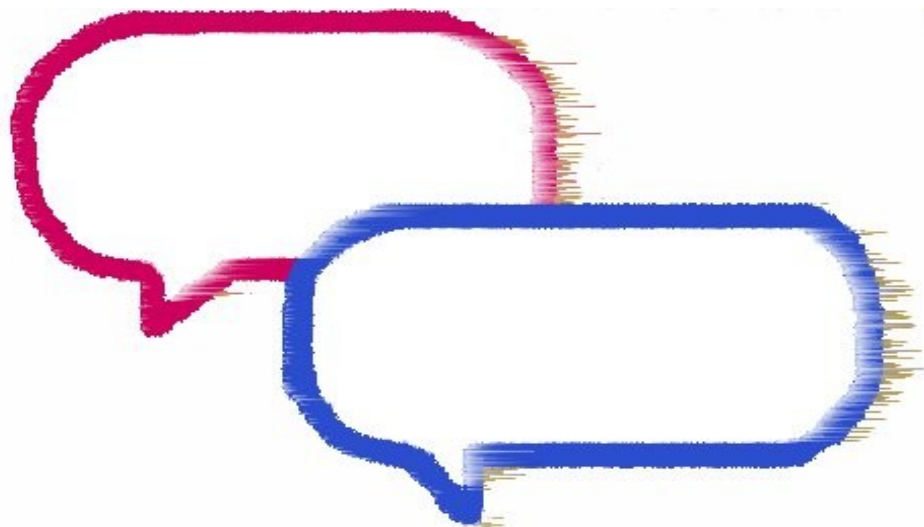


# *30 Hot Conversation Lessons*

*–by Daniel Stephens*



**30 Hot  
Conversation  
Lessons**

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## I. Introduction

Conversation lessons can be some of the most enjoyable moments for both students and teachers, but they are also fraught with potential difficulties. Even after 19 years, I can still recall the silences, the embarrassed looks, the mutual incomprehension of my first attempt at a conversation lesson. I'd prepared nothing, thinking the students would do all the work. They had hoped I would know what to do. Not a success.

Today I run my own school and during this last academic year we tried out something new: our students had the choice, over and above their usual classes, to pay extra to attend conversation lessons with native-speaker "tutors", young people who would be paid to chat to them in English. I advertised for tutors, who didn't have to be qualified or experienced, just willing to interact in a positive way with students for one or two evenings a week. There were lots of willing applicants, and I interviewed and selected half a dozen of them: Americans, English, Irish, an Australian, and a lady from Ghana. Obviously I wasn't going to let these "tutors" loose on our clients without at least some training and support, so I found myself organising an initial training session and promising that each week I would e-mail out a page of conversation prompts which would form the basis of the conversations for the next 6 days. No planning required, just turn up, print out your conversation prompts, and talk. It'll be fine!

And so began thirty Sundays of head-scratching at the kitchen table. Each Sunday morning my calendar would remind me to write the conversation prompts for the tutors, and each week I would struggle to come up with a theme and one A4 sheet of questions and prompts, as well as cooking the lunch, taking my son swimming, and so on.

Now the academic year has finished, the tutors have gone home to Ireland, New York or wherever, and I am spending a weekend packaging up those thirty lessons into an e-book. We'll be repeating the conversation tutor offer for our clients again next year, but this time the material will be ready and waiting for my tutors and clients to select from, and I'll be doing something else on Sunday mornings! Already this material has formed the basis for many successful and enjoyable conversations between learners of English and native-speakers. I hope, in future, you and your students will enjoy using it too.

If you find this e-book useful, please mention it to your Director of Studies, colleagues, and teacher friends, who can download their copy from: [www.30hotconversationlessons.com](http://www.30hotconversationlessons.com)

Your opinions and feedback will also be very welcome on the blog, which you'll find on the same site.

See you there!

*Daniel Stephens, Bologna, June 2010*



## II. Why do a conversation lesson?

Why do a conversation lesson? Or conversation as part of a “normal” lesson?

There are the “theoretical” answers to this question, and then there are the “practical” answers. First the theory: whether you do, or don't do, conversation with your students will depend on your teaching context and your beliefs (along with those of your students) about how learning happens, and what methodologies and approaches promote it.

For example, if you work in a school which promotes a fairly rigid methodology based on behaviourist learning theories (Yes, schools like this still exist!), then the answer may simply be: “Don't!”. According to this type of theory, uncontrolled student speaking will result in error, and error, if uncorrected can result in students learning the “wrong” structure. Very bad. In contrast, “acquisition” theorists would argue that, if the conversation is pitched at only just above the students level (not too hard, not too easy), then it will be beneficial even without any “formal” teaching - students will naturally acquire new lexis and structure from the contexts which arise from the discussions in which they participate. Learning more or less happens automatically, given the right context, and the teacher's job is to provide that context.

