

# LANGUAGE ACTIVITIES AND THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE TEACHER

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The teaching and learning of oral communication has always been difficult. It has always been a challenging problem to get students to speak spontaneously and intelligibly.

Many of the oral courses which have been designed use the structural or the functional approach. In both, the dialogue is usually one of the vehicles for presenting either the structure or the function of the particular lesson. This often takes the student to a level where he may be able to memorise the dialogue's structures/functions but is not able to proceed further. What is meant by this?

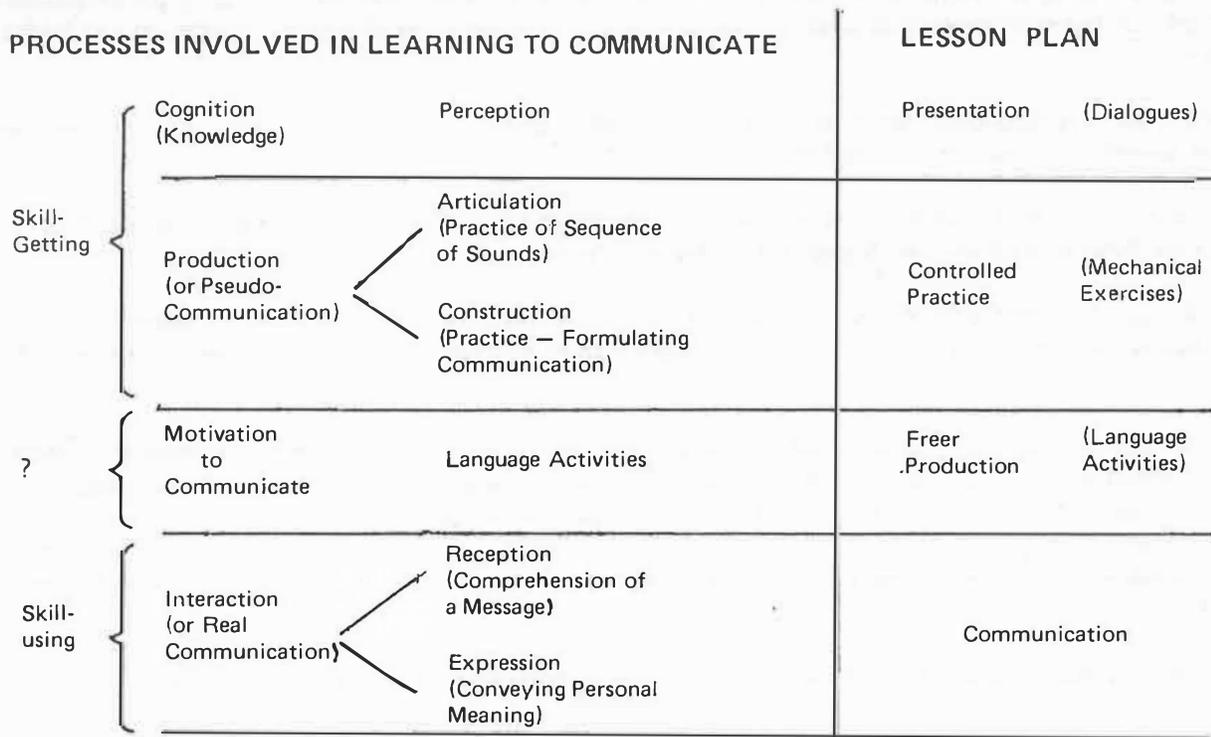
To clarify the above point, we'll refer to the adapted version of Wilga River's diagram on the PROCESSES INVOLVED IN LEARNING TO COMMUNICATE, taken from *A Practical Guide to the Teaching of English as a Second Language*.

The various steps in a lesson plan which ultimately lead to communication, have been appropriately aligned with the processes involved in learning to communicate.

A language lesson could start with the presentation of a language item (structure/function), leading on to controlled intensive practice of the item. This part of the lesson is classified as 'skill-getting'. By this, Wilga Rivers means designing activities which provide practice in pseudo communication "in which the content is structured by the learning situation, rather than springing autonomously from the mind and emotion of the student".

