
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Study of Opening and Closing of Conversations in Oral English Textbooks

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| ABSTRACT

Language communication ability refers to the ability to use language in society. The acquisition of this ability by second language learners mostly relies on textbook dialogues adapted from real-life conversations. Therefore, whether scripted textbook conversations can help improve second language learners' language communication ability should be taken seriously by the academic circle. This paper has analyzed all the conversational texts in the book *Functioning in an Intercultural Community*, using book1 and book2 as corpus and finds that there are deficiencies in the opening and closing of the conversation in the textbook. This study suggests that textbook compilers should improve the completeness, diversity, and colloquialism of the beginning and end of conversations, and teachers appropriately extend the form of the opening and closing of the conversation during the teaching process.

| KEYWORDS

Opening and closing; oral English textbooks; Chinese; conversation analysis

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Communicative competence is the ability of second language learners to use language. According to Hymes's theory of communicative competence (1974), the study of communicative competence involves possibility, feasibility, appropriateness, and occurrence of language. The four elements interact with each other and form a complete conversation. Conversations in textbooks are representations of real-life communication; therefore, it is important for English language teachers to examine and use conversation in textbooks. However, enough attention has not been paid to whether the textbook conversations are set in a way that covers everyday conversations and whether they improve second language learners' communicative competence in general. In addition, there is a general problem with how second language learners express themselves at the beginning and end of their conversations in the course of actual communication. Therefore, it is imperative to examine textbook conversations, especially at the beginning and end of conversations. Discourse Analysis, first proposed by Harris in 1952, has attracted a great deal of attention from scholars and has gradually developed into three branches, one of which is conversation analysis theory. Brown (1980) points out that there are openings and opening sequences, closings and closing sequences in conversation. The first step in a conversation is to gain attention, and the last is to end the topic. In China, the study of conversation analysis began in the 1970s. Liu Hong (2006) investigated the characteristics and functions of turn, turn-taking, the conversation structure, and the opening and closing of a conversation. Conversation analysis has also been applied to the study of language teaching, but there are few studies of conversation in spoken English learning materials at home. This paper investigated the oral English textbooks used by university students. At present, the study of the opening and closing of conversation in English spoken textbooks has not been fully covered in the academic field. Therefore, based on Liu Hong's (2006) theory of conversation analysis, this paper investigates the opening and closing of the conversation structure used in the series of spoken English textbooks *functioning in an intercultural community* using Book 1 and Book 2 as corpus.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conversation Analysis

In 1974, Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson published a famous paper, "A simplest Systematics for the Organization of Turn Taking for Conversation", in which they presented a structural system for a turn in conversation based on their study of natural conversation, describing how interlocutors in everyday conversations alternate turns between speakers. By taking an empirical approach, they explored the principles and regularities of everyday conversation in social interaction through the recording and precise transcription of natural conversations in life. This system of rules consists of two parts: the first part is the turn construction part, which examines how discourse is constituted, and the second part is the turn distribution part, which explains how the turn taking is achieved.

In conversational analysis, a conversation consists of two or more turns. There is a basic structure in a conversation. A conversation usually has an opening and a closing. During a conversation, the speaker and the listener constantly change roles and take turns speaking. However, there are some rules in turn taking. The most typical structural unit is the adjacent pair. In adjacent pairs, sometimes the listener interrupts the speaker's turn, and there are insertion sequences; speakers also have their own correction mechanisms. The theoretical framework of conversation analysis contains a number of important concepts, including turn-taking, adjacent pairs, preference organization, repair and so on. What's more, research is few regarding the application of conversation analysis theory to the development of English language teaching materials in China and using conversation analysis to analyse dialogues in Oral English textbooks will give us a new look in future textbook compiling.

3. Openings in Functioning in an Intercultural Community

According to Liu Hong's (2006) theory of conversation analysis, conversation openings include openings between strangers and openings between acquaintances. In the two books, openings between strangers appear 22 times in total. Liu Hong (2006) classifies the conversation openings between strangers into the following five types:

3.1 Conversation between Strangers:

Question: conversations in order to get unknown information. For example, ask for the time.

Eg: Excuse me, sir, could you tell me the way to the department store? (book1, unit 13)

Request: conversations in order to ask for help. For example, borrow a pen from someone at the post office.

Eg: Excuse me, could you do me a favor? (Book1, Unite 4)

Introduction: conversations in order to build relationships. For example, participants introduce each other during a meeting.

