Grammar of Conversation and Its Role in Teaching English Language at Tertiary Level in Bangladeshi Context: Teachers' Perception

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Abstract: *In Bangladesh, English Language Teaching shifted from traditional Grammar Translation approach towards Communicative Language Teaching approach. Although in CLT approach all language skills should be treated equally, we still do not give emphasis to all four skills. Speaking skill should be highlighted for learners at tertiary level in order to improve communicative competence in learning English language. This article tries to focus on the differences between the grammar of conversation and the written language. Then, it presents some features of grammar of conversation and discusses that if learners can effectively use the features of grammar of conversation, they can develop their proficiency in English language. In this research a study has been conducted through questionnaire survey with teachers and the results have been analyzed while some suggestions have been made on the basis of the results.*

Keywords: *grammar of conversation, written language, tertiary level, features of spoken language*

1. Introduction

English is treated as a foreign language in Bangladesh. Now most of the private universities in Bangladesh are following Communicative Language Teaching approach. In CLT approach four language skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening) should be emphasized and taught equally in the English classroom. Unfortunately speaking skill is hardly practised and emphasized at SSC and HSC level in Bangladesh except in English medium schools. So when the learners of Bengali medium school and college get admitted to private universities, they face problems because of poor speaking skill. As a result, it becomes difficult for them to communicate in the class. As the learners are poor in speaking skill, they remain weak in comprehending and producing spoken language, and they fail to achieve the CLT goal of communicative competence.

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Though each language skill plays an important role to develop the competence of the language learners, and the CLT approach is found in syllabus and curriculum, classroom teaching is mostly limited to develop only two skills: writing and reading. But, the importance of speaking skill is recognized in English language teaching now- a -days. Besides, linguists who have also begun to describe features of spoken grammar are skeptical about the application of written register in speaking skill. Basically, the grammar of conversation is different from the written language, and if the learners can identify and use the grammar of conversation effectively, they can enhance their communicative competence in English language. In order to do that, they need to be aware of the differences between the grammar of conversation and written language. In this regard Helgesen (2003) states:

> Spoken language is very different from written language. It is more redundant, full of false starts, rephrasing, and elaborations, incomplete sentences, pauses, and overlaps are common. Learners need exposure to and practice with natural sounding language (p. 32).

Real life conversation does not sound like the textual language. It is different from written language. Formal descriptions of English grammar are typically based on standards of written English. Technological advances have made it possible to analyze and to construct large corpora of spoken data. Recently researchers have highlighted the characteristics of spoken grammar.

This paper focuses on the differences between grammar of conversation and written language in English language teaching. It also discusses some common features of the grammar of conversation with activities. Finally, some recommendations have been made that can be applied to teach grammar of conversation.

2. Background of the Study

All over the world English is taught as the first, second or foreign language for correspondence. Although many researches have been conducted on the poor performances of the Bangladeshi students at different levels and on the strategies of improving different skills, but very few researches have been conducted to identify and making them aware of the different features of spoken grammar and the differences between spoken grammar and written register. Simultaneously, in spite of having some speaking activities at different levels of learning, no test has been designed for Bangladeshi

learners to prove their oral competence. As a result, the learners cannot develop natural, real life speaking competence. Therefore we considered the necessity of incorporating features of spoken grammar for teaching speaking skill and have tried to highlight the differences between the features of conversation and written register for the tertiary level students.

3. Literature Review

As a matter of fact, not only the written language but also the spoken language contains grammar. People often consider spoken language as a poor version of the written language. Historically, spoken language precedes written language. Besides, all of us learnt to speak long before we learnt to write. Thus, when we learnt to write we actually learnt to transform into written symbols what we already knew (Palmer: 1984).Besides, spoken grammar deserves attention because of special and distinctive characteristics that enable speakers to communicate ideas in a changing environment. McCarthy and Carter (1995) highlighted the grammatical features of spoken language; they stated that spoken grammar was neglected by standard grammar of written language. McCarthy and Carter (1995) pointed out, "Learners need to be given more grammatical choices if they are to operate flexibly in a range of spoken and written contexts" (p. 207).

3.1 Difference between Spoken language and Written Register

Learners should be aware of the differences between the features of spoken language and written register. The following two excerpts are quoted to recognize the difference between spoken grammar and written language.

