

## Introduction

*Hi. Welcome to this book. How are you doing? Do you want a cup of tea while you're reading?*

This is rather an odd way to start a book, especially one which aims to look at the way in which dialogues can be used in language teaching and learning. Of course I cannot really offer you a cup of tea, and I can't even be sure that you drink tea! There may also be issues of register: I have adopted quite an informal style in what I have said to you, and I have no way of telling whether this is appropriate. On the other hand, there is a sense in which entering into dialogue with the people who are going to read this book is a good idea.

I'm assuming that, if you are reading this, then you are somehow involved in the teaching of languages. You are probably a busy teacher and are looking for some practical activities that you can do with your students. You may even be thinking about skipping this introduction and going straight to the sections with the activities. At the same time, you may be wondering about what exactly I mean by dialogue, and whether this book will offer you anything in the way of new ideas.

By anticipating the questions that you may be asking, I am engaging you in a kind of dialogue. It is a bit one-sided, in that I am only imagining what you might want to ask, but of course, if I've got this totally wrong, you will probably have stopped reading already!

All genuine language use, either spoken or written, is essentially dialogic. It exists because of a need to communicate an idea or a feeling to somebody else, and in response to some previous communication – either actual or assumed. As the Russian linguist Mikhail Bakhtin observed, 'Any utterance – the finished, written utterance not excepted – makes response to something that is calculated to be responded to in turn. *It is but one link in a continuous chain of speech performances.*'<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> As quoted in Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World*, London, Routledge, 1991, p. 59.

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Writers need to communicate with readers who they may have never met – and in a way which will have general relevance. Speakers, on the other hand, because they tend to have their listener in front of them, are able to talk in a way that they can modify exactly to suit the person who is listening. It is this form of spoken dialogue, exemplified by the first line, that this book is principally concerned with.

**What exactly do we mean by dialogue?**

Dictionaries define dialogue in three main ways:

- 1 the lines used by characters in drama or fiction
- 2 a conversation between two or more people
- 3 a process of negotiation through speech.

All of these definitions are relevant to the approach to dialogue taken here. Throughout the chapters, there are activities which focus on asking learners to understand, analyse, reproduce, reconstruct, memorise, rehearse, perform, create and communicate lines of dialogue. There are also activities which encourage learners to engage in natural conversation and to negotiate their intended meanings. However, for the purposes of this book, I would like to be more specific about how exactly a dialogue activity may be defined.

- Dialogue is (usually) spoken interaction between (typically) two people, and/or the record of that interaction.
- It may be *pre-scripted* (as in the case of many coursebook dialogues for example, or of play scripts etc.) or it may be *unscripted* (as in the case of improvised dialogues and chat etc).
- It may be *real* (as in naturally occurring talk) or *simulated* (as in the case of film scripts etc. or of classroom dialogues, written to display some particular language point).
- It can be recorded, either as audio or video, or written – or both.
- It may be coursebook-authored, teacher-authored, student-authored or other-authored.
- It may be *form-focused* – i.e. designed to display some feature of grammar or lexis, or some functional exponent; or *meaning-focused*, i.e. intended as a vehicle for information exchange, or both.
- It can be *transactional* – as when someone is asking for information or buying groceries; or it can be *interactional* – as when two friends meet and chat about the weather.

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- It may take the form of student–student or student–teacher or student–other (e.g. a guest to the class).

**A brief history of dialogue in language learning*****Dialogues as a model for real-life interaction***

Towards the end of the sixteenth century, an influx of refugees into Britain meant that there was a sudden need for English teachers and teaching materials which could help to equip these people with the ability to communicate effectively in English. One successful teacher and writer of this time was Jacques Bellot, whose book *Familiar Dialogues*, published in 1586, consisted almost entirely of dialogues of everyday conversations, together with a French translation and a pronunciation guide. It is clear, from the following example, that Bellot wrote the dialogues to include examples of situational language that his students would need in their day-to-day lives.

