

The Performance of Iraqi EFL University Students in Using Conversation Closings

Iman M. Alshemmery Azhar Hussain Ubied Muayad M. Alshemmery

Introduction

1.1 Problem

In actual life communication, native speakers of a language utilize their communicative competence to communicate with others (Cf Canale, 1984). In other words, they depend upon the abilities which make them interact successfully at recognition and production levels. In this way, as a part of their communicative competence at the recognition level, they can recognize conversation closings in different situations. At the production level, they can perform conversation closings appropriately according to the given situations.

As far as learners of a foreign language are concerned, their performance in the target language is influenced by various pragmatic and linguistic factors such as the cultural and language interference (James, 1980:137). Concerning Iraqi learners of English, the recognition and the production of the conversation closings have not been dealt with in detail. As a result there is a need to answer the following question:

- To what extent can Iraqi learners of English recognize and produce different conversation closings?

1.2 Aims of the Study

1. Presenting a theoretical study about conversation closings.
2. Identifying the Iraqi EFL university students' performance in using conversation closings.
3. Finding out the subjects' errors and analyzing them through the results.

1.3 Hypotheses

1. Most of Iraqi EFL learners are not able to end some conversations correctly.
2. Subjects' achievement at the recognition level is expected to be better than their achievement at the production level.

1.4 Procedures

1. Presenting the literature relates to conversation, per closing , and closings .
2. Selecting a sample of EFL university students for conducting a test to investigate their performance in using conversation closings.
3. Identifying the learners' errors and analyzing them.

1.5 Limits

University students of the Fourth Year, Department of English College of Arts, University of Kufa during the academic year 2011-2012 .

2. Conversation

Conversation can be defined as a communicative act of speech among face –to –face interactants who exchange their speech with each other(Spier,1972:398). Gill and Rumbough (1974:172) state that conversation is " a vocal activity, an exchange of vocally produced statements between individuals". Depending on such definitions, it can be said that conversation is amount of speech which includes separate linguistic stretches produced by different speakers. Thus, it is a reciprocating process that requires two complementary modes(speaking and listening). For Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974) as cited in Coulthard , (1985: 69) , conversation is " a string of at least two turns". To know these turns it is essential to gain knowledge regarding the organization of conversation and type of turn used in each section of this conversation.Participants in any exchange of talk have goals to achieve and their task is how to organize their conversation to accomplish what is intended. Ervin – Tripp (1993:243) points out that it is required for the speaker and the listener to pay attention to what their partners in talk say and make appropriate responses. Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974), as cited in Sallumi, (2002:5), investigate 'turn taking mechanism' which involves assigning turns for participants engaged in talk exchange and one of the problems they face is how to 'close' a conversation. Ochs (1979:4) indicates that participants in any talk are sensitive towards the occurrence of the utterance in the opening or

closing parts of their talk because the utterances that may appear in the phases are expressing certain intentions in part on the basis of their appearances in the environment. Similarly, Burton's words (1980: 19): "Laver's point here is that it is in the opening and closing phases of an interaction that most of phatic communication is seen to be done; and that, note, these are points of psychological insecurity of differing kinds of degree ". Gernimo et al. (1985: 42) state that turns fall into three divisions : opening, replying and closing.

According to James(1980:136), conversation failure may occur in two ways:(a)When the participants do not or fail to achieve their communicative goal(so the conversation); (b)When one party stops participating. He (ibid.) adds that having communicative competence , one can avoid those failures. Thus, to end conversation in a wrong way is embarrassing and, even keeping silent or ending conversation hastily leaves bad impression. Consequently, knowing how to end a conversation appropriately is a task that needs skill. The present study tries to answer the question " How is the way to close conversation appropriately? ".

2.1 Pre-closings

Conversation has a beginning, middle, and an end. This fact is shown by Verschueren (1997:38) who points out that an important feature of conversation is the sequence in turns which includes openings and closings. Participants often try to end their interactions in a polite and tactful way because quitting talk accidentally is less preferable thing to receive.For Akmajian et al. (2003: 391) just as conversations begin with their central topic, so they rarely create an abrupt end. Participants have rarely ritualized way to let their conversation come to its end safely so they do not stop conversation all of a sudden. Brown and Levinson (1978:227-8) point out that the structure of conversation is sensitive to conversation violations such as interruptions, ignoring, ...etc. including the violations of closing procedures which are face threatening acts. To present tactful closings, one employs pre-closings (one of pre-sequences i.e. structures that are built to prefigure the specific kind of action that they potentially precede (ibid:396).

