Investigating errors committed by Iraqi efl learners in Conversation openings

Azhar Hussien   **Fareeda Khalid**

University of Kufa   Technical institute of Babylon

1.Introduction

Since conversation is "a way of using language socially"(Mey, 1993: 214), studying its components is unavoidable. It is certain that conversation, like any other type of communication, consists of a beginning, middle and an end.

Knowing how to start a conversation is an important task because establishing safe and comfortable conversation, to a great extent , depends on initiating talks nicely. Failure to get along with others using the wrong opening creates misunderstanding. This may happen because of inter-cultural differences of employing various kinds of gambits for example, misunderstanding a form of greeting such as 'how are you as " as an inquiry about health, while,in fact, it is a sort of phatic communion'"(ibid: 219). Depending on mother tongue linguistic habits,one cannot decide the specific form of conversation opening adopted by people of different culture when communicating with them.Thus, the study aims at measuring the students' ability in manipulating conversation openings , identifying the types of errors made by them as well as recognizing and producing appropriate kinds of opening.

. It is hypothesized that:

1- Iraqi University students face difficulty in opening their conversation.

2- Iraqi EFL learners' inaccurate responses may be attributed to misuse of conversation opening.

To verify these hypotheses, a diagnostic test has been adopted and applied to a sample of (50) Iraqi EFL University students, First year class, Department of English, College of Basic Education, University of Babylon during the academic year 2011-1012.They are asked to use the appropriate opening for a given second role of a conversation. Analyzing the data, the results expose that errors committed by the subjects are attributed to the following sources:

1-Interlingul transfer

2- Communicative strategies.

3- Context of learning.

4- Intra lingual error.

2.Teaching conversation

According to Richards(1990:76-7)two major approaches characterize 'current teaching ' of   conversation ;an indirect approach, that involves planning   a conversation program around the specific micro skills, strategies and processes that are involved in fluent conversation, direct approach includes that one does not actually teach conversation, rather that student a acquire conversational competence ,peripherally, by engaging in meaningful tasks .A direct approach explicitly calls students attention to conversational rules, conversations, and strategies. Richards (ibid:79) is somehow critical of task-based instruction, which he labeled an indirect approach, because in tasks," the focus is on using Language to complete a task rather than practicing language.

Richards (ibid:79-80)suggests the following list of features of conversation that can receive specific focus in classroom inter-action:

1-How to use a conversation for both transactional and interactional purposes.

2- How to produce short and long turns in conversation.

3- Strategies for turn-taking in conversation including taking aturn, holding a turn, and relinquishing a turn .

4-Strategies for opening and closing conversations .

5- How to initiate and respond to talks on abroad range of topics, and how to develop and maintain talk on these topics.

6- How to use both a casual style of speaking and a neutral or more formal style .

7- How to use conversation in different social settings and for different kinds of social encounters such as on the telephone.

8-Strategies for repairing trouble spots in conversation, including communication breakdown and comprehension problems.

 9- How to maintain fluency in conversations,through avoiding   excessive pausing, breakdowns and errors of grammar or pronunciation.

10-How to produce a talk in conversational mode, using a   conversational register and syntax.

11- How to use conversational fillers and small talks.

12- How to use conversational routines.

On the other hand, Willis's (1996)framework for task-based instruction , for example, involves focus in form , including analysis and practice, as an integral part of every task. Likewise, Skehan(1998:131)recommends that communicative tasks "maximize the chances of a focus on the form through intentional manipulation".

By scanning current English language textbooks, it is obvious that the prevailing approach to teaching conversation includes the learner's inductive involvement in meaningful tasks in addition to consciousness- raising elements of focus on form.

Communicative competence has come to cover a multiplicity of meanings, it is a useful phrase in its principal form. Bachman(1990:1280)communicative competence is a combination of the following components:

a-Organizational competence(grammatical and discourse).

b-Pragmatic competence(functional and sociolinguistic).

c-strategic competence

d- psychomotor skills(pronunciation).

2.1The Structure of Conversation

Sinclair et al.(cited in Coulthard,1985:123)suggests five ranks to deal with the structure of interaction in the classroom: lesson, transaction, exchange , move, an act, For them (ibid),the 'lesson" is just like a paragraph in grammar, while transactions have the structures which are represented by 'exchanges'. For Tehrani and Yeganeh (1997:79),exchange is the basic unit of conversation. Exchanges are bound by 'frames' which are limited to five words

"OK, well, right, now, and good"(Coulthard,1985:123).However frames are pronounced with strong stress, high falling intonation and with a short pause followed.