- The Poulterer: What doe you buye?  
 Ralf: Showe me a coupell of good, and fatte Rabettes.  
 The Poulterer: Here be them, that be very good and fat.  
 Ralf: They be very stale.  
 The Poulterer: Truely, they be very new.  
 Ralf: How sell you them? How much?  
 The Poulterer: Ten pence the couple.  
 Ralf: It is to much, you are to, deare. They be not worth so much. They be worth but a grote.  
 The Poulterer: They be not mine for that price. They coast me more.

Interestingly, the idea of providing learners with short dialogues as models for real-life interaction was also adopted almost four centuries later by A. S. Hornby and others, as the backbone of *the situational approach*. Dialogues like the one below (from *Situational Dialogues* by Michael Ockenden, 1972, p. 48) were intended to be practised and eventually memorised, in order to equip students with the language they needed to function in the host community. Though the language used is significantly closer to the varieties of English used in Britain today, the content of the dialogue is similarly tied to the time at which it was written.

**Asking for change**

- A: Excuse me, but could I trouble you for some change?  
 B: Let me see. Do you want coppers or silver?

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A: I want to make a trunk call.

B: You'd better have silver, then.

**Dialogues as a source of language input**

As well as serving as models of day-to-day talk, dialogues were also being used as contexts in which to present grammar and functional expressions. In the *audiolingual approach* of the 1950s and 1960s, based on the principles of *behaviourism*, language mastery was seen as the acquisition of good language habits. Central to this approach was the use of specially written dialogues, incorporating the repeated use of a particular structure. This structural approach survived into the 1970s and beyond, and was developed into an 'art form' in the *Streamline* series (Bernard Hartley and Peter Viney, 1978). The example below is from the elementary book *Departures* (the first coursebook I ever used!). Despite being set in a hairdresser's, this dialogue is not transactional, and may have less immediate usefulness to learners as a model for a real-life situation than Bellot's or Ockenden's dialogues. Moreover, since it was contrived in order to display pre-selected grammatical features, it has a rather artificial style. It does, however, provide a humorous and therefore memorable context in which learners can focus on the form and use of *can* to express ability. It also demonstrates a range of vocabulary items which can be used with the structure (*speak French, play football, sew* etc.).

## At the hairdresser's

Jane: . . . Oh yes, my husband's wonderful!

Sally: Really? Is he?

Jane: Yes, he's big, strong and handsome!

Sally: Well, my husband isn't very big, or strong . . . but he's very intelligent.

Jane: Intelligent?

Sally: Yes, he can speak six languages.

Jane: Can he? Which languages can he speak?

Sally: He can speak French, Spanish, Italian, German, Arabic and Japanese.

Jane: Oh! . . . My husband's very athletic.

Sally: Athletic?

Jane: Yes, he can swim, ski, play football, cricket and rugby . . .

Sally: Can he cook?

Jane: Pardon?

Sally: Can your husband cook? My husband can't play sports . . . but he's an excellent cook.

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Jane: Is he?

Sally: Yes, and he can sew, and iron . . . he's a very good husband.

Jane: Really? Is he English?

With the development of a more communicative approach to language teaching, such contrived dialogues fell out of favour. Authenticity became the standard by which language data was judged. Moreover, improved recording and transcribing techniques meant that naturally occurring spoken language could be captured and used for teaching purposes. Carter and McCarthy's *Exploring Spoken English* (1997), for example, consists of transcripts of naturally occurring conversations between native speakers. Reading the scripts, listening to the recordings and working through the notes that follow, help to raise awareness about the typical features of spoken language.

The short extract below (also called *At the hairdresser's*) displays a variety of these features, such as hesitation devices (*ermm* – line 13), binominals (*nice and short* – line 14), discourse markers (*you know* – lines 15 and 24, *like* – line 23 and *so, right, yeah* – line 26), backchannels (*yeah* – line 17), ellipsis (*so wispy there* – line 20), heads (*this back bit do you tend to have that bit clipped?* – line 22), false starts (. . . *I have, I tend to have* . . . – line 23), informal language (*cos* – line 27) and vague language (*kind of* – line 24 and *side-ish* – line 28).

