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Teaching Tip#7

Practical Activities for Adult Learners

Choosing Activities: Factors to Consider

A classroom experience

The instructor comes into the classroom excited because she just came back from a conference and has a new "bag of tricks" to share with her students. She counts the students in the classroom and immediately pulls out a set of playing cards. She begins by dividing the class into groups by the suits. The *clubs* will go to one corner of the room, the *diamonds* to another, the *spades* to another, and the *hearts* to still another.

Then the teacher asks the students in each corner to form lines by the number on their cards. She calls all the fours from each group to form a new group. Each number or card value forms a new group of four people. Now that the class is in groups of four and the groups are basically set up randomly, she proceeds to have the students do an activity where they discuss goals they have as language learners.

Huong, a student, asks one of her classmates why the teacher took fifteen minutes to divide the class into groups when she could have done it in less than five minutes a different way.

Effective activities

After identifying student needs and motivations, evaluating student learning styles and your own teaching style, and after selecting appropriate objectives, you're ready to choose and develop appropriate activities to use in your lesson plan. There are a number of possible activities that you can use to satisfy any objective.

At ESL/EFL conventions and conferences, workshops that give suggestions for different activities are often very popular. Instructors are excited to hear of new ideas and are often eager to apply them in their classrooms. Many of these activities are very innovative and can be productive if used in the proper way within a lesson. However, they will not be as effective if they are incorporated in a part of a lesson that is not appropriate or if they don't satisfy the objective.

There are many different factors to consider when selecting activities to use in class.

FACTORS TO CONSIDER WHEN SELECTING ACTIVITIES	
student level	The first thing to consider is student level. Be aware that setting up an activity will take time. The activity may also require a lot of repetition. Level will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2 of this

variety	Adding variety prevents boredom and allows for different learning styles. An instructor should avoid doing the same four or five activity types (no matter how successful) over and over throughout a lesson or a course.
integrating skills	The four skills usually discussed in English language teaching are listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In communication, these skills are rarely used in isolation. To design effective, meaningful activities, the instructor should choose tasks that integrate at least two skills and when possible, all four. This will be discussed further in Chapter 3.
fluency or accuracy	There is a debate in ELT about whether <i>fluency-building</i> or <i>accuracy-building</i> activities are better for students. The pendulum has swung back and forth on the issue. In Chapter 4, we'll discuss this in greater detail. For now, let me say that I think that fluency-building activities should be tempered with accuracy-building ones.
cooperative learning	<i>Cooperative learning</i> techniques foster student-centered instruction and attend to student needs and motivation. When possible, teachers should include these kinds of activities in class. In future lessons, we'll explore how to incorporate cooperative learning techniques into instruction.

Integrating Skills

A classroom experience

The objective of Mr. Perez's lesson is that by the end of class, students will be able to summarize (in outline form) the main ideas of a short story in English. The story is about a young man and his travels to a distant land where he encounters problems because he can't speak the language. The following is an outline of the lesson:

I.	Warm-up
a.	Discuss with class difficulties they have had communicating in a foreign country.
b.	Ask students in groups to discuss and make a list of what to do to communicate in a foreign country.
II.	Presentation 1
a.	Discuss what the main parts of a short story are – write these on the board.
b.	Give a simple example - ask students to identify the story's main ideas.
III.	Practice 1
a.	Ask students to read a short story.
b.	Ask students to identify the story's main ideas.
IV.	Presentation 2
a.	Teach students how to write a summary (in outline form)
b.	Start the summary of short story on the board.
V.	Practice 2
a.	Ask students to complete the summary (in outline form)
b.	Ask students to use their notes to tell the story to a friend.
VI.	Application - Ask students to write about their trip to a foreign country. Have them share it with a partner. The partner should then practice summarizing it.