Sacks (cited in Coulthard ,ibid:69)considers conversation as "a string of at least two turns "which are called adjacency pairs. Such pairs are two –utterances long and the first pair part often selects

the next speaker and action as well which means that it predicts the occurrence of the second part .For example giving a question the speaker expect an answer(ibid). Conversationalists agree that all exchanges are composed of "moves"(See Coulthard, 1985:123 and Tehrani and Yeganeh (1997: 79). The first move is called "the opening

move" by Sinclair ,while Sinclair and Brazil(cited in Tehrani and Yeganeh, ibid) prefer calling it "initiation" e.g :

A-What do we do with the saw?

B-Cut wood.

A-We cut wood.

A is a teacher who initiates a question to get an answer from B.

Mostly ,the first pair part of conversation includes questions, greetings, challenges, offers, requests, complaints ,invitations, announcement (Coulthard, ibid) .some of the two pair parts of the exchanges are reciprocal such as greetings; greetings, While in some other first pair parts, only one is appropriate e.g, question: answer. In other groups ,more than one is appropriate e.g, complaints: apology/justification(ibid).A starting turn may consist of one word e.g., "right?", or more than one sentence(Stenstorm, 1984:4).

2.2Conversation openings

Effective conversation occurs through interaction of more than one participant, in listening with care ,in keeping the dialogue going and in "opening possibilities(Hopper, 2003:6).

1-Phatic communion

Conversation openings are reminiscent of "Phatic communion" i.e., 'choices from a limited set of stereotyped phrases of greetings, partings, common place remarks about weather , and small talks(Laver,1975:218 as cited in Coulthard, 1985:132). Tehrani and Yeganeh(1999:170-1)define phatic communion as   "a communication which is not intended to transmit information but to establish and maintain social contact"

e.g,:

How are you ?

Nice day,isn't it?

The function of such expressions is to help disclose that the intentions are pacific and break silences at the beginning of a conversation.

Phatic communion is **indexical** and **deictic**(James, 1980: 132). The former functions as transmitting   information about   the speaker's personality and social status:My legs weren't made for these hills(Sallumi,2002:13).-

Such parts of indexical phatic communion are called "self- oriented" expressions and they are determined by the speaker's views and social status relative to the status of the addressee ; thus, an inferior speaker uses self-oriented tokens to a superior hearer (James,1980:133)Other –oriented factors personal to the listener e.g,-How's life?

A superior speaker uses other- oriented tokens to an inferior hearer. However, these kinds of openings include greetings (ibid). Greeting means "an expression of pleasure at meeting someone (Akmajian et al., 2003: 389). This view is shared by Bach and Harnish (1979 : 52) who think that a speaker greets the hearer if the former expresses pleasure at seeing the latter and his utterance satisfies the social expectations that one expresses pleasure at seeing someone. In many cases, greetings such as "How are you?" followed by "fine, and you?" lost their real meaning of asking about somebody's   health to serve as signals for possible conversation and become formal devices .

According to Akmajian et al.,(2003:389), greetings vary in their formality and complexity. They (ibid) classify greetings into three categories;

a-Casual greetings such as:

- 'Hello'!

-"Good Morning"

"A hoy!"-
"How are you?"-
-"How have you been?'"

b-Informal greetings
 "Howdy !","Hi", "Greetings"
"How y'doing?" "What's up?"
Go ahead, don't say hello!(ironic).
Long time no see!

C-Formal greetings
Good day,Mrs.Smith.
To what do I owe this lucky meeting?
For Coulthard(1985:88-9),there are two characteristics of
greetings:
1- They occur at the beginning of a conversation.
2- They give the speaker his turn to indicate his speech.
Hello.
Hello, there you too.
-Hi.
-Hi, there(ibid).
There are two occasions in which a conversation does not start with greetings: First, people who do not consider themselves co-conversationalists ,e.g., strangers .The speaker must tell why he is beginning the conversation e.g., :
-Excuse me, can you tell me the way to …
Or:
-Hey, you've dropped your book.
Second, in telephone conversation, because even if the speaker says "Hello" , it is an answer to a summon(ibid).
   A special type of greetings is seasonal greetings (Leech and Svartvik,1994:174):
Merry Christmas.
Happy birthday.
Happy New year.
Many happy returns(of your birthday)(ibid).