Excerpt I:
A: My little brother is a really good student.

B: Why do you say that?

A: Well, he is really smart, so he always gets good grades.

B: Maybe he gets good grades because he studies hard.(Hilliard, 2014)

Excerpt II:

A: Didn't know you used boiling water.

B: Pardon?

A: Didn't know you used boiling water.

B: Don't have to buy it's um…they reckon it's um, quicker.(Hilliard, 2014)

The first excerpt is taken from an English text book, and the second excerpt is from a real life conversation.

In this regard, Lier (1995, p. 88) states that spoken language and written language differ in many significant ways. Some key contrasts between spoken language and written language are presented in the following table:

Spoken language	Written language
Auditory	Visual
Temporary, immediate reception	Permanent, delayed reception
Prosody (rhythm, stress, intonation)	Punctuation
Immediate feedback	Delayed or no feedback
Planning and editing limited by channel	Unlimited planning, editing, revising

(Lier, p.88)

By following these differences between writing and speech, it can be assumed that learners who learn a foreign language largely from a textbook often sound artificial. After identifying these features of spoken grammar, the learners can increase the authenticity of their speaking skill, fluency in face to face conversation and avoid speaking English in textual language. At tertiary level, if the differences between spoken grammar and written language are identified at the beginning of learning, learners can improve their speaking skill and learn to speak naturally (Hilliard, 2014).

In a language learning process, teachers need to represent spoken language in course books and also in classrooms. Learners need to learn how to present complaints, how to mitigate requests, or the use of vague language. Learners need to understand speaking in target language; the speech acts and speech events. Teachers should understand that learners need to develop some awareness about speaking skill (Paran: 2012, p.451). Two areas need to be focused on: firstly awareness of differences between written and spoken language and secondly, strong language production skills (Huges:2010).These points identify important implications for thinking about what teachers can teach in a language class for teaching the target language.

The following five features of spoken grammar will help the teachers to understand the characteristics of spoken grammar and to give instructions and guide activities of learners for their development of the spoken skill.

3.2 Feature 1: Ellipsis

Ellipses are incomplete constructions resulting from the omission of one or more words that are clearly understood. Ellipsis can be clarified in terms of the elements, even though with some of the clausal elements. Ellipsis in conversation can be classified as initial ellipsis and final ellipsis. In spoken English, initial ellipsis, words near the beginning of the clause that have low information value are dropped and are meant to be understood from the situational context. It is also called situational ellipsis. Situational ellipsis often occurs with omission of subject and verb (Hilliard: 2014). It is not commonly used in written English. Situational ellipsis occurs in a shared context and therefore allows speakers to reduce the length and complexity of their comments (Leech, 2000).

3.3 Features 2 and 3: Fillers and Backchannels

Fillers and backchannels play significant roles in contributing to the interactive character of speech, because they signal relations between the speaker, the listener and the discourse. Fillers are words and utterances like 'er', 'well', 'hmm'. These words are devoid of meaning but they fill up the time and enable the speaker to gather his or her thoughts. Backchannels are words or utterances like 'Oh', 'Okay', 'I mean' that are used to acknowledge what the speaker is saying to encourage the listener to continue to listen to the conversation.

There are different types of fillers and backchannels: such as- greetings /farewell – hi, attention getters – hey, response getters – okay, discourse markers – well. In conversation, individual items can be used for more than one function, for example, okay can be used as a discourse marker, a response form, or a response-getter. Although fillers and backchannels are peripheral to grammar, they play an important role in the interaction between the speaker and the listener. So it will be difficult and awkward to have a conversation without them (Willis, 2003).

3.4 Feature 4: Phrasal Chunks

Chunks are fixed words or phrases that can be attached to other elements but act as ready-made lexical units of language. Phrasal chunks show the habitual repetitiveness of speakers in general. Phrasal chunks have been defined in many ways. Wray's (2002) definition of lexical chunk is:

> A sequence, continuous or discontinuous, of words or other meaning elements, which is, or appears to be, prefabricated; that is, stored or retrieved whole from memory at the time of use, rather than being subject to generative or analysis by the language grammar (p. 465).

From the above definition it can be understood that the basic characteristics of the phrasal chunks can be stored and retrieved automatically as a whole unit in the process of language acquision. Some examples of phrasal chunks are given below.

