

Increasing Language Performance through Engagement in Language Experience

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Abstract

This paper describes and supports (through citations of published literature) hands-on and personalized activities that help English (and any other) language learners of all ages and skill levels to acquire and express integrated reading, writing, speaking and listening skills. The paper discusses use of motor activities, video, graphic art works and artifacts of ordinary life to develop and elicit language with an emphasis on clarity of situation-specific communication. By learning how to supplement existing curricular tools with readily available materials, readers will acquire ideas and activities that they can implement immediately in their classrooms with minimal preparation. These activities will increase both the level of engagement of students in learning tasks and their subsequent language performance. The author also advises on how to adapt these techniques for assessing performance.

There are persistent problems in language and literacy instruction. Among them is the identification of instructional materials that will appeal to all learners and cue meaningful language experiences. For many individuals and some entire populations, however, authentic materials that relate to their lives and express their concerns do not exist. While some materials will appeal to some learners, there is no generic product that meets all learning needs and interests of all populations. In cases where no materials exist to meet the learning needs of individuals and groups, teachers in various parts of the world have gone to great lengths to develop materials and experiences that address specialized or unique needs. Freire (1985), for example, wrote of working with a team of social scientists to identify objects and issues that pervaded the lives of adult literacy students in South America and of developing successful literacy education programming around those objects and issues. Subsequently Freire elaborated on the complex political and social implications of the perceptions and perspectives that that instruction helped to crystallize in the previously illiterate students (1986).

More or less contemporaneously with Freire, Ashton-Warner (1963) was working, almost as a participant-observer, with Maori children in New Zealand. It was evident to Ashton-Warner that the content of conventional commercial instructional texts had little relationship to Maori cultural priorities and social realities. However, when she developed reading and writing instruction around the concerns and issues that the children themselves had articulated, they experienced an efflorescence of literary activity attributable directly to personal investment in reading and writing tasks.

The success of instruction through contextualization of content has been pursued more recently by Jacobson, Degener, and Purcell-Gates (2003) in an elaborate empirical study. However, their recommendation that teachers develop personal relationships with their students outside of the classroom setting in order to discover content that is most relevant to the students does not account for institutional prohibitions that forbid the pursuit of such relationships.

Another issue is that of register. Many second language and native-language literacy students come into educational programs with little or no successful experience of academic discourse. As Olson established in 1977, and Schleppegrell (2004) reiterated exhaustively, the discourse of school, usually in various forms of written text, is qualitatively different from home and community discourse, which usually consist of vocal utterances supported by facial expression, gesture, and shared prior experience. Salzmann (2004:247) also observes vocalized paralinguistic supports, such as “variations in pitch, tempo, rhythm, articulation, or intensity.” There are no such external supports for academic texts, so they have to be augmented and elaborated. The acquisition of this set of skills will be facilitated by students learning language skills around content that they already know (their own realities and experiences) rather than having to learn writing and editing skills simultaneously with exotic content. This former approach harmonizes more closely than the latter with the Zone of Proximal Development posited by Vygotsky (1978:86). The less radical the progression from skill to skill, then the more likely the performance of independent learning on the part of the student.

The long and the short of this is that meaningful, thorough, expeditious, and enduring learning, whether in native-language literacy or in second language skills, comes from learning experiences that are derived from and designed around the cultural,

social, political, and economic realities of the students. Language teachers, however, do not typically have access to a team of social scientists to research, identify, and articulate salient issues. Nor do they have the opportunity to immerse themselves, as participant observers, in the life of the community of which their students are members. Moreover, any particular group of students might come from a variety of national and ethnic backgrounds that do not share common values, goals, or stresses. Even the superficially homogeneous groups in which everyone speaks the same native or national language can contain people with diverse social, economic, and political experiences and priorities. Time is another limitation, with some groups having only a few months with any teacher before being moved to another. All of these factors militate against the success of experience-based language instruction, so some language instruction can be based in the immediate shared reality of the teacher and the students: the physical setting of instruction (the classroom itself). This can take as many forms as the teacher perceives and can address numerous learning requirements. For example, a student's action-by-action performance or re-creation of a typical entry into the classroom and preparation for learning could be an exercise in prepositions, the possessive case, or the present tense of verbs:

1. Every day Pho opens the door and walks through the doorway into our classroom.
2. He walks to the side of the room.
3. He hangs his coat on a hook.
4. He walks past the window and the closet to the front of the classroom.
5. He walks around Rhom's and Yanna's desks.
6. He hangs his backpack on the back of his chair.

