‘Reverse reading’ conversation lessons

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Q: When is a conversation lesson not a conversation lesson?
A: When it’s actually a reading lesson with some discussion questions tacked on for the last 10 minutes.

A common approach to conversation lessons is that the teacher, or students, brings in an article or text as a prompt. It makes for a lesson with more structure than just trying to chat for an hour, which is a challenge for long-term classes, and provides a source of new vocabulary.

The bad news for falling back on a text as a prompt is that reading and understanding the text ends up dominating the lesson. This dominance proliferates even though many of us would agree that students often ask for speaking practice above everything else. It’s not conversation about the topic that then follows, it’s responding to the text. That might mimic exams, but it doesn’t resemble real life. When was the last time you discussed something you’d read by answering a series of questions on it and then commenting at the end how much you agree?

The good news is that it’s easy to overhaul reading texts to turn them into full speaking activities by reversing the tasks from the usual order of Reading → Comprehension → Language analysis → Production/Speaking.

For the purposes of this article I’ve used a text which has been edited for length but not level. If you’re using a text from a coursebook, the level will be right for your class. If not, adapt it to suit.

1. Production
Braindump conversation questions that raise ideas from the text. You can discard any that aren’t interesting enough to discuss, but students will linger over or skip questions according to what piques their interest so it’s better to have a long than a short list. Work in vocabulary and lexical chunks that will otherwise cause difficulties when reading, to prime students to ‘Notice’ them. You can include questions that serve as a lead in and reactions to the topic in general.

Here’s a (not exhaustive) list I came up with, target language highlighted both in the questions and the text for the ease of the students when reading later.

1. What devices/apps do you use every day? How often do you check them?
2. What do you know about Google Glass, iWatch or FitBit?
3. Have you used apps or gadgets to track fitness or nutrition?
4. Have you ever bought and ditched gadgets? How long did it take for the novelty to wear off?
5. Where do you keep your phone? Is it getting scratched to hell, floating around in your bag?
6. What are the benefits of wearable devices? What are the drawbacks?
7. Do you have a panic attack if you forget your smartphone when you leave the house?
8. What do you think of someone wearing Bluetooth headsets to talk on the phone? Do they look like an insufferable geek?
9. How do you usually tell the time? Do you wear a watch? Are watches functional these days or just outdated statements of wealth?
10. Would you use visible wearable technology or technology embedded in your clothes?
11. Are we well on the way to smartphones taking over the role of the personal computer?
12. How many people in the world have smartphones? One out of every …?

2. Language analysis
Since the target language is in context in the questions, the teacher can tackle any difficulties or ‘pre-teach’ during the discussion, at the same time encouraging students to use the language while speaking.

3. Reading
Often the students get so involved in the conversation, because it’s natural and not curtailed by a text that’s told them what to think, that the entire class gets taken up by speaking. Assign the text for homework in much the same way as in the Flipped Classroom approach.

This way, students who want to will reinforce the language by reading and will be much better prepared to deal with the text with less support. They might not read it at all, which would suggest reading for them is not a priority. Even more reason to shift it out of the class!
4. Comprehension questions

Students could devise their own comprehension questions, as homework to be exchanged in the next lesson. Obvious benefits are further practice of the language, taking the workload off the teacher and providing an engaging revision activity as students care much more about the answers to questions they’ve written themselves.

Preparing the materials is the work of 10 minutes once you get used to doing it. Simply go through the text and see if you can pick out enough language or points of conversational interest. If not, it wasn’t going to make an interesting lesson in the first place and that’s definitely worth knowing in reverse.

What’s wrong with wearables?

Janel Torkington, on www.medium.com
[Full link: https://medium.com/the-wearables/84568d05e432]

I, too, want to get excited about Google Glass, the iWatch, the FitBit Force, and the rest of the next wave of wearables. Like everyone else these days, I’m riding the nutrition and fitness wave. I love data on my progress but hate the effort it takes to track it. I want an ankle thingy that tells me everything through the magic of technology.

My smartphone’s slowly getting scratched to hell, floating around in my bag. I want a thingy safe from the danger of loose change and bobby pins. I spend precious seconds poking around for my smartphone to check for urgently incoming Facebook likes, maybe a full two minutes each day. That’s nearly 12 hours of rummaging each year that could be alleviated by an immediately visible thingy on my wrist or face.

Unfortunately, the thingy of our dreams is not going to happen, not as a wearable, and certainly not in the near future. Here’s why:

1. There’s not enough added value

Wearables are inconvenient, and current technology doesn’t offer enough added value to offset the drawbacks. This isn’t true for absolutely everyone. There are folks who truly dig knowing how many steps they walk each day, but for most of us, the novelty wears off sooner rather than later.

The Endeavor Partners research quoted by the trending Guardian piece focuses on fitness trackers, which Americans are ditching en masse. About 10% of US adults bought a tracking gadget; a mere half of them still use it.

If you’re going to remember another gadget, it has to provide tangible added benefit. Leaving your smartphone at home means a panic attack on your commute, plus being exposed to dreaded eye contact on the metro. Forget your FitBit and, what? You’re missing a data point on your Lose It! graph?

Any reasonably-sized watch screen isn’t big enough to replicate the complexity of what a smartphone can do. Even reading a significant amount of text is out of the question. Voice controlled tech isn’t strong enough yet to facilitate complicated interactions, either. The slight convenience of not having to pull anything out of your pocket when you get a text doesn’t outweigh the effort required to deal with one more device.

2. Wearable tech is dorky

A wrist- or ankle-mounted device is fairly discreet. Anything else looks ridiculous. Electronics anywhere near the face conjure up either insufferable Silicon Valley geeks or socially unacceptable cyborgs. We’re not going to get over the awkwardness of wearables anytime soon. Consider the general attitude towards Bluetooth headsets, which came out 14 years ago.

Regrettably, wrist-mounted devices aren’t the solution either, because:

3. No one wears a watch anymore

The usefulness of a watch has been completely usurped by digital devices. Actual watches are only fashionable as musty, outdated statements of wealth. Watches aren’t cool. No one I know under 40 wears a watch, and certainly few folks under 30 would ever consider owning one.

Smartphones are fine, because they’re not something you wear. Even if you use the thing exclusively to shoot digi-zombies full of bullets, it’s an eccentric hobby rather than the personal image you present to a style-conscious public. Anything worn on your person has to be the fickle barrier of fashion.

The alternative to wearables

Wearables will work when tech renders them completely invisible – say, as contact lenses à la Minority Report, or as a device completely embedded in your clothes. We’ve got to be able to set it and forget it. My prediction: smartphones are going to completely take over the role of personal computers long before wearable tech becomes worthwhile.

We’re already well on our way there; many daily tasks (checking email and social media, getting directions, reading news, etc.) have already migrated to mobile. This trend’s only set to accelerate: estimates from last December put smartphone penetration at approximately one out of every five people worldwide. The future is definitely mobile. We’re just not going to wear it on our sleeves.