Example: *I don't know why* Robert didn't play much at the end of the season.

Moreover, conversation has more use of "phrasal chunks" than academic writing.

Example: *Can I have ...?Do you know* what ...?

As conversation occurs in real time, face to face context, speakers rely on fixed words and phrases to fulfill particular grammatical purpose. Additionally these phrases are used as conversation fillers so that the speaker can have enough time to think and what to say in the speech communication process (Cullen and Kuo, 2007, p.370).Finally, in order to enhance both the fluency and efficiency of the language production of learners, teachers need to pay more attention on phrasal chunks.

3.5 Feature 5: Stances

Speakers in conversation express their feelings, attitudes, and assessments of likelihood, and these are identified as personal stance. Modal verbs, complements, clause construction and adverbials are some of the most common grammatical features in conversation are used to express stance. For polite or respectful purposes in conversation, the speaker in her/his interaction requests, offers, apologies and for expressing those acts some specific words are used. Some inserts represent politeness. Example: *thanks* and *thank you, please* and *sorry*. Vocatives such as *sir* and *madam* also play a respectful role. For exclamations , the speaker can use *how wonderful*. For managing interaction many inserts and discourse markers also can be used. So conversations display a varied range of attitudes. These special features are used by the speaker to represent their feelings in conversation.

4. Activities for Teaching the Grammar of Conversation

As grammar of conversation occurs in real time, face to face and in shared contexts, it is difficult to incorporate speakers' instruction in the EFL language classroom. At the same time, EFL textbooks, there is a lack of many features of grammar of conversation; thus, many language teachers have to tussle to teach them (Hilliard, 2014). In the following activities, some examples of spoken grammar have been incorporated for teachers that will help them to instruct students on ellipsis, fillers, backchannels, phrasal chunks, and stance.

4.1 Spoken English Activities for Ellipsis

First the instructor can discuss the definition and types of ellipsis. Then the teacher can give them some examples of ellipsis. Afterwards, the teacher will select a short video where two or more than two speakers are speaking. Then, the teacher can give the students an exercise script where all the omitted subjects and verbs will be included. After showing the video clips to the students, the teacher can ask them to cross out the words that they do not hear in the video clips. The teacher can ask the students to have a discussion on which words have and have not been omitted in the clippings. Then the teacher can tell the students the answers. (For Table 1 video and transcripts are available at Luke's English Podcast: http://teacherluke.co.uk/2010/03/26/116)

Instruction: Watch the video carefully and cross out the words in the script that you do not hear
Interviewer: So, uh, how long have you been in London? Interviewee: I have been in London two weeks. Interviewer: Is that really true? So what do you do? Interviewee: I study graphic design at Camber well School of the Arts. Interviewer: So, this is your first two weeks? Interviewee: Yes, this is my first two weeks. It's quite a big impact. London is very big, there are lots of people, and it's quite expensive as well.
Answer Key: (words not heard are in parentheses) Interviewer: So, uh, how long have you been in London? Interviewee: (I have been in London) two weeks. Interviewer: (Is that) really (true)? So what do you do? Interviewee: (I study) graphic design (at) Camber well School of the arts. Interviewer: So, (this is) your first two weeks? Interviewee: (Yes, this is my) first two weeks. It's quite a big impact. (London is) very big impact. (London is) very big, (there are) lots of people, and it's quite expensive as well.

4.2 Spoken English Activities for Fillers and Backchannels

The teacher can first introduce the concept of fillers and backchannels, and then explain their function. Then the teacher can select a dialogue, and ask students to identify fillers and backchannels. This activity will help the students to use fillers and backchannels to the appropriate places.

Dialogue from textbook (Identify the fillers and backchannels in italics)
Dialogue: 1
David: How soon would you be able to do it for me? Henry: *Well now,... let me see,* ... How soon could we do it? David: Because... *well actually, you see...* I was hoping to find someone who could do it by the weekend. Henry: *Ah,* that's a problem... I'm not quite sure, But I think...
Dialogue: 2
Janet: Have you seen my typewriter anywhere, Simon? Simon: *Ah ,... let me think...* When did I last see it? ... *Oh yes,* I'm afraid I borrowed it last week. I didn't think you'd mind, and *er...* I think I must have left it at work.

