

UNIT 2: COMMENTARY

INTERACTION, SPEAKING AND DISCUSSION

1. The first five or ten minutes of each session should be spent on a warm-up activity. Some suggestions are listed in Unit 7.
2. Today's session follows a characteristic sequence for this training programme: experience, followed by discussion, followed by the creation of some teaching material. The initial activity is intended to give participants the opportunity to experience oral, interactive exercises in a small-group context. The exercises themselves should be simple enough to allow teachers to reflect on the organisation of the activity rather than worry about getting the language right, but don't be surprised if you have to correct some of the responses.

You will have to adapt the exercises to the regional and cultural context in which your programme is taking place. The materials on the attached hand-out illustrate how the exercises were adapted for a group of secondary school teachers in Tanzania, which just happens to be the last place they were used at the time of writing. They have also been used in various forms all over Europe.

3. Do not distribute the hand-outs yet. When students are used to working in this way you can give out exercise sheets and they can work through the exercises without having to have them demonstrated. Your course participants are probably not ready for this yet. Write up on the board the words in the box. Demonstrate the example for exercise 1 with a couple of participants, then get a pair or two to demonstrate. Show how A asks B and then B asks A. Make sure they all know who is A, who is B etc. Then get them all working in pairs at the same time.
4. Demonstrate and then practise exercises 2 – 4 in turn. For these exercises show how the conversations move round the group. It is very important that you work through these exercises yourself beforehand to make sure you have the structure clear. When you get to the follow-up discussion, you will be emphasising the importance of the structure of interactive exercises. For exercise 2 the structure is:
 - a. A asks B
B answers, then asks A
A answers
 - b. B asks C
C answers, then asks B
B answers
 - c. C asks D
D answers, then asks C
C answers

When it comes to c. above, C may ask A, if there are only three people in the group

5. Notice that in exercise 3 you have three people involved in each conversation (A, B & C) and in exercise 4 there are four people involved. In each exercise the person starting the exchange moves round one place each time. Remember you must put up another box of key words for exercise 4.
6. Introduce exercise 5 by telling the participants that you are doing it to demonstrate that you can do interactive writing exercises as well as oral ones. The exercise works more efficiently if you give everyone in the class a half-sheet of paper before you begin. Explain the situation clearly and write up on the board the information in a, b and c on the handout. Make it clear that they are working individually, that they should write their name clearly on the paper and that they should hold up their piece of paper when they have written their email message. You then act as the internet system that delivers the messages and their replies. As soon as people start to hold up their messages, collect them and exchange them for other completed messages. When participants receive a message written by someone else they must write a reply on the back. When people have finished their replies return them to the original senders. This can all get quite chaotic, but it doesn't matter because everybody is involved and they usually have fun with the messages. When everyone has their answer back you can get some of the participants to read out their messages and the replies they received.
7. Before the session you need to prepare small slips of paper each containing one of the two discussion questions. Make enough so that all members of each group can see one, but there is no need to make enough for everyone. They will all receive a copy of the full handout later.

Instructions for how to organise this discussion activity are on the handout. To do it as described in the instructions you need to divide the participants into four groups. Two groups will discuss question A and the other two groups will discuss question B. This enables two groups to compare their results for each question. It also means that there is some variety in the feedback session when two topics can be discussed rather than just one.

8. Emphasise that participants should consider each activity in turn and focus on its structure and organisation. Throughout this training programme you will constantly have to steer participants away from expressing methodological generalisations and towards describing the detail of what the teacher and students actually DO in the classroom.
9. Find out how well the participants can reconstruct each activity. (You have not yet given out the exercise sheets.)

The discussion should include:

- a. Simultaneous group work – advantages gained from the amount of practice everyone can have (student-talking-time v. teacher-talking-time) outweigh the disadvantage of possible unmonitored errors.

Discuss the role of the teacher in this type of activity.

- b. Students are engaged in face-to-face interaction.
 - c. Varied participation in the interactions: pair, threes and fours.
 - d. Students ask and answer questions.
 - e. Key words are given for questions, but the students' answers are their own.
 - f. In exercise 4 students have to listen to the conversation in order to take part.
 - g. The teacher has to plan very carefully how the exercises will work. This may mean drawing a diagram on a piece of paper and rehearsing before the lesson.
 - h. You can have interactive writing exercises as well as oral ones.
10. The key words yesterday were interaction and communication. The example exercises are interactive and they also involve the expression of personal meanings, i.e. the students answer for themselves and they do not know exactly what is going to be said. To this extent they are communicative though controlled.
11. Point out again to participants that the points on the handout relate to organisation and structure. The ability to organise and structure effective communicative activities in the classroom is a basic teaching skill which has to be learned and practised. It will not be acquired in some mystical fashion as a result of declaring oneself a supporter of "the communicative approach".

Some comments on the handout points:

- a. *Make people talk to each other.* Not just teacher-to-student question and answer. Not just reading from the coursebook. Not just using the words put in their mouths by teachers or course books.
- b. *Plan and structure it so that people have something to say.* Looking for information. Finding out about something. Telling somebody something that only the speaker knows about. Completing a task. This might mean providing the students with appropriate source material; texts, pictures, recordings, websites etc. The result of the activity is something worth talking/writing about.
- c. *Personalise it.* This means that student responses cannot be predicted, therefore real communication takes place and the language has real meaning for the participants.
- d. *Re-arrange the classroom.* You cannot have a conversation with the back of someone's head. Discuss with participants the variety of ways classrooms can be organised – tables in groups, conference table, U-

shaped, etc. Remind the participants that a basic skill for language teachers is effective furniture moving. Acknowledge that there are still many teaching situations where classroom furniture cannot be moved. In these cases you have to move the students. The important thing is that students must be able to look at the people they are talking to. So they must physically move to look at the person to their left or right or turn round to look at the people behind them. I have arranged group work in Chinese secondary school classrooms with up to 80 students sitting in fixed rows of desks and benches. Once again, the vital thing is for the teacher to work out exactly how to organise the activity beforehand.

- e. *Vary the groupings.* Not everything should be done in pairs. Some conversations are best done in threes or fours. And some things are best done individually.
 - f. *Get out of the way.* The teacher must remain in control, but does not have actively to control everything. If an activity has been well-planned, well-organised and well explained the teacher can – and in most cases should – move to the side of the classroom and let it run. Students should get used to the idea that not everything has to be monitored and approved by the teacher. Let them focus on communicating free of the worry about the teacher’s judgement on their performance. It is usually possible for the teacher to monitor from the sidelines. While in every course there are times for the focus to be on getting things right, there must also be occasions when the focus is on communicating and completing a realistic task.
12. You will need to make copies of the two discussion example sheets and cut them in half to separate the activities. You can then give out each activity by itself as you come to it.
- It is not necessary for groups to complete each task. The purpose of this activity is to get participants to experience two approaches to organising discussions: the traditional “debating” approach and a more structured task-based approach.
13. You want participants to compare a more abstract and open-ended approach with a more structured and focused one in which people are given a task to complete. You would expect the participants to report that the second activity got going more quickly and achieved a greater intensity of discussion. Ask for suggestions about how to extend the discussion in activity 2. If nothing is forthcoming describe how two groups can be put together with the task of comparing their results and agreeing on the order of priority of the first six qualities.
14. Don’t do this activity. Just ask participants to look at it and talk about it as a lead-in to the half-and-half exercise.
15. This is one of the most effective and productive of all communicative activities. You can use the basic half-and-half technique to practise language functions,

situational language and general, focused discussion at almost every language level. I was introduced to it by Chris Jones and Adrian Doff who joined me in leading a British Council Teachers' Summer School about 35 years ago and I have been grateful ever since.

The basis of the idea is to set up two-way interactions with a disagreement or conflict built-in. There is first a period of preparation in which students think about what they are going to say. They then have their first interaction, after which they move round and meet a different student and repeat the interaction. They can repeat the interaction with another two or three students if it continues to go well.

There are two key elements which determine the success of the activity. The first is the preparation of the two sides to the interaction and the second is detailed and careful classroom organisation. The description below will appear a little complicated, but once the basic idea is understood it is quite straightforward to set up in many different teaching situations.

The interaction will normally take place as a follow-up or as the final activity in a teaching sequence. The example demonstrated here might follow work on a text about national traditions of hospitality, so the context will have been explored and there will have been some general discussion in connection with the text.

You will need to make separate copies of A and B so that each student will only see their own side of the interaction. You will then need to think very carefully about how to structure the activity for your particular group of learners/course participants. In the ideal situation you will have an even number of students and be able to arrange them as follows:

A B A B A B A B
A B A B A B A B

so you have two As sitting opposite each other then two Bs and so on. If you have an odd number of students one A or one B will have to consist of a pair working together. It is important to make sure you have the same number of pairs of As as you have of Bs. If you have As at both ends of the row it won't work. The pairs can be arranged in a line, in a circle or in a U-shape. It can even be arranged in a classroom with students fixed in parallel rows. When you have worked out how to arrange your rows follow the following sequence:

- a. Give each pair their slip of paper, either A or B.
- b. Explain that this is NOT the interaction, this is the preparation stage. This is their chance to think about what they are going to say when they eventually meet their "colleague".
- c. When they have had a few minutes preparation either the As or the Bs move one seat to their left. If they are sitting in a line, the first A or B will have to move to the other end of the row. You then have an A sitting opposite a B and you tell them to start their discussion.
- d. When the discussions are still going well, stop them and ask the row that moved before to move TWO places to the left. They are now opposite a different A or B and they start their discussion again.

- e. You should try to move them at least one more time.
16. The main reason why this is such a successful activity is that it enables students to repeat the situation without being able to repeat exactly the language. Because each person they sit opposite is a different person and because everyone has prepared what they want to say for themselves, the things actually said will be different. So you have the requirements for genuine communication. People are saying what they have decided to say, but they cannot predict what the person opposite them will say. Participants usually report that each time they moved opposite a different person they felt more confident and the interaction became more fluent.
17. As far as possible, whenever a particular technique or form of activity is demonstrated in this programme we try to incorporate a workshop session in which participants can create similar activities and materials for themselves. They have probably never before attempted to cooperate with others to produce teaching materials, so don't expect too much too soon. You will have to allow them time to talk about what they are going to do, but it may be a good idea to give a time limit of ten minutes within which each group must decide on the particular bit of language they are going to work on. The language topics suggested here are fairly basic, but you can use anything that your participants will be comfortable with. After they have worked for a while you will need to sit down with each group and get them to tell you what they have done and where they are going with it. In most cases participants will follow very closely the pattern of the exercises demonstrated in the morning and if groups are finding it difficult to get started you may need to suggest they look closely at the examples and try to follow a similar approach. To produce worthwhile exercises groups will have to:
- a. Think about the language and isolate one or two uses that they are going to practise.
 - b. Think of realistic and meaningful conversational exchanges that people might engage in when using this particular language.
 - c. Not construct substitution tables – many teachers seem to have substitution tables hard-wired into their understanding of what language exercises are like.
 - d. Not give the students all the words they need (as in substitution tables).
 - e. Choose carefully what key words they provide – if they provide any. For example, if the exercise is practising verb forms, don't list possible verbs, list things they can talk about so that students show they can choose appropriate verbs for themselves.
 - f. Make sure the exercises will work in a group context.
 - g. Be very careful and precise when writing the teacher's instructions.
18. These workshop activities usually take more time than you expect, so you will have to be prepared to carry them over to the next session if necessary. It's very important that every group should succeed in producing something. Nevertheless, you will have to chivvy them on occasionally and, at least 15 minutes before the end of the session you will have to insist that each group begins to write their exercises legibly on a large piece of paper to display on the walls. When the material has been displayed you will have to decide how

much discussion is appropriate. All the participants want their work to be acknowledged, but too much criticism can be counter-productive. After giving time for everyone to wander round looking at the work, it can be useful to run through each group's poster clearing up any uncertainties and giving other participants the opportunity to ask questions before saying briefly what is good about each piece of work and making no more than one or two suggestions for making it even better.