

Vesna Gliha

"ICE BREAKERS" OR HOW TO START UP A CONVERSATION

Today's emphasis in foreign-language teaching on contextualization of all language material and the developing of communicative competence has thrown a new light on the use of the dialogue, as a language-teaching device.

Dialogue, as it has often been pointed out, is a social unit of speech, which involves two speakers and furnishes students with a social context in which to practice the new language. Words and structures to be learned, are best infused with life in the context of the dialogue. In it, information bounces naturally to and fro, from one speaker to another accompanied with the appropriate rhythm and intonation and kinetic actions, thus making the language "come alive".

In the language classroom, a dialogue can fulfill a whole range of functions. It can be used to model grammar and pronunciation patterns, clarify meanings, present cultural insights, or teach stylistic and registral variations of the target-language.

Taking all this into consideration, we may classify dialogues into different types. First, a distinction can be made between structure-based and situation-based dialogues. Another important division of dialogue types has to do with level of proficiency—elementary, intermediate or advanced. A more detailed classification can be based on the fundamental aim or purpose of the dialogue. We know that dialogues are designed to portray natural conversation, but within this framework they can be directed to different aspects of language. They can focus either on a situation, or a grammar point, or a specific word or expression, specific cultural features, or different style levels or registers of the language.

A writer of pedagogic dialogues must keep all this in mind when he decides to write dialogues for the purpose of language-teaching,

The dialogues that follow are situation-based and are not either grammatically or situationally graded. They are tailored to fit into pre-intermediate and intermediate proficiency level, which approximately corresponds to the English Language proficiency level of the average student of the preparatory stage of the reformed secondary school in Croatia.

Since almost all pedagogic dialogues in our English textbooks are written in "everyday" English — the informal, conversational English in current, everyday use, the same speech style was adopted here as well. Yet, within this

stylistic and registral variant a distinction has been made between the colloquial English of older and younger generation of speakers. Slang and "offensive" expressions, though common in the language of teen-agers, have been intentionally avoided, so as not to encourage the students to use them.

All the dialogues here, though, conform to one specific requirement and that is to represent, in as natural a manner as possible, the things a native speaker of English might say in starting up a conversation.

We all find ourselves in situations, regardless of age, when we are with foreigners and want to "break the ice" and open conversation gambits. For example: at a party, during the ride on a bus or train, standing in a queue at airports or railway stations, sitting on a bench in a park etc.

Not once have I been asked by my students a question like this: "What should I say if I liked a girl and wanted to speak to her?" or "How to address a foreigner, who is a complete stranger, and ask him for a favour or direction?", or simply "How to start up a conversation if only for the sake of practicing English?"

Having in mind the age and possible interests of my students, I tried to make the dialogues that would answer their needs. And not only theirs, but also of all those beyond school age who might have the same problem.

The dialogues are arranged in parallel, i. e. they refer to the same situation, have the same number of interchanges, but the characters involved and their age are different. The intention was to show the differences, though sometimes slight because of the restrictions mentioned above, of style levels appropriate to the age of speakers.

What constitutes these differences?

- the choice of vocabulary and expressions
- the choice of "rejoinders" (such as "Really?", "Great", "I see" etc.)
 - pause words ("Well", or "Hmmm")
 - interjections ("Oh", "Gee")

and the frequency with which they appear in speech

- sentence structure
- the use of abbreviations and elisions
- greater or less brevity of the expression in general
- the form of address
- topics of interest
- degree of politeness etc.

What they have in common are the so-called "ice breakers" that are usually in the form of question with a falling intonation which invites a reply, for example:

Do you mind if I . . . ?

Do you like it here?

Isn't this fun?

Nice weather, isn't it?

etc.

1. IN A TRAIN

(A man to a woman)

- A. Let me help you with that bag.
B. Oh no, please don't bother. I can manage all right, thank you.
A. Yet, it seems rather heavy. Won't you let me put it on the rack for you?
B. Thank you, but there's really no need to.
A. (After a pause) Are you going far?
B. No, not really
- (two teen-agers, a boy and a girl)
- A. That knapsack's pretty loaded. I'll put it on the rack.
B. No, that's O. K. I can manage, thanks.
A. Come on. There's no need to wave your Women's Lib flag here.
(After a pause) Well, I didn't really mean it. Let me help you.
B. Don't bother about me. I can look after myself all right
A. As you wish... (pause). It seems you hitch-hike most of the way. It must be great fun.
B. So it is. Much greater than sitting opposite a stranger who's trying to be smart.

2. IN A CAFETERIA — standing one opposite the other

(two men)

- A. Haven't I seen you somewhere before?
B. No, I don't think so.
A. But your face is so familiar... Wait a minute. I know... We were on the same boat to Casablanca last summer.
B. Oh, yes. Now I remember. What a coincidence to meet here!
A. Well, you know what they say- it's a small world.
- (two long-haired music fans)
- A. We have met before, haven't we?
B. Maybe... Wait! Oh, yeah. Beat and blues.
A. Was it Wight or Liverpool?
B. I've never been to Wight. It must be Liverpool then.
A. Oh, it was great. Remember? I've only just come back from Kent. The Wings were absolutely fantastic. Laser is a great stuff.

