



## DEVELOPING CONVERSATIONAL SKILLS VIA LITERATURE (PROVERBS, SAYINGS, MAXIMS)

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### ABSTRACT

*I would like to describe how I use proverbs, popular sayings, and maxims as conversation topics with my degree students in the Department of English language and Literature, College of Science and Humanities, Prince Sattam Bin Abdul Aziz University (Girls), Sulayyil, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.*

*The procedure involved completing, comparing, analyzing, and discussing proverbs and maxims. It permitted the participation of a large number of students (up to 40) and does not require preparation time.*

*The paper focuses on the use of these proverbs, sayings and maxims and highlights the acquisition of conversation skills.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Humanities, Prince Sattam Bin Abdul Aziz University (Girls), proverbs, sayings and maxims.*

### INTRODUCTION :

I would like to describe how I use proverbs, popular sayings, and maxims as conversation topics with my degree students in the Department of English language and Literature, College of Science and Humanities, Prince Sattam Bin Abdul Aziz University (Girls), Sulayyil, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The procedure involved completing, comparing, analyzing, and discussing proverbs and maxims. It permitted the participation of a large number of students (up to 40) and does not require preparation time. (The interaction is more authentic if you go directly into the proverbs.) However, I divided the students into working groups, gave each group a different set of proverbs to discuss, and then let them tell the others about their exploration of the proverbs. The groups that are listening are encouraged to interact whenever they wish by asking questions, giving their points of view, or making comparisons with their own set of proverbs.

I present below the three main steps I followed, the role of the teacher, and some conclusions about my experience with this procedure.

### First step

I selected as many proverbs as I knew or found in a dictionary or in a survey of English proverbs. I did not write them in full; the preliminary step was to arouse the students' interest in replacing blanks with key words, e.g.,

1. An Englishman's home is his \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_'s company, \_\_\_\_\_'s a crowd.

I had great fun trying to fill in the blanks with suitable words or expressions. Most of the time, they took words or expressions from similar proverbs in their mother tongue. When the teacher corrects these, replacing the words they have chosen with the actual words of the English proverb, students become aware of two things: (1) one language cannot be viewed in terms of another, as the uniqueness of each can make literal translations incomprehensible if not impossible; (2) proverbs and maxims tend to reflect different and sometimes opposite social, cultural, ethnological, and historical backgrounds. For example, an English speaker might say, "I am as happy as punch" or "I am as pleased as punch"; however, most of my students would say, "As happy as a king," or "As happy as a fish in water," according to their mother tongue Telugu pattern.

Discussion was directed towards explaining and comparing the three figures of speech and deciding which of them most closely corresponds to the idea of absolute happiness. I was surprised at the answers my students gave and at the arguments they put forward.

### Second step

I allowed my students to choose proverbs and maxims they want to comment on, but saw that the following questions are taken into account at the very beginning:

- What does the proverb mean?
- Is it a positive or a negative statement? Apologetic? Pejorative?
- Is its moral value still relevant in modern times or does it sound archaic?
- What is its impact on modern life?

### Example 1: *There's nothing like plain food.*

Needless to say, the students were eager to talk about a topic of such current interest. They touched on the following issues, which they presented in the order shown here.

- Fast food
- Preservatives
- Over consumption
- Frozen food
- Chemical colorants
- Food chemicals
- Homemade food
- Restaurants
- Food and health
- Food and diseases

### Example 2: *Travelers tell fine tales.*

This proverb triggered an interesting debate on:

- The credibility of tales
- The credibility of travelers
- travelers' imaginations
- Marco Polo (according to the recent television series)
- The Sahara and its magic spells
- *Gulliver's Travels* (a few students had read the book in French)
- Travelers as sellers of dreams, fantasies, and illusions in times when it was hazardous to leave one's native region
- The discussion of this proverb also led to the following topics of conversation: travel and

modern means of transportation and communication

- Travel and advertising
- Tourism
- Photography
- Television documentaries
- Audiovisual techniques
- Space travel and its impact on people's imagination

### Third step

I asked my students to put proverbs into pairs-either concordant or discordant pairs. For example:

- There's nothing like plain food.
- An apple a day keeps the doctor away.
- Two's company, three's a crowd.
- The more, the merrier.
- A friend in need is a friend indeed.
- Friends are plenty when the purse is full.
- Money is a passport to everything.
- Health is better than wealth.

Studied in this way, these proverbs induced immediate pro and con arguments and encouraged spontaneous self-expression.

### The role of the teacher

As you can see, students are given free play to handle the situation as best as they can. However, the teacher must:

1. Orient the discussion toward the central topic.
2. Get discussion back on track whenever the students get too far away from the subject.
3. Correct wrong words or expressions, but act as an interested observer rather than as a criticizing participant. Just repeat correctly what the student said incorrectly.
4. Explain further certain points of interest (not all students would know about Marco Polo or *Gulliver's Travels*, for example).
5. Rescue students by supplying words or expressions when lack of vocabulary halts the discussion. Students should be encouraged to ask for words they need rather than to use a dictionary. Unfamiliar words provided by the teacher or by other students should be written on the board for the benefit of all.
6. Channel disagreement between students into a reasonable debate by asking the contenders to give arguments.
7. Finally, briefly state aspects of the subject that the students might have overlooked.

### CONCLUSION

From my experience in using this exercise, I have drawn the following conclusions:

1. This method allows for active student participation.
2. A fruitful exchange of ideas takes place.
3. Students do not just opine; they speak their minds simply and naturally.
4. The activity gives rise to interesting arguments.
5. It opens perspectives on various topics of general interest that relate to true- to-life situations.
6. The experience takes you and your students beyond proverbs and maxims to the discovery of language peculiarities and cultural differences.
7. Most students become aware of their need for a wide range of vocabulary in order to express themselves.

8. On the whole, students find this activity stimulating, challenging, and entertaining.

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