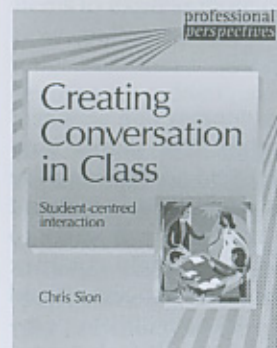


Creating Conversation in Class

Student-centred interaction

Chris Sion

Delta Publishing and ETp 2001



This fifth title in the *Professional Perspectives* series of practical methodology resource-books consists of innovative ideas and original classroom materials to build students' confidence and get them talking in the classroom.

The philosophy

The first fifteen pages in this 95-page book deal with the author's views on The Art of Conversation and provide sensible advice. They are obviously written by an experienced practitioner. This is followed by 'Using this Book', with ten informative tips, which will probably serve as a timely reminder to many. For example, twenty ways of organising pairs of learners. Also provided are tips on tailoring activities to suit individual classes as well as ideas on starting and ending the lesson. Most space in this section is devoted to classroom instructions on task time and pace.

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The author also suggests the teacher observes a little silence to give time for listeners to formulate their responses. In the excitement of trying to achieve a task, many teachers perhaps forget that they are not quite conversing with people of a similar linguistic level.

Aims

Although the overall aim is to motivate adults who are unsure orally, the material will doubtless stimulate other users who may have the initial confidence but still need more opportunity. The tasks are clearly designed to contrast with controlled coursebook activities, such as role-plays which, while they may have clear objectives, sometimes stimulate little interaction because of poorly-contrived or inauthentic material. The aim is also, adds Chris Sion in his foreword, to get students talking about things that interest them instead of what the coursebook unit tells them to discuss.

Contents

The detailed and informative contents section indicates at which level users of a task may need to be. Also stated are the function of tasks, such as Narrating and Describing, Asking and Answering or Comparing. Tasks are designed to enable lessons to consist of whole or part discussion, although I suspect most would last at least thirty minutes. The topics of activities within suggest a book intended for classroom use by adults, and mature learners in high schools. They mostly seem best suited to users at intermediate level. As is the case with all good resource books, with a little thought most can easily be adapted to a variety of classroom situations.

Sections

This title sets out to develop oral skills through 'seemingly inconsequential moments and ideas' (page 1). This should not deter users. The progression of tasks throughout is in no way haphazard and shows a clear,

logical development in terms of classroom thinking. Opening with three separate sections totalling sixty ways to start a lesson and aptly titled Getting Started, it moves onto sections on Breaking the Ice and then Talking to Each Other, before moving on to tasks that involve more personal details, such as Talking about People and Focusing on the Family. The final section is devoted to Playing Games, the aim of which is to have the learner engage in less structured language activity.

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Tasks

Individual tasks require minimal preparation and are generally spread over two full pages, one outlining short, clear stages for the teacher to follow, the other a photocopiable handout which, in the absence of a photocopier, could be either dictated or drawn on the board for learners to copy. Several tasks, quite naturally, require initial input from the teacher but occasionally suggest an over-emphasis on teacher-talking time. Such talk should not be underestimated, though, as learners frequently find comfort from it in a potentially threatening situation. Although most tasks proved a huge success with my own groups, one particular favourite was Prizes in section four. In this, individuals are asked to award a suitably encouraging prize to another member of the group, such as one for extreme punctuality, generosity or friendliness. They are then asked to present the prize, which might be either imaginary or in the form of realia, by explaining their reasons in as much detail as they think necessary. The follow-up activity, during which the group were asked to outline which prizes they would award

themselves, and why, proved particularly productive and also extremely enlightening!

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Learner-training

One of the interesting features of this book is its clear emphasis on learner-training, dealt with rather extensively at the end of each of the first five sections. The two-page focus usually consists of two 15-30 minute tasks. One focuses on mnemonics (memory aids), another on learning to transfer skills from one successful activity to the area of language learning. Other sections deal with turning negatives into positives, learning to revise, recycling language outside the classroom and dealing with exam anxiety and stress.

Creating Conversation in Class provides teachers of even little classroom experience with a valuable means of enlivening classes that may have grown stale on a diet of grammar analysis and coursebook rigidity. With just a little energy on the teacher's part, learners working with the material in this book should soon become confidently fluent.

Wayne Trotman

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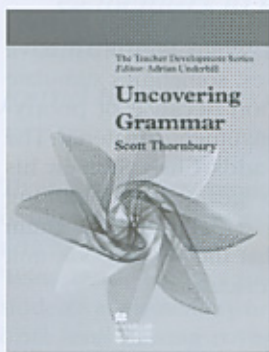
Wayne Trotman is a language teacher at The Institute of Technology, in Izmir, Turkey. He is also an approved UCLES CELTA tutor.

Background books

Uncovering Grammar

Scott Thornbury

Macmillan 2001



Uncovering Grammar is a new volume in the Macmillan *Teacher Development Series*. It offers a practical discussion of the process of grammar development in English as a Subsequent Language (ESL) and suggests various techniques to foster this development.

Uncovering Grammar is organised into two parts. Part 1, the first two-thirds of the volume, lays out the theoretical and practical background underlying the author's approach to grammar learning and teaching. Part 2 contains some practical activities intended to help teachers implement the ideas presented in Part 1, and may be reproduced for classroom use.

Part 1 of *Uncovering Grammar* consists of five chapters in which the author draws on research in first and second language acquisition, grammar learning and teaching, to support the view that grammar is not a static list of items that can be taught – and learned – one at a time. The notion of grammar as a gradual process is underlined by the use of expressions

like 'emergent', 'uncovering grammar' and 'grammaring'. The author suggests that teachers should recognise the process of grammar development as one that evolves over time to accommodate increasingly complex communication. This process should be supported with appropriate pedagogical materials and techniques. Drawing on research in children's first language development, Thornbury argues that early language production requires few grammatical markers because it concentrates on the 'here and now'. As young children's language development progresses, they master an increasing range of grammatical markers, which enables them to express more complex relationships in time, space, social distance and with reference to hypothetical situations. He supports the argument that language professionals should view subsequent language learning in a similar manner, i.e. in the initial stages, learners should focus on language contexts that require few grammatical markers. As they gain confidence in using their subsequent language, they gradually tackle more complex contexts. The teacher's role is to facilitate the progression towards tasks that require more explicit grammatical means for clear communication through mediation of interaction, which should include input, output and feedback.

In his advocacy of a process approach to grammar learning and teaching, the author highlights the need to strive for a balance between fluency and accuracy, as well as the importance of two other concepts that are frequently discussed in the language acquisition literature: 'noticing' and its relationship to 'consciousness-raising'.