



SPONTANEOUS COMMUNICATIVE ACTIVITIES

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I read with interest the article "Communicative Activities for the Classroom" in your recent September issue. A teacher of a weak set of pupils in the language in a Secondary School will certainly develop feelings of anxiety and despair particularly if her class is reluctant to talk and participate freely. One can succeed in getting Primary school pupils to communicate and get involved in the various tasks. But at Secondary level there seems to be some restraint; for I have seen language teachers at Form 3 level trying earnestly to get their pupils to communicate, but in vain. In this short article, I would like to share with teachers of Secondary Schools some communicative tasks that I've carried out, rather successfully I feel, with teacher-trainees in a Teacher-Training College in Kuala Lumpur. In fact, ever so often I discard the text and use communicative or group activities for my language classes.

It seems to me that the difficulty is not in setting up communicative settings in which pupils can carry out language functions, as much as utilising, to the maximum, the classroom settings available to the language teacher.

Once, I entered my language class of teacher-trainees with a newspaper cutting, "Trappings of wealth . . ." full of exuberance and enthusiasm to initiate a lively discussion in groups. I had made numerous copies of the above article. It was 1 p.m. and the last lesson for the day. However, hardly had I greeted the class when the class representative stood up with an outburst of, "I have something to ask you, but I don't know how to put it." Silence followed. Naturally, my curiosity led me to elicit from him what he was trying so desperately to express. Admidst the stammers and inaudible exchanges among the students, someone boldly uttered, "Can we do without English today?" I frowned in disappointment, but was soon enlightened when Leela clarified the situation, "Can we interrupt your lesson today?" "Why?" I asked, "I've prepared a very interesting lesson for you . . .", "But", went on Leela, "we've surprises for some of us here". Well, I had no choice but to succumb – what with the current criticism and articles in the press on language teachers who have become slaves of the text and the syllabus. Deep down I assured myself that this could be an ideal communicative setting.

Within seconds, natural leaders emerged in the class. There was some quick arrangement of desks and chairs. The whole atmosphere was filled with bustling activity. There was life at this hour of the day. Four names were called out. There was suspense for a few seconds. Everyone was quiet. I was wondering. What was happening? A beautiful iced cake was brought to the front Well, there was the singing, the cutting and the eating. I had a surprise for them too.

Each of the four 'birthday trainees' had to come forward and express his feelings to the others in the class. Well, the first began with the hackneyed phrase "I have nothing to say" but to our dismay, became very verbose towards the end. Each improved on the other. When one was stuck with emotion, the members of the class were quick to fill in the stop gaps. Some trainees went to the extent of correcting gross grammatical errors in their speech. Finally of course, the class apologised for using the English period for a "birthday party", but wasn't the 50 minute period well-utilised? Here was a natural setting for "emotive responses" from students who seldom communicated unless called upon to. What more – one o'clock is no conducive hour for a language lesson.

Just a couple of days ago, also during an English period another student came up with, ". . . do you mind if we have a repeat performance of . . .?" This time different students had the rare opportunity of expressing their feelings. Others participated by supplying key words and phrases – all in a natural setting.

Only last night, the English optionist group of twenty-five teacher-trainees in their final year, had a Farewell Night with some of their lecturers. Even here amidst the gaiety and merriment of a social gathering, I saw that there was another communicative task. This time, on the programme were the words, "Verbal Self-Expression". I wondered whose brain-wave it was. Every lecturer was asked to recall some interesting moments he had encountered during the two years of teaching this group. Next, every teacher-trainee was required to relate some exciting reminiscences. Each student highlighted some episodes during his two-year training in college. Students corrected one another's jarring errors. And as each stood up to speak, mind you, these were English optionists, my ears could not help picking up the ungrammatical utterances. Well, . . . what had I done to improve their English? The words of the ELT editor . . . "we will realize that there are no poor students, only poor teachers" were bugging me. Had I been a poor teacher? I had tried group activities, games, nursery rhymes, story telling sessions, role-playing, and many such interesting activities during their training; to me there's hope they'll improve. They did express repeatedly "we enjoyed your English lessons, and specially the communicative tasks. We will use similar activities in our teaching too".