But this does not yet enable a student to use the knowledge he has acquired in interacting with others. This would be the 'skill-using' stage of the lesson, where practice is provided in "actual, purposeful conversational exchange with others".

## DIAGRAM 1



Adapted from Wilga River: *A Practical Guide to the Teaching of English as a Second Language*.

This then gives rise to the main problem: bridging the gap between skill-getting and skill-using. How does one do it?

Here is where language activities can provide the answer to the above question. Language activities can be used to bridge the gap between knowledge-acquiring and controlled practice of language items (skill-getting) and the freer communicative use of language (skill-using).

## Language Activities

Language activities comprise games, problem-solving tasks, puzzles and role-play activities which provide a freer framework for language use. They also provide students with an interesting means to a serious end: the opportunity and motivation to communicate spontaneously and purposefully in an English Language classroom.

For a game to provoke spontaneous communication, it is necessary that the players are motivated sufficiently to want to communicate — only then will they attempt to use the structures/functions they have learnt. To fulfil this requirement, successful games have been devised based on two principles, which have been formulated by ELTI (the British Council's English Language Teaching Institute). These two principles cover interaction in everyday communication:

1. The principle of the Information Gap.
2. The principle of Built-in Disagreement or the Opinion Gap.

The first is based on the premise of co-operation. In real life, interaction takes place between two or more people where one person may have information that another needs to overcome a problem. The purpose of the interaction is to bridge the information gap created. In these activities, if player B has information that player A needs to complete a task (or A has information that B needs), the two players have to co-operate and communicate with each other to successfully complete the task and thus bridge the information gap. For example, a game like 'Spot the Difference' and an activity like 'Matching Activities' exhibit the principle of the information gap. (The instructions for these games will be dealt with in the Appendix.)

The second principle works on the premise of difference and competition. Many problem-solving tasks fall into this category. Here, player A has to convince the others of the rightness of a move or decision he makes to complete his task, as it will not be in the interests of the others to agree. For example, 'Choosing Presents' and the 'If Game' exhibit the principle of the opinion gap. (The instructions for these games will be dealt with in the Appendix.)

## The Changing Role of the Teacher

"The image of the teacher as the 'star performer' who can fill the classroom with his presence" is inappropriate for the successful implementation of language activities.

What is the consequence of this for the teacher? It means that the teacher still plays a very important role in the class though not in the traditional sense of being a 'one-man band' — the sole dispenser of knowledge.

Instead, the teacher must now adopt the motto of Minimum Teacher-talk and Maximum Student-talk. But this does not mean that all a teacher needs to do during activity time is to explain the activity and hand out the necessary materials. As Rogers says, "her temporary retirement from active instruction does not mean she becomes a passive observer. Instead, a teacher should spend the classroom time fulfilling the following roles: animateur, organiser, morale booster and monitor."

### 1. *Animateur*

Here, the teacher provides help to students who have trouble overcoming their shyness and lack of confidence. This usually happens during the introductory weeks of the activity sessions. The teacher could help the students by participating more than usual in the activities so as to encourage the students to communicate. For example, in a role-playing exercise, the teacher could participate as one of the characters and not merely as an overseer.

### 2. *Organiser*

To perform this role, the teacher should be familiar with the materials, how the activity should

be carried out and the final task to be accomplished. Only then will the teacher be able to give clear instructions and explanations to the students to ensure that the necessary interaction takes place during the progress of a language activity. In addition, effective organisation of the students in terms of classroom arrangement (this will be dealt with in more detail later) is very important to further ensure maximum participation from the students.

### 3. *Morale booster*

A warm and open relationship between teacher and students should be cultivated with patience and perseverance. This, together with a lot of encouragement from the teacher, will ensure that the students are not hampered in wanting to participate fully in the activities.

### 4. *Monitor/Supportive Corrector*

A separate lesson, or if this is not possible, a separate portion of class time should be made available for correction work. A teacher should *not* constantly disrupt an activity to correct the students. As Rogers says, "In the conversation class itself, it is sufficient quickly to supply the needed work or smooth the way for a student hesitating over the formulation of a sentence."