Eg: Hello, Mr Grey. Let me introduce Mr Feng to you. He's the new interpreter. (Book1, unit2)

Offer: conversations in order to provide help. For example, offering to help someone with their bag.

Eg: I'm very sad to hear that, but how can I help you? (Book1, unit4)

Small talk: conversations in order to break the silence and awkwardness of the situation. For example: casual conversation between passengers on a train.

Eg: Sir, how far is the castle from the city? (Book1, Unit13)

According to Liu Hong (2006), conversation happens in three main situations

3.2 Conversation between acquaintances:

Conversation happens in a situation between people who have been close to each other for a long time, such as family members, colleagues, and classmates;

Eg: Lucy: I'm tired of watching TV. Let's go to watch a movie tonight.

Dick: All right. Do you want to go downtown? (Book1, unit5)

Conversation happens when people call in other people's homes or places of work;

Eg: Lucy: Let me get you a cup of coffee.

Diana: Thanks. (Book 1, unit 4, Lucy invited Diana to her apartment for a visit.)

Conversation happens when people meet outside their homes or places of work. This includes meeting on the road or meeting on other occasions.

Eg: Tom: Hi, Jane.
 Jane: Hi, Tom.
 Tom: Are you waiting for the bus? (Book1, unit14)

The statistics of the selected opening sessions of conversation in the textbooks are listed below according to the above classification.

conversation	Openings between Strangers					Total
Book1 and Book2	Question	Request	Introduction	Small talk	Offer	
	10	7	3	1	5	26
Openings between Acquaintances						Total
Conversation happens in a situation between people who have been close to each other for a long time	Conversation happens when people call in other people's homes or places of work		Conversation happens when people meet each other outside their homes or places of work			
59	3		6			68

3.3 Types of Function in the Opening of Conversation

Based on the types of adjacent pairs summarized by Richards and Schmidt(1983) and the types of Chinese replies proposed by Liu Hong (2004), this study divides the types of adjacency pairs into the following 13 types: greeting-greeting, summons-answer, question-answer, farewell-farewell, introduction-greeting/introduction, advice-accept/reject, thank-humble/thank, invitation-acceptance/rejection, offer-accept/reject, statement response(statement/addition/question/request/confirmation/affirmation/negation), request-grant/putoff/refusal/challenge, congratulate-thank/humble/congratulate, wish- thank/wish.

Types of adjacent pairs in the opening		proportion		
First pair part	Second pair part	Functioning in an intercultural community1(77)	Functioning in an intercultural community2(20)	Total
greeting	greeting	6	4	10
summons	answer	1		1
question	answer	28	9	37
farewell	farewell			
introduction	greeting	2		2
	introduction			
advice	accept			
	reject			
thank	humble	1		2
	thank	1		
invitation	acceptance			
	rejection			
offer	accept	2	2	4
	reject			
statement-response	statement	6	2	32
	addition	4	1	
	question	9	2	
	request	2		

	confirmation	2		
	affirmation	4		
	negation			
request	grant	6		7
	refusal	1		
	put-off			
	challenge			
congratulate	thank			
	humble			
	congratulate			
wish	thank			
	wish			

4. Problems at the Opening of Conversations in the Textbooks

4.1 Problems at the beginning of conversations between strangers

The number of conversation starters between strangers accounts for only 28% of the total number of conversation starters in both textbooks, compared to 72% of conversation starters between acquaintances, which is significantly low. The content of the textbooks is based on students' lives, and conversation is usually designed between teachers and students, classmates and friends. However, students are likely to encounter many situations in which they need to deal with strangers in their daily lives, such as asking for information. The scenarios designed in the textbook need to be improved in terms of real-life situations. The most frequently used two types of conversation starters between strangers are question and request, with an introduction, offer and small talk being less involved. Although making a request between strangers at the beginning of a conversation is one of the more designed types in both textbooks, the strategy for expressing a request is simple in the textbooks. In the 1980s, Blum-kulka conducted research on the speech acts of request and identified three types of request strategies in English: impositives, conventionally indirect, and non-conventionally indirect. Impositives usually use imperative and declarative sentences; conventionally indirect request strategy asks the listener about his possibility of conducting behaviour, usually in the form of a question; non-conventionally indirect request has no fixed form, and hints are usually used to fulfil the request. Most dialogues in the textbook begin with conventionally indirect requests, and the other two types are less frequently used. Therefore, it is necessary to add other types of sentence patterns to express requests. For example, needs statements, such as "I need...., I would like you to....", imperatives, imperatives plus tag questions, such as "Turn off the light, will you?", pre-request, etc.