Following Akmajian et al. (2003: 391), the end of any conversation may contain pre-closing sequence, where participants agree to end it. They introduce then, the 'closing section' where they really close their conversation. These two stages are planned way of being finished, e.g.:

- We- ell, it's been nice talking to you.
- Say hello to Joan for me.

Similarly, other conversationalists (see Mey,1993: 319), and (Schegloff and Sacks 1973) clarify that there is what is called ' opening up closings' in which conversation is expected to finish so that others can have their say. There are signals in telephone conversation, for example, 'OK', 'Well' or other summarizing devices often indicate an upcoming closing 'pre closing'. Normally, they are followed by changing the intonation and speed to be easy to discover but difficult to describe. They (ibid.) state that these 'final' or 'intended to be final markers' can be employed to manipulate conversation. To prevent others from being involved in the talk, they signal that the next transition relevance place is the end point of the whole interaction, e.g., a speaker may remark at the final section of his speech "To sum this all up, let me add a last comment..."Or "Concluding our discussion, we should not omit to..." (ibid). When a conversation ends, participants do not produce any topic; they simply present their closing part of the talk(cited in Goffman,1976: 130):

**Farewells sum up the effect of the
encounter upon the relationship and
show that participants may expect
of one another when they next meet...
while the enthusiasm of farewells
compensates the relationship for the
harm that is about to be done to it
by separation.**

Ending a conversation without the rituals of closings endangers social relationships. Clark and Clark(1977:231) observe that closing phase :

1- Begins with pre-closing statement plus response.

2- Ends with the terminal exchange.

3- In its simplest formula, it may be like this:

A- Ok.

B- Ok. Or:

A- Bye.

B- Bye.

Or it can be done with the general formula:

The first speaker: pre- closing.

The second speaker: acknowledgement.

The first speaker :closing and departure.

In the pre-closing statement, expressions like 'well-ell' or 'okay' or 'so-oo' may appear to show the addressee that what is talked about is finished. Thus, the pre- closing statement investigates the listener to certain choices such as:

1- Bring up a topic that has not been mentioned before, or:

2- Agree to participate in the closing of conversation (ibid.)

2.2 Closings

The endings of conversations are things that need to be achieved. For Coulthard (1985:90) conversations virtually always end with 'a closing pair' which may include 'good bye' , 'good night', 'see you' and the like. Clearly, a closing phase occurs when a topic has been ended and other participants admit that there are no new topics to be presented. To reach the point where a closing sequence may start a participant needs certain planning or specific strategy.

According to Colthard (ibid.), topics frequently combine to yield 'a clear ending'. There are different ways of doing this:

1- When one party produces a proverbial or aphoristic summary or comment on the topic which the other party agree with:

DORINNE: Uh- you know, it is just like bringing the ----- blood up.

THERESA: Yeah, well. THINGS UH ALWAYS WORK OUT FOR
THE ----- BEST.

DORINNE: -----Oh certainly. (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973)

2- The other technique is for the speaker to indicate that he has nothing further to add to the topic by using his turn to produce simply 'alright', 'okay', 'so', 'well' almost lengthened with a falling intonation boundary. In this way the speaker passes. This helps the listener to choose either to introduce an entirely new topic, because the constraints of topical coherence have been removed or to pass and turn the speaker's given possible, pre-closing into a pre-closing sequence because non of them (both the speaker and the listener) present a new topic, they reach the closing sequence to stop the talk.

Topic THERESA: Yeah well. Things uh always work out for the

boundary

Best

sequence

Oh certainly

Pre-closing DORINNE: Alright Tess.

Sequence THERESA: uh uh. Okay.

Closing DORINNE: G'bye.

Sequence THERESA: Good night (ibid.)

This example indicates that both participants agree that the conversation had gone on long enough; however, in some cases, a speaker wants to end but for some reasons , he cannot achieve a topic bounding sequence thus, he will be obliged to produce a different type of pre-closing either a statement which presents a reason for ending:

- I gotta go, baby is crying.

or an offer to allow the other speaker to end:

- Well, I will letcha go. I do not Wanna tie up your phone.

- This is costing you a lot of money.

- Okay I will letcha go back to watch your Daktari (ibid.)

3- There are possible pre-closings which may not be accepted. The speaker may deny he wants to go away in spite of the fact that if he does accept, they can move into the closing sequence:

B has called to invite C, but he has been told that C is going out to dinner.

Pre-closing B: Yeah, well get on your clothes and get out and collect

Sequence some of that food and well make it some other time. Judy then.

