

Among all the skills a second/foreign language teacher has to teach her pupils, the most difficult is spontaneous speech. Pupils are willing to repeat after the teacher in chorus or speak sentences from a substitution table but are most reluctant and unwilling to say anything on their own in the second/foreign language they are learning.

The reason for this reluctance is obvious. Language is a personal and emotionally felt medium used to seek and relate information and to express our innermost thoughts, wishes and anxieties. If the pupils are already using one language to communicate with facility and confidence, why should they abandon that and use another language — English in our context? Besides, when the pupils' mastery of vocabulary and structures is poor, they lack the confidence to communicate in English. So how do we get them to speak in English at all?

One of the techniques that has been quite widely used to get children to talk in English is to involve them in problem-solving tasks which require some interaction in English. This is still not 'real' communication, but because of the intrinsic interest in solving the problems at hand, the learners are not so self-conscious about using English.

The problems can be of various types. Two or more children solve them in pairs or groups. What is central to the problem is 'information gap'. Each person has some information that the others don't know. In order to solve the problem, they have to talk to each other to seek or to supply the information. One could then argue that the children could talk in their own language to solve the problem. This is a valid objection. Indeed, some learners would naturally use their L1 to some extent. But experience shows that most learners will cooperate and attempt talking in English. The pressure of the task normally overrides their self-consciousness and, at least for the time of solving the problem, they are not shy about talking in English.

There are various activities in which we can incorporate the concept of 'information gap'. Some of these are described below.

1. Group Composition

This activity can be carried out by groups of 3–5 children. Each child is given a sheet of paper with something written on it about the topic on which they are to write a composition as a group. The children are not to show their pieces to the others. The group leader is given the topic and he initiates the discussion and helps to write down the composition. Before the composition is written down, the group members have to ask and answer pertinent questions so that they can organize all the information they have into a single composition.

The task can be made more difficult or more easy by varying the complexity of the language and information in the sheets distributed. With weaker children, instead of giving them a topic to write on, the task is made easier by giving them a series of questions to answer. Here is an example:

Student A

Ali lives in Taman Berjaya.
Nurul and Hassan are Ali's sons.

Student B

Ali lives in Sitiawan.
Ali has one daughter. Her name is Fatimah.

Student C

Ali is a postman.
Ali's wife is a nurse.
Ali cycles to work. His wife cycles to work too.

Student D

Ali has two sons.
Ali works at the Sitiawan Post Office.
All his children are studying at Sekolah Kebangsaan Sitiawan.

The group discusses the questions given and the group leader writes the answers to make a composition.

Ali

1. Where does Ali live?
2. Where does he work?
3. What does he work as?
4. What does his wife work as?
5. How many children does Ali have?
6. Who are they?
7. Do they all go to the same school?
8. What school do they go to?

This activity can be used for asking and answering questions that will lead to factual, descriptive or narrative compositions. Instead of writing compositions, the children can also fill in plans of rooms, schools or towns.

2. Strip Story

This activity is quite similar to the one described above except that here the sentences in the strips are used exactly as they are given.

This is a group activity for groups of 4–8 children. Strips of one or two sentences are given to each child in the group. Each one tells the others what is in his strip and the children as a group discuss and sequence the information and write out the story.

The task can be made easier if the children are

allowed to show their strips to the others. To make the task more difficult, each strip has sentences that will come in at different points in the story. Here is an example:

Amin has a pet. It is a monkey.

Ramu is Amin's good friend.

One day Ramu visited Amin.

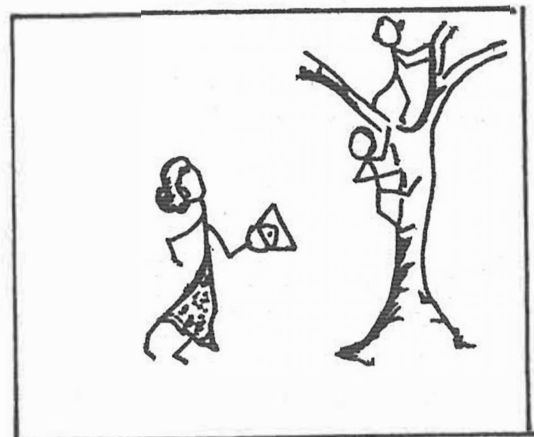
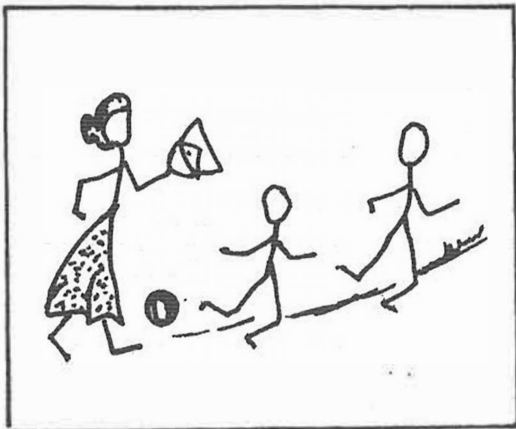
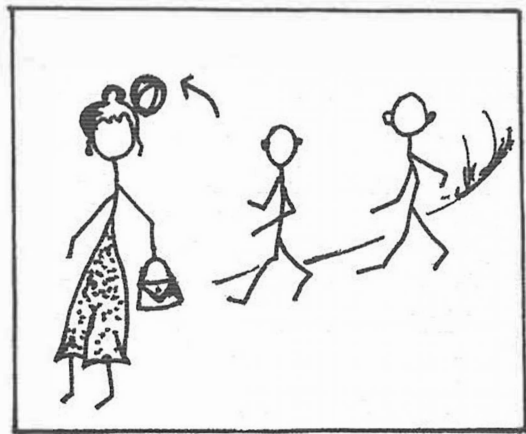
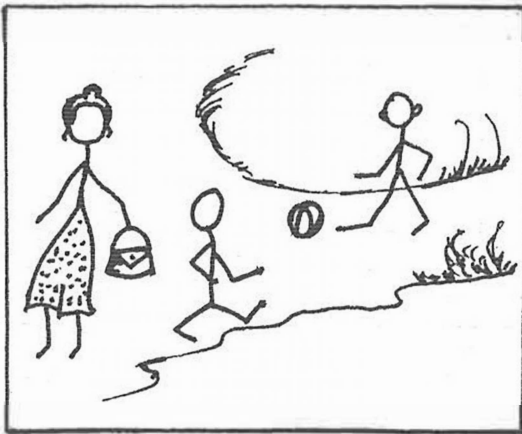
Ramu didn't know that Amin's monkey doesn't like visitors.