While an activity is in progress, a teacher can note the errors committed by the students on a monitor sheet like the one drawn up by Shelagh Rixon (Diagram 2). Errors are then listed under separate categories like pronunciation, lexis, structure. These errors can then be dealt with later.

In addition, a tape-recorder can be used to

note the most consistent errors made. This tape recorder could be placed on the table of one of the groups. The main criticism against this is that students might become self-conscious in their responses because of the presence of the tape-recorder. This, I feel, can be overcome by only using it once the course is already in progress for about a month and the students are confident about the procedures. A pep-talk should also be given to the students to let them know that this method of monitoring is for their benefit and that there is no necessity for them to feel self-conscious.

## Classroom Arrangement

It is essential that teachers arrange their classes appropriately to obtain maximum participation from the students and to ensure the successful implementation of the activities. Classroom arrangement entails:

1. arrangement of desks and chairs for group-work and pair-work or as a whole class.
2. the appropriate grouping and pairing of the students in the class.

At one end of the pendulum, the fortunate have the luxury of movable and light-weight desks and chairs, sufficient classroom space and the ideal number of students (12–15) to work with. At the other end, the not-so-fortunate have forty students cramped into a classroom, with limited space for movement of desks and chairs.

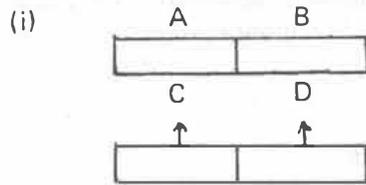
Therefore, depending on the classroom situation, a teacher can choose from the list of suggested arrangements for different types of activities involving group-work and pair-work, the one most suitable for his situation.

## DIAGRAM 2

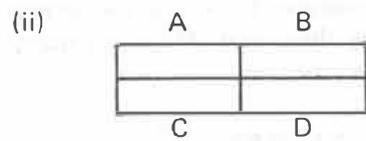
### CLASS MONITORING SHEET FOR PAIR AND GROUP WORK

PRONUNCIATION		SYNTAX	LEXIS	
CORRECT	ERROR		CORRECT	ERROR
<u>Aminah</u> blaek	bɪ/aek	both/all The thing <u>who</u> was stolen.	thief/ robber	stealer

In a large class, the following arrangements can be used, with minimum movement of tables and chairs:

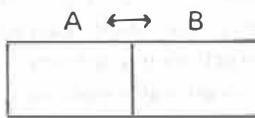


Students C and D turn around to face the other two students, A and B to form a group of four.

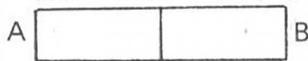


If more space is needed, then students C and D need to join their desks with A's and B's desks. All sit behind their desks.

*Pair work:*

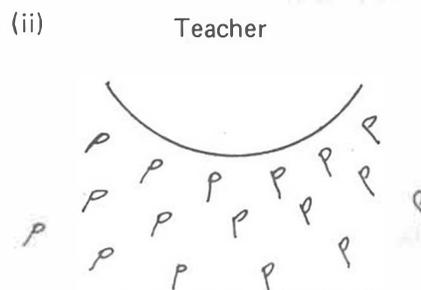
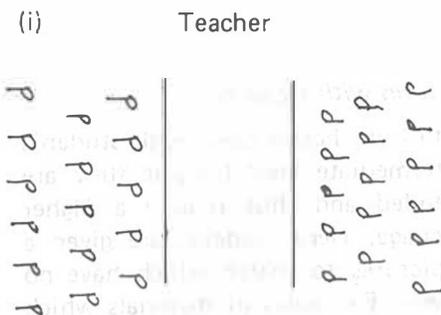


For purely oral work, students A and B simply turn to face each other.

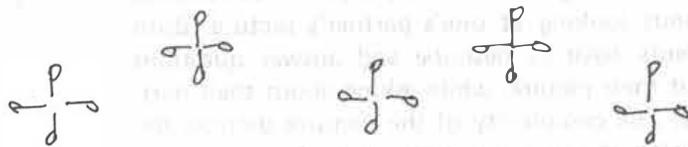


If written work is involved, then students could sit opposite each other.

