



Investigating Difficulties Encountered by Iraqi EFL learners in Their Opening and Closing a Conversation

Faris Kadhim te'ema Al-atabi

Mohammed Abed Saleh Albadri

University of Wassit / College of education

Abstract

English language conversations, just like in any other languages, are governed by definite etiquettes for keeping the flow of the speech smoothly going on. Proper openings and closings ways of a conversation are good examples for having a conversation well-understood and tangible. University students, after a long period of studying English, are seen unable to (open) start or close(end) a conversation due to many reasons and difficulties they face in this regard. The present paper has tried to investigate these difficulties by selecting a sample from third year students at English department /University of Wassit to achieve the aims of the study by carrying out a diagnostic test. The results have showed that university students do face difficulties in opening and closing a conversation. These difficulties are attributed to many reasons regarding; the prescribed textbook, little exposure to authentic conversations, methods of teaching conversation, and the students' deficiencies in the speaking and unawareness of the structure of conversations .

Section one : Introduction

Statement of The Problem

It is known by everybody that language is a means of communication and it is unique to human beings because by language one can express his / her feelings, needs ,attitudes, and the like. To accomplish all of these people need an etiquette, this etiquette is embodied in a form called a conversation . Conversation is "a way of using language socially"(Mey; 1993: 214). Liddicoat (2007) also states that Conversation is considered to be as one of the most common uses of human language. Furthermore, a conversation is sometimes, if not all times, thought as an interaction or a communication that

exceeds the language itself because it includes lettered and unlettered means of communication .Establishing a safe and comfortable conversation requires knowing how to start and close a conversation and it much depends on initiating talks nicely .Otherwise, failure to achieve that and if the speakers use the wrong opening will create misunderstanding .(Liddicoat,2007)

Iraqi EFL learners who have been taught and studied English language use the conversation for about a long period of time still unable to start (open) or end (close) a conversation.Thus the study aims at finding out the difficulties encountered by Iraqi EFL learners in their opening and closing a conversation.

Aims

The research aims at finding out :

- 1-difficulties encountered by Iraqi university students in their ability to open and close a conversation .
- 2-the reasons behind these difficulties .

Hypothesis

The present research hypothesizes that there isn't any difficulty encountered by Iraqi EFL learners in their ability in opening and closing a conversation.

Procedures

- 1.Presenting related literature regarding; The definition of conversation , conversation opening, and closing a conversation.
2. Selecting a suitable sample for conducting the test and collecting the required data.
- 3.Analyzing the obtained results to verify the hypothesis posed and to find out if there are any difficulties.

Limits

The present study is limited to:

1-Iraqi university students at University of Wassit / College of Education /Third year / morning studies during the academic year (2016-2017).

2-The prescribed text book of conversation (Break Through) for the third year students.

Section Two : Theoretical Background

Conversation

Generally speaking conversation is one type of communication yet it is seen as a divergent term since it is defined differently by many scholars. This section is intended to give a due account for its most common definitions. Liddicoat (2007) states that Conversation is the way for socializing and developing relationships among people and is not confined to language but also other ways can also convey messages of conversation such as; eye gaze and body posture, silences and the real world context in which the talk is produced.

Traditionally and recently a conversation is still problematic because it is defined in different ways, for example Cook (1990) sees conversation as having the following characteristics:

- 1-it is not primarily necessitated by a practical task .
- 2-any unequal power of participants is partially suspended.
- 3-the number of participants is small.
- 4-turns are quite short.
- 5-talk is primarily for the participants and not for an outside audience.

He also asserts that a conversation falls in to the category of the interactional speaking, in contrast to the transactional speaking situation .The former involves establishing and maintaining social relations, while the latter involves exchanging information in order to get a job done, and most service encounters come within this second category.

He adds that If a conversation is to open, progress and close smoothly and productively, the speakers need to manage it by following the (rules) that seem govern normal interactions such as :

- 1-opening and closings.
- 2-responding appropriately in fixed routines.
- 3-turn taking.
- 4-topic management .

He also adds that conversations is seen as an informal and unstructured as compared with other formal and rehearsed situations. Concerning purpose of a conversation it has been seen that there are a variety of purposes for a one conversation they involve; making and keeping up social contacts, exchanging news, information, and opinions, and making decisions with other people .