For the communicative approach, the answer would be somewhere in between: conversation could provide the “free practice” necessary to consolidate the language previously taught in a more controlled way. What do I think? For what it's worth, I'd argue that motivation and opportunity are the keys to language-learning and that conversation classes are one way of keeping motivation high, and providing opportunities to encounter new language items and consolidate those heard previously.

What about the practical answers? Here's a list of practical reasons to do a conversation lesson, in no particular order:

1. Students like them, and want them. If you work in a “commercial” school, as I do, that's reason enough!
2. Students may believe that free conversation is the best way to learn a foreign language (whether they are right or not, depends on your view of language learning theory).
3. Many students feel they have “failed” in more traditional learning situations and so are unwilling to try a course which they perceive as “grammar-based”.
4. Talking to people is fun and motivating.
5. Speaking a foreign tongue, actually getting the words out of your mouth with the right pronunciation and in the right order, is a “learned habit”, (arguably) – you need to do it quite



a lot before you get good at it.

6. Conversation lessons also involve listening (to the teacher, to other students). Listening is an important skill!

7. Conversation lessons are a fantastic opportunity with monolingual groups (i.e. all Italians, all Japanese) for an experienced teacher who knows the students native language. Listening to what students say, the teacher can identify typical problems and give correction or specific teaching to raise students' awareness of the differences between English and their own language. A very focused and effective form of teaching!

8. If there's a native speaker teacher, students get a model for pronunciation, vocabulary and structure.

9. Conversation lessons are great for making new friends!

10. Your boss will like this one: conversation lessons are easy to sell, either on their own or as an "add-on" to a normal course.

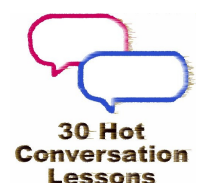
By the way, there are also reasons for NOT doing a conversation lesson!

1. Students of some nationalities or age-groups, or with preferred learning styles which involve reading or memorising, may prefer more "formal", "traditional" lessons.

2. Conversation lessons may be perceived as "just conversation", containing "nothing new".

3. Conversation may be seen as an easy option for the teacher (by the students, or by the school).

How to avoid these negative perceptions? Read on, my friend, read on!



### III. How to teach a conversation lesson

There are obviously as many ways of teaching a conversation lesson as there are different teaching contexts. There's no single "model lesson" that will work in every situation. What are the most important variables you should consider?

- Class size
- Age (kids don't do conversation easily)
- Cultural background / preferred learning style
- Classroom management issues (table layout, whether you have level differences, etc.)

As regards the first, and probably most important variable, with a small group of adults, or an individual students, a "whole class" conversation lesson might work very well. The teacher talks directly to the class, or individual student, and shares the interaction with them. This is definitely the easiest situation to manage. With a larger group, you might want to vary the interaction patterns more. A whole group discussion with a class of twenty or thirty students leaves very little time for any one individual to speak. You can solve that problem by including pair or small group tasks. For example, start by talking to the whole class about the topic ("Hands up, if you want to say something"), then switch to pair work, or small groups to discuss the detailed questions or perform a task involving speaking, that way everyone gets a chance to speak. Finish by bringing the class together again and sharing some of the ideas they have had.

How to avoid the negative perceptions mentioned in the previous section? Easy! Follow the Golden Rules of Conversation Lessons!

#### Golden Rules for Successful Conversation Lessons

1. Always have a nice, professional-looking handout to base your lesson on. Or more than one, in case of emergencies! (Hint: there are 30 of them in this book!). This demonstrates that you are prepared to deliver a serious, professional lesson, even if you aren't.
2. Pick out or underline some words or grammar structures from the handout that your students will not know or may need to revise. Teach them before you begin, or if the conversation starts to flag, do a "grammar focus" or "vocabulary focus" on the board. If your boss, or a student wants to know what the point of your lesson is, you can reply that you're focusing on the second conditional ("What would you do if...?") or vocabulary related to whatever the topic of the day is.
3. Make notes of mistakes and words which come up during the discussions. Feedback to the class at the end of the lesson. Listing the new words on the board so students can copy them is always popular and ensures that the class has something written down to take away.