On the basis of examination of the textbook dialogues, it is found that whether between strangers or acquaintances, the functional type of adjacency pairs in the opening of dialogue is basically question-answer based. There are some shortcomings in the representation of the functional types of the second pair part. In daily life, respondents can use a wide variety of functional types as responses to the speaker; however, in the textbooks, different second pair parts are not fully covered. According to Levinson, Atkinson and other conversation analysts, responses involve different orders and constraints, with at least one being preferred and one being dispreferred. Dialogues represented in the textbooks contain significantly fewer functional types of responses that may occur in everyday life. In conversations between strangers, the dispreferred format responses make up only a very small proportion of the total number of conversations, while preferred format responses are dominant. Students learning English as a second language are unlikely to receive or give a preferred response in all situations. Oral Textbooks are used to develop students' communicative skills in daily life. If the dialogue is written to focus only on preference format but ignores the types of functions that may occur in other situations, students will be overwhelmed when they encounter dispreferred format responses, which is contrary to the principles of the practical and communicative nature of learning materials.

4.2 Problems at the Beginning of conversations between acquaintances

Conversation starters in the textbooks show that there is a predominance of conversation happening between acquaintances who are members of the same family, colleagues in the same office or students in the same dormitory, and the other two types occur less frequently. In terms of the way acquaintances are addressed at the beginning, the dialogue in the textbook is set up in a way that prefers to address them by their first names or in no address form. Occupational titles and other forms of address also appear. However, some address forms are not represented, such as "Mrs+last name, Miss+last name, Lady, Madam, Sir". Address forms are closely related to cultural factors and are widely used in people's life. Solidarity and power relationships influence the use of address form. As there are few other forms of address in the opening dialogue, it is not possible to inform second language learners on the appropriateness and variety of ways to address each other in everyday communication. More types of address forms need to be added to improve students' communicative competence. The most frequently used type of conversation starter between acquaintances is the "question-answer" type. Most of the conversations in the textbooks are designed in a situation where acquaintances work or study in a common place. In such cases, conversations at the beginning of this type are relatively simple

and casual, mostly straightforward, using greeting or address signals to introduce the topic directly. On this issue, given that the introduction of the topic begins mostly with statements and questions, it should be a matter for the textbook writers to be aware of how to use a richer expression in the same context. Though conversations are set in visiting scenarios, the content is not designed to be a conversation starter but one section of the conversation. In both textbooks, the proportion of conversations calling in other people's homes or places of work is small, and the design of the beginning of each conversation in *Functioning in an Intercultural Community* simplifies the greeting at the beginning of the conversation. Moreover, how they greet each other when English speakers pay a visit to other people's homes is not fully shown, and the structure at the beginning of the conversation is not complete, which reflects in one way the lack of awareness of conversational structure among textbook writers. Here is an example:

(Lucy invited Diana to her apartment for a visit Book1, unit4)

Lucy: Let me get you a cup of coffee.

Diana: Thanks

Lucy: Black or with cream?

Diana: Uh, with cream please.....

5. Closings in *Functioning in an intercultural community*

It is the topic of conversation closings as part of overall structuring practices. It is a vital component of interactional competence. According to Schegloff and Sacks(1977), the closing of everyday conversations generally consists of three basic parts: the topic boundary sequence, the preclosing sequence and the closing sequence. However, in real-life conversations, closings of conversations vary in different situations. Sometimes participants don't use boundary sequences and preclosing sequences to end the conversation. Studies have revealed some scripted dialogue closings are unauthentic. If a conversation closes, both participants need to negotiate the talk to its very end. A basic closing consists of a preclosing sequence and terminal exchange. Pre-closing is one or more adjacency pairs where participants initiate closure before terminal exchange; terminal exchange is an adjacency pair where participants exchange goodbye and end a conversation. Examples of terminal exchange include A: G'bye B: Goodnight (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973, p.307). A: Thank you. B: You're welcome (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973, p. 298). However, terminal exchanges are sometimes omitted and incomplete in *Functioning in an intercultural community* book 1 and book 2. Here is an example:

Ann: I hope it is. I'm very fussy about the food.

Waiter: I have great confidence in our chief, if you can just give us another chance.

Ann: All right.