## At the hairdresser's

- 12 (S 01)<sup>2</sup> How much do you want off?  
 13 (S 02) Ermm [ 2 secs] Well I like to keep the top quite long [(S 01)  
 14 yeah] ermm, but I like the back nice and short and the sides  
 15 nice and short. It's just got a bit, you know, a bit grown out of  
 shape  
 16 (S 01) Too heavy  
 17 (S 02) Yeah.  
 18 (S 01) Do you have your sides feathered?  
 19 (S 02) Yeah, yeah.  
 20 (S 01) So wispy there  
 21 (S 02) Yeah.  
 22 (S 01) Now, this back bit do you tend to have that bit clipped?  
 23 (S 02) Yeah, and I have, I tend to have it like graduated at the back,  
 right at

<sup>2</sup> 'S' stands for 'Speaker'.

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- 24 the bottom really short and then kind of graduated up, you know
- 25 not like a line as such, just [(S 01) Right ] graded up
- 26 (S 01) So, right yeah.
- 27 (S 02) And I generally style it, but it's cos it's got so, I generally have like a
- 28 maybe side, side-ish parting

**Dialogue as language practice**

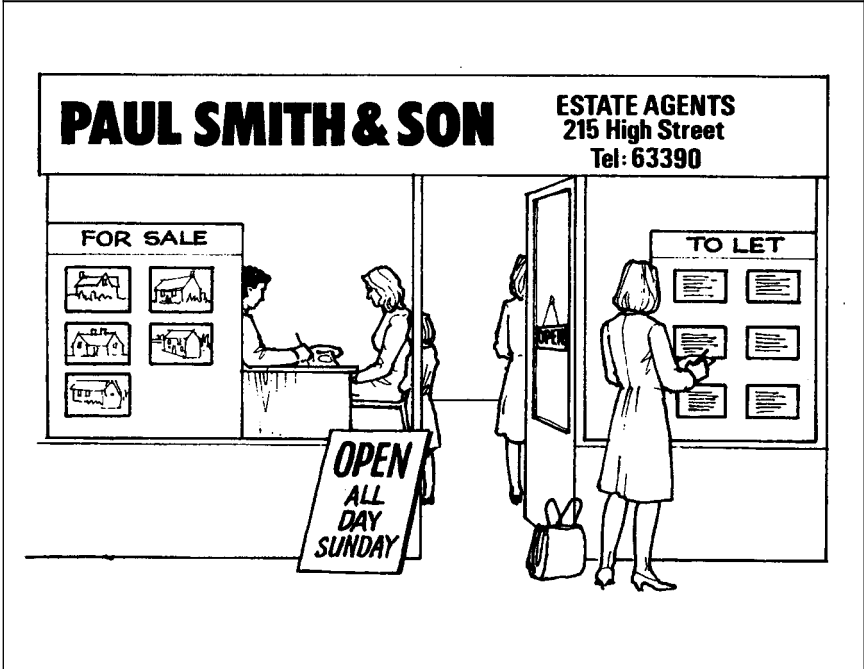
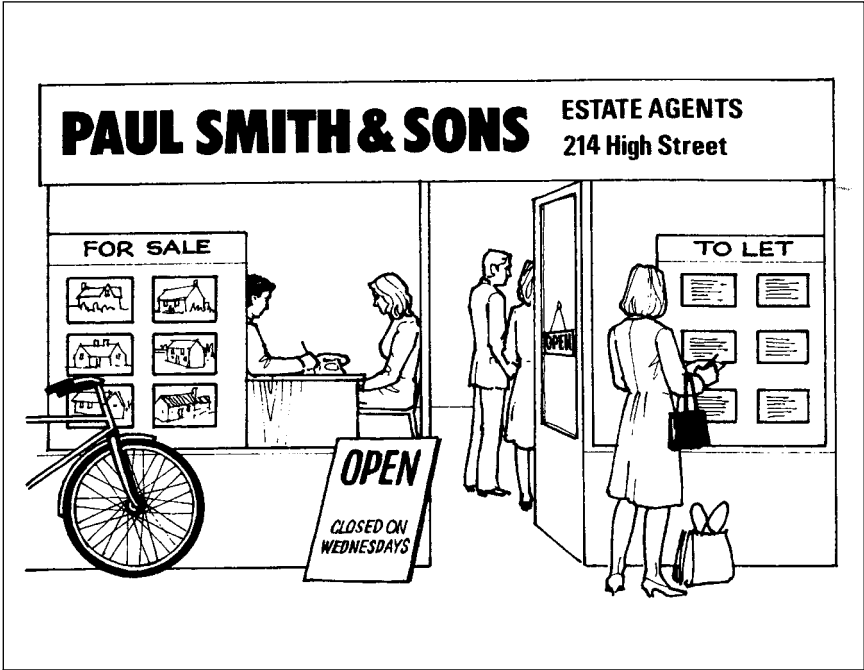
Dialogues have always been used both as sources of input and as a way of structuring language practice (i.e. output). Under audiolingualism this practice function was tightly controlled. The basic procedure for dialogue practice was as follows:

