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FACILITATING ESL LEARNER'S LANGUAGE SKILLS USING INTERACTION BASED ACTIVITIES

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Abstract

English language learners at all proficiency levels, need to speak and understand spoken English for a variety of reasons. They engage in interactive, communicative activities in all aspects of the class—from ice-breaking activities, goal-setting to life-skills, needs assessment, grammar, phonics, and spelling. The most important outcomes of interaction include motivation, feedback, and the ability to adapt content to a learner's needs. In addition, research on second language acquisition proposes that effective learning takes place when students are engaged in relevant tasks within a dynamic learning environment rather than in conventional teacher-led classes (Moss & Ross-Feldman, 2003). Learning is greatly improved when learning environments support learners to experience real world complexity, with support. People don't learn well by being fed with the information. They learn best by engaging in meaningful activity. The current article brings forth various activities that encourage student's interaction which in turn facilitates their language skills. The best activities are those that mirror the way the content is used in the real world.

Keywords: Communicative activities, language acquisition, dynamic learning

Introduction

Teachers often face the problem of students who are bored, uncooperative and fidgety, while the lesson that they have taken and trouble to prepare is not yielding the expected results. Discipline problems arise, pupils talk to one another, and the goal of the lesson to impart knowledge and increase understanding is not achieved.

Research in education and in language learning has presented different approaches that could help frustrated teachers. David Perkins (1986) focuses on the meaning of knowledge and shows how learning can lead to understanding. One important part of his argument is his call for challenging tasks in the classroom. Another point of view is the product of language-learning strategy research. Researchers dealing with this area have identified many different styles and strategies that are used by different learners and have described them in books aiming at helping teachers teach better (Oxford 1990; Cohen 1998).

Activities

The set of activities described below focuses on the learner, not the teacher.

1. Introduce your partner: When the teacher meets the class for the first time, he or she can ask the students to sit in pairs, interview each other and write down the information, Each student will then rise and introduce his or her partner to the whole class. This way of "breaking the ice" on the first day of the course can achieve two goals: a speaking activity and a social activity as a way of getting to know one another. Another advantage is the replacement of the traditional self-introduction which embarrasses many pupils who are too shy to speak about themselves or who do not have a good command over the second language.

2. Introducing a New lesson: Introducing a new text can be done by writing the topic (preferably an intriguing one) on the board. The teacher can then ask some students to write on the board their names and predictions of what the text will say about the topic. A text-skimming activity will follow, in which the students will see who guessed correctly, and their names will be circled on the board by the teacher.

3. Questions on board: Another way of introducing the new article is by writing some relevant questions on the board and letting the students discuss them in groups for several minutes. Each group should choose a spokesperson who will present the group's answers to the whole class. If the answers of some groups are very different from those of other groups, a debate can follow (in English, of course) between students from the different groups or between the groups' spokespersons. After skimming the text, the class can see which groups provided answers that are similar to those in the text. The teacher can write short answers of the various groups on the board so that a comparison between the groups' answers and the text can easily be made.

4. Disputable topics and reversing students' roles: Introducing a new article with a controversial subject (such as the death penalty and drug legalization) can be done by dividing the class into two groups. One will raise arguments for the issue on the board and one against. The activity is limited in time and should not take more than a few minutes. When the time is the spokesperson of each group should tell the whole class the group's views. The teacher can write these points in short on the board. Then the groups will have to switch roles and raise arguments for the opposite point of view-#but will make sure that the new points have not been mentioned yet by the other group. The teacher will write the new arguments on the board enabling everyone to see that they have not been raised in the first round. After skimming the text, a comparison can be drawn between the arguments in the text and those made by the students. The teacher can make a good use of colours by using one colour of chalk or whiteboard marker for the students' arguments and one for those of the text, or two different colours for the two groups or one colour for the students' pro arguments and one for their con arguments.

5. Jigsaw Puzzle: The teacher can take a text, divide it into several parts, cut and separate the parts, and give it to a group. The same task is given to all groups. The goal of the groups is to organize the parts according to the right order. The first group that completes the task successfully is the winner. This task could precede the skimming of an article. As it may demand comprehension of connecting words, it can serve as an activity that introduces this subject.

