Chapter 2
Research Base for Discourse

Conversational Discourse

The word ‘discourse’ is commonly used in academic texts and presentations, but what is it, really? Like academic language, it has multiple overlapping meanings. Here I don’t attempt to define it, but instead present several terms that most often emerge in discourse’s wide range of definitions in the literature: extended, communication, discussion, argument, orderly, formal, reasoning, conversation, social practice, beyond the sentence level, how language is used in a discipline, and language in use. These terms cover a lot of ground, so I have chosen to focus on one area under discourse’s broad umbrella: conversation.

Thus, this book focuses on what I call conversational discourse, which is the use of language for extended, back-and-forth, and purposeful communication between people. While this type of discourse can and does happen through the use of visual and written messages, I highlight oral conversations in this book. And I zoom in even further to focus on paired conversations because of the high concentration of listening and talking per minute that they offer to each student.

A key feature of conversational discourse is that it is used to create and clarify knowledge, not just transmit it. Too many people view language as just as a tool for transmission and reception of static ideas and knowledge. Language is not one solid tool, but a dynamic and evolving mix of resources and flexible tools used to communicate, build, and choose ideas at any given moment. Conversation, as Theodore Zeldin writes, “is a meeting of minds with different memories and habits. When minds meet, they don't just exchange facts: they transform them, reshape them, draw different implications from them, engage in new trains of thought. Conversation doesn't just reshuffle the cards; it creates new ones (1998).”

The Clash of Learning Paradigms

In recent decades, policies and testing practices have had a large influence on what learning looks like and how it is fostered. Especially in schools with diverse populations, huge emphasis was placed on choosing right answers on tests and raising test scores. Curricula, lessons, and classroom assessments were tailored to help students do well on these high stakes tests. Learning, in the eyes of many students, teachers, and curriculum guides, meant memorizing word meanings, grammar rules, and the easiest-to-assess standards. Too many students have come to think that learning equals amassing points, which comes from getting answers right on homework, quizzes, and tests. This is much like Paolo Freire’s “banking model” of education in which teachers are supposed to deposit learning into student’s passive minds (Freire, 1970).

Many educators are now working hard to move beyond this “memorize for points,” quantity-focused paradigm of learning that still shapes instruction. This paradigm is deep-rooted because of the large amount of time it has been in place. Many teachers currently in the workforce were students in schools—and then teachers in training—
under this paradigm. Moreover, the recent pushes for “data-driven” practices and spreadsheet-based results also tend to favor the quantity-focused paradigm. The messier collaboration-focused “quality” paradigm struggles to win in such a battle. I hope that this book will help to strengthen this messier, yet deeper, paradigm and also describe how to effectively assess growth along the way.

**Conversational Purposes, Maxims, and Dispositions**

In an effective conversation, the participants, for the most part, have an agreed upon purpose for talking with one another. Yet, many students don’t know what the purpose of conversing is. Indeed, purposes beyond “to get points” are often lacking in school activities, including conversations. Students might view conversation as free time, a time to share or get answers, show off, and so on, but too many students don’t see conversation as a chance to clarify and fortify ideas with another person or to engage in collaborative argumentation to make an important decision about an issue.

A foundational principle for any effective conversation is cooperation (Grice, 1975). This principle, called the Cooperative Principle, depends on several maxims (often called Grice’s maxims), summarized here:

- Make your contribution not more or less informative than is required at the current stage of the conversation
- Don’t say ideas that you think are false or ideas that lack evidence
- Be clear
- Be relevant to the current stage of the conversation

These maxims seem obvious at first, but upon closer inspection of them and of typical conversations in classrooms, we see how important they are. Many students still need to learn how much they need to share, how to use evidence to shore up their ideas, what it means to be clear to different conversation partners, and how conversations work.

It also helps students to have certain interactional mindsets, or dispositions, as they enter into conversations. These dispositions help to extend and enrich conversations. I have turned these into several “I will try” statements for students (many adults should try these, too). Look at each one and consider what happens in a conversation if one or both partners don’t have the disposition.