4.3 Spoken English Activities for Phrasal Chunks

As spoken grammar is repetitive and formulaic, phrasal chunks are frequently reused. Incorporating several classroom activities of phrasal chunks will teach the students to apply it in their conversation. In the activity the teacher can give the students some detached sentences and ask them to identify different phrasal chunks from the sentences.

Instructions: Identify the phrasal chunks from the following conversation and underline
Jonas: ... And then I came up with the ... the thought that maybe a ... a communal stretching session would be appropriate as well ... or maybe I don't know ... a yoga lesson in the evening.
Ana: Yes but ... yeah ... yeah maybe ... a few more breaks would be good. What about ... introducing breaks of about 15 minutes one in the morning and one in the afternoon ... during which people can go to the gym ... and I mean you mentioned some stretching ...

> Ana: I just had the idea of ... I mean maybe there are some exercises certain exercises people can do in a very short time even if they stay in front of their computers but ... yes ... just a little bit of stretching ... standing up every now and then ...
>
> Jonas: Yes ... that's quite right ... if you ... I mean it would be pretty realistic to organize something like this ... between ... in breaks or I don't know and it would be of course all on a voluntary basis you wouldn't ... wouldn't be forced to do yoga or anything like that.

4.4 Spoken English activities for stances

Spoken grammar expresses different stances. In spoken grammar, for different stances different vocatives, modal verbs, interjections, adjectives etc. are used to express different expressions. In the activity, the students can watch videos expressing different stances, and identify different speech acts like requests, greetings, offers, apologies, orders, exclamations etc. Then the teacher can prepare a script with the words expressing stance omitted and ask students to write them after watching the video. Afterwards, the teacher can discuss the role of stance in conversation with the students.

5. Methodology

This descriptive exploratory research used survey method for data collection. Both primary and secondary data have been used to conduct the research. To collect primary data, a structured questionnaire was made to survey tertiary teachers from different private universities. The sources of secondary data collection process were publications, research studies and journals. Private universities were chosen for the survey because their medium of instruction is English. After analyzing the data the responses were calculated in percentages.

5.1 The Respondents

For the questionnaire survey, 33 undergraduate teachers from the Department of English have been randomly selected from four private universities. Among the teachers 23 are female and 10 are male. Their age varies from 25 to 43 years. The experience of the teachers varies from 2 to 13 years.
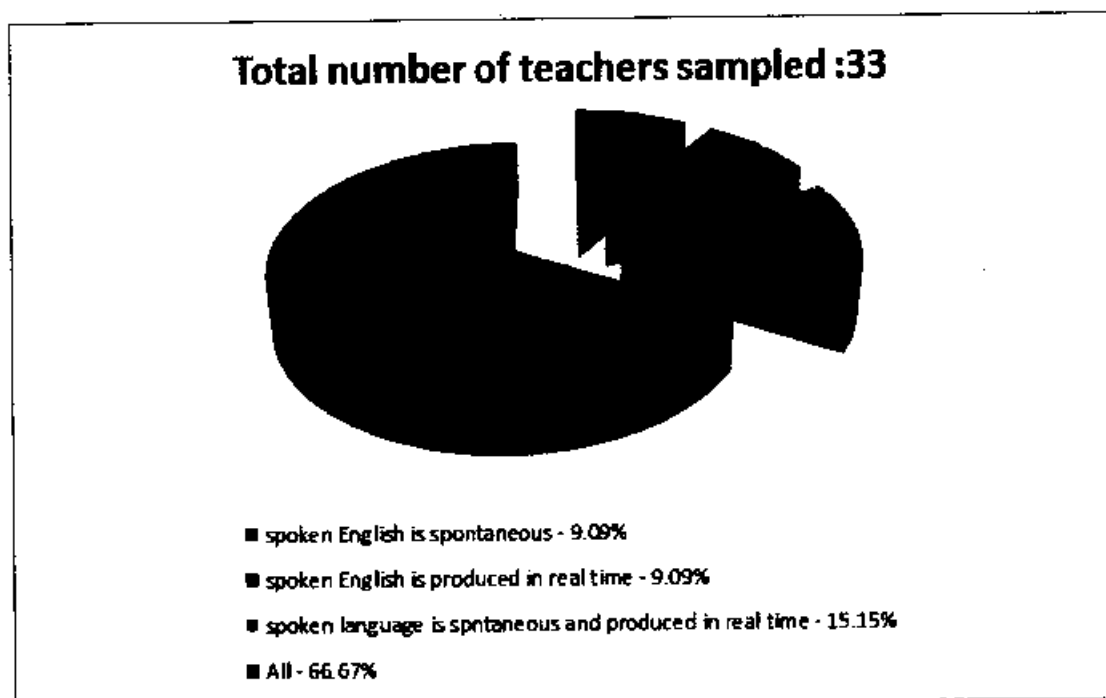
5.2 Data Collection Tools