An integrated vs. segregated-skills approach

Rebecca Oxford (2001) compares teaching English as a second or foreign language to a tapestry with many different strands woven together. Among the strands are listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. She states that "the skill strand of the tapestry leads to optimal ESL/EFL communication when the skills are interwoven during instruction." She calls this an *integrated-skill approach*. She labels an approach that separates the skills in classroom instruction a *segregated-skill approach*.

Many programs continue to offer segregated-skill approaches perhaps because of the complexity of identifying levels (as discussed in Chapter 2). Even in these programs, isolating one skill is very difficult to do especially since it doesn't mirror true communication. For example, any conversation includes both listening and speaking. Furthermore, no reading course can stand alone without some kind of discussion and writing component.

Balancing the approach

The fact that skills should be integrated doesn't mean that each skill should be given the same weight. In many classes (and indeed, in real life), emphasis is often placed on one skill or another.

Also, research shows that listening skills will develop before speaking skills and reading before writing. This seems to suggest that at least at the lower levels, it is appropriate to place more emphasis on receptive skills (listening and reading) before productive skills (speaking and writing).

An integrated-skills approach functions well at all levels. It is important to choose activities, keeping the integration of skills in mind, so that a lesson (such as the one at the beginning of this chapter) is balanced.

Look back at the lesson plan outlined at the beginning of this chapter and identify the different skills needed to participate in this lesson.

Accuracy versus Fluency

When selecting or designing activities, it's also important to consider whether to focus primarily on fluency or accuracy. According to Edsworth (1998), most in the ELT community are now promoting a focus on fluency in language instruction.

The purpose of many fluency-building activities is to encourage learners to produce and use language as confidently as possible without stopping frequently to self-correct, look up words in a dictionary, etc. Accuracy approaches, in contrast, will often focus on the structure of language. The goal of using language accurately is frequently emphasized over expressing meaning.

Communicative approaches stress fluency. With the *Natural Approach*, for example, attention is given to meaning rather than form. Focus is on getting learners to acquire language by providing them with input that is just above their language level, and by giving them opportunities to use the language in meaningful contexts. Students are

encouraged to monitor their output, but not to the extent that this interferes with natural communication.

An extreme case of form over meaning would be the Grammar Translation Approach where learners translate a text word for word and no effort to communicate meaningfully in the target language is usually required.

Error correction

No discussion about accuracy and fluency would be complete without mentioning error correction. The question that often arises is "When and how?" If students are "over-corrected" their speech is inhibited. Krashen's theory suggests that all learners have a built-in mechanism that helps them to monitor their speech and eventually self-correct. Critics of this model suggest that learners make too many errors and that it's impossible to address them all through self-correction. They suggest that the only way to ensure accuracy is to have students concentrate on form throughout a lesson.

One of the disadvantages of focusing on fluency exclusively is that student errors may *fossilize*. In other words, if students learn and repeatedly use structures or phrases incorrectly for a period of time, the errors may become fixed and difficult to correct. Error correction, therefore, is important and can help to avoid such problems.

It's also important to note that many students expect feedback, and when they don't get it, they are disappointed and their motivation may decrease. On the other hand, students in classes that employ more error correction and attention to accuracy tend to avoid speaking or writing at all unless they can speak with 100% accuracy.

When deciding whether to focus on fluency or accuracy, an instructor must consider the purpose the students have for learning the language, their goals, and motivation. Fluency-based approaches have as their principle goal to understand and be understood with little concern for student linguistic errors.

Still, some students harbor the need to be as accurate as possible for their careers or for credibility. Other students have the intrinsic motivation to perform at a near native fluency, which requires that they be as accurate as possible.

Learning and acquisition

In many studies that have examined first and second language acquisition, a distinction is often made between learning and *acquisition*. It has been suggested by research that there is an *acquisition order*. This means that individuals acquire certain structures before others and that they do so when they are ready to, and not necessarily when they are taught.

For example, students may learn a grammatical structure in class because it is the focus of a given lesson, but the structure won't necessarily become an integrated part of their speech, spoken without concentrating on form, until their minds are ready to acquire it. More about grammar and pronunciation will be discussed in a future lesson.

