



# What Theodore Zeldin can teach language teachers

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looks at meaningful conversation.

‘Humans have already changed the world several times by changing the way they have had conversations.’

– Theodore Zeldin, *Conversation* (1999)

Conversation classes are usually considered a way to supplement ‘proper’ language lessons and improve fluency. But surely we are all aiming to create meaningful conversations in *all* of our classes?

When new students arrive in a class we usually try and integrate them through asking a few questions about where they are from. Ideally, this evolves into a meaningful exchange between students: a conversation. We promote and facilitate conversation in class as we feel this gives the students an incentive to improve their

language in order to have fuller, more meaningful conversations. On a deeper level, is there not an aim to create, within the EFL classroom, to promote some form of genuine cultural exchange and to see our students develop as people? Perhaps it sounds a bit idealistic, but are we not fundamentally seeking to connect people through language?

In this article I explore the notion of deep conversation as articulated by the historian and polymath Theodore Zeldin. Born in 1933, Zeldin has been a leading public intellectual for several decades, his work cutting across the fields of philosophy, sociology and history. He sees his role as a ‘visionary historian’ as being engaged in a conversation with the past, from which new insights may emerge (Zeldin, 1982). Much of Zeldin’s writing is in the form of essays, a form of writing

often seen as conversational in character, with the author trying to make sense of some inchoate gut feeling. Zeldin (1988) even sees the act of reading as something that should be done in a conversational manner, with books ‘taken in spoonfuls’ and then ‘be mixed with the reader’s own thoughts, to stimulate those thoughts’, to ‘encourage taking temporary leave of one’s habitual beliefs, putting aside one’s customary caution’.

Zeldin has synthesised many of his insights into works for a more general audience, such as *The Hidden Pleasures of Life* (2016). For Zeldin, conversations are at the heart of what it means to be human and creative; they are a route out of the ‘inconveniences’ of loneliness (Zeldin, 1982) and isolation (Zeldin & Taylor, 2014). How does Zeldin’s rich and wide-ranging work relate to language teaching?

The inspiration to look again at Zeldin's work was sparked by a conversation with a friend who had been reading *An Intimate History of Humanity* (Zeldin, 1998). Reading him again with fresh eyes and with, in some sense, 'TEFL eyes' (Ellis, 2021a), resulted in me thinking about Zeldin's relevance to language teaching. That my return to Zeldin was inspired by conversation with someone else is an example of Zeldin's view that we all need some sort of 'muse' to inspire (Zeldin, 2016:65–66). At a fundamental level, this article wouldn't exist without that conversation. From Zeldin's perspective, it's evidence of the creative potential of conversation.

## Natural conversation

Recently, while journaling, I noted something paradoxical. Something I really look for in a class is lively conversation. I want the students to develop the ability to respond naturally and to speak in a less hindered way. I feel I've managed to encourage some of my students to become a bit more natural in the way they interact.

There is no doubt I've had some students who struggle with this – a small minority but something to be aware of. Oddly, I would, in my younger days, probably have been one of those quieter students who might have found my teaching style a bit much. This is a reminder that many people have a natural resistance to conversation with strangers (O'Leary & Zeldin, 2011), also, that I need to put myself in my students' shoes and retain awareness of different personalities. However, I remain convinced that a class with conversation at its heart is something to aim for. Zeldin's work on conversation should, however, make us pause and reflect on exactly what we mean by conversation. Exploring Zeldin's work reveals much of great relevance to language teaching.

## Transformative conversations

Zeldin believes that our contemporary world is full of talking and communication but lacks *meaningful* conversation. Zeldin has, in his writing, and his work with the Oxford Muse organisation, explored ways to engender conversation. The subtitle of his book *Conversation* (Zeldin, 1999) was 'How talk can



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change your life', and embedded in his philosophy is the idea that conversation can produce profound personal *and* social change. His particular interest is in transformative conversations – the type of conversations from which we are 'prepared to emerge a slightly different person'.

Zeldin's Oxford Muse organises 'Conversation meals' where participants are seated in pairs with people they have never met, or know only very vaguely. They are each given a 'Menu of conversation'. Instead of descriptions of dishes, each heading contains topics to talk about – 25 in all – similar to those listed at the back of his book *Conversation* (Zeldin 1999:67–70) with questions such as: 'When have you felt isolated and what do you do about it?'. The aim is to 'induce' participants 'to avoid gossip and all the things you usually talk about' (O'Leary & Zeldin, 2011). In Zeldin's sessions, by working through a menu of different

questions, participants will both reflect on the details of their lives, speculate on their personal experiences and gain a deeper understanding of one another. The relevance of this to the world of EFL hardly needs to be stated. We often use such activities in class but how can we shift from lively 'mingling' activities to *genuine* conversation.