For collecting information, questionnaires were prepared for teachers. The questionnaires for teachers contained 4 fixed alternatives and one open ended question. In the open ended question, the teachers were requested to provide their valuable suggestions. After collecting the survey results, the calculated responses transformed into percentages shown in a table. In the qualitative research, opinions and feedbacks of the respondents were given priority.

5.3 Findings

The primary study planned to look at the responses from the questionnaire set for teachers. In the questionnaire, the first three questions focused on teachers' knowledge about the differences between spoken grammar and written register. The fourth question was set to ascertain the reason to teach spoken discourse. In the questionnaire for teachers, the first question was set to know whether English grammar of conversation is different from English written register. In reply, it has been found that 100% (33) teachers think that English grammar of conversation is different from written English register.

The second question was set to find out whether the grammar of conversation should be taught in an English language class. 100% (33) teachers answered that the grammar of conversation should be taught in English language class.

The next question was asked to come to know the features of English grammar of conversation that makes it variable from written register. From the responses to the question it has been found that9.09% (3) teachers identified spoken English is spontaneous, 15.15% (5) teachers replied spoken English is produced in real time, whereas 66.67% (22) teachers referred to all features of spoken English that makes it variable from English written register. Moreover, in the same question 9.09% (3) teachers answered that spoken English is spontaneous and spoken English is produced in real time. Thus, most of the teachers selected all features of grammar of conversation that makes it variable from written English register.

Total number of teachers sampled :33

■ spoken English is spontaneous - 9.09%

■ spoken English is produced in real time - 9.09%

■ spoken language is spntaneous and produced in real time - 15.15%

■ All - 66.67%

Figure 1: Features of English grammar of conversation that makes it variable from written register

Through the fourth question, the teachers were asked to explain what pedagogical issues they considered important while teaching English. In reply to the question with alternatives,60.61% (20) teachers opined that teachers should consider all pedagogical issues(increasing learners' spoken ability to interpret target language, using spoken language in all contexts, emphasizing the production and the recognition of spoken grammar, producing spoken grammar at great speed) should be considered while teaching English. 6.06% (2) teachers selected increasing learners' spoken ability to interpret target language, 6.06% (2) teachers chose using spoken language in all contexts, and 9.09% (3) teachers identified emphasizing on the production and recognition of spoken grammar. In reply to the same question, 9.09% (3) teachers selected both increasing learners' spoken ability to interpret target language, and using spoken language in all contexts, 9.09% (3) teachers chose both using spoken language in all contexts, and emphasizing on the production and the recognition of spoken grammar.

The last question was asked to gather the suggestions and recommendations in teaching grammar of conversation in a language class at tertiary level. Some teachers opined that grammar of conversation is still a neglected area which should get more priority specifically in teaching spoken skill. One

teacher suggested introducing real life conversation in the classroom so that the students can easily handle the challenges of spoken difficulty. Another teacher suggested ensuring a target language environment in the university premises. Some said to practice simulation based real conversation outside the class. Students may bring recorded materials and fellow students may provide their comments on that. One of the teachers opined to incorporate tasks and activities of spoken grammar in the class. Students should watch movies with subtitle. One of the teachers recommended incorporating worksheets and videos of spoken grammar to improve learners' spoken language. Someone suggested incorporating role play where students might be put in real life situations.