7. He takes his cell phone out of his backpack and turns it off.
8. He puts his notebook on his desk.

This is a shared reality of all the students in the class, so the students can generate the text of this narrative with the teacher editing simultaneously.

By the very nature of the classroom, it is soon exhausted as a resource for continued language development, so the teacher needs to find experiences that are, or have been, shared by the entire group. In the absence of a common experience, though, the teacher has to create or contrive events that the students can share in and that will engage the interest and investment of the entire group. These activities can take a variety of forms, and there are variations and contingencies within those forms:

- viewing a segment of a video
- food preparation activity
- science experiment/demonstration
- low-impact adapted sport activity
- role play
- community field trip
- art works

Any of these experiences in and of themselves are not language instruction devices. They simply provide an immediate common experience as a stimulus for elicitation of discussion and writing. Moreover, they serve as an academic support for students who have difficulty visualizing from a printed text. The teacher should not be limited to this sample list. It is merely a cueing device to encourage ideas for development of any teacher's effective individual repertoire.

Some considerations for these classes of activities are in order, though. For example, if students are going to view a segment (7 to 12 minutes) of a silent film, the teacher will need to pre-teach some vocabulary that will be new or exotic. This may be individual words (*wilderness, blizzard*) or chunks of varying length (*gold mine, told him to get out*). If the film contains dialogue, the teacher should write a synopsis in two or three paragraphs using basic previously-learned vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure. The point of this synopsis is to clarify the action in the segment, not to teach new language skills. The video itself will introduce those. Also, the students should read this synopsis before watching the video to provide a clearer understanding of the dialogue and action.

A food preparation activity should be accompanied by selectively numbered lists of equipment, ingredients, and instructions. The best way to manage this type of activity is to divide the class into small groups with individuals assigned to particular roles and responsibilities (supervisor, production workers, liaison to other groups to borrow equipment/supplies). Incidentally, if the class is a heterogeneous mixture of native languages, this is an opportunity for the teacher to manipulate the groupings so that the only language in common is the target language. After introducing and previewing the write-up of the activity, the teacher can collect most of the copies, leaving only one per group for an appointed reader to provide the instructions step-by-step to the production workers. This does not have to be an elaborate activity. Budgeting and logistics can restrict such activities, but they can require as few as two ingredients and be as simple as spreading peanut butter on crackers. There is a wealth of language in prior preparation, the activity itself, and the clean-up afterward.

Food preparation activities and science experiments/demonstrations are particularly rich in language instruction possibilities because they involve acting on materials in ways that cause change or changes in those materials. Those changes offer a wealth of descriptive, comparative, and narrative opportunities. As with food preparation, the teacher should prepare a write-up to introduce and guide any science activity, and it should include selectively numbered lists of equipment, supplies, and step-by-step instructions. The follow-up writing can include or consist of a lab report, depending on the judgment of the teacher. Moreover, the teacher can manipulate the content and context of these activities to meet particular instructional needs. For example, requiring a labeled diagram will introduce the past tense of the irregular verb “to draw” into the follow-up discussion and writing activity.

Additionally, the teacher needs to communicate clearly the behaviors that are required for the performance of any of the above tasks. Wilhelm (2001) recommends teacher modeling followed by phased withdrawal of teacher supports leading to successively more independent student actions and initiatives. A pared-down variation of the elaborated continuum that he recommends could consist of the following sequence:

1. I do – you watch.
2. I do – you help.
3. You do – I help.
4. You do – I watch.

Implementation of this strategy decreases the amount of lecture, which, for many students, is not particularly effective for language instruction. Modeling assures that all students will understand what the teacher wants them to do, irrespective of the range of receptive language in the group of students.