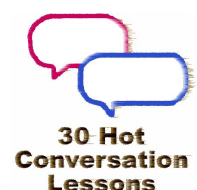


Writing the errors you heard, and eliciting corrections, convinces students there was a purpose to the lesson.

4. Correct mistakes. Forget everything you have been taught or think you know about not interrupting free conversation to give correction. You **MUST DO IT!** Sensitively, yes, paying attention to the students underlying message, yes, but don't shirk your responsibility here! The corrections, even if only occasional, validate the lesson in the eyes of the students. Many or most of your clients will **WANT TO BE CORRECTED** (If you don't believe me, ask them!). If you are seen to be doing your job, here, everyone will be happy. If not, there will always be doubts as to whether, perhaps, more could have been learnt with a "proper" lesson. Will the corrections help students avoid repeating the mistakes? Probably not. Will they distract from the conversation itself? Possibly. Should you correct anyway? Definitely. Everyone needs that you are seen to be doing your job. Do correction because correction creates a perception of value in your students' minds, and consequently increases their appreciation of the lesson as a learning opportunity.

How to guarantee your conversation lessons will be memorable, useful and popular!

1. Have a handout (buy this book!)
2. Identify unknown vocabulary and grammar
3. Make notes of new words and mistakes
4. Correct errors!



## IV. Suggested correction techniques

Following on from what was emphasised in the previous section about the importance of correcting errors, here are some suggestions for how to correct.

### SUGGESTED CORRECTION TECHNIQUES FOR SPEECH

- write them down, feedback to the board after the conversation has ended
- elicit from the student who made the mistake (see “How to signal that there's a problem”)
- invite other students to offer corrections

### HOW TO SIGNAL THAT THERE'S A PROBLEM

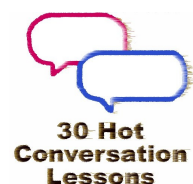
- Frown, look puzzled, raise your eyebrows
- Raise your hands in a “stop” gesture
- Repeat the comment with stress on the error, rising intonation, etc.
- Ask “What was that?”, “Sorry?”, “I beg your pardon?”
- Say “There's a grammar/pronunciation problem - would you like to try again?”

### HOW TO INVITE PEER CORRECTION

- (Open your arms wide to the class) “Can anyone help?”
- “Who knows what the problem is?”
- “What do you all think?”

Not sure you have the right skills to do this? Practice is all it takes! Just to get you started, here's a list of “errors” made by students in my last conversation class (intermediate level). Find a teacher friend, get him/her to read out the phrases. Practise correcting the mistakes using different techniques.

- We had a dinner in a restaurant.
- I spent my salary for to stay in an expensive hotel.
- I'm not good in maths.
- You have all the day to relax on Sunday.
- I don't go at school.
- I'm sorry for last week.
- We like so much the sports.
- I knew him at a party.
- I'm a lot serious. I want to be less serious.
- What means “You know”?
- I took a coffee with my friends.
- An article on the Corriere della Sera...
- I've just took my husband to the airport.
- My daughter has four months old.



- I went to work by foot because of the bus strike.
- I stayed in the bed all the day.
- It depends from your tastes.
- He falled in love with me.
- I didn't study Greek at the high school.
- It's the love, no?



## V. How to give clear instructions

When setting up pair or group work, you need to give clear instructions or the result will be confusion. Many teachers simply never work out how to do this: unfortunately, poor instruction-giving is surprisingly common in our industry. Again and again I observe classes in which teachers give confused, repetitive instructions which simply have the effect of teaching the students that the teacher need not be listened to (as experience has demonstrated that he/she will not say anything comprehensible or vital). Students listen politely as the teacher repeats his/her gibberish two or three times with varying facial expressions, then ask each other in their own language “What do we haveto do?”. So here's how to do it right.

### 1. KNOW PRECISELY WHAT YOU WANT TO HAPPEN

Who will do What, When?

### 2. GET EVERYONE'S ATTENTION

Stand up, Raise your hands, Cough, Say “Can you listen, please?”, “Is everyone ready?”, etc.

### 3. ARRANGE THE PAIRS GROUPS FIRST

(if necessary)

### 4. GET EVERYONE'S ATTENTION AGAIN

Stand up, Raise your hands, Cough, Say “Can you listen, please?”, “Is everyone ready?”, etc.

### 4. STATE BRIEFLY WHAT YOU WANT THE STUDENTS TO DO, AND WHETHER THEY SHOULD DO IT ALONE OR WITH A PARTNER - USE STRESS TO EMPHASISE

i.e. “WORK ON YOUR OWN. I want you to READ THE TEXT and answer QUESTIONS 1, 2 and 3. NOT EXERCISE B NOW, we'll do that later. When you have finished CHECK WITH YOUR PARTNER.”

