

WHY WON'T THEY SAY SOMETHING?

Annie Lee

The above lament is, no doubt, familiar to teachers of English in Malaysia. Many Malaysian students appear afflicted by what Earl Stevick (1976:78) refers to as 'lathophobic aphasia' -- an unwillingness to speak for fear of making mistakes.

A lack of proficiency is only one possible reason for the above situation. I would lay greater blame on traditional teaching techniques. In most Malaysian classrooms, lessons are very teacher-dominated. In various studies comparing 'teacher' talk versus 'pupil' talk, it has been discovered that teachers often take up two-thirds of class time. In a class of forty, if the remaining one-third of a forty minute lesson is divided equally, each pupil will have twenty seconds per lesson. I don't doubt that some of the pupils may be participating mentally.

Pattern-practice drills may mean greater pupil participation but involve long periods of inactivity for most learners and the result is often boredom or despair. Besides, the acquisition of a set of structures does not guarantee the ability to use a language. In addition to being able to approximate phonological, morphological, or syntactic patterns, the speaker must have the will to communicate. There is a distinction between linguistic and communicative competence. Knowing the rules that fit the social context is equally important for communication.

One solution to some of the problems mentioned, is to use group activities for language learning. Group work allows several students to talk simultaneously. The 'quality' of talk also changes. Intimacy seems to encourage 'exploratory' talk. While it may be true that much of the talk often appears uneconomic, tentative and implicit, this is often the only way that genuine exploration can occur. In many classroom today, students are no longer streamed according to ability. Group activities can help eliminate some of

the problems of heterogeneity. The better students can assist the teacher. Students often learn better from their peers. Results of experiments consistently show that students learn faster in groups than in individual learning situations.

There can be some 'problems' in group activities. Teachers have to decide beforehand on the number, size and composition of groups. The nature of the task often determines the size of a group. In some exercises, 'leaders' have to be allocated. In mixed ability classes teachers may want to decide on a group composition that has a mixture of abilities. From my experience, it is best to be flexible and depend on 'natural' groupings. It has never happened that the best students grouped together or that the weakest students were ignored. In most cases, my students displayed gratifying diplomacy and tact when left to form their own groups.

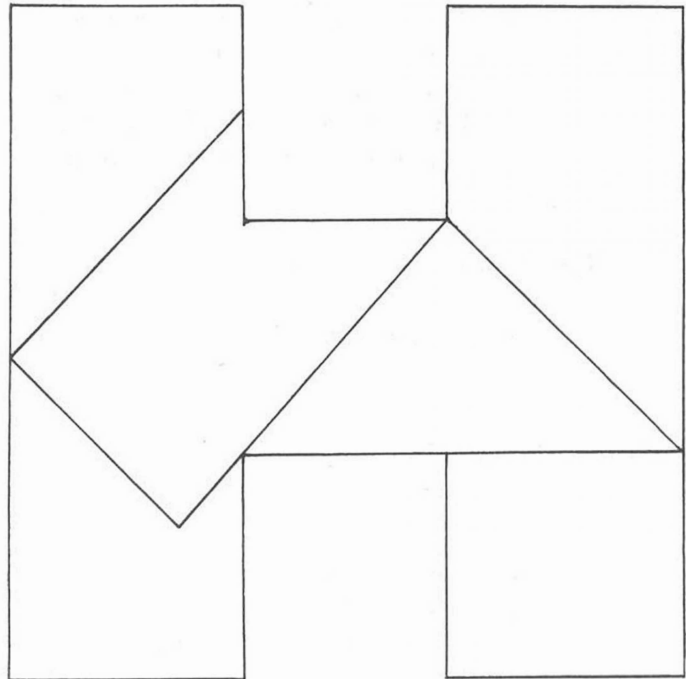
A strong criticism of group work is the uncontrolled use of language and, consequently, the production of errors. I don't deny the problem but I have decided that I would rather measure the success of a method in terms of the amount of language used than in terms of the number of phonological and grammatical errors. If the main aim is to get students to 'use' the language, then mistakes have to be tolerated, especially in the beginning. Experience has shown me that initial errors decrease with increase of confidence. Besides, it is not difficult for teachers to make notes of common errors during their supervision and discuss them at the end of the lesson or in another lesson. For especially weak classes, it is possible to devise materials where language use is controlled, for example, the Strip Story or Split Dialogues. The competitive spirit ensures that group members correct each other in order to have the best finished product.