C: Okay Jack.

Closing B: Bye Bye.

Sequence C: Bye bye. (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973)

The examples above contain only the essentials of a closing, an achieved pre-closing sequence and closing pair, but pre-closings may contain arrangements, reemphasizing arrangements made previously, restating the reason behind calling, in addition to many repetitions, and may continue for many utterances: Schegloff and Sacks (ibid.) quote 'modest' example of a closing containing twelve utterances .

The position after the possible pre-closing is the one provided for presenting any topic which has not been mentioned yet but new topics can be introduced after a pre-closing or even after a closing, provided that they are marked as being misplaced (ibid.).

CALLER: Okay, thank you.

CRANDALL: Okay dear.

CALLER: OH BY THE WAY I'd Just like to...(ibid.)

Any item included during the closing after earlier opportunities have been passed up have the status of after-thoughts and this position can be employed to take a way the importance of the news because people do not usually forget important news.

3. Some Conversationalists' Views

According to Akmajian et al. (2003:391), conversation should be brought to its end once the closing sequence has been reached except for special situations such as forgetting something important. A speaker can do this thing collectively with one notice or by glance at eye body, or separately with suitable closings. In his study of telephone conversation, Levinson (1983:315) argues that closing down topics are not strictly part of the overall organization of telephone calls, rather they are 'local procedures' that can work throughout the telephone call. He adds that closings are delicate matters both technically and socially. Because they must be so placed that no party is obliged to exist even when still there are compelling things to say. Socially means both over hasty and over slow

terminations may lead to unwelcome inferences about social bonds between participants. The structure of closing is sensitive to those problems. Thus, we find a talk close in the following manner:

A: Why do not we all have lunch.

B: Okay so that would be in St Jude's would it?

A: Yes, (0.7)

B: Okay so ::

A: One o'clock in the bar.

B: Okay?

A: Okay ?

B: Okay then thanks very much indeed George.

A:= All right

B: //See you there

A: See you there

B: Okay

A: Okay //bye

A: Bye

The standard features here are the arrangements to the next meeting, a sequence of 'Okays' closing down them. A 'Thank you' produced by the caller and a sequence of 'Okays' just before the final exchange of 'Good byes'. General formula for closing section in the previous example can be presented:

- a- a closing down of some topic, typically a closing implicative topic; where closing implicative topic contains the making of arrangements in mono- topical calls, sending regards to other's family, members,...etc.
- b- one or more pairs of passing turns with pre-closing items, like Okay, All right, So, :: ;etc.
- c- if an appropriate, a typing of call as a favor request and done (hence thank you), or as a checking up in recipient's state of health (well I just wanted to know how you were),...etc. followed by a further exchange of pre- closing items.

d- a final exchange of terminal elements: Bye, Right, Cheers,...etc.

The important element here (after (a) has been fulfilled) are (b and d). Crucially what is achieved by the two components together is a combination exist from the conversation: they do this by the form of the topic- less passing turns in (b), reciprocal agreement to talk no more, this being a preface to the exchange of the final adjacency pair in (d) which closes down the interaction. The reciprocal agreement is kept by one party presenting a topic- less passing turn, showing that there is nothing to add, while the other participant if he too has no more to add may present similar turn (ibid.). There are technical and social problems raised by closings. They are dealt with by giving the closing section as a whole is placed in a location that is interaction achieved: a pre-closing after to close is issued in the form of 'Okay', 'Right',...etc. and only if taken up do closing proceed (ibid.: 318). There is an important point about closing section that its components indicate that the placement and content of closing phase is attuned to all other features of overall organization. Thus 'Thanks' in the previous examples can be oriented to the specific context of the first topic position of that call, namely a request for favor. Similarly, one may find reference to aspects of opening section included in the closing section e.g., 'Sorry to have woken you up' referring to ' I hope I am not calling too early, or Well I hope you feel better soon ' referring back to responses to ' How are you?' , and so on. Each aspect of the whole structure can be oriented to other aspects.

4. James' Account

James (1980: 134) associates closing , to a great extent, with phatic communication which is used to 'terminate conversation amicably'. For him (ibid.), one can intend to or suddenly dispense with the etiquette where he/she will be viewed as 'socially gauche' or one's companion in conversation will lead to achieve he is upset one. He (ibid.) assures that when communication ends, it will not be easy to resume in the future. Thus, easy resumption can be ensured by polite closing. Laver (cited in James ,ibid.) identifies six closing strategies :

1- Give one's reason for terminating the encounter. If they are indexical , may be either self - oriented or other – oriented.