Deictic expressions are factors of time and place related to or reflected in the utterance;
-Nasty storm last night!
-Nice hotel this(James,1980:132).
-What a boring play!
-Cold in here ,isn't it?(Leech,1983:39).

2.3Vocatives and Attention Getters
        Conversation openings are not limited to what is   shown previously about greetings or other forms of phatic communion. " " Vocatives " and / or " attention getters " are also starter for communication especially face –to-face conversation :
-Hey, Hey, John(ibid).
Say….-
-Excuse me,…(Couthard,1985:76).

In addition, speakers can use conversational parenthetical such as 'You know" ,"listen", Know that"…etc. (Akmajian, et al., 2003: 389) . They are called presequenses . Some of them are called inquirers, while others include preannouncement e.g.'What do you know" pre-invitations such as "Are you doing anything tonight ? " , pre - threats such as "Watch it" . Such expressions are used to ensure that what is said is within the limits of the possible(i.e. they pave the way to something so that this thing can be achieved).

   Leech and Svartvik(1994:172)add other categories of conversation openings:

2.3.1 Introductions
May I introduce (you to)Miss Brown?(formal) Leech and Svartvik (1994:172).This is John Smith(ibid).
Meet my wife.(familiar) (ibid).
I don't think you've meet our neighbour, Mr. Quirk(ibid).

2.3.2**. Greetings on Introductions**
How do you do?(formal) (ibid)..
Glad to meet you (ibid).
Hi (familiar) (ibid).
How are you?
Hello.(informal).

In formal situations , as Ockden(1986:64) explains, a man is introduced to a woman, except when the man is more senior or more senior. Young women are introduced to older women and young men to aldermen e.g :
A-Wendy, I'd like you to meet my brother, Sam.
Or:
Mrs.Hughes ,this is Peter Brown(ibid).
If the person is of the relatives or of certain nationality, this can be shown in the opening part of conversation:
  Mother, this is Joe's brother , David. Or
Mrs. Stacey,I 'd like to introduce my Greek friend,Milos.

Yule (1996:77)presents some examples that typically found in the opening phases of conversations(i.e in the first part):
1- What's up?
2-How's it goin'?
3-How are things?
4-How ya doin'?(ibid).

 2.3.3 Phrase Openings
   According to Allen(1974:287),phrase openings are "stock phrases that lead easily into our thoughts, they are commonly followed by an infinitive or a that-clause".It is important for the teacher to present his students with the conversational exercises regarding such kinds of phrases especially to give them the opening asking them to finish the sentence.Examples of phrase openings are:

It's good for you to eat plenty of vegetables.
It's wrong for a student to neglect his homework.
It was the fault of the teacher that he didn't understand.

The time has come for us to say good bye.
He was sometimes heard to swear(ibid).

2.4. Some examples of conversation

In their attempts to investigate conversation structure and function, researchers have studied telephone conversation as an example of real conversation.It has been found that the structure   of such type of conversation "opens with a summon" (Levinson, 1983:309).The first turn at talk(the receivers' Hello) is the second interactional move according to Schegloff(ibid).This explains a number of features of telephone openings such as " strong compulsion to respond " and the reportable inference which motivates it (no response means "No one at home'). The summon - answer sequences are similar to other adjacency pairs such as greeting - greeting or offer acceptance / refusals in sense
 that they pave the way to something :
A :John?(summon)
B :Yeah.(answer)
A : Pass the water ,would ja?(reason for summon)(ibid).
Sometimes the summoned feels the obligation e.g. in telephoning a store to know whether it is open , one might say
'Oh, I was just calling to see if you were open' (ibid).There are other features for openings:
a-Telephone and some other conversations that are similar to such type begin with summon -answer pair.
b-reciprocal greetings are relevant at the beginning of the call.
c-at the very beginning of calls , recognition (or identification) is the main concern.(ibid)
The opening section of a telephone call (first topic slot)is followed by announcement of reason of such call :
-Hello.
-Hello, Bob, this is Laurie. How's everything?
 –(sniff)pretty good. How about you?
-Jus' fine.The reason I called was to ask …(ibid).
However,conversation investigation is searched in the classroom thus Tsui (2001: 20) shows that the term classroom interaction refers to the interaction between the teacher and the student as well as the interaction between the students. Allwright (1980)views classroom interaction in terms of turns , topics and tasks, while Van lier (1982 : 1988) observes that there are two dimensions to classroom interaction , the first dimension being the teacher's control of the topic (i.e. what is being talked about) and the second referring to activity (i.e. the way the topic is talked about) based on these dimensions. Van Lier (1988 :170   further identifies four basic types of classroom interactions .The first type is where the teacher does not control the topic or activity. The second type is when the teacher controls the topic , but not the activity, therefore , providing information or exemplifying issues . the third type is where the teacher controls both the topic and the activity. Finally, the teacher may control the activity but not the topic. The teacher sets up small discussion groups with students able to nominate the topic for discussion.