Opening and Closing a conversation

In fact, a common feature of any conversation is having three main parts; a beginning, a middle, and an end. This fact is also confirmed by Searle (1969) who declares that a usual conversation is the sequence of turn taking which includes openings and closings. Sometimes we don't use opening and closing but opening sequence and closing sequence are used instead. For example Finegan, et.al.(1997) mention that conversations are started in a socially recognized ways as they meet each other in the work. Conversationalists greet each other at the starting day of work . e.g ;

Jeff : G' day, Stan !

Stan : Hi. How are you ?

Jeff : Oh , can't complain , I guess .Ready for the meeting this afternoon ?

Stan : Well, I don't have much choices !

So, opening sequences are utterances that ease people into a conversation intended to convey the message ' I want to talk to you ' and greeting is a good example of opening sequences .

Other times, situations don't require greeting but opening sequences take place as in the case between two strangers are approaching each other in the street one of them is asking for the time:

A: Excuse me, could you tell me what time it is ?

B: it's

Therefore, greeting is not the only type of opening sequences .Few conversations lack opening sequences like:

A: Guess what

B: what ?

A: I broke my tooth.

Akmajian et al.,(2003) classify greetings according to their formality and complexity into three categories;

a-Casual greetings ; ('Hello!', "Good Morning" , "A hoy!", "How are you?"

"How have you been?")

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

C-Formal greetings; (To what do I owe this lucky meeting?)

Good day , Mrs. Smith)

While Coulthard (1985) classifies them depending on two features ;

- 1- They take place at the starting of a conversation.
- 2- They give the speaker his turn to indicate his speech. (Hello , Hello, there you too , Hi)

A second type of opening a conversation is the "Phatic communion ". This type is defined as " a communication which is not aimed at transmitting messages but to build up social relations among people of a certain community. " e.g.:

How are you ? Nice day ,isn't it? (Burke ;1993: 67)

A third type of conversation opening is "Vocatives and Attention Getters". This type is used when two conversationalists are face to face.

(Hey, Hey, John, Say , Excuse me,...(Couthard,1985:76).

Another type is presented by Leech and Svartvik (1994) as cited in Study Guide and Reading, Deakin University,2012) for the purpose of a conversation openings, via,

" Introductions"

May I introduce (you to) Miss Brown? (formal) Leech and Svartvik (1994:172 as cited in Study Guide and Reading, Deakin University,2012).

This is John Smith(ibid).

Meet my wife.(familiar) (ibid).

I don't think you've meet our neighbour, Mr. Quirk(ibid).

B- 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 Cook (1990) 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).

Closing conversations

Closing a conversation is one essential and a complementary part to the opening a conversation which is considered as to be indispensable. At the same time it is seen as interactional problem since conversationalists need to end their talk nicely. Ending a conversation properly is secured by providing all participants with the opportunity to talk about all of the things which need to be dealt with in the conversation. (Liddicoat; 2007:108)

This congruents with what Finegan, et.al.(1997) have state that closing a conversation is to be closed before speakers start feeling uncomfortable due to have nothing more to say. Just like opening a conversation, closing also has sequences and these sequences are characterized by certain properties .Conclusion is one of these requirements. In conclusions participants should arrange to meet again or to reveal the sense of such meeting.

e.g.;

A :Okay , It's nice to see you again .

I guess you will be at Kathy 's party tonight .

B : Yea , I 'll see you there .

A: See you later .

B: See ya !

So, one of the importance of closing sequences is to make sure that nobody has nothing to say.This is achieved by using a simple exchange of short turns like ; okay or well. These simpler exchanges are called pre-closing sequences which are accomplished by a series of pauses take place between and within turns which also function to prepare for closing down the interaction .

Finally, conversations are usually close by a parting expression such as: goodbye, bye, see you ,and catch you later

Schegloff and Sacks (1979) give a new paradigm for classifying conversational closings into categories which they call it as “terminal exchanges. They distinguish markers in American English as “pre-closings,” or indicators by which a group of people are ready to terminate the conversation but at the same time give the opportunity to other people to start another topic of conversation These “pre-closings” can take different forms.

They also emphasize the importance of taking into account surrounding context in determining that a certain word or phrase is functioning as a pre-closing marker, since words such as “we-e-el-l” or “okay then” can also be used in other contexts that do not necessarily implicate the desire to close the conversation.

In addition, Schegloff and Sacks (1979) describe various stages of the closing (without giving precise names to them), Schegloff and Sacks do not offer formal names for their closing sequences, I have tentatively put them into the following simplified categories:

1- preclosing, or initiation of the closing sequence which have been discussed above (the only category for which Schegloff and Sacks do offer a label);

2- new topic introduction; means simply that an introduction of a new topic of conversation after a preclosing gambit.

3- recapitulation; involves a brief summarizing of the topics discussed and/or arrangements made. I have decided to also include such elements as sending best wishes to other family members and other shutting-down details in this category, for the sake of simplicity. Such recapitulation is often an optional element in a personal conversation, although Halmari (1993:422) indicates that it is almost obligatory in business conversations.

4- final closing: Final closings are the actual “goodbyes” or some equivalent appropriate to the specific context of the conversation, such as “Thank you” (generally in business or information seeking phone calls) or “I’ll talk to you later. I have looked for representations of these categories in determining the closing sequences of Spanish.

These categories are pre-closing, acknowledgements, sequence, closing and sequence. Pre-closing: it is mainly intended to get agreement to end the conversation and it takes different forms and expressions like; ('well-ell' or 'okay' or 'so-oo') these words state that the conversation about to finish.

Test and Data Analysis

To achieve the aims of the research and to verify its hypothesis a diagnostic test in a form of a "function file" is used. The test includes one question with two blank spaces; one at the beginning while the other is at the end; the first one is intended to measure the students' opening ability while the second one is to measure their ability in closing a conversation see Appendix (1). A sample of (60) subjects from the university of Wassit /College of education / English department. Validity of the test is achieved by exposing the test to a jury members who are specialist in ELT and applied linguistics. The jury members have proved its validity. The reliability is also achieved by applying a formula. The difficulty level and discrimination power is also secured. The following table shows the number and percentage of the students' correct and incorrect responses in both questions. The tables below show the results of the test:

Table (1) subjects' responses in (Opening a conversation)

No. of Items	No. of correct answers	Percentage	No. of incorrect Answers	Percentage
1-	22	37%	38	63%
2-	15	25%	45	75%
3-	25	42%	35	58%
4-	33	55%	27	45%
5-	29	48%	31	52%
6-	27	45%	33	55%
7-	18	30%	42	70%
8-	19	32%	41	68%



9-	24	40%	36	60%
10-	30	50%	30	50%
Total	242	40%	358	60%

Table(1) shows the following results :

1-the total number of the correct responses and their percentage are (242,40 %).

2-the total number of the incorrect responses and their percentage are (358,60 %).

It can be concluded that the students face difficulties in their ability to open a conversation since the rate of the correct responses and its percentage are (242,40 %) whereas that of the incorrect responses are (358, 60 %). This proves the fact that the students are unable to open a conversation see appendix (2)

Table (1) subjects' responses in question Two(Closing a conversation)

No. of Items	No. of correct answers	Percentage	No. of incorrect answers	Percentage
1-	24	40%	36	60%
2-	30	50%	30	50%
3-	26	43%	34	57%
4-	35	58%	25	43%
5-	28	47%	32	53%
6-	25	42%	35	58%
7-	22	37%	38	63%
8-	15	25%	45	75%
9-	23	38%	37	62%
10-	21	35%	39	65%
Total	249	41.50%	351	58.50%

Table(2) shows the following results :

1-the total number of the correct responses and their percentage are (249, 41.50%) .

2-the total number of the incorrect responses and their percentage are (351, 58.50%) .

It can be concluded that the students face difficulties in their ability to close a conversation since the rate of the correct responses and its percentage are (249, 41.50%) whereas that of the incorrect responses are (351, 58.50%).This indicates the fact that the students are unable to close a conversation see appendix (2).

