

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Background of the Study

Students who are required to speak English especially in a conversation must face many problems. First, they should know the two main functions of language namely interaction and transaction (Yule, 1985:54). The interaction is aimed at building a social relation among the speakers of the language. Social interaction requires the students to understand the cultural norms and values of the people who use the language. In a conversation, for instance, they have to be familiar with expressions that deal with personal feelings. Second, they should know the difference between interaction and transaction which can occur separately or at the same time. The transaction has the purpose of transmitting information. Therefore, the students ought to know the certain expressions that can convey the meaning of communication. Scientific discussion is an example of transaction.

In fact, the interaction and transaction can occur in the same conversation. For instance, they can start the talk by using the greetings and social expressions that make the personal relation more intimate. Later they can exchange information that is essential to their life development and progress. The pressure of life requires them to know as much information as possible.

Speaking is a difficult skill to acquire. There are several reasons that can explain why it is difficult. The students should be open-minded people. They are

ready to welcome the ideas of other people. They should also feel confident in expressing themselves by using the common expressions. If they cannot maintain the conversation, the speakers will not feel satisfied.

In terms of communication, the problems are mainly concerned with the nature of the conversation. A conversation is an exchange of information that should be familiar with them. Thus, there is a topic to discuss between the two speakers.

In the process of speaking English, the conversation can be maintained to the end when the topic is well understood by the two speakers. The topic becomes the center of the conversation.

The procedures of conducting a conversation may be seen as a continuum.

First, one speaker starts the conversation by uttering a greeting or any expression that attracts the attention of another speaker as a listener. The second speaker then responds to the utterance either by uttering another greeting or any expression that makes the conversation interesting to be maintained. An interesting conversation is needed when the two speakers want to express more. It motivates them to contribute something to the interaction.

Second, the two speakers will take turns in expressing themselves. There can be a clue or signal that one speaker hear before he takes his turn. For example, the second speaker as the listener may feel that he should say something new or different to what the first speaker has said. In this case, turn-taking is an important aspect of the conversational interaction. If one speaker just keeps silent most of the time, then, the other speaker is said to dominate the conversation. The

conversation becomes boring because the two speakers give unequal amount of information. In other words, one speaker should be able to read the signal when he will take his turn. He cannot be silent all the time. The speaker who takes his turn normally knows when to interrupt the conversation.

Third, when the conversation goes on, the two speakers are supposed to enjoy it. The exchange of information goes from one speaker to another in the form of take-and-give manner. One speaker can tell more about the topic being discussed, however, the other speaker should also use his right or privilege to say something else. There can be an argument between the two. But that is not the main thing to notice in the conversation. It is the process of starting and ending the conversation which becomes the focus of attention.

When one speaker has to say something different, this is the time of changing or shifting the topic. This is possible because the mind of the speaker is creative. He can relate one idea with another. Some information is related to some ideas in the form of a continuous interaction. Topic shifting is another aspect of the conversational interaction. It is not easy to predict when one speaker shifts the topic. But it is possible to know if there is topic shifting during the conversation. The key words related to the topic can show if the topic has been shifted or not. Topic maintenance is focused on the constant contribution to the content of the topic. A speaker may say more on purpose or spontaneously to make the conversation more interesting and open another chance for the other speaker to contribute something else.

Certainly there are factors that influence the process of the conversation in the communicative interaction. Since the conversation is in English, the grammar of the language is an essential requirement for the speakers. When a sentence is grammatically wrong, the meaning can be confusing. The meaning of the sentence is a contributing factor to the success of making a conversation. Another factor is concerned with the vocabulary or words that are used. This is the concern of diction. The vocabulary used should be related to the topic being discussed. General vocabulary is mainly about daily activities such as “ go, walk, sit, sleep” and so on. Academic vocabulary consists of words that are mainly used for academic purposes by university students and lecturers such as “rotate, facilitate, consume, organize ” and so on. Technical vocabulary deals with specific words by experts of a particular science or technology such as “bluetooth, internet, gadget, conductor” and so on.