- Well, I'll really have to get on my way.

- Now, I must not keep you any longer.

The above turns reflect Lakoff's maxim of non- imposition.

2-Assess the quality of the encounter. Suppose, one can make a favorable or a crucial assessment.

- It's been nice talking to you.

- Well, I do not think all this has got us far.

3- Express concern for the other person's welfare when you will no longer be with him.

- Take care now.

- Mind how you go.

4- Reference to future resumption of encounter. In certain languages, there are fixed formulas for farewell that refer to future encounter. However, they do not express the speaker's wish to end conversation rather, they are symbols that termination is agreed upon and achieved. English uses some literal forms such as 'see you next week then' or ' can we fix a date for next time?'. Some people use this in their diaries to reinforce signal.

5- Reference to a mutual acquaintance, where that acquaintance is closer to hearer than to speaker, i.e., the expression is other – oriented, e.g:

- Give my regards to Mary. (hearer's wife)

- Say hello to the kids.

6- Increased use of terms of direct address: this has the effect of reassuring one's addressee, lest he should interpret one's desire to close the conversation as a rejection. This will compensate too much as it will tell the addressee that though business is business, one has not lost his addressee's sight on a personal level. Thus, those six strategies are shown by Laver (ibid.) regarding English society's communication. There is doubt about their universality. In other words, do all societies employ the same procedures for closing conversations? This question is in need to be answered through analyzing the errors of the test.

5- Test and Data Analysis

Brown (1987:219) believes that a test is a method that has the purpose of measuring the learner's ability in certain area. For Genesee and Upshur (1996:14) a test is a task or a form of measurement that elicits certain information from the test taker. It is generally agreed upon that errors are indicators of difficulties encountered in certain structures and the percentage of errors shows the degree of that difficulty (Johanson, 1975:225). Accordingly, the present test is constructed to investigate the performance of Iraqi EFL university students in using conversation closings. The test includes two questions, the first of which measures the students' responses at the recognition level, it is of ten items. The highest percentage of the correct answers is (78 %) in (item 10), the students answer this item correctly because they are exposed to many chances to deal with the conversations used in this item, whereas the lowest percentage of correct answers is (24%) in (item 1). This reflects the students' insufficient training and ability to deal with this item as they are incompetent in recognizing suitable closings conversation. The students' answers are shown in the Table (1). The second question is constructed to measure the students' responses at the production level. It also includes ten items, the highest percentage of the correct answers is (76 %) in (item 6), whereas the lowest percentage of the correct answers is (4%) in item (2). This rate shows that the students are unaware enough to deal with conversations used in these three items. This is an indication that most of the students face difficulties in closings conversation of such types. The students' answers are shown in the Table (2).

Table (1)

Subjects' Performance at the Recognition Level in Question (1)

No. of Q.	No. of Items	No. of correct answers	Percentage	No. of incorrect answers	Percentage
Q1	1	12	24%	38	76%
	2	17	34%	33	66%
	3	24	48%	26	52%

	4	23	46%	27	54%
	5	36	72%	14	28%
	6	35	70%	15	30%
	7	24	48%	26	52%
	8	17	34%	33	66%
	9	21	42%	29	58%
	10	39	78%	11	22%
Total		248	49.6%	252	50.4 %

Table (1) presents the following results:

- 1- The total number of the correct responses is (248, 49.6 %).
- 2- The total number of the incorrect responses is (252, 50.4 %).

It can be concluded that the students encounter difficulties at the recognition level since the highest rate of their correct responses is (248 ,49.6 %) whereas that of the incorrect responses is (252 ,50.4 %) . This reflects that they lack knowledge about the closings conversation.

Table (2)

Subjects' Performance at the Production Level in Question (2)

No. of Q.	No. of Items	No. of correct answers	Percentage	No. of incorrect answers	Percentage
Q2	1	8	16%	42	84%
	2	2	4%	48	96%
	3	8	16%	42	84%
	4	32	64%	18	36%
	5	8	16%	42	84%
	6	38	76%	12	24%
	7	37	74%	13	26%
	8	24	48%	26	52%
	9	30	60%	20	40%
	10	28	56%	22	44%
Total		215	43 %	285	57%

Table (2) presents the following results:

- 1- The total number of the correct responses is (215 ,43 %).
- 2- The total number of the incorrect responses is (285 , 57%).