Waiter: Thank you very much, madam. See you next time. (book1, unit2)

In this conversation, Ann is not satisfied with the food, and she complains about it to the waiter. At the closing, there is no second pair part to the waiter's answer. From a dataset of 94 dialogue closings, only 8 closings contain terminal exchanges. One of the problems for second language learners is "the inability...to pick up on the closing signals of the interlocutor and/or to respond to these signals accordingly" (Griswold, 2003). The preclosing signal is a lexical item, such as OK, alright then, well, so, yes, anyway, which neither adds anything new to a current topic nor raises a new one. For example: 01A: Okay boy, 02B: Okay 03A: Bye bye. 04B: Good night (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973, p.307). However, dialogues in the two books do not include "okay", which is an extremely common preclosing signal in English as a preclosing signal. Therefore, it is necessary to add supplements to the existing materials that reflect the actual preclosing signals used in interaction.

According to the study, there are nine preclosing sequence types used in telephone conversations(Button, 1987, 1990, 1991; Schegloff & Sacks, 1973): (1)announced closing; (2)appreciation; (3)arrangement; (4)reason-for-the-call; (5) solicitude. (6)back reference; (7)in-conversation object; (8)topic-initial elicitor; (9) moral or lesson sequence. However, dialogue closings in textbooks display a very limited range of preclosing sequence types. Here are five types that appeared in the textbooks.

The arrangement sequence is a preclosing sequence in which participants make or restate plans to contact one another or get together. Here is an example from textbooks:

Ted: I prefer the restaurant across the street. It's a little older, but the food tastes better.

John: Oh, yes. I really like that, too. Let's go there next time.

Tod: OK. (Book1, Unit9)

In the dialogue, John initiates closure by proposing they go to that restaurant next time, which is an arrangement sequence. Tom accepts with a minimal response, "OK".

The appreciation sequence is a preclosing sequence in which participants express or repeat thanks to one another. For example:

Policeman: It's about a five-minute walk.
Harry: That's very clear. I think I can find my way. Thank you.
Policeman: No problem. (Book3, Unit13)
Harry expresses his appreciation, and they end the conversation.

A solicitude sequence is a pre-closing sequence in which participants express concerns, well-wishes, regards to third parties, holiday greetings, or the like. It is probably the most familiar sequence. An example of a solicitude sequence is below:

Mr. Grey: We will miss you, too. I suppose you'll be leaving soon?
Mr Li: In a couple of days.
Mr Grey: Well, I wish you great success at the institute.
Mr Li: Thank you very much. (Book1, unit 2)

An announced closing sequence is a preclosing sequence in which participants overtly state that the conversation should close and/or give a reason for ending the conversation. Here is an example from textbooks:

Jack: Well. It looks as if we'll have to wait till next week then.
Mary: Yes, I am sorry, Jack. Look, I must go now. I have to meet Tessa in 10 minutes. Call me next week some time.
Jack: Fine. Try and keep an evening free for me.

In the example, Mary used the utterance "I must go now. I have to meet Tessa in 10 minutes." to give a reason for her leaving. Jack accepted her closing, and the conversation ended.

A moral or lesson sequence is a preclosing sequence in which participants use a moral or lesson to summarize the topic so far. In the example below, after Miss Burners' agreement, Mr Evans summarizes the topic with "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy".

Mr Evans: Oh, yes, Everything becomes routine after a while. But it's up to us to make the routine a creative experience.
Miss Burners: Oh yes, I do agree!
Mr Evans: And we mustn't forget that "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy." (Book1, Unit 19)

The preclosing sequence types are mostly arrangement and appreciation sequences in the textbooks; other types, such as back-reference, in-conversation object, and topic-initial elicitor, are not scripted in the textbooks.

6. Problems at the Closing of Conversations in the Textbooks

Many dialogues don't have closings. One of the reasons why most of the dialogues do not have closings is that they are designed to be conversations between acquaintances. Given the nature of conversations between acquaintances, there is no fixed format for the closings of the conversations because after discussing the topic, people will continue to engage in the conversation or the events that preceded it. There is no indication that the two parties are going to separate, so many of these dialogues, which take place between acquaintances, are not designed to end. However, the target audience for our materials is non-native learners who are weak in basic knowledge of the language and the understanding of the structure of a conversation. Therefore, it is important that we design a complete structure of the conversation so that learners will be benefited.