Noise is a real problem, perhaps the problem most difficult to eradicate, but again students can be trained to move and speak more quietly. I developed a system of hand signals (adapted from Girl Guides) to control the noise level of my classes. I also arranged to use the hall or isolated classrooms for group activities. Even other teachers, occasionally inconvenienced, would agree that healthy 'noise' is preferable to deathly quiet classrooms.

Yet another difficulty that teachers have to watch out for is the use of the native language to arrive at the solution. Here again, teachers can eliminate the problem during supervision. They can work on the competitive spirit by threatening to 'disqualify' any group heard using any language other than English.

I don't advocate teaching English solely through group work but I would definitely recommend its occasional use as a solution to the problem of getting students to participate actively. Students are weaned from dependence on the teacher as the only source of learning. A change in the routine is always welcome in the classroom. Group activities are fun. Even my most serious students relax, perhaps because the classroom atmosphere is less threatening.

Student A's key (reduced)

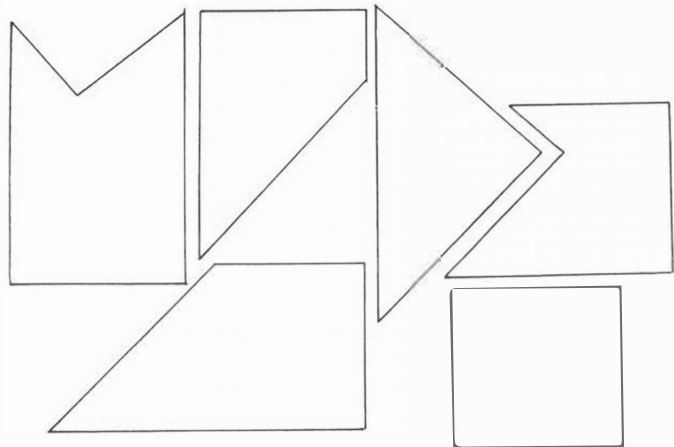


SAMPLE MATERIALS

Pair/Dycom/Dyad Activities

1. Following Instructions

In each pair one student is the instructor (A), the other the pupil (B). Student (A) has an envelope in which there are a number of pieces of card, cut into various shapes. He also has a key which shows him how to arrange these pieces into a pattern or shape. Student B has an envelope with an identical set of pieces of card but no answer key. It is Student A's task to give oral instructions to B so that he can arrange his pieces in the correct pattern. Roles can be reversed. One pair can watch another pair and comment on the instructions.



(The H-Puzzle is taken from *Group Activities for Language Learning* compiled by John Rogers, RELC Occasional Papers No. 4)

Variations

- (a) Student A arranges the pieces into any shape he likes. It is his task to give Student B oral instructions so that he can arrange his pieces in the same way that A has done. A and B should not look at each other's designs until the instructions are completed.
- (b) Student A has a picture of a geometric diagram. A describes the diagram to B who draws it on a small sheet of paper.

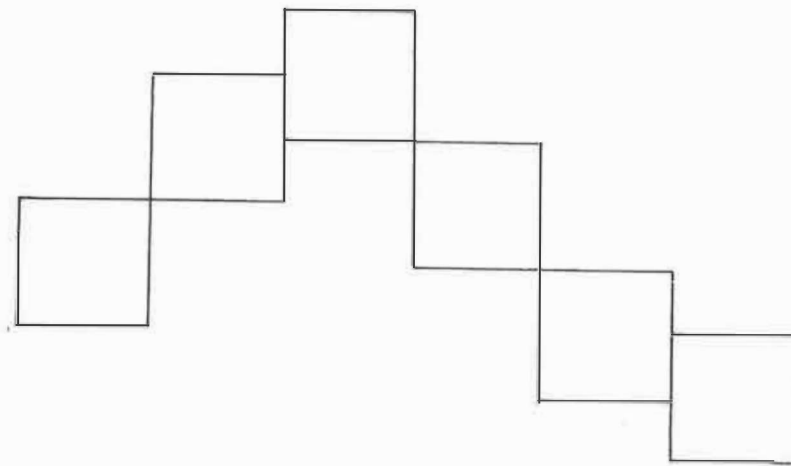
Step 1

Student B cannot ask questions.

Step 2

Student B can ask questions. When B has completed the diagram he passes his drawing to A. A describes the diagram again to B, but this time pays attention to B's mistakes using B's picture. B passes his picture 2 to A. A checks again with the original then he describes the symbol again, paying special attention to the areas where B is still making mistakes.