6. Cocktail party: This is a pre-skimming activity which is very helpful both for the skimming activity that follows it and for the understanding of the structure of the whole text. Once the students have done that, they walk around in the room with their marked texts and compare their markings. This activity is called cocktail party, since it requires mingling with others just for a short time and moving on to the next person, as is done in real cocktail parties. It combines learning from peers with and does not need to be too long, The teacher can join the 'party' at a certain point and enable the students to compare their markings with his or hers, so eventually everybody will have the right markings on their texts.

7. Paper ball: Once the students have read the text, they can be divided into two groups, each one sitting in a circle. Each student can be asked to write one difficult sentence on a clean sheet of paper (and state the paragraph number so that the sentence can be easily located). The teacher walks around, collects those sheets of paper, crumples and puts them one inside the other until a paper ball is created for each group. Now each group begins to "play" with their own ball. The first student who gets the ball from the teacher "peels" the most external sheet of paper, reads the sentence written there and tries to explain the difficulty. If he or she cannot, they can find the sentence in Me text and see if the context helps. If it is too hard, they can ask their group to help. Once the sentence has been clarified, the student with the paper ball throws it to whoever he or she

chooses and the game continues. This is not a game for a whole class. Therefore, the teacher should divide the class into two or three groups so that the pupils should not wait too long for their turn with the ball. Of course, there could be lots of variations for the contents of the game. For example, each student can write one word from the text that he or she does not understand, or a difficult idea, a word with an affix or whatever may be the challenge. One variation of the game is that each group will build his/her own ball again after having finished the game and will exchange the ball with that of another group so that everybody could now resume the game with a new ball. Another variation could be the use of paper balls created by the teacher with the difficulties that he or she wants the class to cope with.

8. Cards : Cards prepared by the teacher can be a useful, pleasant activity for the students and a time-saving preparation for the teacher because once prepared, they can be used many times. If the teacher wants to reinforce new vocabulary items from a text, he or she can print many new vocabulary items on one set of cards (one card for each word, printed with a very large font) and synonyms on another set of cards. The two sets of cards can be printed with two different colours to distinguish between them more easily. It would be helpful for the students to have the paragraph number where the new words can be found next to the words in the first set of cards, and try to figure out their meanings from context. The students can sit in small groups and receive some of the two sets of cards from the teacher. Their task is to match the new Vocabulary items from the text with their synonyms. They will have to locate the words in the text to be able to find out the meaning. Once a group has completed the task, the teacher can switch their sets of cards with those of another group so that eventually all groups will do the work with all the cards. A variation could be a set of words and antonyms instead of synonyms.

9. A "sitting" carousel: Students are seated in the center of the classroom in two circles facing each other. The internal circles have their back to the center, the external circle are facing the students in the internal circle. In this way, the students create pairs facing each other. Now they can exchange some kind of information. For example, all students in the internal circle ask their counterparts in the external circle some question about the text or the meaning of a word from the text. The students from the external circle must give the answer. Once the task was completed, the students from the external circle move one chair forward, so new pairs are created. Again, the students in the internal circle ask a question and receive an answer. There can be many variations to this game. Information can be exchanged in writing, cards can be passed from one circle to the other, The game is completed once the students have moved a whole circle and are returning to their first partners. The teacher can prepare cards with questions or words for this game and give them to the students in one of the circles.

10. Triplets: Trainer, trainee and observer: The class is divided into groups of three. In each triplet, one student is the trainer. He or she has to teach the second student a new structure (e.g. a grammatical structure). The trainee has to learn the form. The third student is the observer, who will comment on the teaching and explain to the trainer or trainee if it was adequate or not and why. Then the students exchange roles twice so that everyone has experienced the three roles. The teacher can prepare this activity by writing on the board three new structures that have to be learned in this game. The students can prepare for the activity by reading about the three structures in their books for some minutes before the game starts.

11. Competitions: The teacher divides the class into two groups and asks each group, at their turn, to answer a question or to give the meaning of a word, or to suggest a new word from the text that is important to learn. If the answer is correct, the teacher gives the group one point on the board. If the group has made a mistake, they lose a point. At the end of the activity, a total is made for both groups and the winners get a "hooray" from the teacher. Alternatively, instead of writing points on the board, the teacher can stick coloured magnets.