### 5. NEVER ASK “DO YOU UNDERSTAND?”. CONCEPT CHECK INSTEAD

“Mario, can you tell me what you have to do?”

“Who can summarise the instructions for me, so I can be sure you understand?”

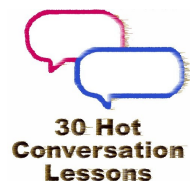
### 6. GIVE A TIME LIMIT

(if necessary)

“It's important you learn to read quickly, so you only have TWO MINUTES for this.”

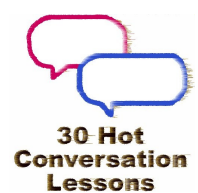
### 7. FIRE THE STARTING PISTOL

“Please begin now”.



## 8. NOW STOP TALKING!

Here's a tip. If the students don't do precisely what you intended at this point, it's probably because your instructions were poor. Time to raise your game, my friend.



## VI. Photocopiable lessons (in alphabetical order)

### A note on copyright and piracy

You have permission to photocopy these 30 lessons for classroom use, without limits on the number of copies. You can distribute the copies in any way you choose. You may also modify the original text in any way you please, assuming you can work out how to copy text from a .PDF file, and as long as you retain the information in the footer (bottom of the page), which identifies me as the original author. Seems fair enough, right?

I'd also be honoured if you felt that the material in the first section of the book (for example, how to give instructions) was worth photocopying and distributing amongst your colleagues or pinning up on your staff-room wall. You could even use it for a training session at your school. However, please do NOT e-mail this PDF file to all of your teacher friends!

This material in this book took me a long time to create, as well as the time and money which will be involved in marketing it when I've finished writing it. I'm planning to price it so that it will be easily affordable for a typical TEFL teacher and more than worth the money spent in terms of your time saved planning lessons. Consequently, I need to sell as many copies as I can to make anything at all back. Your help in making this happen will be very much appreciated.



## Lesson 1. Advertising

### Best places to advertise

Assuming you wanted to buy a car, find a job, get ideas for Christmas presents, choose a holiday, or buy some new clothes or shoes, where would you look to find information? Would you pay attention to the adverts that you saw?

### Types of advertisement

Which sort of adverts do you personally pay most attention to? - TV - Magazine or newspaper - Radio - Internet - Sport sponsorship - Junk mail - Other Why?

Do you have a favourite TV advert? Why do you like it?

Are there any adverts that you really hate? (Why?)

### Advertising and ethics

“Let the buyer beware” - do you know this expression? Do you think it is true?

Is it more important for an advert to be true, or to be effective?

If YOU were selling something (i.e. a car) which was not in perfect condition, would you hide the problem, or tell the truth?

Have you ever answered an advertisement or bought a product and then found out that the advertisement was misleading? (In what way was it misleading?)

How do you feel about adverts which sell things which are bad for us? i.e. Cigarettes, alcohol. Should they be banned or restricted?

In some countries, political advertising is restricted (because it favours richer parties or interest groups).

In other countries, there are no limits. What is the situation in your country? Which do you think is better?

If you saw an advertisement on TV which made you really angry, would you complain?

Is it ethical to advertise “unhealthy” or “expensive” products directly to small children?

### Advertising and you

Have you bought anything recently because of an advert? (i.e. a pair of shoes, a car)

If you think you are NOT influenced by advertising, what factors influenced your decision to buy your last big purchase (i.e. a pair of shoes, a car)

Do you buy things which are discounted or on “special offer”?

How important is this factor in your choice of product?

Have you ever advertised something? For example, when selling a car. (What? Where? Was it a success?)

Have you ever advertised YOURSELF? For example, on a job seekers website, or on a dating website. (What? Where? Was it a success?)

Would you like to work in advertising?

If you were famous (a footballer, a TV presenter) and a company asked you to be the “face” of its brand, would you do it? (What about if you didn't like the products?)

### Branding

Many advertisements try to create a “brand identity” which their customers will feel in some way reflects their goals and values. Is there a brand or brands which YOU feel close to? Does this influence what you buy?

Which brands would you recommend to your friends (Why?):

- cars - shoes - jeans - watch - computer - mobile phone - beer or soft drink - other

Which of today's brands (Toyota, Nike) do you think will still exist in a 100 years?