Variation (b): A Geometric Diagram (reduced)

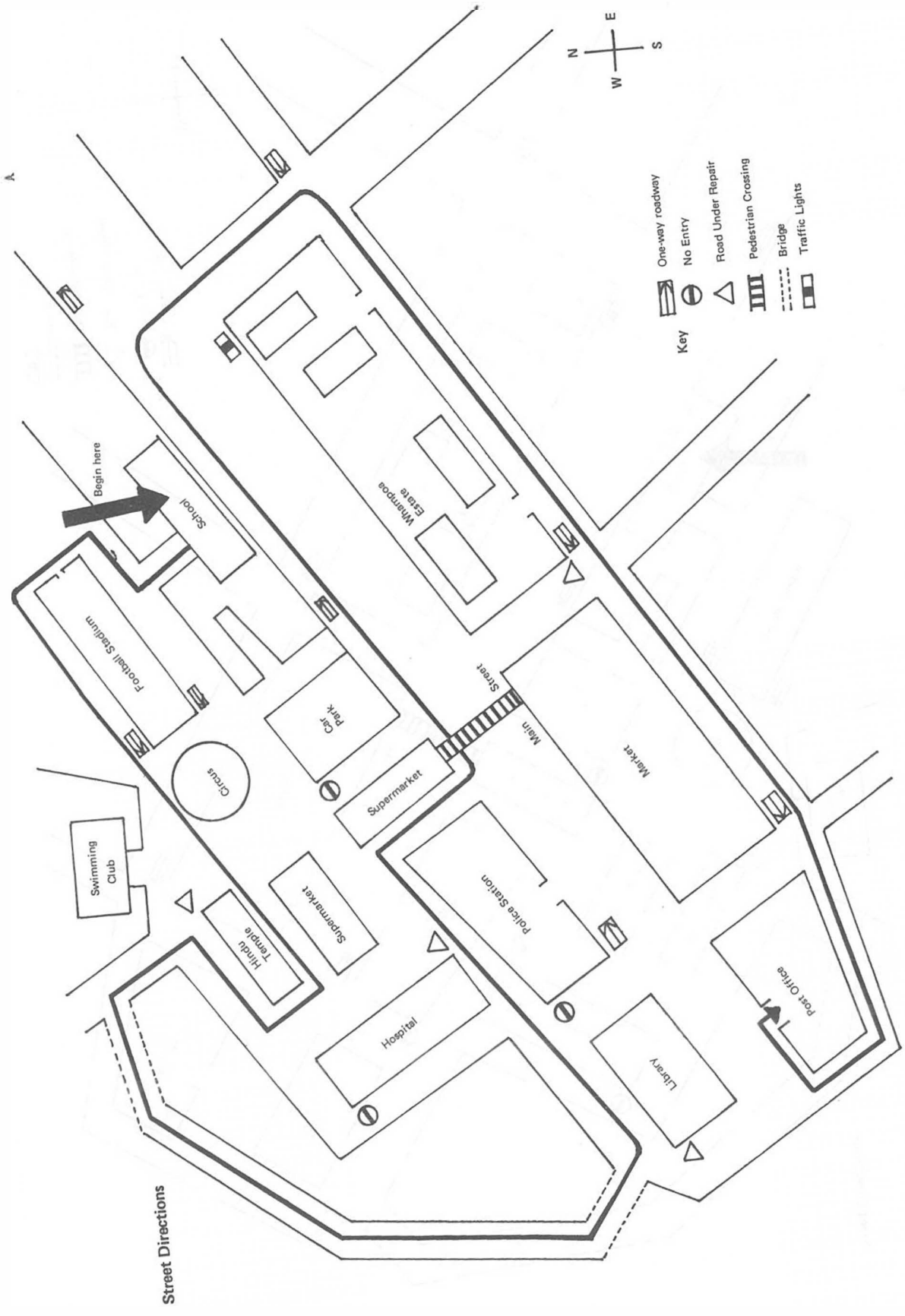


2. Street Directions

This is an activity in which intermediate level students work in pairs. Students are required to give clear and accurate directions to get from one point to another. The students' language will be controlled in that they will be using the language used in giving street directions.

Instructions

Each pair of students will have two identical street maps. On one map the route from the school to the Post Office is shaded black. On the other map the route remains unmarked. Student A has the map with the marked route and Student B the other map. Student A gives B the directions on how to get from the school to the Post Office by following the street map with the route already marked. Student B marks the route on his street map by following A's instructions. When this is done both Students, A and B, compare their maps. Finally, each pair presents a written explanation of how to get from the school to the Post Office.

