Taking turns

The purpose of the activity
This activity explores the many ways in which participants in a conversation give and use cues for taking turns. The focus is on the verbal rather than non-verbal cues, although these are at least as important.

The teaching points
• Learners will identify the words and phrases used to indicate the end of a turn.
• Learners will identify the words and phrases used to initiate or challenge a turn.
• Learners will review and make changes in their ways of keeping a conversation flowing through effective turn-taking.

Resources
• Whiteboard and pens (optional).

The guided teaching and learning sequence
1. Explain the purpose of the activity and have learners discuss how they typically go about taking turns in conversations. These will vary in different situations. What works for you? Are some conversations harder to break into than others? Why do you think that is? What can happen when people feel they can’t get a turn?
2. Discuss: What’s the difference between taking a turn and interrupting?
3. Use your observations and those of the group to point out some of the strategies that people have used in the discussion so far. Keep this positive and avoid personal comments.
4. Brainstorm a list of the words and phrases that people have used when they are attempting to take a turn. These may include single words and phrases such as *but*, *yeah*, *hang on*, *mmm*, *I reckon...*, as well as questions and responses.
5. With the learners, identify a set of guidelines that seem to govern many conversational patterns. For example, wait until a person has finished speaking, use words that indicate you want to agree or disagree with the speaker before you, don’t talk over each other. Encourage learners who have different social or cultural guidelines to share these with the group if they wish, for example, some may use a ‘talking stick’ to indicate turns.
6. If the group is big enough, set up a fishbowl exercise: two or more people sit in the middle of a circle having a conversation. The others sit around them, looking and listening to see how the people in the middle manage the turns in their conversation. After a few minutes (or when the conversation comes to an end), ask the observers to share what they saw and heard. Change positions and repeat this exercise if it generates good talk.
7. Review the list of guidelines and make any changes learners suggest.

Follow-up activity
Discuss the ways in which the roles of the participants can affect the turn-taking. For example, if one person has more power than others, is it more likely that person will get more turns? Why is that? How is it shown?

Learners can use these skills as they participate in other course work, for example, during reciprocal teaching of reading (see *Teaching Adults to Read with Understanding*, page 57).

Learners can be observers as they go about their business and bring back to the group other examples of the ways in which turn-taking can be more (or less) effective.