- 1 Students listen to a dialogue containing key structures to be focused on.
- 2 They repeat each line of the dialogue after the recording.
- 3 Certain key words or phrases in the dialogue are changed, and it is practised by the class.
- 4 A range of choral and individual drills are used to practise forming the key structures.

Again, the advent of the communicative approach and the decline of both situational language teaching and audiolingualism heralded an emphasis on using language for real purposes. Activities which promoted fluency (as opposed to purely accuracy) were prioritised, and memorisation and practice of dialogues consequently became less fashionable.

Dialogue now took on a new role in the classroom. As it involves both a message communicator and a message recipient, dialogue provided the natural format in which communicative language use could occur. Communicative activities involving some kind of 'information gap' became very popular. In an information gap activity, information is distributed among students who, in order to complete a task, are compelled to communicate to share this information. 'Spot the differences' is a typical (and still popular) example of such a task. It involves the students working in pairs. Each student is given a picture which they do not show to their partner. The pictures are slightly different from each other, and the students' task is to find out what the differences are, by asking each other questions ('Is the first person wearing a hat?', 'Has she got long hair?' etc.). The example on the facing page is from *The Collins Cobuild English Course* by Jane and Dave Willis (1988).

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Another, more creative and less controlled, dialogue-based activity which gained in favour with the communicative approach, was the use of simulation and roleplay. This was popular because it provided opportunities for students to use language creatively and spontaneously in situations that mirrored real-life ones. At the same time they were 'safe' environments in which students could take risks, since the learners were not genuinely responsible for the effect of their utterances.

Students may be told what their role is, or given a role card (see the example below from *Eight Simulations* by Ken Jones, 1983). After some planning time, perhaps in consultation with other students who have been given the same role, the students engage in dialogue with other learners who have other roles. Again the emphasis is on dialogue as a means to achieving something (in this case, agreement over whether or not a bridge should be constructed) rather than practising specific language items for the sake of it.

**Burns – contractor**

You are the managing director of Collins and Sons, the civil engineering contractors. You believe the design of the bridge is superb and that the price is realistic. You have spent a lot of money doing research and preparing plans, so it is important that the bridge is built to repay this expenditure.

There has been a lot of opposition to the scheme in the press.

Persuade the members of the public to support the plan.

***Dialogue as the medium of instruction***

So far we have been looking at the role of dialogue as part of the *content* of language instruction. But dialogue can also be viewed as the *process* of language instruction. According to this view, all learning is dialogic. That is, learning is jointly constructed through the interaction between the learner and a 'better other' (whether parent, sibling, peer, teacher or supervisor). This process of joint construction is conducted largely or entirely through dialogue, and has occurred throughout the history of human interaction.