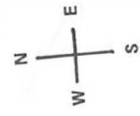


A

Begin here

Street Directions

- Key
- One-way roadway
 - No Entry
 - Road Under Repair
 - Pedestrian Crossing
 - Bridge
 - Traffic Lights



School

Football Stadium

Circus

Swimming Club

Kindle Temple

Supermarket

Hospital

Police Station

Supermarket

Car Park

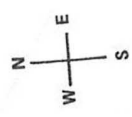
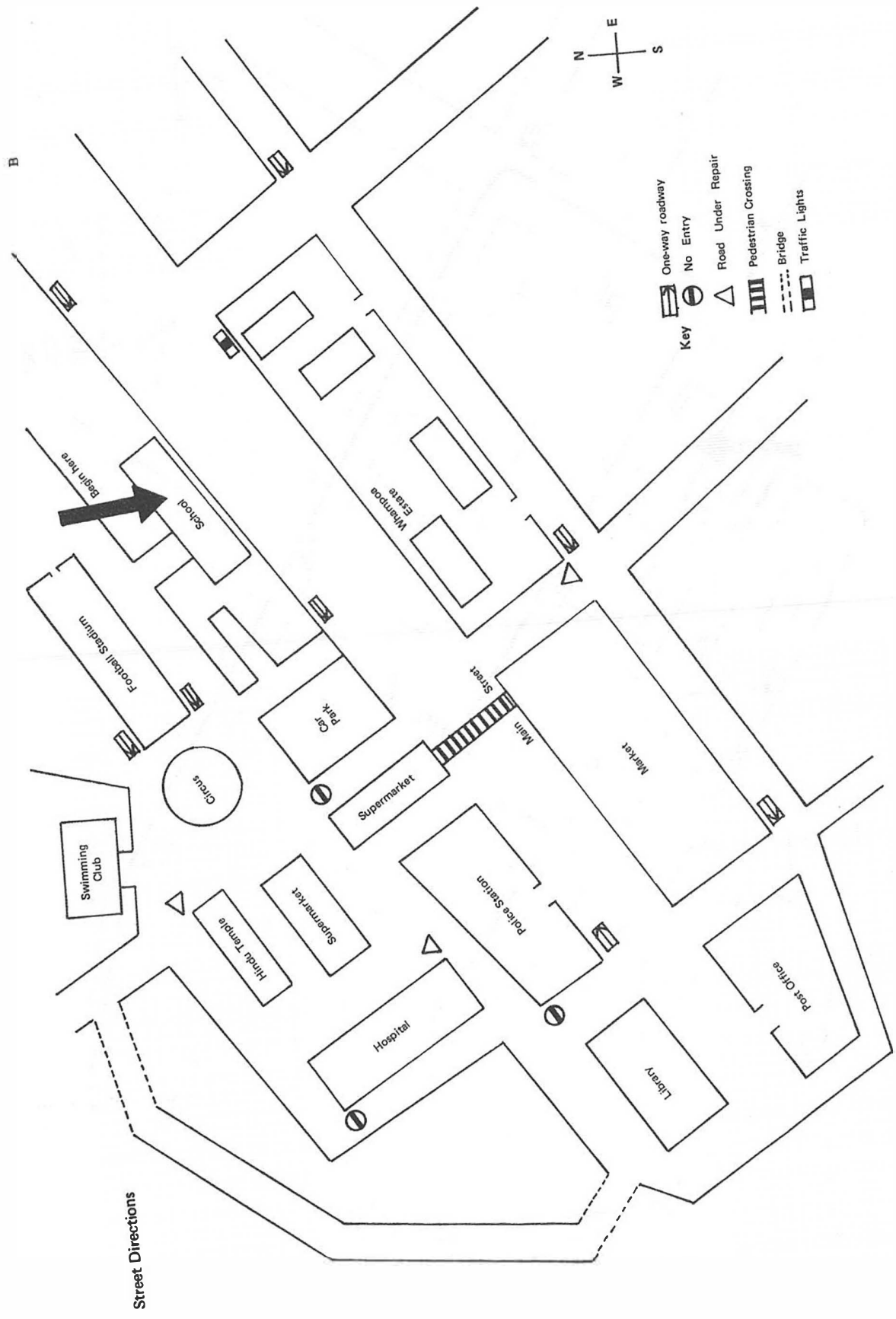
Wharfedale Estate

Main Street

Market

Livery

Post Office



- Key
- One-way roadway
 - No Entry
 - Road Under Repair
 - Pedestrian Crossing
 - Bridge
 - Traffic Lights

Street Directions

Begin Here

3. A Strip Story

- (a) Select the story, or description, or set of instructions to be learnt and have it duplicated, with each sentence beginning on a new line.
- (b) Cut the story into strips, one sentence on one strip.
- (c) Divide the class into groups, group size depending on the number of sentence strips.
- (d) Distribute the strips so that each group member has a strip.
- (e) If the story is longer, or if the level of the class is higher, each group member can have two sentence strips, not necessarily consecutive sentences.
- (f) Give the group members time to memorize their sentences.
- (g) Collect the strips from the group members. Their task is now to reconstruct the story or description.
- (h) Each group presents its version. The simplest way is for each group member to say his sentence out loud in the correct sequence.