The following table shows the questions asked to the teachers and their responses:

Question topic	Responses			
1. English grammar of conversation is different from English written register	Yes-100%		No-0%	
2. Grammar of conversation should be taught in an English language class	Yes-100%		No-0%	
3. Features of English grammar of conversation that makes it	Spoken language is spontaneous-9.09%	Spoken English is produced in real time-15.15%	Spoken language is spontaneous and produced in real time-9.09%	All-66.67%

variable from written register						
4. While teaching English what pedagogical issues should they consider	Increasing learners' spoken ability to interpret target language-6.06%	Using spoken language in all contexts-6.06%	Emphasizing the production and the recognition of spoken grammar-9.09%	Increasing learners' spoken ability to interpret target language and Using spoken language in all -contexts -9.09%	Using spoken language in all contexts, and emphasizing on the production and the recognition of spoken grammar-9.09%	All-60.61%

6. Recommendations

On the basis of the analyzed data and the findings, and the open ended question set for the teachers, the following suggestions can be recommended. The implementation of these recommendations may help to bring about some positive changes in teaching English grammar of conversation.

1. Teachers should teach the students the characteristics of spoken grammar and demonstrate how to apply them in real conversation. The students should be given some communicative tasks and activities for the advancement of the knowledge of spoken grammar.

2. Existing ELT textbooks do not always include or cater adequate or complete materials for common features of spoken grammar. Thusteachers should supplement the authentic or specially constructed material to expose the students to spoken dialogue.

3. Real life situations with the features of spoken grammar can be created in the classroom so that students can easily handle the difficulties in spoken skill. Simulation of real conversation outside the class can also familiarize students with features of spoken language used by native speakers. Ensuring a target language environment in the university premise for students can also foster the learning of spoken grammar. Students should be competent to recognize and produce spoken grammar like native speakers.

4. While teaching English spoken language, teachers should increase learners' spoken ability to interpret target language, use spoken language in all contexts, emphasize the production and the recognition of spoken grammar, and produce spoken grammar at great speed.

5. Movies with subtitles can be shown to the students to familiarize them with features of spoken language. Then the teacher can introduce and explain different features of spoken grammar used in the movie. Based on the dialogue of the movie, students can be given different communicative tasks and activities.

6. In the class students can listen to different situational dialogues in audio CDs. There may be different conversational situations such as: dialogue at the bus stop, at a railway station, in a cricket match, in the hotel reception, in a hospital, at the airport etc. After presenting the conversation, students can be asked to participate in a question answer session.

7. Students can also record different dialogues containing features of grammar of conversation in different situations on which fellow students may provide their comments.

7. Conclusion

The focus of Communicative Language Teaching is to getting learners to speak. But it is a challenge for teachers to get learners to interact. As learners at tertiary level in Bangladesh feel speaking is a tough activity, both the teachers and the learners need to contribute to improve the speaking skill. In order to achieve fluency and accuracy of speaking skill, students should be familiarized with the features of conversation used by the native speakers. At the beginning, teachers should identify what spoken grammar is and thenthey should teach students the features of spoken language which is necessary both for production and comprehension for communication. Finally, it can be said that by incorporating the activities of spoken grammar and by following the recommendations, teachers can help the tertiary learners to be interactive

said that by incorporating the activities of spoken grammar and by following the recommendations, teachers can help the tertiary learners to be interactive in the target language and prevent their speech from sounding like artificial textbooks.

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Appendix

Survey questionnaire for the teachers

A survey is being conducted on "The Grammar of conversation and Its Role in Teaching English at Tertiary Level in Bangladesh". Please complete the following questionnaire in light of your own experience and opinion. All information provided by you will be kept highly confidential.

Name of the Institution:

Type of the Institution:

Teaching Experience:

Age:

Gender:

1. Do you think English grammar of conversation is different from English written register?

   a) Yes   b) No

2. Should the grammar of conversation be taught in an English language class?

   a) Yes   b) No

3. What are the features of English grammar of conversation that makes it variable from English written register?

   a) Spoken English is unplanned

   b) Spoken English is spontaneous

   c) Spoken English is produced in real time

   d) Spoken English occurs in shared context

   e) All above

4. While teaching English spoken grammar what pedagogical issues should the teachers consider?

   a) Increasing learners' spoken ability to interpret target language

   b) Using spoken language in all contexts

   c) Emphasizing the production and the recognition of spoken grammar

   d) Producing spoken grammar at great speed

   e) All above

5. What are your suggestions or recommendations in teaching grammar of conversation in a tertiary language class?