Assessment

One mechanism for assessing the students' understanding of the discussion and the writing is to take the written narrative that they generate and delete all of the capitals and punctuation. In addition to assessing capitalization and punctuation skills, this tool evaluates reading comprehension, since a student will punctuate correctly only with an understanding of content. This deletion technique is a variation on the Cloze method that Fry (1977:266) described, in summarizing the findings of other researchers, for testing students' reading comprehension and for determining the readability of a text for any particular learner or learners. According to Fry's summary, systematic replacement of every fifth word should yield a score of 55 percent or higher to establish that the text is at or above the student's instructional level. Scoring below that 55 percent threshold indicates that the text is at frustration level.

This instrument falls within the category of summative assessments defined by Ribas (2003:62) as "those assessments teachers use to assess the students' learning after the teaching is completed." If the teacher needs to generate a test for the purpose of recording an academic grade, this Cloze technique can be applied to a student-generated text that was cued by the language experience activities in the classroom. The advantages of using this as a testing mechanism is that the content and structure are at the vocabulary and syntax skill levels of the students, and the assessment is every bit as contextualized as the instruction itself.

The following passage is an example of the Cloze procedure applied to a portion of a student-generated narrative that was cued by viewing a segment of a Charlie Chaplin silent film called *The Gold Rush*:

Tonight we watched a (1)_____ of Charlie Chaplin. He (2)_____ a prospector in Alaska. (3)_____ was a blizzard with (4)_____ lot of snow and (5)_____ wind. Charlie went into (6)_____ shack because he was (7)_____, and Larsen told him (8)_____ get out. Larsen was (9)_____ criminal. The police were (10)_____ for him. Charlie couldn't (11)_____ because the wind kept (12)_____ blowing him back into (13)_____ little shack. Larsen was (14)_____ very angry and kept (15)_____ him to get out. (15)_____ Jim came into the (16)_____, Larsen told him to (17)_____ out, too. Jim kept (18)_____ the bone that he (19)_____ from Charlie. Larsen fired (20)_____ shotgun. That made Jim (21)_____ angry. He tried to (22)_____ the shotgun away from (23)_____, but Larsen wanted to (24)_____ it. They wrestled for (23)_____ shotgun, and Charlie was (24)_____ because he thought they (25)_____ shoot him.

Consideration of assessments in general is in order because outside of a laboratory environment, where inputs are strictly controlled, conventional posttests are not necessarily a reliable indicator of the effectiveness of a particular intervention or instructional program. The fact is that students might be acquiring language from CNN, CCTV, BBC, neighbors, friends, or any number of other sources in addition to classroom instruction. Consequently, the teacher needs to rely on other indicators as well without

necessarily going to the elaborate design, collection, and documentation lengths proposed by such authorities as Barr and Syverson (1999), O'Malley and Pierce (1996), and Hubbard and Power (1999).

One of the easiest means of evaluating the effectiveness of a lesson is for the teacher to make an informal observation of the degree of student engagement in the learning activity. It is just a matter of asking oneself: "Are they participating or not?" A high degree of participation, obviously, indicates success at engagement.

Another indicator is the articulation and elaboration of unique expressions of language. For example, if a student consistently responds in language that consists of repetitions of phrases and sentences learned in prior lessons, the student is not putting language together in those unique ways that express immediate situational contingencies. The teacher needs to look for instances of the students assembling words and phrases in utterances and expressions that they have never heard or read before. A succinct example of this, cued directly by participation in an in-class experience, might be: "Hey, don't move my balloon." The teacher needs to ask inwardly: "Have I ever before heard or read these words put together in this way to express this situation?" and "How likely or unlikely is it that this student is repeating this phraseology from a prior experience?" The teacher can view this information qualitatively or quantitatively:

- How many such constructions does a given activity typically elicit from a group?
- How many does it elicit from the average student?
- Are responses elaborated, and, if so, how extensively?

