A Structure for Successful Conversation in the ESL Classroom

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Introduction

Conversation is one of the most important ESL skills a student can have. It employs and enhances a host of other skills, such as listening, vocabulary, grammar, developing responses, and critical thinking. Students crave this practical English skill as it allows them to engage and communicate, which is the very reason most students are learning the language in the first place. Unfortunately, in Japan, students on the whole are sorely lacking in this very important department. There are numerous reasons for this, but perhaps the main one is lack of practice. The following are two simple conversation lesson plans that aim to get the students to utilize much of what they already know, while at the same time introducing new vocabulary, expressions, grammar, etc., with context and practical usage.

Class 1: Talking about Food

Class outline

1) Warm up: (brainstorming) activity
2) Pair work with general questions about food and dining out
3) Extension exercise: interactive food survey
4) Class review (quiz)

Class note: At the beginning of class, the teacher should put the students into pairs, preferably with students who have not been partners before.

1) Brainstorming activity

With their partners, have the students (together) brainstorm and write down at least 7 words that spring to mind when they think of the word ‘food.’ If they have trouble coming up with the English word, tell them they can use their dictionaries.

A good thing to do to confirm understanding and get things going is to first write the word ‘food’ on the board and explain that there are no wrong
answers. It could be any type of word: noun, verb, adjective, etc. Start things off by writing any food related word (such as ‘tasty’) on the board and point to a student to elicit a response. The student might say, “cake.” Point to another student and that student might say, “cook.” Tell the students they have 5 minutes to complete the exercise. Throughout the activity, walk around the room and engage the students on a more personal, one-on-one level.

This activity is a wonderful way to kick off the lesson because it immediately has the students working together while focusing on the topic of the lesson, it’s fun, and it’s easy. The students will either be busily discussing particular words, or be discovering new words together with their dictionaries. After the time is up, tell the pairs to choose one answer and go around to each pair and have them announce it to the class. Encourage them to try not to repeat words already taken and write their responses on the board. This is also a surefire way to ‘organically’ introduce new vocabulary to the class.

2) Food questions

Have students discuss the conversation questions on their worksheet.

**Class note:** It is important for students to know how to ask follow-up questions, know how to expand on their answers, and be ready to illustrate them with details and examples. I find that to ensure the students understand what you are expecting, it is best to model a question. Prompt a random student in the class to ask you the first question, “What is your favorite food?” I would say, “Sushi, especially salmon.” I would then ask the class if anybody could think of a follow-up question to my answer. A student may raise their hand and perhaps ask, “What kind of salmon?” I would then say, “Toro-salmon. But I only eat that on special occasions because it’s expensive.” By doing this simple ‘pre exercise’ exercise, you are setting the bar higher with more defined expectations and encouraging the students to not only answer the questions, but to make that important leap towards truer and more effective communication (the lesson’s objective.)

For the lower level students, it may be a good idea to go over each question to confirm understanding and give model answers for each.
a) What is your favorite food?  
b) What food do you dislike?  
c) What’s the strangest food you have ever eaten?  
d) What is your favorite restaurant?  
e) Do you prefer to eat Japanese food or Western food?  
f) Do you think your diet is healthy?

Give the students 10 or 15 minutes to complete the task. Dictionaries are allowed because there’s lots of new vocabulary to be found, but downplay the need for ‘perfect’ grammar and instead emphasize the importance of fluency and communication. During this task the teacher should walk around and monitor. These types of exercises in particular are an excellent opportunity for the teacher to engage with the students one-on-one, which is not only vital to check for understanding, but it allows the teacher to more thoroughly gauge individual student’s strong and weak points and at the same time to bond with them on a personal level.

At the end of the activity, go through each question as a class. For example, for question 2, you might have all the students stand up at once and then instruct each one of them to take turns answering the question and then sit down. You could also encourage the other students to ask one or two follow-up questions before they are allowed to sit down. If class size is too large, (say over 20,) you could simply throw in random parameters such as, “All students born in winter stand up,” or, “All students who have an android smart phone stand up,” or, “All students wearing glasses stand up,” etc. The exercise is fun and utilizes the lesson’s objectives of engaging the students in more meaningful and evolved conversations.

3) Extension exercise: Food Survey

Have the students stand up and find a new partner. Give the students about 4 or 5 minutes and then have them change partners again. Then repeat the exercise. Explain to the students that the focus is not on completing all the questions, but rather to concentrate on engaging in meaningful conversation. Emphasize the use of follow-up questions through illustrated answers.

How often do you….  
a) eat French fries?  
b) eat chocolate?
c) eat fruit?
d) eat vegetables?
e) eat fish?
f) eat at a fast food restaurant?
g) miss breakfast?
h) eat with your family?

Once the activity is finished, have the students sit down and share information about the other students with the rest of the class. For example, “Mariko’s favorite chocolate bar is snickers,” or, “Shuto doesn’t like fish.”

4) Review (quiz)

A fun and very constructive activity I employ in my conversation classes is a general review at the end of the lesson. This review comes in the form of a quiz and could include anything that comes up in that particular class. For example, for the topic of ‘food,’ vocabulary such as ‘scrumptious,’ ‘smorgasbord,’ or ‘pricey’ might arise, as well as new phrases such as ‘I’m starving,’ or ‘I’m stuffed.’ Also, new information, such as ‘31 Ice Cream’s’ Western name being ‘Baskin Robbin’s,’ or ‘shu cream’s’ being ‘cream puff,’ may be mentioned. In addition, information the class has learned about individual students may arise. For example, “What is Mariko’s favorite type of chocolate bar?” “Snickers.”

