Feature articles

Creative variations for textbook conversations

Bill Pellowe, Kinki University, Fukuoka Campus

William "Bill" Pellowe is an associate professor at Kindai University's campus in Iizuka City, Fukuoka. Bill is currently JALT's Acting Director of Public Relations and runs the PanSIG and TEVAL websites.
pellowe@fuk.kindai.ac.jp

Many of the textbooks that teachers use in language classes contain some kind of model dialog for students to practice. These dialogs are usually also available in audio form. Beyond having students simply either listen to or read these conversations aloud, what are the best ways to utilize this section of the chapter?

When I began teaching in Japan in 1990, the most popular textbook series was *Streamlines*, which had a very detailed teachers' manual. It encouraged a very specific approach to the dialogs, combining traditional audio-lingual drills with nods to the communicative approach (such as personalizing the drills to the students and their surroundings). Since then, I've used a lot of textbooks, and the teachers' book for each one has had similar yet different approaches to the dialogs.

This article combines my years of accumulated experience with teachers' manuals, conference workshops, JALT chapter meetings, and talking with other teachers, to give you several options for making the most of sample dialogs. Trying different combinations of options can bring variety to your classroom. I'm sure many of these ideas will be familiar to veteran teachers, but I hope everyone gets at least one new idea.

Taking the process to its most basic level, the students will be doing four things:

1. looking at the artwork for context,
2. listening to the dialog,
3. reading the dialog, and
4. studying the language of the dialog.

These look like ordered steps, but we don't have to go through them in that order. You could, for example, start by having the students listen with their books closed. On the other hand, you could study the language of the dialog first, then read, then close the books to listen. You can re-order these four steps for a total of 16 ways of doing the dialog, so please view this article as a series of options that are available to you at each step, and be aware that you can rearrange the steps.

Pre-listening

Before students listen, we should set up the context for them. Here, we have a few options:

- Students look at the illustration in the textbook but cover the conversation. Try to co-construct the situation with the

students ("How many people do you see? How do they feel? What are they doing? What do you think they're talking about?").

- Instead of looking at the illustrations, have students keep their books closed. The teacher's pre-class task is to find three photos online to show to students. Talk about each situation with the students. Tell students that they will listen to the dialog and have to choose which of the three photos matches the conversation best.

- You also have the option to pre-teach language. Before one dialog featuring "can't" and "must" to show certainty, I showed the students some photos I'd found online. One was of a man with a giant Superman logo tattooed onto his chest. ("Which superhero do you think he likes? Does he like Superman a lot? You think so? Me too. Look at that tattoo. He must love Superman!") I then have the students repeat the key sentence as a chorus. Another photo showed two twin girls. "Do you think they're just friends, or are they sisters?" This leads to, "They can't be just friends. They must be twin sisters."

  You can also pre-teach reduced pronunciation (e.g., "wanna"), unfamiliar vocabulary items, and discourse features (such as "Hey, guess what?"). I usually pre-teach these by first putting them up on the whiteboard or on the screen, often with some context. An option is to tell students to discuss the meaning in pairs.

  Later, while listening, one option is to have the students raise their hands when they hear the pre-taught items.

- If your textbook has videos for the dialogs, one pre-listening option is to show the video with no sound. Then, you can elicit responses based on the video ("How do they feel? What's happening? What do you think they're saying?"). Some dialogs include a shift in emotions, such as when a character starts off worried, but then feels relieved, or when one character becomes irritated with the other. If so, re-watch the video (still without sound) and pause to ask how they feel at that moment. After you've established the shift in emotions, the students' listening task is to find out why this shift happened.

Listening and Reading

This section focuses only on the actual listening and reading of the dialog, and we'll ignore everything else for the moment.

- Your first option is to have the students listen first without looking at the dialog. They can either keep their textbooks closed, or they can open the textbooks but cover the dialog with their hands. In my lower-motivation classes I don't mind if students peek at the dialog, because this indicates curiosity. In my higher-motivation classes, I'm pretty strict about not letting them peek.

- When it is time for students to read the dialog, you have three choices: they can read it silently, you can read it to them slowly while they read it silently, or they

can read it together chorally.

- One option is to add a "read while listening" step. Note that it is actually difficult for many students at lower to intermediate levels to read fast enough to actually keep up with medium-to-natural speed dialogs, so you might want to include pauses in the audio. An option here is for students to read silently while mouthing the words: a form of shadowing.

Comprehension Questions

At some point, you'll want to ask some comprehension questions. They are multipurpose:

1. you learn what the students could understand;
2. students who did not understand have a chance to catch up;
3. you and the students have a chance to use some of the new language in context.

Of course, there are different types of questions and options associated with them. Please note that you could actually do all of these question types with a single dialog, giving students a reason to go over the dialog multiple times.

- One option is to ask open-ended questions ("Tell me what they talked about" or "Discuss with the person next to you what this dialog was about"). This tends to work better if the students know beforehand that you're going to ask the question ("After we listen twice, I'm going to ask you this question").

- Another option is to offer multiple-choice questions. One technique with multiple-choice questions is to give the students the questions before listening and show them the answer choices after listening.
  For example, before listening, ask the question:
  What theory is in Alex's book?
  After listening, show the responses:

1. *Aliens helped the Egyptians build the pyramids*
2. *The pyramids are really UFOs.*
3. *Egyptian people came from another planet.*

- A third option is to match L1 equivalents for phrases or vocabulary items. In a textbook dialog, one character invites the other out to dinner, and says, "My treat!" The question I gave my students was:
  Which "treat" means the same as "My treat!"?
  A: Ann was treated for diarrhea.
  アンは下痢の治療を受けた。

  B: My father still treats me like a child.
  父はいまだに私を子供扱いする。

  C: I'll treat you to dinner.
  夕食をおごる。

  (All examples are taken from ウィズダム英和辞典, the free dictionary included with Mac OS X).
- I like using this option when a familiar word is being used with a meaning that the students may not be aware of.