Another example that was observed by the author was in an essay that a student wrote as a follow-up of a discussion of a copy of an art masterwork by Georges de La Tour. The subject piece was *The Repentant Magdalen*, an atmospheric lamp-lit

deeply-shadowed oil painting (c. 1640). It pictures a young woman sitting contemplatively at a table with several objects on it, including a human skull. The student observed that, “She touches the skull as lightly as she touches her memories.” This is undoubtedly a unique and creative phraseology invited by a stimulus not typically encountered in a second language classroom. The author’s experience with art works is that those depicting individuals or groups of people are more effective in elicitation of language than those works from which humans are absent. Also, a higher quantity and quality of discussion can be elicited by removing titles and other identifying information. This allows students to impart their own interpretations without directions or restraints imposed by these factors.

Another indicator of language development is the understanding of language-based jokes. Frequently, but not always, these come from understanding of homonyms. An early-stage language joke could be the one about being on a seafood diet. (The punch line is, “When I see food, I eat it.”) Another source is the manipulation of alternate spellings of words or syllables in a written narrative. For example, “Today we made turkey soup, and Lyudmila was the *sou*pervisor of the cooks.” In this case, the students applied their receptive language skills to understanding the joke.

Applying expressive language skills to the making of a joke is a major step beyond understanding a joke, though it is an issue that apparently has not been addressed in quantitative terms by researchers. With sufficient encouragement and opportunity, some students will begin creating their own jokes when they see similarities across situations, and then they will express them to each other. The author found intermediate-level adult students doing this in a pumpkin carving activity to create jack-o’-lanterns. The class was divided into five groups whose only common language was English.

Students in each group were following the instructions of a supervisor who was reading the directions to the workers. One group of four women, whose native languages were Arabic, Polish, Russian, and Spanish, had cut the top off of their pumpkin leaving a very narrow opening to scoop out the seeds by hand. The Spanish-speaking woman, who was having difficulty pulling her hand out of the opening when it was full of pumpkin seeds, leaned toward the members of her group and murmured something that caused an explosion of laughter from them. Subsequently I asked one of the other women what she had said. It was the utterance, “The pumpkin is having a baby.” They had acquired “pumpkin” in their vocabularies a few minutes earlier, but the rest of the words were at introductory level. However, this outwardly simple utterance embodies all four of the success indicators described above:

- active engagement,
- unique utterance,
- understanding a language joke, and
- making a language joke.

Would the coincidence of these events have occurred if the students had not been working together on this activity that at first glance has nothing to do with language instruction? That is the judgment of the teacher, based on what the teacher knows of the students. The teacher has to know what instruction is likely to yield meaningful results in any particular population. However, there is no instructional manual that provides assurance of learning with every group of students. The only way to acquire that information is to give oneself permission to experiment in the classroom with innovative strategies, methods, techniques, and activities that will appeal to and engage the students.

So the above list is neither final nor prescriptive. It is only a list of evaluation

factors of some teaching activities that have been implemented, developed, and adjusted by one teacher. As an innovating teacher develops a repertoire of language-stimulus activities, that teacher will concurrently identify and develop a set of performance-based indicators of the students' language development, which in turn reflects the effectiveness of the instruction. While Dubin and Olshtain (1986) proposed the creation of a bureaucracy to implement curricular change and improvement, teachers working alone or in small informal groups, are confronted with the necessity of improving instructional practice independently and expeditiously. Schmoker (2006) argues for the efficacy of scheduled periodic meetings of groups of colleagues whose purpose is to share and improve techniques and strategies. Their first step is to give themselves permission to experiment with activities that all of their students share and discuss. Subsequently they will proceed with evaluation and refinements that encourage high-quality communication from their students, regardless of where on Earth they are.

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