The other factor is concerned with the pronunciation of the words. Since English is unphonetic, it is important for the speakers to pronounce words. The wrong pronunciation can create the wrong meaning and misunderstanding between the two speakers. However, in the interaction, there is a clarification about the meanings that exist in the conversation. The clarification can be applied to the topic itself or to the mispronunciation of the words that the two speakers know.

In the writer’s observation, these things are not practically applied. The third year students (12th graders) of SMA (Senior High School) have a hard time to express their ideas in conducting a conversation. They seem to lack the

vocabulary and certain expressions for the purpose of communication. According to the SMA curriculum, the students ought to be able to express simple ideas about their personal experiences. This is the reality in the field. The writer has seen the weakness of most of the students who are not very proficient in this international language. Despite the given materials that are sufficient for the practice and exercises of conversation, this reality exists most of the time. It needs a kind of resolution.

Textbook conversations can be modified to meet the purpose of communicating well. There can be expressions that should be introduced to them at an early stage of learning English. The conversational skills are also the element of success in conducting a conversation.

Certainly, the gap between the reality and expectation is the problem to be solved in the field. The reality is clear enough when the writer has practiced the conversations with her students at school. The expectations are those things that have been mentioned earlier. They should be able to talk in English without much hangup or discontent. Doing a research in this area can help the writer find the solution to the existing problem. The writer should get the data in the form of conversation for the analysis of the facts discovered in the conversations.

The success of the conversation depends on the conversational skills applied by the two students or speakers. The skills can make them maintain the conversation to the end until the two speakers are satisfied. Such skills can be acquired through the constant practice. When they become accustomed to hearing

various expressions by one another, the speakers will get the meanings of sentences more clearly.

It is true that in a conversation or speaking interaction, speakers are not always aware of the grammatical mistakes. But they surely know what message they want to express. In other words, they know the “what” to say but they lack the knowledge of “how” to say in the linguistic sense. This is due to the fact that they have not mastered the grammar of English. Often they translate their native language expressions into English which lead to more confusion. When they are criticized for being unable to produce correct expressions, then, they will withdraw from the action. As a result, the speakers tend to be passive and timid in performing the conversation.

In the writer’s opinion, students of Indonesian language should be taught certain skills for maintaining a conversation. They need to know what makes them unable to contribute to an interesting conversation. These skills will be familiar with them when they have the chance to practice their English in daily conversations. In this case, the writes wants to make a research on what skills the students use and develop to maintain conversations in English.

The skills that the students use in maintaining their conversations can be observed or evaluated from the nature or theory of conversation. Basically, there are 3 discourse structures of a conversation namely *turn-taking*, *topic shifting* and *encyclopedic knowledge* (Hudson, 1980:134). These 3 structures will appear in the conversation that can lead the speakers or students to apply the conversational skills in having the conversations.

The skill for *turn-taking* is important because a speaker should know how and when to interrupt the other speaker. It is quite boring when only one speaker dominates the conversation. The interesting conversation as the two speakers really want to experience is when they can contribute something equally. Of course, there is no clear-cut fifty-fifty between the two. However, the speakers know that they should enjoy the conversation through the sharing of ideas (Hudson.1980:136)

The skill for *topic-shifting* is another one to be noted. The students who have the chance to express themselves will automatically have the desire to shift (change) the topic so that their conversation will be interesting. The more information there is, the better for them to communicate with each other. In other words, the emphasis of communication is on the content of the language. The topic is in the center of the conversation which can be shifted so that there will be more information exchanged. However, the students should be able to use meaningful expressions to show the shift. For instance, the expressions like “Talking about.....”, “By the way.....”, “Do you mean that....?” can suggest the possible topic shift in a conversation (Hudson, 1980:160)