For Zeldin, many aspects of modern society are shifting us away from conversations with those outside our immediate networks. We are, it is widely argued, witnessing an era of disconnection and an erosion of civic spaces (Foges, 2019), with online communication leading to people existing within 'non-geographic communities', sharing a particular, narrow interest. Exchanges within such groups, for Zeldin, lack the ingredients of genuine conversations. Social networks 'have mainly specialised in brief and superficial exchanges' (Zeldin, 2015:48). It is the meeting of minds with different



backgrounds and interests that stimulates genuine exchange. As Zeldin (1999:14) powerfully puts it: 'when minds meet they don't just exchange facts, they transform them, reshape them, engage in new trains of thought. Conversation doesn't just reshuffle the cards; it creates new cards'.

Zeldin (1999) uses the metaphor of 'procreation' to suggest that only in genuine engagement with others can you be truly 'intellectually fertile'. Zeldin argues that true creativity is not an individual act: 'we can't just sit and think out of our own heads'. Instead, we all need some form of muse to inspire new thinking and help us 'produce something whose exact dimensions and character I can't predict'. Embedded in Zeldin's promotion of the deep conversation is this open-ended aspect; we don't know where it will lead. As he asks rhetorically, 'is a successful conversation one which goes exactly as planned?'. The same can be said for language lessons.

## Creative conversations at work

One of Zeldin's main interests is in the changing nature of work (Zeldin & Taylor, 2014). Zeldin feels that most workplaces are stuck in a twentieth century mode lacking an experimental aspect. With people living longer, work must adapt as

well. For Zeldin, the lack of innovation regarding the character of work is failing to reflect our innate curiosity, resulting in a massive amount of unused potential. In Zeldin's view they don't reflect the fact that work is a relationship, not just a contract.

I've seen this in many schools I've worked in. I remember working at a school without a staffroom where teachers barely interacted. It was not an enjoyable place to work. Luckily, I've mainly taught in places with a good culture, where my best lesson ideas have often derived from staffroom conversations. I think this is evidence of the creative character of ELT and what it shares with other cultural practices. For instance, the actor David Morrissey relates that he 'can only function creatively with other people around' and a sense that those involved in a film or TV series are 'all in it together' (Brydon, 2014).

I've generally been surrounded by colleagues with a lot of experience as teachers but also, crucially, a real interest in teaching methodologies and constantly striving to develop. As Zeldin (1999:54) puts it, 'creativity needs to be fuelled by more than polite chat'. Staffroom exchanges have often produced stimulating and generative conversations which have shaped and improved me as a teacher. Not engaging in such conversations can lead to teaching stasis or 'plateauing'.

Zeldin suggests that most people are trapped in jobs that are unsatisfying. According to him:

'work has not yet been reconceived as a social and cultural activity, as having as its primary objective, from the individual's viewpoint, the aim of enhancing intellects, imaginations and sensitivities.'

In order to do so, work needs to be about 'bringing strangers together and stimulating them to learn from one another, rather than being a system to produce goods and services judged in monetary and quantitative terms' (Zeldin & Taylor, 2014).

Many in ELT have had this experience of feeling that there is something inherently 'dead-endish' about it. Good quality conversations with colleagues can help mitigate this feeling, as they may lead you to explore new ideas and approaches, or remind you of ones you used to use but had neglected (Ellis, 2021). More broadly, conversations with *everyone* at a school can be productive and can overcome the office-teacher divide that exists in many schools. A former colleague of mine related to me that they'd often 'have a chat with the cleaner on Friday afternoons, which sometimes gave me lesson ideas'.



## Who I am versus who are you?

This is the shift in focus that Zeldin (2016a:49) wants us to embrace. It might be seen as a contrast with an inward-looking culture, the culture of retreats, journalling and mindfulness. According to Zeldin (2016b) the question, who am I? is one 'people have asked for centuries and have always got the wrong answer because you cannot know yourself fully'. For Zeldin, any true insight into ourselves and others derives from meaningful engagement with others, not from retreat. The EFL classroom seems to be ideally suited to this – when you can find a way of giving a real purpose to the interactions.

Someone such as Zeldin is a reminder for us to read widely, well beyond books and articles with an obvious relevance to our teaching. EFL is not some aspect of life that is disconnected from other aspects. Language teaching should be much more than the mere transference of knowledge. Instead, 'the purpose of education is to stimulate curiosity'. Curiosity is Zeldin's guiding light (Zeldin, 1998:183–202) and is what drives him to seek out people from outside his usual orbit to converse with.