There is no response at the end of the conversation. According to the theory of adjacent pairs in conversational structure, turns occur in pairs, and the second pair part should appear in the next turn after the first pair part; otherwise, there would be a lack of complete turn structure. The generation of a response is not random; it must be chosen from several types of responses. Most of the conversations in these two textbooks are designed to be conversations between acquaintances, which are characterized by familiarity between acquaintances. Therefore, there are not many constraints in the conversation. Patterns are not fixed at the end of the conversation, and there can be a natural conversation or a natural silence. In this case we have examined the end of the conversation in these two textbooks on the question of whether there are adjacent pairs and whether the conversation structure is complete. Through analysis, it is found that some dialogues don't have responses at the end of the conversation in the two textbooks. Here is an example:

Susan: Oh, I see. But then what should I do after I find the book I want?
Librarian: Click on the book you want, and you will see its identification number. Write down the number, and you can locate the book by the number on the shelves in the library.

Susan: Oh, I get it. Thank you very much for your help. (book1, unit4)

In this case, the librarian offered help to Susan, according to the adjacent pair: thank—thank/humble; the librarian should respond to Susan's appreciation; however, at the closing of the conversation, there is no sign of response.

In a text, a complete conversation closing is not commonly seen, and many conversations mainly focus on the presentation of the preclosing sequence, mostly arrangement and appreciation sequences. Although other types of preclosing sequences are involved, they infrequently occur, including the farewell sequence, which occurs frequently in daily conversations, which is rare in these two volumes. In addition, the first volume focuses more on the presentation of the basic conversation between acquaintances, while the second one has improved the complexity of conversation. Both conversations in the two books are mostly limited to face-to-face conversations.

It is also found that relatively complete conversation closings mostly occur in conversations between strangers. Generally speaking, conversations in the two textbooks all pay attention to adjacent pairs of the "question-response" type. What's more, since dialogues are represented in written forms in textbooks, non-verbal forms of the beginning and end of the conversation are not shown to learners.

7. Suggestions for Textbook Compilers and Teachers

On the basis of summarizing the characteristics of *Functioning in an intercultural community*, the following suggestions are proposed in terms of textbook compilation and language teaching:

(1). Textbook compilers should improve the completeness, diversity and colloquialism of the opening and closing of conversations. First of all, the compiler of the textbook should pay attention to the integrity of the textbook dialogues and the closing of the conversation, ensuring that the ending of the conversation in the textbook is as complete as possible. If space is limited, it is possible to consider choosing a more obvious closing sequence to highlight the topic or the end of the conversation. Secondly, it is recommended that compilers enrich the diversity of conversation opening and closing types in the textbook, narrow the differences in the proportion of conversation settings between strangers and acquaintances, and increase the diversity of types and functions. Thirdly, it is necessary to represent the diversity of address forms and the richness of address types. Consideration could be given to setting up special topics to conclude the ways in which people in English speaking countries address each other so that learners of English know how to address each other properly in their daily communication. Finally, minimizing the use of incomplete closing of the conversation and representing more closing type sequence.

(2). Teachers can appropriately show other types of forms in the opening and closing of the conversation. For instance, using various forms of teaching materials, such as multimedia, audio recordings, extracurricular reading materials, etc., is helpful in deepening students' understanding of the opening and ending of English conversations. Even if most of the ending sessions of the conversation in the textbook are incomplete, teachers may flexibly select texts with more complete conversation sessions as a focus in their teaching. Besides, it is advisable that teachers adopt appropriate teaching methods, such as task-based teaching approach and situational approach, to help students acquire the form of conversation opening and closing in a vivid dialogue. Given dialogues in the textbooks are represented in written forms, it is necessary to set up special subjects to summarize the opening and closing of nonverbal conversations that cannot be reflected in textbooks.

8. Conclusion

Under the guidance of conversation structure theory, an empirical study is conducted by extracting the relevant dialogue from the textbook, and a table is used to compare and analyze the opening and closing of the two textbooks. This study investigates the openings and closings of conversations in textbooks by adopting conversation analysis to find out some problems in the design of conversations in the textbooks and offers suggestions for future textbook compiling and language teaching. This study indicates that there are some problems in the design and compilation of the conversation, such as the single type of functional form of expression at the beginning of the conversation, the proportion of dispreferred format is relatively small, and the address form not diverse enough. As for the closing of the conversation, because the compilation of the textbook will be limited by space, it is impossible to script a complete ending for each conversation. It is suggested that textbook compilers should design as many different types of closing sequences as possible and try to enrich expressions of closing sequences if they are used in the same situation. This study sheds light on the deficiencies of the dialogue design in the textbooks and provides relevant suggestions to textbook compilers and teachers. However, a limitation of this study is that the theoretical basis is not fully grounded, and the sample is relatively small. In spite of its limitations, this study offers some insight into the compilation of oral English textbooks in the future and provides some help in English teaching. More corpus needs to be added to investigate this research in the future.

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