2.5. Listening Comprehension Tests

The basic problem in listening comprehension tests involve the need to any external evidence that learners have understood what they have heard, for example one participant in conversation may murmur "uh uh" while another is speaking because he wishes to indicate that he agrees with what the other is saying . It is worthy to mention here that a tester cannot depend fully on either, i.e learners who always say 'yes" and those who always sign or say "uhuh " as a sign of their understanding of what they have heard. Accord-ingly, in testing the comprehension of the spoken language, the focus should be on understanding   the communication event that the learner has listened to . Al-Mutawa and Kailani (1989: 162) introduce some listening comprehension tests which take the following forms:

-listen and point. The teacher shows the class various pictures. He, then, describes one of the pictures, asking learners to   distinguish it from others.

-Listen and organize. Learners listen to an appropriate text , they , then, state the meaning of certain vocabulary items. The form of items whether singular or plural , count or non- count or tenses of verbs whether present , past…etc.

-Listen and write .The teacher provides the class with dialogue, a story or a conversation. Learners listen and answer the questions about the content.

-Listen and answer. The teacher gives oral messages or conveys some information instructions, etc. The learners answer the questions by means of which the teacher determines how much they have understood.

Participate and be tested. The learners may participate in an oral activity(e.g. an interview ,a role-play, or a conversation). The learners then can be tested directly during the activity. The teacher observes the quality of interaction through gestures, questions , comments and the like.

2.6. Comprehension speaking tests

It is very common that the most credible or natural type of a speaking test is a free conversation with a teacher or with another qualified speaker. In the latter case it is better to have the speaker talk with each learner for several minutes. The teacher should try to remain as unobtrusive as possible ,perhaps sitting behind the learner . While the speaker encourages the learner to express himself, the teacher is free to concentrate on scoring the learner's performance objectively. It is worthy to say that the tester (a teacher or a qualified speaker 0should realize that his primary functions are putting the learner at ease, encouraging him to speak and helping him out when necessary (Lee, 1985:61). Moreover, learners can be given greater opportunities to orally construct their messages, such as responding to brief written messages, to listen to announcement and extract specific points of information on or to exchange information with a fellow learner (Hedge, 2000 : 383) . Biggs (2003 :177) explains that the ability to speak is tested through an overall impression in most cases . This way seems more practical as the teacher need not designate a special day or   time for oral fluency exams. By observing learner's interaction and participation in class , he can judge their oral ability . However the following testing techniques might be of some help in this regard (Weir, 1990: 75-9) :

-Learner's participation in a dialogue , a debate, a classroom   conversation ,etc.

-Learner's narration, telling jokes, recounting events, giving instructions talking about familiar topics, etc for a limited period of time.

-Learner's engagement in a formal talks or speeches such as class reports, panels, arguments, etc.

-Learners may be asked questions of general interests to which they answer in two or more sentences .
-Learners may interviewed by the teacher who asks Wh- questions about topics and situations the learners have been dealing with. However, one can point out very briefly the role played by the teacher in order enhance speech production of learners.

3.Test Analysis
To investigate the EFL learners' ability to produce or recognize the opening of conversations , a list of ten items is adopted . The sample of this study consists of fifty subjects who are first year students in the department of English, College of Basic Education, University of Babylon.
According to Masden(1983:181-2)" a test question is considered too easy if more than ninety percent get it right". An item is considered too difficult if fewer than 30 percent get it right".
On the other hand Heaton(1988:178)notes that the difficulty or facility value) of an item simply reveals how easy or difficult that a particular item proves in the test. It can be calculated by the following formula :

FV=R/N
Where:
FV stands for difficulty value.
R stands for the number of the correct answers.
N stands for the number of the students taking a test.
The results obtained after analyzing the subjects' performance in each item of the question are presented in table (1)which shows how the subjects respond to each item in the test.
Table(1)Subjects' performance

Items	*Correct Responses*	*Percentages*	*incorrect Responses*	*Percentages*
1	17	*34*	33	*66*
2	20	*40*	30	*60*
3	41	*82*	9	*18*
4	17	*34*	33	*66*
5	16	*32*	34	*68*
6	20	*40*	30	*60*
7	37	*74*	13	*26*
8	14	*28*	36	*72*
9	16	*32*	34	*68*
10	20	*40*	30	*60*

It is clear that most subjects have failed to give the correct answer for the question.
3.1. Discussion of Results
The type of errors which are made by the larger number of stud-ents can be summarized as follows:
1- Failure to use conversation opening in many cases .
2-Repeating the same opening in more than single situation.
3-incorrect arrangement of sentences.