In his public talks and lectures, recurrent phrases he uses include 'I've asked myself why' and 'you can ask yourself', but to move from curiosity towards a coherent answer requires the contribution of others. Others, importantly, who think differently and have 'experienced life in a different way'. He finds it 'very unsatisfactory' to stand at a lectern lecturing an audience about things he already knows. What he wants to hear is the thoughts of those listening to him: 'curiosity means I want to know what each one of you is thinking'. Talking one-to-one is his favoured mode.

Zeldin questions the 'virtues of introspection', arguing that this can be a bit of a cul-de-sac, hence his scepticism about mindfulness and retreats. We should not be retreating from others but engaging with them. This was the route to a fuller life. Ultimately, other people 'are infinitely more interesting' and 'have infinitely more to say' (Zeldin 1999:17). As teachers, we often make use of our personal experiences in class, but we probably need to keep in mind *why* we do this



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We do it to engage students and hopefully give them an incentive to ask good questions. Also, to act as a model; you might want the students to emulate some of the language you use, as well as *the way* you express something (e.g. an anecdote). Ideally, you want students to dig further in their conversations with one another. For instance, is it a problem when pairwork conversations that go 'off topic'? I suspect that in my early days as

a teacher, I may well have seen that as an issue and might have cut the activity short, breaking the exchange. Today, I seek to encourage students, which hopefully will mean they are more willing to have fuller conversations in future lessons.

We need to give students the language they need to sustain conversations and to ask good questions that delve further without becoming intrusive . . . how to negotiate that boundary? perhaps teach language to gently steer things away from highly personal stuff. In short, getting your students to talk about themselves is not the *goal* but a *step* towards meaningful conversation with others, in English – being curious about each other. That's ultimately what we want to see, if students are going to be able to properly live and work in English.

So, what do we do when students, in pairs or groupwork, go off on tangents? This usually relates to them exploring each others' lives a bit more, going beyond the type of rather 'controlled' speaking activities that is the bread and butter of ELT. What we need to do is to *praise* students who do this; who independently make the judgement that they have done



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what was asked by the teacher but have now made a connection with their partner and wish to explore further and have a genuine conversation. The likelihood is that they will struggle with this but the strong incentive to communicate will assist them in dredging up the language that they have. This is more powerful than being able to use the phrases drilled into them five minutes before.

## Language teaching as 'free travel'

For Zeldin, the power of conversation is best illustrated when people from different backgrounds come together and discover something new, something beyond what they have thought about before. English language teaching is by its nature international. One of the great joys of teaching is seeing people from different countries and cultures meeting, conversing and discovering new things.

Equally, it's joyful to see students from different backgrounds find areas of shared interest – something that often only emerges after a significant period of time. The best language schools have a deeply communal feel about them. Improving students' English equips them with a tool to access something deeper. Of course, passing exams may be deeply important for some of our students (it may give them educational and employment opportunities), but we should also look beyond the instrumental value of learning a language.

For Zeldin, travel 'confronts' us with meeting people 'living a completely different life'. In addition, they may well have a 'different tradition of conversation' (Zeldin 1999:29). For Zeldin, it is through 'family hospitality' that we can create the right conditions for conversations with strangers to 'fruitfully begin'

The ELT classroom gives us this type of 'confrontation' in microcosm, with students thrust together in a fairly dramatic way. While they may not be a family in the strictest sense, the best language schools have a communal feel, aiming to help students acquaint themselves in unfamiliar surroundings. For many students I've taught, it was their first time away from their family on their own and often their first extended period abroad.

In addition, teaching students from a variety of backgrounds has been a rich educational experience. As Zeldin (2016b) puts it, conversing with others is 'the great adventure of our time', giving us access to ideas and knowledge well beyond our own experience. Teaching language can be a profoundly interesting learning experience.

As teachers in schools, one of our central tasks is to create the right environment for conversations to take place. Zeldin himself believes that such situations don't happen often enough in the normal course of our lives. Hence the need to intervene in order to engender it, through social activities. One way I've seen genuine conversations engendered is through a teacher acting as an interlocutor in the students lounge, making sure that all are given a chance to contribute – and those with a lower level of English are drawn into the discussion. Such activities should surely be at the heart of a good language school, rather than drawing a strict delineation between the classroom and the rest of the day. Every class should have conversation at its heart, not just talking.

Zeldin's rich and varied writings remind us that important insights into teaching can be derived from work that is beyond what might be seen as directly 'relevant'. Zeldin's writings on culture

and communication invite us to reflect on what we are trying to achieve as language teachers. It's easy to get caught up with the specific focus of a particular lesson and forget that we are aiming to nurture genuine conversation between our students, allowing them to improve their language ability and enrich their lives. Zeldin (1998:31) suggests that conversation is 'still in its infancy' as a human activity. Is it possible for us as language teachers to contribute to making progress in this area by deepening conversations between our students?

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