that each practice session is distinct.

Another suggestion from the list above that provides a lot of potential is “expand out.” A dialog is a snapshot of an interaction, but there is a lot of possible context around the dialog that is missing. After becoming familiar with the dialog, student groups can discuss what lead up to the dialog or the next scene. Short dialogs often do not provide the whole story, so there is a a lot of potential to add to the story and expand the narrative. New characters can be introduced, information can be relayed to new interlocutors, solutions can be found, and issues resolved. This can also work with “change the style” or “change the context” with new characters and settings.

A further modification to a dialog could be to use it for practicing communication break downs and clarification requests. This is a useful communication strategy for language learners. Bleistein, Smith & Lewis (2013) list strategies for when successful communication fails. These include:

- Ask the meaning of a word
- Ask if your understanding is right
- Ask the speaker to repeat or slow down
- Guess
- Use facial expression to show confusion
- Give an example
- Use non-verbal cues to express meaning

Each of these could be practiced with example dialogs to give learners strategies to use in real situations. Examples of expressions and questions needed could be suggested by the class together and

then practiced in small groups to equip students with this skill for when communication inevitably breaks down.

Whichever modifications are chosen, the teacher should be aware of the language level and ability of the learners. Modifications can range from limited and simple to creating whole new scenes and situations. This technique can be introduced slowly until learners become familiar with the options and possibilities. Imagination and creativity can go a long way with these modifications.

5.4 COMIC STRIPS

Comic strips are a useful, but often under-utilized, material for TESOL. They are familiar, being common outside of the classroom context, and they are suitable for all ages. They are also visually rich, showing a sequence of events in a way that is easily understandable, and they are appealing for visual learners. Comic strips can be used in conjunction with dialogs to show, support, create and explore meanings, options, possibilities and outcomes. There are various ways of integrating comic strips into lessons which utilize dialogs. Several ideas are discussed in this section.

As part of the introduction and modelling stage of a lesson, comic strips can be used for introducing the context of interaction. This could be done by only pictures or a series of pictures without any written language included in the comic strip. They can also be used for eliciting or predicting information such as who are the interlocutors, where the interaction takes place, and any vocabulary or expressions that students may know that could work in this context. Since comic strips are primarily visual, they can support understanding without the need of explicit language focus in these initial stages of a lesson. This could help to activate background knowledge and provide an understanding of the context in which the communication takes place. Depending on the students, other techniques and materials such as TPR (Total Physical Response) or word banks could be used at this point.

Comic strips can also be used in the practice stage of dialog use. Students can create or be provided with a comic strip that matches the dialog for the course materials. There is a website called Make Beliefs Comix (www.makebeliefscomix.com) that has a comic strip creator that works in the browser. There are many options for characters, speech bubbles, backgrounds and other drawn items that can be placed within blank comic strip panels. All of the editing is done easily within the browser and results can be downloaded as an image file or sent by email. This is an interesting interactive tool to make dialogs into visual media.

Finally, comic strips can be used with the concept of “expanding out” (Bilbrough, 2007) discussed in the previous section. In this activity, learners are put into groups and asked to imagine what happened before and after the scene from a textbook dialog. Comic strips can be used to plan and illustrate these scenes so that groups can develop their ideas, perhaps with a final performance stage as an objective.

6. CONCLUSION

Pre-scripted simulated dialogs continue to be a common feature of EFL/ESL textbooks and English language course materials. Despite their drawbacks in terms of replicating the features of everyday interactions, they can be useful in providing a language model and controlled practice, especially for lower-level learners. Considering how commonplace they are, it is useful that teachers are equipped with a range of ideas, techniques and materials to expand the use of dialogs beyond the standard scaffolding sequences. The ideas in this paper include text coding, running dictation, modification, and comic strips. It is hoped that this range of suggestions provides some new insight into options available for the use of dialogs in language teaching.

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