It can be concluded that most of the students have failed to give the correct responses for the items in this question, hence the total number of the correct responses is (215,43%), whereas that of incorrect ones is (285, 57%). This indicates that most of the students face serious difficulties in conversation closings or they may be incompetent enough to produce closings of such types.

Due to the limited exposure to the language or insufficient practice of English language, the students produced wrongly closings conversation. Inadequate information about the conversation and real situations may be the main reason behind making ore erroneous responses in recognizing and producing them.

6- Conclusions

In the light of the preceding analysis, the following conclusions have been drawn:

- 1- Most of Iraqi EFL learners face difficulties in using conversation closings and they cannot differentiate between situations to close conversation correctly.
- 2- They are unaware of conversation closings and their types in the way that they did not know how to close conversations in different situations. Finally, knowing how to end conversation is a task that needs skill. Participants have to ensure safe and polite endings for their conversation because terminating a dialogue incorrectly or hastily endangers the break down of communication. In addition, it leads to unwelcome inferences on the part of the addressee.

Appendix A

The Test

Q1: Say whether each of the following conversions is closed correctly or not?.

(1) A: Excuse me, please. Could you tell me how to get to the town center?

B: First right, second left. You can't miss it.

A: Is too far to walk?

B: No, you can walk it in under five minutes.

A: It is a pleasure.

B: Thanks.

(2)

A: Which train do I take for Basra, please?

B: 9.30. This end of Platform 2.

A: When does it get in?

B: It gets there at 11.30.

A: Must I change?

B: Yes. It is a through train.

(3)

A: Can you tell me the charge for minibuses, please?

B: You can have one for 20000 ID a day, or 140000 ID for a week.

A: All right. I'll take one for the week starting Sunday next.

B: Is your driving licence valid?

A: Yes, I've had one ever since 2011.

B: Good. All you do now is complete this form.

(4)

A: Have you a single room for two nights?

B: Yes, but only on the top floor.

A: What price is it?

B: 25000 ID with service and TV.

A: Fair enough. Can you show me the room, please?

B: Many thanks.

(5)

A: I'm looking for a job where I can live in.

B: What exactly did you want?

A: A school job of some sort.

B: Have you ever done anything similar?

A: No, so far, not.

B: There is nothing at present, but look back in a week.

(6)

A: 223344

B: Hallo, Ali speaking. May I have a word with Ahmed?

A: I'll just see if he is in.

B: Right you are.

A: I'm afraid he's not here.

B: Would you ask him to call back.

A: Yes, of course.

(7)

A: How's your father keeping?

B: He's been off work for a day or two.

A: What's wrong with him?

B: He's gone down with a cold.

A: Tell him. I hope he soon feels better.

B: That's very kind of you. I'll pass it on.

(8)

A: I've got a sore throat and my chest hurts.

B: How long have you been like this?

A: Two or three days now.

B: I should think you have got flu: there's a lot of it about.

A: What do you advise?

B: Nothing. Many thanks.

(9)

A: It's time we were off.

B: So soon? Can't you stay a little longer?

A: I wish I could, but I'm already late.

B: What a shame!

A: Thank you for a good hospitality.

B: I'm glad you enjoyed it.

(10)

A: I want to fly to Geneva on or about the first.

B: I'll just see what there is.

A: I want to go economy, and I prefer the morning.

B: Lufthansa Flight LH 203 leaves at 920.

A: What time do I have to be there?

B: The coach leaves for the airport at 745.

Q2 : How would you close a conversation in the following situations?

1. You have got a stomach pain and you've seeing the doctor.
2. You have been invited to an enjoyable meal and you wish to leave.

3. You are looking for a room with service in a hotel and somebody has found it to you.
4. You have phoned your friend but she/he was out.
5. You are at the airport and a person books a ticket for you.
6. You are asking about Babylon University and a person describes the exact way for you.
7. You are in a hurry to leave. What do you say?
8. You really don't want to leave. What do you say?
9. You are " seeing someone off " at the train station.
10. You just met someone at the party, but you have to leave early.

Appendix B

The Answers of the Test

Q1:

- 1- F
- 2- F
- 3- F
- 4- T
- 5- T
- 6- T
- 7- T
- 8- F
- 9- T
- 10-T

Q2:

- 1- What shall I do?
- 2- Thank you for the most enjoyable meal.
- 3- Could I have a look at it, please.
- 4- Would you tell him / her I rang?
- 5- What time do I have to be there.
- 6- Many thanks.
- 7- Good bye, and thanks for everything.
- 8- I am thinking to spend an enjoyable time.
- 9- Good bye.
- 10- I am sorry, I am very busy.

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