A sample strip story

WHO'S THE LAZIEST BOY?

An old man was walking along a road.

Suddenly he saw three boys lying on the grass under a tree.

He said, 'I'll give twenty cents to the laziest boy. Who's the laziest boy?'

The first boy jumped up, ran over to the old man and said, 'I'm the laziest boy. Give me twenty cents.'

The old man shook his head and said, 'No, you aren't. Go and lie down again.'

The second boy sat up and held out his hand. 'I'm the laziest boy,' he said. 'Give me twenty cents.'

The old man shook his head again. 'No you aren't. Lie down again.'

The third boy rolled over on to his side and said, 'Please come and put twenty cents into my pocket.'

'Yes,' said the old man. 'You're the laziest boy!' And he put the money into the boy's pocket.

'Thank you,' said the third boy.

(The sample strip story is taken from *Group Activities for Language Learning* compiled by John Rogers, RELC Occasional Papers No. 4)

4. Shared Information

- (a) Divide the class into groups of five. Each member is given a number 1, 2
- (b) Each member of the group is given a bit of information orally which he will have to memorise.
- (c) When all the information is given, the question sheet is given to each group.
- (d) Groups will use their own strategy to find the answers.

Information for each group member

No. 1 The Pacific Ocean is deeper than the Atlantic Ocean.

No. 2 The Mediterranean Sea is shallower than the Arctic Ocean.

No. 3 The Caribbean Sea is deeper than the Indian Ocean.

No. 4 The Arctic Ocean is not as deep as the Indian Ocean.

No. 5 The Caribbean Sea is shallower than the Atlantic Ocean.

The question sheet

1. Which is deeper, the Mediterranean Sea or the Arctic Ocean?
2. Which is shallower, the Atlantic Ocean or the Pacific Ocean?
3. Which is shallower, the Arctic Ocean or the Caribbean Sea?
4. Which is deeper, the Indian Ocean or the Pacific Ocean?

5. Which is deeper, the Atlantic Ocean or the Arctic Ocean?
6. Which is shallower, the Indian Ocean or the Mediterranean Sea?
7. Which is the shallowest?
8. Which is the deepest?
9. List the Oceans/Seas with the deepest first and the shallowest last.

(Shared Information is taken from *Group Activities for Language Learning* compiled by John Rogers, RELC Occasional Papers No. 4)

5. A Consensus-seeking Activity

- (a) A written problem is distributed to each student in the class.
- (b) After each student has understood the problem, he votes by secret ballot for the course of action he would choose. One student collects the ballot slips and counts them but the results are not revealed until later.
- (c) The class is then divided into 'buzz groups' (goal-directed discussion groups of five or six). The task of each buzz group is to arrive at a consensus regarding the solution, select a spokesman, and formulate a rationale for the group's decision. The time given for this should not exceed fifteen minutes.
- (d) The spokesman of each group presents his group's rationale to the class as a whole.
- (e) Another secret ballot is taken and the results of all the ballots are disclosed and discussed.

The Problem

There has been a rash of cheating lately in your school. The Board of Discipline has decided that any student caught cheating will be expelled. Most students and teachers support this policy.

While sitting for an important examination, you see a friend copying from notes on a paper concealed in his hand. This student is a good

friend. He is the editor of the School Magazine, a good student whose grades have fallen drastically because of extra-curricular activities. He had no time to study for this exam although he needs a good pass to apply for a scholarship he badly needs. YOU are limited to four courses of action:

- (i) ignore the cheating student, pretending not to have seen him;
- (ii) quietly whisper to him to stop cheating;
- (iii) announce to your friends that you have seen someone cheating and say that if it happens again you will report the culprit to the Principal;
- (iv) report the student to the Principal – which will mean his expulsion from the school.

(Adapted from *Some Techniques for Communication Practice*, Peter Cole, TESOL Quarterly 4:4)