For an *interactive classroom* situation, the class can be arranged differently from the usual lecture-style. Two suggestions are:



For *group work*, the students can be divided into groups of four or five:



## Problems That Can Be Encountered

A number of problems can be encountered while carrying out language activity sessions:

### 1. Errors

Teachers may find many more errors being committed in a language activity classroom than they would in a traditional classroom, where the teacher has total control over the nature of language output from the students. This might worry some teachers who may find that they are not able to cover and correct all the errors committed in the class. This should not be a cause for worry. The aim of a language activity session is to inject as much communication and interaction as possible between students. Therefore, major errors need to be dealt with during one class session.

### 2. Self-consciousness

Students who have been used formerly to working through a teacher and who find themselves having to interact a lot with each other, may feel awkward and self-conscious of what they say initially. But gradually, as their confidence grows, the students should get used to the idea of communicating with one another to achieve the required result in the target language. The teacher should make this very clear to the students.

## Appendix

### LANGUAGE ACTIVITIES

Spot the Difference  
Matching Activities  
Choosing Presents  
If Game

#### Spot the Difference

*Method:* You need two photographs which are similar but not identical. The students work in pairs. The object is to find, say, five differences without looking at one's partner's picture. Both students have to describe and answer questions about their picture, while asking about their partner's. The complexity of the pictures dictates the precision of communication required.

Note: The sort of puzzle found in newspapers or quiz books is not suitable for this game, the differences being so minute as to require careful study of both pictures by the player. However, advertisements in colour supplements are a surprisingly rich source of such photographs.

## Matching Activities

These are tasks which involve students in moving around different parts of the same item, and through the target language, finding and exchanging parts to complete their unit. There are many ways of devising these activities:

### 1. Matching Words with Pictures

- (a) Cartoons: Students are given a cartoon picture without the caption and a caption without the picture. They are then asked to circulate and look for the person who has the caption for their cartoon: they should then exchange captions (not pictures), so that eventually everyone ends up with one complete cartoon.
- (b) Newspaper Pictures: Method as above, but using photographs from newspapers and their captions.

### 2. Matching Words with Words

News in Brief: Using this section of any English language newspaper, the headline forms one part and has to be matched with the short article.

### 3. Matching Pictures with Pictures

These activities are better done with students of above intermediate level because they are more open-ended and thus require a higher level of language. Here students are given a number of pictures to match which have no absolute answer. Examples of materials which can be used are:

- (a) People/Objects: The students are given 10 pictures of people and 20 pictures of objects (radio, umbrella, basket, doll, etc.). They must then decide which two objects belong to each person and have a reason for it.

- (b) People/Transport: The students are given pictures of 10 people and 10 methods of transport.
- (c) People/Places: 10 people and 10 places.
- (d) People/Animals: 10 people and 10 animals.

With this third group of activities, rather than individuals looking for each other, it is better for the students either to work alone or as a group and come to a decision which has then to be justified.

Adapted from MET Winter 1982, Vol. 10, No. 2

### Choosing Presents

A pack of picture cards identifies people for whom holiday gifts (or birthday presents, etc.) might be bought, with details of their age, interests, etc, written on the back of each card. A second set of cards identifies those gifts that are imagined to be available in a given shop or shops. The two sets of cards are separately shuffled and placed face downwards in two piles. Each player in turn takes

whichever cards happen to be uppermost in the pile, one card from each pile. He/She must then attempt to justify buying the gift shown on the one card for the person shown on the other. The other players vote whether the justification is convincing or not. The student who gets the largest number of cards wins the game.

### Board Games: 'If Game'

You need a board, marked off in squares, with pictures of objects in each square. The board is marked START and FINISH. You also need a set of cards with conditions, e.g. "If you have seen one of these today go forward ten squares, otherwise go back two." If the student is on a picture of a HELICOPTER he has to establish a connection, e.g. "I was walking along the beach this morning and I saw one rescuing a man from the sea."

As with the two preceding games, the group has to judge the connection. The game begins with each student rolling a die.