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# voices

**May/June 2022**  
**Issue 286**

# The class conversation vs the conversation class

## Roslyn Young helps her students to develop speaking skills

For me and many others, the starting point of good language teaching is students saying things they want to say. As John Holt (1967, p. 124) put it:

It can't be said too often: we get better at using words, whether hearing, speaking, reading, or writing, under one condition and only one – when we use those words to say something we want to say, to people we want to say it to, for purposes that are our own.

I consider that speaking a language is a skill. It has been known for decades that people learn skills by (1) trying things out; (2) getting feedback on the result; and (3) adjusting the next trial in response to the feedback received. While the traditional conversation class offers some of what is necessary for ideal language learning, it fails because feedback to students is intermittent at best. The aim becomes 'getting the message across', and mistakes become fossilised. I remedy this by using what I call the 'class conversation'. This is whole-class work for students who already have some of the language.

Someone starts off the conversation with something they want to say. And then others respond with whatever comes to them. Crucially, each contribution is corrected by the speaker and the class and made as good as possible at every point before we move on. The thread of the conversation is always maintained, even if the correction process opens up a lengthy period of work on a particular problem, for example, if students have a gap or misconception about some aspect of the language.

## The tools

What makes this different from Community Language Learning or Dogme is that I use two main tools from the Silent Way for correcting and for introducing new words and constructions.

- 1 *Finger correction: excellent for rapid interventions when the problem is more of a slip-up than a misunderstanding*  
Finger correction allows for quick, unobtrusive and pinpointed work



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on grammar (<https://silentway.online/2020/12/28/finger-correction/>).

### 2 *Pointing on wall charts: for more fundamental problems*

I use three different types of wall charts:

- A *phonemic chart*, which allows precise work on pronunciation  
Since pronouncing is a motor skill and skills take time to install, I start the course with a couple of hours dedicated to work on pronouncing. I can then correct the students as we go along without undue disruption to the conversation.
- A *spelling chart*, which shows the exact relationships between spelling and pronunciation
- *Word charts*, which show all the function words in English as well as the usual triggers for the various verb forms.

These charts and their uses are described in more detail in Messum and Young (2021).

I also lay out a visual representation of the verb tense system (Hanson, 1996) which shows all the forms English verbs can take. I have found that very few students know how many forms there are and how to choose between them.

## The ground rules

There are rules for a class conversation.

### For the students

- Be yourself.
- Say what you want to say to whomever you choose.
- Everything you say must be true. (We need this last rule to keep the conversation grounded.)

### For the teacher

- Don't participate in the conversation.
- Your job is to be the source of quality control and linguistic know-how that the students don't yet possess.

Students usually need to learn what a class conversation is. So I seed the first few conversations by giving the students an open question and helping them to take it where it would naturally go if they were speaking in their native language.

## Results

It can take some time for a class to realise that it's up to them what they



Correction is a key aspect of this technique, which works for classes both large and small. Image: wavebreakmedia/Shutterstock

**“ While the traditional conversation class offers some of what is necessary for ideal language learning, it fails because feedback to students is intermittent at best. ”**

talk about, but then it becomes second nature. Here is how some of our class conversations have started:

- 'My second grandchild was born last Tuesday.'
- 'Coming to class this evening, I heard a nightingale.'
- 'During the Christmas holidays, my father died when his house burnt down.'

Whatever anyone says in a class conversation arises out of an urge within

them to speak. And when students cannot say something correctly but genuinely have something to say, their error creates a 'teachable moment': they are poised to notice and integrate the new facet of the language that I introduce to help them express their idea. And everyone else in the class learns by observing and being part of that experience.

I have used this technique with classes of up to 30, and more.

### For more information

In October 2021, I led an experimental four-day workshop in France, where 25 language teachers were introduced to techniques based on the Silent Way approach to language teaching. The result was a series of short films. Here's a link to the site where we present this series of films: <https://silentway.online/cours-de-francais-en-ardeche-2021/>

Here's a link to the films:

<https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLRq-ZwIDOKSWURKh04hIHEsJUp7q9Xm0Gi>

### References

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