What you can do

Accuracy and fluency are not mutually exclusive. Both can, and should, be addressed in the classroom. To facilitate language acquisition, it is often best to choose activities that

focus on fluency. Error correction should be employed, but only with concepts being taught at the moment or ones that have been previously introduced.

Recycling of key concepts and language then become essential throughout the term. Repeatedly exposing students to specific structures and concepts can help to facilitate acquisition.

Activity Types

In order to select appropriate activities that are the best for a given situation, it is important to have a firm understanding of what activities will do. Up to this point, we've discussed the need to select level-appropriate material that provides variety as well as the ability to integrate skills. We've also examined ways to include both fluency and accuracy in classroom instruction.

A list of possible activity types

In order to select the best activity types and include variety in a lesson, it is helpful for an instructor to maintain a list of activities to refer to. Below is a one that can be used as a starting point. Some of these activity types will be discussed in greater detail in future lessons on teaching listening, speaking, reading, writing, and grammar.

<p>Authentic forms Students are asked to complete real-life forms such as applications, checks, check registers etc.</p>	<p>PAVE A vocabulary technique using index cards that helps students predict the meaning of words, verify their predictions, evaluate, and then create an associative link to help them remember the word.</p>
<p>Best Idea Each pair or group discusses solutions to a problem and reports to the class their best idea.</p>	<p>Prediction Students are given preliminary information and are asked to predict what comes next. This activity type is often used with reading texts (for example, stories).</p>
<p>Brainstorming This is used to quickly generate ideas about a topic or to find out what the students already know. All ideas are valid and can be recorded or listed with <i>graphic organizers</i> for reference.</p>	<p>Roundtable In a group, students take turns sharing an idea, opinion, or a response until all students have spoken.</p>
<p>Classifying Ideas Learners give opinions about concepts and ideas by classifying them in charts. Often there is no one correct answer. This activity can be done in groups, pairs, or individually and is often used as a pre-conversation activity.</p>	<p>Simulations Simulations are extended role-plays in which students develop a skit or idea over an extended period of time, usually in a group.</p>
<p>Corners Students are asked to go to one of the four corners in the room. Each</p>	<p>Stand Up and Share The entire class stands up. The teacher asks one student to share</p>

corner corresponds to an opinion, characteristic, idea, concept, likes etc. They might be given questions to discuss or another type of task to complete.	an idea or to respond to a question. All students who agree or who have similar ideas sit down. The teacher continues to ask questions until all are seated.
Information Gap Pairs must work to complete a dialogue, chart, map, menu etc. Partner A has some of the information and Partner B has other information.	TPR Total Physical Response: This is a way to encourage language learning by giving commands and having students respond.
Jigsaw Students are asked to learn about one portion of a topic well and become an expert. Then they are asked to share with others who are experts about another portion of the topic. They continue speaking to students until they have learned about the entire topic.	VENN Diagrams In pairs, students discuss similarities and differences between two people, things, or ideas. The area where the circles connect is for similarities.

Choosing activities

The following checklist can help instructors determine whether or not activities are appropriate for their circumstances.

CHOOSING APPROPRIATE ACTIVITIES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Is the activity at the appropriate level for the students? Can students do it? ○ Does the activity satisfy the objective and is it relevant to the students? ○ Is the activity in the appropriate place within the lesson plan? ○ Does the activity relate to previous activities? Are there smooth transitions from one activity to the next? ○ Do you have the resources (<i>realia</i>, supplies, classroom equipment, etc.) to do the activity? ○ Are there other activities that could be more effective? ○ Does the activity lend variety to your lesson? ○ Does the activity allow for integration of skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) to some extent? ○ Does the activity allow for a combination of fluency and accuracy building? ○ Does the activity exclude any students and does it afford variety within the lesson to meet different learning styles? ○ Is the outcome or result of the activity observable?