

This exchange can be used to highlight some of the features of casual language, such as the use of ellipsis (e.g. *Doing some shopping?*), phrases such as *you know*, idioms (*give that a go*) and *Bye* as a closing routine. Like many interactions of this kind, the exchange opens with a friendly greeting, moves towards small talk and then closes with an exchange of greetings. McAndrew (2007) provides worksheets in which the students identify the different sections of the conversation and the discourse functions and practise writing their own dialogues, using the same discourse features. They later enact role plays to further practise the appropriate sequence in a small-talk exchange. A lesson plan for teaching small talk is given in the Appendix.

## Conversation

Conversation involves longer exchanges that may follow on from small talk and is the more meaningful type of interaction that results from small talk. The participants (Wajasath, 2005: 162):

. . . now feel ready to take their relationship to a more meaningful level and to proceed to exchange ideas and thoughts on various topics, depending on their individual preferences. At this stage, it becomes apparent that, in contrast to small talk, the topics . . . and the content [are] much deeper. [In contrast to small talk], conversation is a much more serious type of [exchange] in which partners have a set purpose in mind as to what they are going to talk about, or what conclusion they want to arrive at.

Targets for conversational proficiency in a foreign language are described in the Common European Framework of Reference (see Chapter 17), as follows:

<b>Characteristics of conversation as described in the Common European Framework of Reference</b>	
C2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can converse comfortably and appropriately, unhampered by any linguistic limitations in conducting a full social and personal life.</li> </ul>
C1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can use language flexibly and effectively for social purposes, including emotional, allusive and joking usage.</li> </ul>
B2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can engage in extended conversation on most general topics in a clearly participatory fashion, even in a noisy environment.</li> <li>• Can sustain relationships with native speakers without unintentionally amusing or irritating them or requiring them to behave other than they would with a native speaker.</li> <li>• Can convey degrees of emotion and highlight the personal significance of events and experiences.</li> </ul>

<b>Characteristics of conversation as described in the Common European Framework of Reference</b>	
B1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can enter unprepared into conversations on familiar topics.</li> <li>• Can follow clearly articulated speech directed at him/her in everyday conversations, though will sometimes have to ask for repetition of particular words and phrases.</li> <li>• Can maintain a conversation or discussion, but may sometimes be difficult to follow when trying to say exactly what he/she would like to.</li> <li>• Can express and respond to feelings such as surprise, happiness, sadness, interest and indifference.</li> </ul>
A2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can establish social contact: greetings and farewells; introductions; giving thanks.</li> <li>• Can generally understand clear, standard speech on familiar matters directed at him/her, provided he/she can ask for repetition or reformulations from time to time.</li> <li>• Can participate in short conversations in routine contexts on topics of interest.</li> <li>• Can express how he/she feels in simple terms, and express thanks.</li> </ul>
A1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can handle very short social exchanges, but is rarely able to understand enough to keep conversation going of his/her own accord, though he/she can be made to understand if the speaker will take the trouble.</li> <li>• Can use simple everyday polite forms of greeting and address.</li> <li>• Can make and respond to invitations, suggestions and apologies and say what he/she likes and dislikes.</li> </ul>
A1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can make an introduction and use basic greeting and leave-taking expressions.</li> <li>• Can ask how people are and react to news.</li> <li>• Can understand everyday expressions aimed at the satisfaction of simple needs of a concrete type, delivered directly to him/her in clear, slow and repeated speech by a sympathetic speaker.</li> </ul>

One of the most important aspects of conversation is managing the flow of conversation around topics. Whereas topics are only lightly touched on in small talk, as we noted above, conversation involves a joint interaction around topics and the introduction of new topics that are linked through each speaker's contributions. The skills involved include (adapted from Goh and Burns, 2012: 180):

- Initiating a topic in casual and formal conversation.
- Selecting vocabulary appropriate to the topic.
- Giving appropriate feedback responses.
- Providing relevant evaluative comments through back-channelling.

- Taking turns at appropriate points in the conversation.
- Asking for clarification and repetition.
- Using discourse strategies for repairing misunderstanding.
- Using discourse strategies to open and close conversations.
- Using appropriate intonation and stress patterns to express meaning intelligibly.

Learners need a wide range of topics at their disposal in order to manage the flow of conversation, and managing interaction and developing topic fluency is a priority in speaking classes. Initially, learners may depend on familiar topics to get by. However, they also need practice in introducing new topics into conversation to move beyond this stage.