- I will try to help my partner think more deeply about this topic
- I will try to allow my partner to help me think more deeply about this topic
- I will try to understand this topic better during our conversation
- I will try to work with my partner, not against, even if we disagree at times
- I will try to be open to learning new ideas and having my ideas change

Of course, in the messy world of real discourse—especially student discourse—we will see a wide range of quality when looking at the purposes, maxims, and dispositions in conversations. This is due, in part, to the overall expectations that students have about learning and about the role of discourse. If students have been conditioned
over many years to think of learning as memorizing answers, then suddenly having them “think together” (Mercer, 2000) with others to build or negotiate ideas can clash with their theories of how they learn. This is a major shift in instruction and assessment that, in the minds and practices of both students and teachers, will take lots of work, time, and patience. Another shift is from a focus on self to more focus on others. Students should have in mind that they are not just in school for themselves, but also to help others grow academically and socially. Most big assessments don’t promote this view, but our daily lessons must do so if our students are to succeed in being collaborative members of society.

Students need teachers with a working knowledge of the many things that make classroom conversations effective such as their purposes, prompts, maxims, dispositions, and skills. And students need hefty amounts of conversational experiences to maximize these things. But how do students learn, for example, how much information is typically required in a conversation, or how much evidence is needed to warrant sharing an idea, or what it means to be clear to peers who aren’t my friends, or what it means to share relevant information at the right times in a conversation? They need teachers who draw attention to these things, model them, and provide loads of practice and support throughout the year.

Building Ideas with the “Given” and the “New”

Now let’s zoom in a bit to look at the more intricate gears of conversations. Most partner turns include two parts, the “given and the new” (Halliday, 2013). The given is a mention of things already talked about. It might be a paraphrase, a recap, or a zooming in on information just shared in the conversation. It might be a reference to common knowledge or something experienced by both partners before this conversation. For English learners, given information is familiar and therefore students can more easily process the language used to describe it.

The “new” within a turn is information that is new to the conversation. Why talk if nothing new results? The new is usually connected to the purpose of a conversation and is vital for the building of ideas. Participants benefit from understanding and articulating new ideas, variations, perspectives, etc. For English learners, the generating and understanding of new ideas pushes them to use new language. Notice the given and the new in the following conversation.

1 Bijila: All that gold? I think I would buy a big house give some money to friends.
1 Manny: Yeah. Me too. Maybe buy a nice car or jet plane. Maybe I could buy the school and make them give me good grades.
2 Bijila: I don’t think they would do that. You could give them money to buy new stuff, like desks and science stuff.
3 Manny: No, I don’t know. Maybe. But I’ll leave school cuz I never gotta work, and/
4 Bijila: /But then you don’t learn things for life. School is not just for jobs. So you get the gold and buy house and what, watch TV all day?
5 Manny: Yeah.
Bijila: What about doing good, like the teacher said, with it? I want to give it to friends and maybe to buy like food for hungry people in other countries. I might/

Manny: /Maybe to some to friends and to my uncle, but not my cousins. They’re lame.

Think about how this conversation and others like it can shape students’ language and thinking. Both students are engaged in trying to go beyond just the givens and build new ideas. New ideas might include new ways to: harness energy, solve a geometry problem, view a historical person, learn from a character in a story, and so on. Student minds have a need to go beyond the givens in order to connect, create, choose, and to improve their lives and world around them. As they push themselves to clarify given ideas and describe the new ones, students push themselves to understand and use increasingly academic language.

Choosing the Best Thing to Say Next

With few exceptions, each turn in a conversation is spontaneous. It depends on the previous turns and the current development of the ideas in the conversation. Thus, several conversations could start with the same initial idea, but, given the amount of choices and “avenues” that keep branching off each with each turn, the conversations will likely diverge significantly.

Let’s say you are in the middle of a conversation with one other person. Out of many possible things to say in your next turn, what is the best thing to say to realize the purpose(s) of the conversation? While there are many choices, some are more likely than others to help the conversation along. There is never one “right” thing to say, of course, but as you learn more about conversations, you will see that some moves have more potential than others to realize their academic purposes, foster disciplinary thinking, and cultivate language.

As you are listening to your partner’s current turn, you are doing several things in your mind. You are thinking about what new things he or she is adding and how well you understand what your partner is saying. You are thinking about what has been said so far in this conversation, what you already know about the topic, and what questions you might ask. You are thinking about what you might say next to build on your partner’s current turn, and how to make what you say as clear as possible. Other types of responses might also be emerging in your mind, such as encouraging your partner to clarify or support ideas, paraphrasing what your partner said to see if you understood, adding details or examples, evaluating evidence, negotiating, and respectfully challenging what your partner said. There are many others, but these moves, which are described in more detail in Chapter 3, are most of the most-likely-to-be-effective options in classroom conversations.
Chapter 3

Conversation Skills

One of the ways in which we can help students make effective choices in their interactions with others is to develop several key conversation skills (Zwiers, O’Hara, & Pritchard, 2014). Unfortunately, many educators, students, and people walking down the street don’t have a clear enough idea of what is involved in an effective conversational discourse. Many students, for example, think that all conversations are arguments to win, or that they involve just one person sharing an answer with another, as what happens in most think-pair-shares. The notion that you can respond back and forth with a partner to build up and negotiate ideas is rare in students.