3.2. Error Analysis

Johnson and Johnson (1998:110)suggest that error analysis is an approach that deals with the errors produced by the second language learners and how these errors are classified into types. Furthermore, Cordr(1973:290)state that error analysis is
 significant in three different way, Firstly, the teacher will be able to know the proficiency level of his/her students Secondly, errors provide the researcher with evidence of how language is learnt or acquired. Thirdly , committing errors is a device the learner uses in order to learn .For Brown(2000;223-7)errors can be attributed to following sources: interlingual transfer, intralingual transfer, context of learning and communication strategies.

3.2.1. Interlingual transfer

It takes place when the learner follows the rules of their mother tongue .According to Yule(2006:167)some errors may occur due to transfer which means using expressions or structures from the first language performing in the second language.

   Brown(2000:224)in this respect, notes that interlingual transfer is an important source of errors for learners. He thinks that the early stages of second language are vulnerable to interlingual transfer from the first language. In these beginning stages, before the system of the second language is familiar the first language becomes the only previous linguistic system to draw upon. The effect of such error can be found in the items 1,3and7.

3.2.2. Intra lingual error

In this case , the learners do not use all the rules. They attend to or decrease the complicated rules to simpler ones because the learners try to achieve effective communication by using simpler rules. Intralingual rules constitute the source of the subjects' performance at the test. Errors attributed to overgeneralization can be found in the items2and 6

3.2.3. Context of Learning

   Brown (2000:226)notes that the third main source of errors is the context of learning. This type may be attributed to the influence of certain factors such as the classroom with its teacher and materials. In other words , these errors happen as a result of a course design or teaching techniques. The effect of the context of learning can be found in the items 4 and 8.

3.2.4. Communication strategies

  Communication strategies are the devices which may be used by the second language learners to deal with problems or break-downs in communication. These plans enable the learners to reach the intended communicative goal even when things do not go well (Schmitt, 2002:179).Littlewood (1998:83)declares that when the second language learners are engaged in communication they have communicative intension which they find difficulty in expressing because of the little knowledge they have. Accordingly, they resort to ways of overcoming the gaps between the communicative intent and the limited ability to express that intent. Avoidance is one of those strategies. It means leaving concepts with no answers. Such strategy can be seen in the items. 5,9 and10 .Finally, we can say that most of the subjects use conversation opening quite wrongly. This means that they do not know how to open their conversation , consequently, they make such errors. It is expected that these errors may attributed to classroom presentation where opening conversation are presented with insufficient explanations and practice because of the limited
time given for teaching such topic Focusing on one aspect and neglecting the other may lead to such confusion in their use .

4. Conclusion

From the empirical work of the study, it can be concluded that:

1-The EFl university students face difficulty in using suitable opening for their conversation. Great number of errors made by students proves such difficulty. This validates the first hypothesis which shows that Iraqi University students face difficulty in opening their conversation.

2-Analyizing the data, the study has found that the subjects face difficulty in using conversation opening which is shown in the total rate of their incorrect responses. Such finding verifies the second hypothesis of the current study which indicates that Iraqi EFL learners' inaccurate responses may be attributed to misuse of conversation opening.

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Appendix
Q-How do present a suitable opening for the following situations:
1-You want to introduce your friend Ted to Jack.
2-A brother of yours feels sick. What do say to him?
3-What do you say to someone who wants to go to the petrol station?
4-You are calling a friend of yours to invite him to a party.How do you open your conversation?
5-What do you say to a friend to prevent him from going near the machine?
6-How do you greet your neighbor in the evening?
7-How do you start a conversation with your boss to give you a   leave?
8-Walking in the street, you want ask someone about the time. What would you say?
9-You need to borrow a book from your friend. Start your conversation.
10-In a restaurant, you try to offer your friend something to eat. How?