3. ON A BUS — sitting one next to the other

(two men)

- A. Do you mind if I ask you a question?
B. No, of course not.
A. Where did you get this badge from?
B. Oh, I got it from a guy next door, who does business with China.
A. It's very interesting. May I have a better look at it.
B. Certainly.
- (two boys)
- A. That's a terrific badge, you've got
B. You mean, this one?
A. Yes. I almost broke my neck to get one myself at the last Show.
B. I bet you did. Only a dozen were handed out. James Hunt is really number one.
A. May I see it.
B. Sure.

4. IN A PARK

(two grown-up people)

- A. Nice and bright this morning, isn't it?
B. A big improvement on what we've been having.
- (two young people, one male, one female)
- A. Trying to catch some sun?
B. No wonder. It's been so ghastly over the whole month.

- A. This April has really been awful.
- B. You are quite right. They say it hasn't been like that for the last seven years.
- A. It's supposed to cloud over this afternoon.
- B. As long as it doesn't rain.

- A. It really makes a change, doesn't it?
- B. But not for long. They say we're in for another rainy spell.
- A. How bad.
- B. Let's hope it keeps fine for the weekend at least. We are to meet The Blue Jays on Sunday.

5. AFTER FIRST DAY AT SCHOOL

(a member of a teaching staff to an unknown boy)

- A. Well... What does it feel like, now that you're back at school?
- B. Well, it's a bit hard to start work again. But when you know you can't evade it, it's not so difficult.
- A. It's always like that at the beginning, but then you get used to it.
- B. I guess, you're right.

(one boy to another)

- A. Hi! Did you like it?... Yes, I'm speaking to *you*.
- B. Hmmm... It's hard to say. It's been my first day here.
- A. I've noticed. It's always pretty tough at first, especially if you're a new one. Keep it up, though.
- B. Thanks. I suppose I'll get through it.

6. AT A PARTY

(a famous actor to a young woman)

- A. Oh, how d'you do.
- B. How d'you do.
- A. Do you like it here?
- B. Oh, yes, I think it's marvellous being among all these celebrities mixing around.
- A. Would you like to meet some in particular?
- B. Well, I've been introduced to quite a few of them already.
- A. Obviously, it's pretty hard to recognize some faces off the stage. My name's Peter O'Neill.
- B. Oh, what a surprise! Pleased to meet you Mr O'Neill. My name's Phyllis, Phyllis Prescott. Oh, gosh, how I'm excited.

(a popular pop-star to a teenager fan)

- A. Hi!
- B. Hi!
- A. How goes it?
- B. Great.
- A. Enjoying yourself among this glamour and glitter lot?
- B. It's absolutely fabulous, don't you agree?
- A. Not quite so. Being a big shot is not always fun. My name's Richard, Richard Donaway.
- B. Gee! I'd never've guessed. You look quite different off the stage. I mean without the glasses, and all. How d'you do. My name's Lynn.

7. IN A QUEUE

(two foreigners trying to get a job)

- A. Is this the right queue for domestic workers?
- B. I should think so, yes.
- A. I wonder whether they still have any vacancies for part-timers.
- B. I'm afraid you've left it rather late. A friend of mine told me they're booked.

(two students trying to get a job)

- A. Are we in the right queue for part-time staff?
- B. I believe so, yes.
- A. Perhaps they could fix us up with some kind of job. I'm broke.
- B. Mee, too. It's pretty hard to get anything these days.

8. ADMIRING A VIEW

(from the top of the observation tower)

- A. Wonderful view, isn't it?
- B. Yes, it's breath taking. It's like being at the top of the world.
- A. I suppose you've seen our new Civic Centre in the West End.
- B. Not yet, unfortunately, but I'm certainly going to.

(somewhere in the East End)

- A. Terrific, isn't it?
- B. I don't find anything of the sort about it.
- A. You're probably one of those who like chocolate box views. This is real life.
- B. Right you are. But I still don't like it.

9. WAITING FOR THE SIGHTSEEING BOAT TO START

- A. It's been pretty long now. We should've left 20 minutes ago.
- B. I really can't understand this. They usually leave on time.

- A. I'm going to quit. It's becoming annoying, don't you think so?
- B. What's a quarter or two?
I don't mind waiting. It's fun to look around.

10. IN FRONT OF A SHOP WINDOW

- A. That's a very interesting costume. Don't you think so?
- B. Yes, the cut is perfect and the price is quite reasonable.
- A. You can get anything you need these days.

- A. That's a smashing design. The latest hit, too, isn't it?
- B. I don't like it. It's too aggressive.

Some hints on how to use the dialogues in the classroom

1. Read the dialogue to your students.
2. Conduct a choral repetition drill in which the students repeat the dialogue after you, line by line.
3. After the first repetition drill explain any new words or structure in the dialogue.
4. Practice the dialogue with the class chorally and individually.
5. Split up the class into pairs and let them memorize it.
6. Call on some pairs to act it out.
7. Repeat the same procedure with the parallel dialogue.
8. Discuss the language and stylistic differences in both dialogues.
9. Assign the students to write a dialogue of their own using the "ice breakers" you have prepared (do it in pairs).
10. Ask best pupils (in pairs) to choose a similar situation and write a dialogue of their own. Use this as an alternative with No 9 exercise.
11. Ask each pair in the class to read out their dialogue.
12. Make the pupils write the two most successful ones on the board.
13. Only after this you can proceed with manipulation drills based on the dialogue lines, if you think it necessary.

Since all dialogues can be used effectively in both the communicative & manipulative stages of language learning, there are certainly a lot more ways of how to use them. A resourceful teacher will certainly find the techniques that suit him and his class best. In the meantime, may I wish you success and enjoyment in working with dialogues.