## Lesson 2. Christmas and New Year

(N.B. For students from countries, families or communities where Christmas is not celebrated, most of these questions can be applied to their traditional festivals, whether religious or secular, instead)

Do you celebrate Christmas / New Year? On what date(s)?

(If not) What festivals do you have in your country/religion? When are they?

Some people love the Christmas/New Year holiday period and look forward to it.

Others find it depressing. How do you feel about it?

Will you have a holiday from work/school at Christmas/New Year period? How long?

### Christmas

Many organisations organise parties or meals for their staff/members. Do you attend many parties at this time of year? Which ones? Do you enjoy them? Why (not)?

Do you send greetings cards to your friends, relatives, colleagues, etc.?

Do you decorate your home? How? (with lights, trees, etc.)?

Some people like to prepare for Christmas (buying presents, etc.) in advance. Do you?

Where do you usually spend Christmas? Do you usually spend it with your family?

Do you see only your immediate family, or also your extended family?

What exactly do you/your family do at Christmas?

Do you attend religious ceremonies? (When? Where? What happens? Who with?)

Do you sing songs? Watch TV? Visit relatives? Other things?

Do you give presents?

What presents did you give/receive last year?

What are you going to give to your friends / relatives this year?

What do you think you will receive?

What was the best present you ever gave /received at Christmas?

At what time of day (morning/evening,etc.) does your family give presents?

Are there any rituals associated with giving presents in your family? (i.e. the arrival of Father Christmas, filling a stocking, sitting around a Christmas tree, etc.)

Do you eat special foods at Christmas / New Year?

What meals are "special" during the Christmas period? What do you eat at each meal?

Do you eat at home? Who cooks? Is the food always the same, or is it different each year?

What memories do you have of Christmas when you were a child?

Do you think today's children receive too many gifts?

Some people think that "Christmas has become too commercial" or that "the spirit of Christmas has been lost". Do you agree?

### New Year

How important is the New Year holiday for you?

Who do you spend New Year's Eve with? And New Year's Day? What do you usually do?

Are there any special traditions associated with New Year? (i.e. wearing particular clothes, singing particular songs)

Do you ever throw a party? Do you stay up until midnight? Do you let off fireworks?

Some people make "New Year's resolutions" (i.e. promise to give up smoking, lose weight, etc.). Do you do this? For example?

Are you successful in keeping to your resolutions?



### **Lesson 3. Clothes and Fashion**

“Clothes make the man” - do you agree?

Do you judge people by their appearance?

Do you think it is important to dress fashionably? Why? Why not?

When was the last time you went shopping for clothes? What did you buy?

How often do you go shopping for clothes? (every day/week/month/year, hardly ever)

Do you enjoy shopping for clothes? Why? Why not? Alone or with someone else?

Where do you usually buy your clothes? Do you have a favourite shop (or shops)?

Do you buy new clothes every season? (Or do you prefer to wear your old clothes?)

What is your favourite item of clothing? (Why do you like it?/them?)

How many pairs of shoes do you own? How often do you buy new ones?

What is the most expensive item of clothing (or pair of shoes) you have ever bought?

Do you/ would you buy/wear second-hand clothes or shoes?

(What do you do with your old clothes? Do you give them away? To who?)

At many schools in Britain the children have to wear a school uniform. Did you have to wear a school uniform? Do you think it is a good/bad idea?

In many offices in Britain men must wear a tie. Is it the same in your country?

#### **Questions for men**

Do you own/wear a suit? (How many? What colour?) Do you wear ties?

#### **Questions for women**

Do you prefer trousers/jeans or dresses/skirts?

Do you (ever) wear high heels? (Why? Why not?)

#### **Questions for working people**

What do you wear to work? Is that different from what you wear at the weekend?

How did you dress when you were a student?

#### **Questions for students**

When you finish studying and look for a job, will you change the way you dress?

#### **Questions for everyone!**

What would you wear if you had a job interview next week?

How will you dress in twenty years / when you are twenty years older?

What style of dress appeals to you in other people? (classic, sporty, elegant, etc.)

Your ideal man/woman: how should he/she dress to be perfect in your eyes?

When you go to a party, what do you wear?

#### **Other fashion accessories**

Do you buy/wear jewellery (or other accessories)? What? (Which is your favourite?)

Do you have any tattoos? (Where? What design? When/why did you have it done? Did it hurt? Do you regret it? How much did it cost?)

(if not) Why not? Would you have one done? (Where? What design? etc.)

Do you have any piercings? (Where? etc.) How do you feel about people with piercings?

Do you wear make-up? (Every day? When? Why?) Do you think men should wear make-up?

(Why? Why not?)