The skill for *encyclopedic knowledge* in this case can be divided into 2 skills such as the *topic clarification* and *topic maintenance* because the topic contains the knowledge to be shared. If one speaker wants to contribute more to the conversation, he can do it in two ways -- by clarifying what has been talked about through question and by adding more knowledge as the spontaneous contribution. He can go further by asking the other speaker what information has

been given to make the conversation go on. The topic clarification can go on from one topic to another or within the same topic depending on the amount of knowledge being transmitted. In the topic maintenance, the speaker adds more and more information by assuming that the other speaker has no confusion about the given information. When one speaker is not satisfied with the explanation of the other speaker, then, topic clarification may help to bridge the gap between the two speakers. The gap is concerned with the amount of knowledge that one speaker has. (Hudson, 1980:167)

The gap can be acceptable because it is a fact that every speaker has a different amount of knowledge. It is said that, in the case of a class, one student may be cleverer than the other. The evidence is that one student may know the answer to a difficult question while the other student just keeps silent. Thus, the encyclopedic knowledge is all the information that one speaker can disseminate to his speaking partner. By applying the *topic clarification* and *topic maintenance* skills, the gap of knowledge can be minimized so that the conversation will be balanced.

The scenario of the conversation can be described as follows: two students of the same or mixed gender speak to each other in English. They have a desire to maintain the conversation and make it an interesting one. After some greetings or opening phrases, the two students get involved in talking about a certain issue or topic. The two may agree either to maintain the conversation to the end without shifting to another topic or to shift the topic so that more knowledge is shared and disseminated. When there is some confusion, they can clarify the topic so that the

two students can have the same perception or opinion about the topic. They must have the same basic knowledge or background in order to maintain the conversation to the end. The satisfaction is achieved when the two agree instinctively or on purpose to end the conversation. As the conversation goes on, there is a process of turn-taking, topic shifting and topic clarification and topic maintenance happening to end the conversation.

For the purpose of research, the writer believes that whatever the students say in a conversation must be taken into account. The utterances in the form of a word, phrases, sentences or expressions can be regarded as the data for the analysis on the students' conversational skills.

Thus, the purpose of the research is to find out the conversational skills that are used and developed paired students of different English mastery in their daily or free conversations, and then the writer can understand more about the nature of conversation and the challenges that the students face in mastering English. Certainly, a new discovery can contribute more information about the problems of conducting a conversation between two or more speakers or students in general. The writer hopes that this research will show how the students actually attempt to maintain a conversation through the three skills as mentioned in the theory of conversation.

1.2 The Problems of the Study

The problems of the study can be formulated in the following questions:

- 1) How do the 12th - grade students of SMA Negeri 19, Medan with different mastery of English develop the conversational skills?
- 2) Why do they use the skills the way they do?

1.3 The Objective of the Study

The objective of this study is to find out how conversational skills are applied or developed by the students in conducting their conversations in English and by two students of different proficiency level or mastery of English.

1.4 The Scope of the Study

Conversational skills consist of three discourse structures of a conversation. The *turn-taking*, *topic shifting* and *encyclopedic knowledge (topic clarification and topic maintenance)* are interwoven in a conversation. It means that the four skills are needed to maintain a conversation so that the speakers feel satisfied at the end of the talk. The application of these skills can be observed and evaluated by analyzing all that has been uttered by two students. The utterances are the data for the confirmation of the conversational skills as found in the transcriptions of the recorded conversations.

1.5 The Significance of the Study

The results of analysis in this research will be useful and meaningful for:

- A. Theoretically:

- 1) Teachers of English who want to improve their students' conversational skills by understanding the conversational skills that can be taught to them.
- 2) Students who will experience and enjoy the daily and free conversations in which they can learn how to contribute more information to maintain the conversation for the satisfaction of the speakers.
- 3) Textbook writers who will design conversations not only for the teaching of grammar but also for the application of the effective conversational skills.

B. Practically

- 1) Teachers who can use the effective conversational skills as explained in this study for the students' practice through the demonstration of conducting the conversations.
- 2) Students who will practice the daily and free conversations which give them a chance to share knowledge.
- 3) Readers in general who will be able to understand the nature of conversation as a means of disseminating knowledge.