12. 'Microphone' rounds: The class discusses a certain topic. Each student who gets permission to tell the class his or her views about the topic, stands up in front of the class, holding a 'microphone' in the hands and talks, but is not allowed to relate to what the previous students said. If any body accidentally does relate to past ideas, he/she is silenced and has to sit down and their turn is given over to someone else.

13.Variation: Practical and impractical: Students have to relate to a current problem. In one round they can give only practical suggestions, in another round they can give only impractical ones. A variation would be to

alternate between the practical and impractical, which may create confusion and add to the fun. In this way, one student who gets the microphone gives a practical suggestion, while the one who comes right after him or her must give an impractical one. Those who get confused lose their turn and must sit down.

14. Info-café: Four tables are prepared in four corners of the classroom. Each table, there is a different type of information (e.g. four categories of words: nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs, or four groups of affixes, four tenses, three conditionals and "wish" structures). Around each "station," there are chairs, one of which is occupied by the "station master". Students walk around in the room and stop occasionally at different stations, where they sit and receive knowledge. Their specific task depends on the teacher: they may have to copy information into their notebooks or collect cards or fill in answers to questions on the tables in the station, once everyone has visited all stations, the game is over and the teacher can review the material on the board.

15. Memos: The teacher gives memo sheets to the students where they write their names. Then the class is divided into some groups and all the memo sheets of the groups are collected by the group leader. The aim of the students is to get back their memo sheets, but they can get them only if they answer the question of the group leader correctly. To increase the fun, the group leader, who asks questions that have been prepared by the teacher and given to him or her before the game, can write some humorous comments on the memo sheet that will reflect the quality of the answer before returning it to its owner, comment.

16. Pictures: Most texts include ideas or sentences that can be drawn visually. One of the easiest drawings of this kind is the cause-and-effect flow chart. But there are innumerable possibilities for simple drawings of ideas or structures that clarify a point in the text visually. The teacher can ask the students to draw such pictures in their notebooks and then call on some students to put their drawings on the board. A drawing can also be the product of a group, with pupils consulting on how to produce the best drawing. The results can be very interesting since there can be many different drawings representing the same idea. Once there are several drawings on the board representing one idea, the class can decide which one is the best.

17. Drama: Sometimes parts of a text can lend themselves to performing an act. For example, in a text that describes five experiments in social sciences, the class can be divided into five groups, each assigned the task of understanding one experiment and then performing it in front of the class so that everybody will understand the experiment, including its objectives and results. This vivid way of handling the comprehension of the experiments can lead to a much better understanding than mere reading.

18. Musical chairs: The class is seated in a circle with one student in the center, who has to perform some task like answering a question about a text or correcting a grammatical error in a sentence. Once the student has performed the task, he or she chooses the next person to sit on the "musical chair" and exchanges places with him or her.

19. Reports limited in time: In the beginning of a new lesson, the teacher can check what the students remember from the previous lesson by telling the students to form pairs, in which one student reports to his or her partner what he or she remembers in no more than one minute, and then the second student adds what she or he remembers also within half a minute. The first can add information in one quarter of a minute. The teacher can monitor the time for everybody, telling the students to start speaking and then to stop according to the watch.

20. Read and report: If the students do not read articles assigned at home, the teacher can divide the class into groups of three and give each group a different article or a different part of an article that has to be studied in class. The groups have to read their part, answer the guiding questions that they get from the teacher and then the spokesperson of each group has to present the article to the whole class. In this way, some reading can be achieved instead of none or instead of the teacher's resorting to penalties, quizzes, poor grades, threats or anything else that may ruin the positive atmosphere in class.

To sum up, the above cited are certain alternative ways of teaching that can take the teacher away from the frontal lesson. These techniques may help the teacher create more effective and interesting lessons and will definitely make the students more active and involved. Teachers who want to adopt this dynamic approach can start using it gradually, introducing a few of the activities as part of their frontal lessons and increasing the

number and types of these activities if they, and the students, feel comfortable using them. Even if the teachers realize that only a few of these activities work out for them they can still gain something, since class interest and participation will lead to a better understanding of the lesson and to higher achievements in the course.

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