I ask a question to the class and the first student to tap their table is given the chance to answer. If the student answers correctly, their name is put on the board and they get a point. The student with the most points at the end of the game is the winner. Such an activity not only acts as fantastic general review of the class, but it is fun and engaging. Perhaps most constructive of all though is that it motivates students to stay more focused, actively listen, and take better notes during class because they are aware that any lesson point or information covered in the class is a possible question for the review quiz.
A Conversation Activity: Food
(Student’s Worksheet)

1) Brainstorm 7 or more words that spring to mind when you think of the word ‘food.’

2) Discuss the following questions with your partner:
   a) What is your favorite food?
   b) What food do you dislike?
   c) What is the strangest food you have ever eaten?
   d) What is your favorite restaurant?
   e) Do you prefer to eat Japanese food or Western food?
   f) Do you think your diet is healthy?

3) Discuss the following questions with your partner.
   How often do you…….
   a) eat French fries?
   b) eat chocolate?
   c) eat fruit?
   d) eat vegetables?
   e) eat fish?
   f) eat at a fast food restaurant?
   g) miss breakfast?
   h) eat with your family?
Class 2: Giving Opinions

This lesson plan contains the following 4 steps, each building logically on the previous. Students will:

A) Practice giving opinions about a familiar topic
B) Give and respond to opinions about a variety of topics
C) Give a structured response opinion
D) Give a mini presentation

These are all important skills for ESL students to master and this activity is flexible since it can be used across levels, with a variety of topics, and in different conversational settings. The lesson plan is written primarily for the students as if it were a segment in a textbook, and it is therefore easy for the teacher to follow.

The teacher should put the students into pairs or small groups for steps A) to C) and change the pairs/groups over and set time limits at his/her discretion. The teacher can also add other lexical phrases that he/she thinks are useful for giving opinions, agreeing, and disagreeing.

The teacher will need to help to prepare the students for the more challenging step D) (mini presentation) activity by emphasizing the 5 points to remember on P.4, namely:

1. Use the ‘Introduction / Body / Conclusion’ structure
2. Make eye contact with the audience
3. Speak loudly, slowly, and clearly
4. Try to use gestures
5. Be prepared to answer questions afterwards

In addition, the teacher should focus on preparing the students with regard to any other points that he/she feels are important when presenting in front of the class. Again, setting time limits here provides an important parameter for the students.

A) Use the framework below to answer the following 3 questions about your hometown.
Is your hometown...
1. a good place to live?
2. an interesting place to visit?
3. famous for anything?

Useful language

**Giving an opinion**
In my opinion, ....
I think ...
For me, ...
I feel ...
As far as I’m concerned, ...

**Giving a reason**
because ...
The (main) reason is ...
One reason is ...

**Giving support**
For example, ...
A good example is ...

A) Now let’s brainstorm a list of 10 opinion statements (not facts) to share our opinions about. The first 2 have been completed for you.

1. All Japanese students should start learning English at elementary school.
2. Japanese food is very healthy.
3.
4.
5.
6.
7.
8.
9.
10.

Now give your opinion about each of these statements using the language above to help you. You should also either agree or disagree with your partner(s) using the language below to help you.
Useful language

Agreeing
I (completely) agree  
Yes, that’s right  
Absolutely  
Yes, of course  
Yes, I’m with you on that

Disagreeing
Actually, I don’t really agree  
I know what you mean, but ...  
I understand what you’re saying, but  
Yes, but don’t you think ...  
I’m not sure

B) Now choose 1 of the topics above to talk about in more detail by giving a structured response. Read the example below to help you.

My topic: Japanese food (is very healthy.)

Introduction (Give your opinion about the topic)
I think that Japanese food is very healthy for several reasons.

Body (Explain your 3 reasons for this opinion)

Reason 1: Firstly, ... Japanese food contains a lot of vegetables and also seaweed which are low in calories and contain many important vitamins and minerals. Most Japanese eat some of these every day.

Reason 2: Secondly, ... most Japanese eat more fish and less meat than people in Western countries. Oily fish, such as salmon and sardines, contains heart and brain-healthy omega 3 fats.

Reason 3: Finally, ... Japanese fast food, especially at convenience stores, includes healthy options, such as green beans (edamame,) salad, rice balls, and sugar-free drinks. This stops people becoming overweight.

Conclusion (Give a summary)
In conclusion, for these 3 reasons, I feel that Japanese food is very healthy.
Now make some notes below to help you to give your structured response. You don’t need to write in full sentences.
My topic: ____________________________________________________________

Introduction (Give your opinion about the topic)

Body (Explain your 3 reasons for this opinion)

Reason 1: Firstly, ...

Reason 2: Secondly, ...

Reason 3: Finally, ...

Conclusion (Give a summary)

Now take it in turns to give your structured response to your partner(s.) Remember to listen carefully to the other student(s) in order to ask some follow questions and to agree or disagree with what they said. You can make some notes about the points you want to respond to below.

Notes:
C) Now go back to your notes and add a few more supporting details. Then take it in turns to stand up and give a mini presentation to the class. Remember to:

1. Use the ‘Introduction / Body / Conclusion’ structure
2. Make eye contact with the audience
3. Speak loudly, slowly, and clearly
4. Try to use some gestures
5. Be prepared to answer questions afterwards

You can make some notes about the points you want to respond to below.

Notes: