

SESSION 1: COMMENTARY NOTES.

OPENING AND INTRODUCTION TO COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING.

1. Arrive about half an hour early on the first morning. You have to make sure the room is open, clean and ready for use. Arrange the furniture as you want it. Check that you have chalk or board markers. Make sure there is someone on hand to direct participants to the room. Whatever other official registration process there is, make sure you get people to write their names clearly on a list for you as they arrive. Greet the participants and chat.
2. Go straight to Ice-breaker 2 if the participants all teach in the same institution and know each other.
3. The attached handout is an example of what can be used. The statements should be adapted to the participating group of teachers.

You are going straight into an activity involving everyone. You want to make it clear that this is NOT going to be one of those seminars in which people can expect to sit quietly just listening to the “lecturer”.

Start by getting everyone up on their feet in whatever open space you have in the room and then give them the instructions. You may need to encourage some people to keep moving and even take them to people they haven't spoken to yet.

Give enough time in each activity for everyone to speak to everyone else, but don't let ice-breaker 2 drag on. It is better to finish while people are still talking.

4. You could expand the activity by putting participants into small groups to discuss their findings, but on this first morning I usually prefer to go straight into a whole class discussion as an example of how we want everyone to contribute in the whole class as well as the small group context. On this occasion we know that everyone has some information they can communicate so the situation is relatively stress free. It is up to you to keep it light-hearted and amusing.
5. Follow on immediately from the discussion on Ice-breaker 2 by putting the two questions to the group. They will almost certainly begin by identifying the activity as an ice-breaker in order for people to get to know each other and to feel comfortable in the room. You will need to push them to delve deeper to say what they were doing during the activity while they were asking and answering questions. Eventually someone will mutter the word “communication” in some form or other. From here you can get to the description of questions and answers as one form of interaction.

Put the two terms in big letters on the board. These are the key words for the programme. Discuss the relationship between the terms.

People can interact without necessarily communicating in any meaningful way, such as in traditional oral drills which manipulate grammatical structures in sentences that don't have to be understood. Here you can give the example of a meaningless sentence such as, “The ridd fildog grued the porgot boffingly.”

Write the sentence on the board and then, with no explanation ask some simple “comprehension” questions such as, “What grued the porgot?”, “What did the fildog do?”, “How did the fildog grue the porgot?”. The participants will be able to give the “correct” answers and you can then ask them if they understood what they were saying.

On the other hand, you cannot communicate without some form of interaction, whether it is between two or more people, or between a reader and a text.

So if we agree that our principal language teaching aim is to enable learners to communicate in a second or foreign language, it follows that much, if not most, of the effort we put into planning our lessons must be aimed at setting up effective (i.e. communicative) practice interactions.

6. List enjoyments and problems on the board. Emphasise the enjoyments, then discuss the problems. Make it clear that this is principally for your benefit. It will help you if you can understand better what they perceive as problems. You also need to make it clear that this short programme will not be able to solve all their problems. It might help if you categorise the problems they raise under headings such as Official Policy, Administrative, Pedagogical, and discuss what, if anything, can be done to improve things under each heading.
7. The posters should either be left on the walls throughout the seminar, or can be taken down, kept and brought back for comment at the end of the programme.
8. You should prepare a demonstration lesson with which you feel comfortable and which is appropriate for the group of participating teachers. It should also, of course, give an example of lively, interactive and communicative approaches and techniques. Don't feel you have to use the demonstration lesson given here in the seminar notes, but please do if you feel comfortable with it. It has the advantage of being adaptable to local conditions while practising a basic grammatical problem and it doesn't need any particular materials or aids. The lesson is presented in outline form, but in sufficient detail for a relatively experienced teacher to be able to handle efficiently. The first part of the lesson, when you are building up the profile of the character should consist of fairly brisk question and answer practice and should take about twenty minutes. Make sure you get plenty of practice of Present Perfect forms, but don't talk explicitly about the grammatical form. You will have to plan the preparation and practice of the interviews according to the number of participants you have.
9. The report form is important as a way to get the participants to consider the structure of the lesson as well as its content. You will be able to use this material again when you get to the Lesson Planning sessions. You will probably have to push them to be precise about what happened. In the follow-up discussion you will need to push them to tell you what they and the teacher actually DID at each stage of the lesson.

10. If you have followed through the given example demonstration lesson just as it is set out with no previous description or explanation you may have an interesting discussion when you talk about the Aim of the lesson. On several occasions participants have suggested “discussing occupations” or “practising interviews”, but have been very surprised when I have told them that the main aim of the lesson was to practise the Present Perfect verb form. For many teachers it is still a surprise to discover that you can have a “grammar” lesson without discussing grammar.
11. In this session the aim is to get participants to think more deeply than they usually have time to do about their aims in and approaches to teaching English. You will be presenting them with some challenging ideas about what “communicative” approaches really mean and you will also be showing how the seminar will be run. You will not be lecturing on key topics. You will be asking the participants to think and discuss things with each other and with you. You will have a lot to say and the danger is that you will get carried away in your enthusiasm and start lecturing, i.e. talking too much. The vital element in all this is to stimulate interaction and participation. This is easier to do in some cultural contexts than others. Sometimes people find it easier to interact in small groups than in whole class situations. Sometimes it is the reverse. There are also many parts of the world where teachers, just like their pupils, are accustomed to simply doing what they are told to do. The idea that teachers should be creative and make their own minds up about things is by no means universal. There are still many parts of the world where teachers have little or no personal autonomy, or at least where they think they do not. Where this is the case you can experience the deeply satisfying possibility that you may be able to plant the seed of subversion that may eventually lead to the crumbling of the suffocating authority of syllabuses, administrators, inspectors and Ministries of Education under which these teachers have to work.
12. One of the aims of this programme is for participants to realise fully that everything they do in the classroom reflects some underlying theory or approach to the nature of language and language teaching. My view is that teachers should know why they do things in certain ways in the classroom and that they should have the opportunity to examine the ideas that lie beneath their actions. There are frequent conflicts between stated national education aims, official syllabuses, the provision of resources, the training of teachers and administrative constraints. Teachers have to find their own ways through these conflicts in order to present a coherent approach in the classroom which employs effective activities related to valid aims.
13. Before starting this programme you should have obtained copies of any relevant official documents relating to aims and objectives in English Language teaching, whether the teachers work in the state system or in a private school. You can then relate the participants’ responses to the set questions with what their institution appears to expect. Encourage individual and personal responses and acknowledge the importance of aims such as “getting as many people as possible through their exams”. You can then discuss the relationship between exams and language teaching aims. Write up a selection of responses on the board. Include “methodological” aims such as references to communicative skills and more personal responses such as “making sure the students enjoy themselves”.

14. This activity is quite difficult for many teachers and not just because it can be difficult to remember a lesson that they honestly consider to have been successful. When they are discussing their lessons in groups it will be the first of many occasions throughout this programme when you will have to repeatedly emphasise the need to be specific rather than produce general theoretical statements. You want to know what they actually did, so it is not enough to say, "I used communicative group work." You want them to tell you, for example, "Each member of the group had read different parts of the story so they had to talk to each other in order to get the whole story."
15. These are five of my suggestions. Add to them any particularly good suggestions from the participants.
16. Having had time to think about what makes a "good" lesson, the participants now start to think more specifically about underlying principles of language teaching. The handout lists eight fairly bald statements which usually stimulate a lot of discussion. Give plenty of time for the group discussions before starting the feedback. You will see that the sheet contains four pairs of contrasting statements. Statements 3,5,7 & 8 reflect a more communicative approach, while 1,2,4 & 6 reflect a more traditional, academic approach. You should find plenty to talk about with the participants in the feedback session here. Keep an eye on the time and avoid the temptation to lecture! Some comments on the statements:

- *You can only learn a language by doing a lot of repetition.*

Repetition can be helpful in some areas e.g. stress, rhythm and intonation, but the idea that it is the central mechanism for language learning belongs to the now largely discredited "habit-formation" approach based on stimulus-response relationship building. What are repeated in language use are grammatical patterns underlying what are mostly unique, meaningful utterances. Repeating and learning by heart the shopping dialogue in a textbook will not guarantee that you can buy your bread in a shop where the assistant has not learnt the same dialogue. Hence statement 5.

- *The teacher should speak as much as possible in class.*

The more the teacher speaks, the less time there is for students to practise. The classroom should be where students can practise their English, not the teacher.

- *Learners get better speaking practice by interacting with each other than by only speaking to the teacher.*

The time factor applies here too. How much time is there for each student to use English if every exchange is between one student and the teacher? The advantages gained from simultaneous pair or group work greatly outweigh any disadvantage there might be from the teacher's loss of total control.

- *People usually learn best by listening to careful explanations.*

This reflects the traditional academic approach to language teaching in which it is believed that you can only teach grammar by talking about grammar. The demonstration lesson this morning will, hopefully, have suggested otherwise and there will be work later in the programme on

handling grammar which will push the emphasis more towards the view taken by statement 7.

- *Communicative language practice is essential for language learning.*

Most participants will obviously “agree” with this, but you may want to see if people can explain what they mean by “communicative”. What I mean by “communicative language practice” will be presented throughout this training programme. Some of the key factors that help to define “communicative” for me are:

- Meaning + interaction = communication
- If you always know what your students are going to (or should) say you are not practising real communication with them.
- There needs to be a communication gap for communication to take place.
- Real meaning is personal meaning.

- *It is more important for learners to listen and speak to the teacher than for learners to listen and speak to each other*

This is the mirror image of statement 3 and is concerned mostly with the idea that the teacher has to be the model of performance. Students must be exposed to the possibly incorrect language of their classmates as little as possible. This ignores the overwhelming advantages to be gained from the students’ increased opportunity to participate in meaningful interaction with each other offering the opportunity for much more practice in the use of language.

- *People usually learn best by trying things out and finding out what works.*

They do not learn just because they have been told. Intensive pair and group work provides opportunities for experimentation and safe risk-taking.

- *The teacher should speak as little as possible in classroom time*

A good rule of thumb for all teachers. The less you speak the more opportunity there is for your students to speak. All the “communicative” ideas in this section depend on the teacher’s ability to create or select appropriate and effective activities which enable students to engage in useful practice. Having set the activity going the teacher’s job is to monitor the students’ performance and supply the help needed. There is also no reason why the teacher should not occasionally be able to stand at the side of the room and do nothing.

17. As with the previous handout this normally gives rise to a great deal of discussion. It is important not to talk too much about each activity. Many of them will be dealt with in some detail later in the programme so you can use them as brief tasters for what is to come. Remember to make it clear that labelling any particular activity as not being very communicative does not mean that there are no circumstances in which it can be used. There will be times in a course programme when any one of these activities can be appropriate. One of the objectives of this session is to examine further what we mean by

“communicative activity” and to get participants to look more closely at some of the most common classroom activities.

Some of my comments on each activity:

- *Repeating sentences after the teacher;*

Not communicative because there is no personal meaning expressed, in fact the student does not even have to understand what he/she is saying. Can be appropriate for practising pronunciation, stress and intonation patterns.

- *doing oral grammar drills;*

The word drill implies automatic manipulation of grammatical forms where meaning is secondary and not necessarily present.

- *reading aloud from the coursebook;*

Could be communicative if students other than the reader listen with their books shut.

- *answering comprehension questions after reading a text;*

Depends on whether the questions focus on the meaning of the text, the readers' interpretation of it and their reactions to it and not just on knowledge of linguistic elements (see note 5 above).

- *giving a talk to the class;*

Should be communicative as long as the talk is on a subject that interests the students, they are hearing something they have not heard before and they can ask questions afterwards.

- *writing a dialogue;*

If the exercise is done in pairs or small groups there will be communication between the students involved while they are agreeing what to write down, but a written dialogue is not an example of communicative interaction because each participant in the dialogue knows what the other is going to say next.

- *acting out a dialogue;*

This usually means that two students read out the dialogue that they have written. In this case it is an exercise in pronunciation and intonation not an example of communicative language use. If, on the other hand, students are asked to think about (but not write down) what they are going to say to someone in a particular context or as the result of some event (after a driving accident, for example) and are then paired with another student to have the conversation then they are forced to communicate in a realistic situation where they do not know what the other student is going to say.

- *giving instructions so that someone can operate a machine;*

This will be a communicative activity as long as the task is a genuine one, i.e. the listener genuinely does not know how to operate the machine.

- *writing gap-filling exercises;*

Unlikely to be communicative because this exercise tends to involve nothing other than grammar manipulation where the same structure is used in a sequence of sentences that have no connection with each other.

- *describing a picture in the textbook while the others look at it;*

This is not communicative because the listeners can see the picture being described. If the listeners cannot see the picture and have to reproduce it by listening to the description then communication takes place.

18. The final handout can be given to the participants to take away and think about. It can be discussed briefly at the start of the next day.