Answering Questions

How will you have students answer these comprehension questions? You have several distinct options:

- Call on individual students. This is my least favorite option because I feel that students tend to stop paying as much attention after they've been called on because they know that they won't be called on again soon.

- Choral answers (all students talk at once). This can work fine with some groups of students, but if you have a class with a few students who always answer, the rest of the students may just come to rely on those outgoing students to carry the load.

- Use a student response system (such as Kahoot! or a clicker system) or a low-tech version (students hold up colored paper or answer paddles). This is my favorite option because it puts pressure on all of the students to maintain their attention.

Practice

Eventually, we will want students to practice this dialog. Some teachers believe in the value of having students memorize a dialog, while others are content to have students rely on their books in order to speak the parts of the dialogs. The following options all fall somewhere on the scale between memorizing and reading aloud.

- Easiest option: Students just read the dialog to each other. This is the least useful option.

- An option that uses students' short-term memory is the "Read, look up, speak" technique. The rule here is that students must maintain eye contact while one of them is speaking. The person who is speaking can pause to look at the dialog if needed, but they don't speak while reading.

- One option that is actually more fun for students than it sounds is the *kuroko* technique. (In Japanese theater, *kuroko* are the stage helpers dressed completely in black.) In this technique, students work in groups of three. One student is the *kuroko*; she is the only one of the three who has an open textbook. The other two students do the dialog without textbooks while the *kuroko* provides hints (in L2 or L1). When finished, the students rotate roles. Continue until each student has done each role once. (It's my opinion that the students learn the most while acting as the *kuroko* helper, since they hear their classmate's errors and supply corrections.)

- An option that leads students from reading to memorizing is the gradual erasing technique. Write the dialog on the board or put it up on a screen. The students do the dialog in pairs with the "read, look up, speak" option described above. When the students finish, erase a couple of parts of the dialog, and have the students switch partners to do the dialog again. You can keep doing this until the dialog is completely erased.

- One option for the gradual erasing technique is to replace some of the text with hints in the form of images or perhaps L1 words to help students remember the dialog.

- If your students are flexible, they may enjoy paraphrasing the main gist of the dialog, focusing on the meaning over the form. This option is actually difficult to get students to do because they believe that they are supposed to memorize the dialog.

Follow-up Activities

After you have done the dialog, you have the option to expand it through follow-up activities.

- Students can create their own version by substituting words or phrases. If you have them doing this in pairs, make sure each student in the pair writes their own copy of it, so then you can get them to switch partners, and do the new dialogs with the "Read, look up, speak" technique described above.

- You could re-examine the conversation in detail. For example, you could focus on anaphors (pronouns which refer back to something mentioned previously in the conversation). In one textbook dialog, the two characters are talking about one person's new neighborhood; when the woman asks if there's a gym in the neighborhood, the man says there isn't, but "it'd be perfect if there was one." In this situation, you could ask students "What does 'it' mean? What does 'one' mean?" These questions could be discussed in pairs, or you could give them multiple-choice questions with several options from the conversation.

- Have a short conversation rally. Conversation rallies are controlled drills with two lines of students facing each other. Take a short question / answer exchange from the dialog, and have students modify it into their own question with follow-up questions (for example: "Do you like movies? What have you seen recently?"). All of the students in the class stand up in two lines facing each other to have their short conversations. After a couple of minutes, tell the person in the front of the right line to go to the front of the left line, and have everyone shift positions so that they all have a new partner.

Dialog Performances

One of the options for a follow-up to the conversation is to have the students do a conversation performance. The pressure on students to do the task well leads to more effort. The performance aspects can include a focus on gestures, intonation, and pronunciation. If you want to do a dialog performance, you have several options:

First, who is the audience? You have four options here:

- Pairs in front of whole class.
- Pairs in front of groups (half of the class, one-third of the class, etc.).
- Pairs in front of only the teacher.
- Pairs on video (using students' own smartphones or devices supplied by the teacher). You have to decide if the videos are to be shown to the class or only the teacher.

  I like using videos in my Business English class because so many of the dialogs lend themselves to performances with gestures. One dialog has a character introduce a coworker to

a visitor from an overseas branch office.

What dialog? There are three options:

- Use the textbook dialog as is. This option is pretty boring.
- In pairs, students write their own variation of the textbook dialog.
- In pairs, students make their own creation based loosely on the textbook dialog theme, language, or situation.

To memorize or not?

- Students memorize the conversation, and you let them choose which side each person will perform.
- Another memorization option is to have both students in the pair memorize both parts. Before the performance, roll a dice to see which part each student will perform.
- An option with less pressure is to allow students to hold a written dialog or written notes.

The last option to consider with performances is whether or not to give a grade for the performance. You have four options here:

- No grades; the performance is its own reward.
- Give a grade to the pair (in other words, the same grade for both students).
- Give a grade to individuals (so, possibly a different grade to each student in the pair).
- Do peer feedback. Peer feedback is easier if there is a video of the dialog.

To conclude

All teachers reading this have their own way of approaching the textbook dialogs, but I hope this article gave you some new ideas or new variations on old ideas.

Endnote:

Many of these ideas were originally posted in a podcast episode on ELT Podcast: The Teachers' Lounge, "Using Textbook Dialogs in EFL Classrooms" (Bill Pellowe, Kevin Ryan, and Dominic Marini; February 12, 2007; available http://www.eltpodcast.com/archive/lounge/dialogs.html)

These ideas were originally presented at the JALT 2014 Conference. Variations were later presented at a few other locations in Japan.

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