An effective conversation in school has and does several things that we can see and hear. First, it changes something. This means that in the mind of participants the information, ideas, or feelings about a topic are built up, strengthened, clarified, or changed in some way. For example, I might talk with a friend about the election coming up and learn his views on a certain candidate. I share my views, some of which clash with his, and I see the characteristics that I value in a candidate more clearly than I did before our conversation. Second, a conversation has evidence of conversation skills. These skills, described in detail in this section, include clarifying ideas, supporting ideas with evidence and reasoning, evaluating evidence and reasoning, comparing the strength of ideas to choose the strongest one, and negotiating ideas.

In every conversation, there should be the building or changing of at least one idea. This usually requires a combination of both clarifying and supporting the idea with evidence and reasons. Then, if another competing idea pops up, it becomes an argument, and students then build up the second idea, too, also by clarifying and supporting it. After building up both (or all, if more than two) ideas, students evaluate the amount and quality of support on both sides in order to choose the “strongest” or “heaviest” one. Picture a balance scale with weights on both sides (see the conversation between Mayra and Ben below). If there is not a clear winner, then students can negotiate and qualify their ideas. This process of jointly and respectfully building up two or more ideas and choosing one is what I call collaborative argumentation. Students don’t choose sides right away and “fight with words” to win; rather, they work together. Examples of both modes of conversation (building one idea and collaborative argumentation) are provided below.

The Skill of Clarifying Ideas

To get an effective conversation going, one student starts the conversation by responding to a prompt, posing a relevant idea to start talking about. This idea, in most cases, will not be clear to the listener the first time it’s described. The listening partner will then prompt for clarification of this idea, asking something like “What do you mean by…” as you see Ilse do in line 3 of the following conversation.

1  Ilse:  So, the teacher asked us why people are biased in history.
2  Ana:  I think they want to look good.
3  Ilse:  What do you mean by that?
Ana: They lie like maybe leave out stuff so that they’re like heroes or something.

Ilsa: Yeah, like when the teacher said even us, we like don’t say the whole truth when we tell our parents stuff.

Ana: So, you’re saying that we are like those people who lie in history?

Ilsa: Yeah, kind of. Remember that guy, John Smith. He made up stuff, like on Pocahontas, to sell books.

Ana: Can you say more about that? I read it but don’t remember.

To clarify, a partner can do several things: ask for definitions (line 3), ask for elaboration (line 8), and paraphrase (line 6). As you saw in the excerpt, clarifying can help to prompt a partner to produce more language, which (a) provides input for the listener and (b) challenges the speaker to put ideas into more and/or better words. This extra language used, as you see Ana produce in line 4 and Ilsa produce in line 7, helps both partners to think about the content being discussed. Complex ideas are more likely to “stick” because students are taking ownership of them—along with the language that describes them—in order to co-construct meaning together.

One challenge that we face is that students’ communication experiences tend to be with people who know them well. They have not had to do much clarifying because family and peers tend to already know a lot about what they are saying. They have not needed to explain more complex, multi-sentence ideas very often to others for authentic purposes, so they don’t develop habits of being extra explicit for a wider range of people.

Thus, one of the biggest needs for students developing academic language is a chance to practice their abilities to describe complex ideas to others and receive immediate feedback related to how clear it is. Conversations contain many turns, and many of these turns are attempts and opportunities to clarify. A partner listens and then offers nonverbal or verbal confirmation of clarity or lack thereof, giving feedback to the speaker to do something more or something different with language in order to get the idea across.

How clarifying within conversations fosters academic language and literacy

Imagine getting feedback on how clear you are from 29 or more different people on a weekly basis, in multiple conversations with hundreds of turns in which you speak and listen. The effect on your literacy, language, knowledge and thinking can be profound. Even if a highly proficient speaker converses with a less proficient speaker, both benefit from the process of seeking clarity. The highly proficient speaker is challenged to make her ideas extra clear and the other student benefits from extra language input—and from trying to make his ideas clear to her.

Students who are clarifying ideas about what they are reading can help one another with the content and language of complex texts. As students are encouraged to go back into texts to clarify what they are trying to get across, they refer to language in the text and use it in their turns.