Conclusion and Discussion

From the above presentation of the results, the researchers have arrived at the following conclusions:

1-Third year students at English department are unable to start (open) the conversation properly.The researchers attribute the failure and inability to the following reasons:

A-little exposure to authentic conversations

B- the few number of conversation that include due amount of expressions of how to start a conversation.

C-the students are not aware of the ways of opening a conversation .

D-students don't use these opening expression outside the classroom .

E-the prescribed textbook, i.e.," Breakthrough " include few number of conversations as well as these conversation aren't enriched with multiple examples of how to open and close a conversation.



2-The results also show that the students face more difficulty in closing a conversation than opening it .The researchers also attributes this to the following attributes:

a-the students are much aware the opening than the closing ones.

b-opening a conversation is easier than closing it, since to open a conversation doesn't depend on a previous speech while closing , on the other hand depends on the previous speech .

e-closing requires taking or coming up with a decision to be sure that the conversation is getting to an end than opening .

f-the students' native language interference .



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Appendix (1)

The Test

Q1-write a suitable opening (starting) and a closing(ending) for the following dialogues , make use of the title and the information given

Q1- Fill in the following blank spaces with the suitable answer :

open and close the following conversation by filling in the blank spaces with the suitable answer :

Ask the way

Mr Guard

Man

Mr Guard Yes. Is there a post office near here?

Man yes, there's a post office in Essex Street. Turn right off Orchard Road.

Mr Guard

Man

A tourist stops you in the street

Tourist

You Elmer Street? Yes... I've heard of it ... let me see. Yes, I know where it is.

Follow this road for three blocks. Then turn left at Cairn Road. Elmer

Street

Is the first street on your right.

Tourist

An urgent request

Tourist Excuse me, please. I'm looking for a toilet.

You A toilet? Well, there's one on the first floor of that bank, on the other side of the street.

Tourist did you say on the first floor?

You

Tourist

In the street

Tourist

Jim Yes, can I he

Tourist Yes. Where can I buy a map, please?

Jim A map? I think you can buy one at the tourist information Office.

Tourist The Tourist Information Office. Where's that, please?

Jim Oh, it's on Cross Street.

Tourist **I see. Thank you.**

Jim You are welcome.

Jane has an appointment with Mark at 9.20 a.m.

Mark **I'm sorry I'm late.**

Jane What happened? Did you sleep late?

Mark Yes, I'm afraid I did. We had visitors last night and they didn't leave till after midnight.

Jane **Oh well, come on then. Let's hurry.**

Tom is waiting for his girlfriend, Lydia. She was supposed to meet him at 8 o'clock. It is now 8.30.

Tom You're late, as usual!

Lydia **I'm awfully sorry. Do you know what happened?**

Tom What?

Lydia I got on the wrong bus. I thought I was on a 116 but was a 119. I ended up at the other end

Of town.

Tom **Well, never mind. Let's go or we'll be late for the movie.**

Going to the Beach

Jill Hi, Harry! , How was your holiday?

Harry **Hi Jill, it was good.**

Jill And where did you go this time?

Andrew To Sydney beach.

Jill Really! Did you enjoy it?

Andrew **Yes, it was great.**

Henry has been to London for a holiday.

Jill Hello, Henry. How was your holiday?

Henry **Oh, it was alright.**

Jill You don't sound very happy!

Henry Well, it rained most of the time I was there.

Jill Oh, how awful! And was it cold?

Henry **Yes, it was freezing.**

Philip is talking on the telephone.

Philip hello Maria

Maria **Hello Philip**

Philip Would you like to go to the movies tonight?

Maria That's a good idea. What's on?



Philip Well, Funny Girl is on at the Ritz. Have you seen it?
Maria And what's on at the Queen's tonight?
Philip Diamonds. Have you seen it?
Maria No, I don't think so. And what's showing at the Princess?
Philip Jaws.
Maria Oh, I've seen that. Let's see Diamonds.
Philip Yes, all right.

Visiting friend

Geoff Hello, George. I called round to see you last night but there was nobody at home.
George Hello, Geoff. Sorry I went out.
Geoff where did you go?
George I went bowling with Ted and Pam.
Geoff Really? And what time did you get back? I phoned at 11.
George we didn't get back till midnight
Geoff Oh, thanks, see you later
George Many thanks see you later