In Bjorn Kurten's fictional but very probable account of the meeting between Neanderthals and Homo sapiens about 35,000 years ago (*Dance of the Tiger: A Novel of the Ice Age*), Tiger, the young Homo sapien hero, is injured and taken to a Neanderthal settlement, where he is gradually nursed



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to full recovery. It is through dialogue, rather than any form of formal instruction, that Tiger starts to learn the language of his hosts. Initially he listens to, and begins to understand, the dialogue occurring around him, and then later manages to enter into dialogue himself with the native speakers who have been looking after him. A turning point in his language development is when, after hearing the phrase many times by those around him, he is able to look at one of the people nursing him and say, 'see you tomorrow' in the Neanderthal language.

The idea that language learning can happen through interaction between more proficient and less proficient speakers was used extensively by proponents of the *direct method*. This was developed towards the end of the nineteenth century as a reaction to the more cerebral *grammar–translation approach*. With a strict ban on either the teacher or students using the mother tongue of the learners, teacher to student question and answer sessions were used extensively and were often set up in such a way as to challenge the learners to use language items from the questions in the answers they gave. One early practitioner of the method (a teacher of French) described a typical direct method lesson in these terms: 'It is a conversation during two hours *in the French language* with twenty persons who know nothing of this language. After five minutes only, I am carrying on a dialogue with them, and this dialogue does not cease.'<sup>3</sup>

More recently, there has been increased interest in what is called a *dialogic pedagogy*. This has been influenced by the writings of, among others, Lev Vygotsky (a Russian cognitive psychologist) and Paulo Freire (a Brazilian educationalist). In what is now commonly called 'sociocultural learning theory', Vygotsky emphasised the idea that knowledge is socially constructed through dialogue with more capable speakers. Freire's approach to teaching literacy in Brazil rejected the idea of learning being the transmission of a body of knowledge from teacher to learner, and stressed instead the idea that the content of learning will come out of a process of dialogue between both parties.

The following extract illustrates the way that dialogue can help co-construct learning. It comes from a chat I had with a native speaker of Chilean Spanish on the Santiago metro. The dialogue provided a safe framework (or *scaffold*) in which I could experiment with the Spanish word for 'crawl'.

<sup>3</sup> *Causeries avec mes élèves (Conversations with My Students)*, Sauveur, 1874.

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- Me: Y cuantos meses tiene el tuyo? (and how many months old is yours?)  
 Hombre: Nueve (nine)  
 Me: Y gatilla? (and does he 'pull the trigger?')  
 Hombre: Gatea? Gatea. Si (crawl? He crawls. Yeah.)

Despite pronouncing the word incorrectly, the other speaker understood what I'd meant, reformulated the inaccuracy, and continued with the conversation. As a result of this short exchange, I was moved much closer to being able to use the Spanish verb *gatear* more appropriately the next time I needed to, in an unsupported environment.

Another important aspect of the above exchange, and where it differs significantly from strategies employed by direct method teachers, is that the question is initiated by the learner rather than by the teacher, and is motivated by the need to have a genuine question answered.

In the language classroom, 'scaffolded learning opportunities' can occur between student and teacher, or indeed between the students themselves. They may take place, in fact, in any situation where there is a difference in level, however minimal, between speakers. Some advocates of dialogic pedagogy would argue, however, that, in classrooms heavily influenced by the communicative approach, where there is an emphasis on extensive student-to-student dialogue, the importance of *student-to-teacher* dialogue has sometimes been overlooked.

**Who is this book for?**

This book is for anyone involved in the teaching of languages and the training of language teachers. New teachers and experienced teachers alike will find a wealth of activities that can be used with their students, many requiring little in the way of preparation and materials, which aim to improve students' speaking and listening skills through challenging them to process or enhance the language content of dialogues.

In many ways this book is an exemplification and a celebration of the ways in which dialogue and dialogues have been previously used in language education. Throughout the chapters, there are dialogue activities which have their roots in everything from situational language teaching through to dialogic pedagogy. At the same time I hope that there are activities which explore dialogues in new ways, and which teachers will be able to adapt to their own teaching contexts and make their own.