Casual conversation between friends or people who know each other well has these characteristics (Pridham, 2001: 64):

- Topics switch freely.
- Topics are often provoked by what speakers are doing, by objects in their presence or by some association with what has just been said.
- There does not appear to be a clearly defined purpose for the conversation.
- All speakers can introduce topics, and no one speaker appears to dominate the conversation.
- Speakers comment on each other's statements.
- Topics are only elaborated on briefly, after follow-up questions or comments from listeners.
- Comments in response to a topic often include some evaluation.
- Responses can be very short.
- Ellipsis is common.
- The speaker's cooperation is often shown through speaker support and repetition of each other's vocabulary.
- Vocabulary typical of informal conversation will be present, such as clichés, vague language and taboo language.



**Observe some of your friends engaging in conversation, and see if you can identify some of the features above in their discourse.**

Developing topics in conversation is a subtle process that requires skills in topic management. For example, Wajasath (2005: 171–2) illustrates a number of ways in which a topic can develop from a question about where someone lives:

**A:** So where are you from, Mr. Dale?

**B:** I'm from Chicago.

From here, there are at least four or five paths that A can take, and, in each path, the partners use different strategies. The following two paths are given as examples:

*Path 1:*

- A:** Chicago! How interesting! Were you born there?  
**B:** No, actually I was born in Tokyo, and I moved to Chicago when I was about ten. My father had to go back.  
**A:** Really? Can you speak Japanese?  
**B:** Very little. My mom didn't really teach me.

From the above example, A does the following things:

- Shows interest by echoing ('Chicago!').
- Asks a question about where B was born and listens intently to the response.
- Shows surprise [and interest] by saying, 'Really?'
- Asks another question, paying attention to the information regarding B's birthplace.

In the course of the conversation, there may be a few more questions about Tokyo or Japan, in general, before both move on to other territories.

*Path 2:*

- A:** Chicago. The windy city. Were you born in Chicago?  
**B:** No, actually, I was born in Tokyo, and I moved to Chicago when I was about ten when my father was recalled to the States.  
**A:** That's interesting. So your father used to work in Japan?  
**B:** That's right. He was stationed in Okinawa when he was in the navy. Then he ventured into business in Tokyo – where he met my mother.

From the example above, A does the following:

- 1 Shows interest.
- 2 Communicates that he knows something about Chicago ('The windy city').
- 3 Shows interest again ('That's interesting').
- 4 Asks another question ('Were you born in Chicago?')
- 5 Shows interest and asks another question ('So your father used to work in Japan?'), apparently interested in what B's father used to do. Here, A may ask a few more questions. For example, he may pursue the same line of questioning before touching on something else.

Personal recounts are also very common in conversation and serve to retell an event that the speaker was personally involved in (see Chapters 15 and 16 for further discussion of recounts). They often involve one person sharing a recent experience, followed by the second speaker's sharing of a similar experience, as in this example:

- A:** Someone nearly ran into the back of my car on the freeway yesterday.
- B:** No way!
- A:** Yeah, I was going down Highway 2001 when . . .
- B:** That almost happened to me a couple of weeks ago. I was . . .

Students need practice in sharing personal experience and exchanging recounts, as in the example above. Technology provides new options for practising recounts and other aspects of speaking and is discussed in Chapter 17.

Agenda management and turn-taking are also important features of small talk and conversation. The former refers to ‘the participant’s right to choose the topic and the way the topics are developed, and to choose how long the conversation should continue’ (Bygate, 1987: 36). This includes strategies for opening, developing and closing conversations, and for introducing and changing topics (Pridham, 2001). This process is often jointly managed by the participants, depending on the social relationship between them (e.g. teacher–student, friend–friend, employed–employee). Turn-taking involves providing opportunities for another person to take a turn in speaking and recognizing when another speaker is seeking to take a turn. However cultural factors can also play a role in turn-taking, as this observation from a teacher in Japan illustrates:

### The role of cultural factors

Teaching speaking in English also has its challenges, and Japanese culture plays an important role here, as well.

I often find that my university students look puzzled when I ask them ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions. For instance, if a student says, ‘I like this song’, and I ask them why, they will often reply, ‘I don’t know’ or ‘I’m not sure’.

A teacher new to Japan would think this answer is perhaps laziness on the student’s part or that the student just didn’t want to explain further. They would also wonder why he or she doesn’t know why they like or dislike something.

In Japanese culture, it is considered rude to query someone’s statement. The person’s statement is accepted at face value, and no further information is requested or expected. The questions ‘why’ or ‘how’ are usually not asked.

*Hiroko Nishikage, teacher and materials writer, Tokyo, Japan*

## Teaching conversation

Ways of teaching conversation include:

- *Awareness-raising activities:* Students examine examples of conversation, either recorded (audio or video) or transcribed examples, and look for examples of how