The monkey bit Ramu's hand.

Ramu began to cry. Amin's father took Ramu to the hospital.

3. Picture Series

Instead of distributing sentences strips, we can distribute pictures which altogether make up a story. Each child tells the others what is in his picture. The other children ask questions to make sure they know what is in the picture. The children as a group discuss and decide on the sequence of the pictures and then put the pictures together to check if the sequencing is right. Here is an example of a picture series:



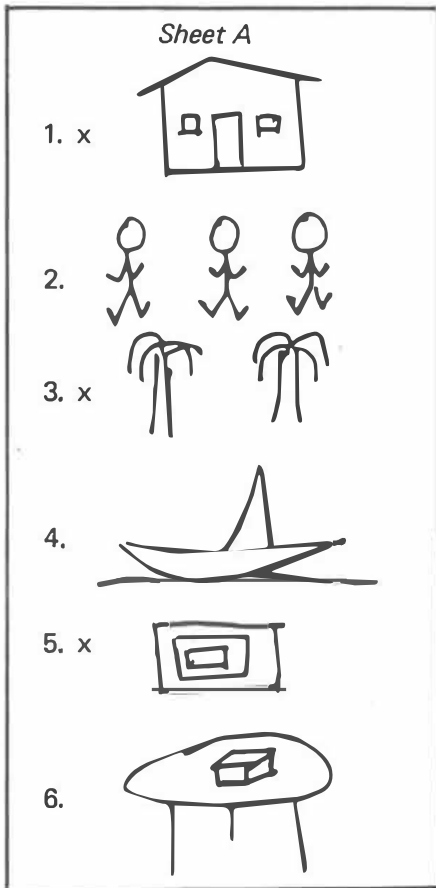
4. Personal Details

This activity is like a party game that can be played with the whole class. When the class is large it is best to play in groups of about 10 children. Each player is given a questionnaire and he has to go round asking personal questions to fill in the questionnaire. It is important to allow the children to move around the classroom freely when they carry out this activity. Here is an example of a questionnaire:

Answer the following questions.

For some questions you will have to fill in more than one answer.

1. Who has 3 brothers?.....
2. Who has 2 sisters?.....
3. Who lives more than 5 km from the school?
.....
4. Whose father has a Honda Cub?
5. Who ate nasi lemak for breakfast this morning
6. Who can swim?

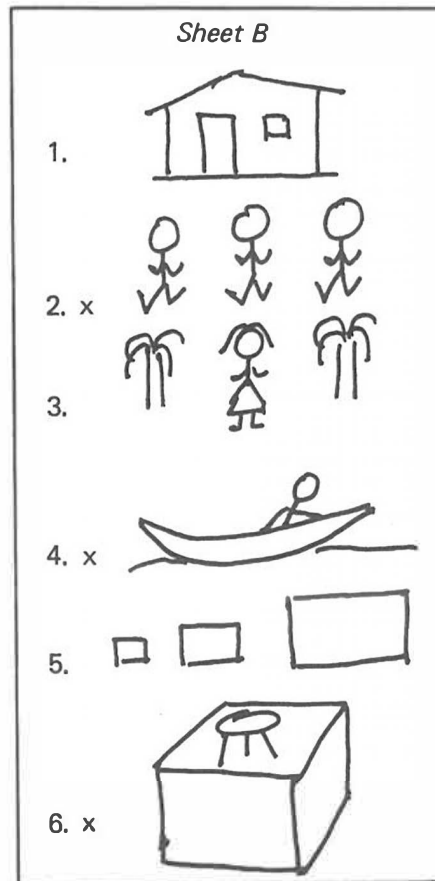


7. Who wears a brown belt?
8. Who hasn't brought a handkerchief to school?
.....
9. Who has been to Singapore for a holiday?
.....
10. Who was born in the month of August?

This activity gives the children much needed practice in asking and answering meaningful questions.

5. Same or Different?

This is a pair activity. Each pupil gets a sheet of paper with numbered drawings on it. One pupil gets Sheet A and the other pupil gets Sheet B. The pupils have to describe what is on their sheets and ask each other questions to find out if the pictures against each number on both the sheets are the same or different. Then they write down the words 'same' or 'different' by the side of the pictures and compare them at the end. The person to start describing the picture for each question is the one who has a cross next to the picture on his sheet. *Note:* 6–10 pictures on each sheet would be a suitable number.



When the activity is introduced to the class, the teacher should first demonstrate it, preferably with one of the better pupils. Later he should go round the class and carry out the activity with as many weaker pupils as possible. It is important to demonstrate to the pupils that even with the simplest pictures, quite a number of questions can be

asked and answered before deciding whether the pictures are the same or different. Of course, with a better class we can make the pictures more complex and involve the children in quite advanced vocabulary for describing and stating positions and locations.