

Some common communicative activities

Here are examples of some popular general types of communicative activities you may wish to try out. Note that, in every case, we are primarily concerned with enabling and encouraging communication, rather than with controlled use of particular items of language or with accuracy.

Picture difference tasks

In pairs, one student is given picture A, one picture B. Without looking at the other picture, they have to find the differences (ie by describing the pictures to each other). See a complete example activity in Chapter 2, Section 4.

Group planning tasks

One example is 'planning a holiday'. Collect together a number of advertisements or brochures advertising a holiday. Explain to the students that they can all go on holiday together, but they must all agree on where they want to go. Divide the students into groups of three and give each group a selection of this material. Their task is to plan a holiday for the whole group (within a fixed budget per person). Allow them a good amount of time to read and select a holiday and then to prepare a presentation in which they attempt to persuade the rest of the class that they should choose this holiday. When they are ready, each group makes their presentation and the class discusses and chooses a holiday.

Another example is 'Survival', which uses the *Lost in the forest* resource from the DVD. Tell students a story, make it dramatic (invent the details) and include a disaster of some kind, eg minibus crashes miles from anywhere, injuries, etc. Give them the map and the notes. Students must plan what they should do to have the best chance of survival.

Ranking tasks

Prepare a list of items that learners can discuss and place in a particular order according to their opinions.

- What's the most useful invention?
- What's the best improvement that could be made to our town?
- What are the worst programmes on TV?
- Who's the most important person of the last 100 years?
- What are the qualities of a good language course?

Pyramid discussion

A 'pyramid discussion' is an organisational technique that works particularly well with simple problem-based discussions and especially with item-selection tasks, eg 'What are the four most useful things to have with you if you are shipwrecked on a desert island?', or list sequencing tasks, eg 'Put these items in order of importance'. Here's how to do it:

- 1 Introduce the problem, probably using a list on the board or on handouts.
- 2 Start with individual reflection – learners each decide what they think might be a solution.
- 3 Combine individuals to make pairs, who now discuss and come to an agreement or compromise. If you demand that there must be an agreed compromise solution before you move on to the next stage, it will significantly help to focus the task.

- 4 Combine the pairs to make fours; again, they need to reach an agreement.
- 5 Join each four with another four or – in a smaller class – with all the others.
- 6 When the whole class comes together, see if you can reach one class solution.



What's the point of doing a discussion in this way? (After all, it will take some time to do.) Well, most importantly, the technique gives students time to practise speaking in smaller groups before facing the whole class. Even the weaker speakers tend to find their confidence grows as the activity proceeds and they are able to rehearse and repeat arguments that they have already tested on others. Learners who would usually never dare state their views in front of the entire class will still get a number of chances to speak, and because they have practised a little, may even get up the courage to say them again to everyone. It also tends to lead to a much more exciting and well argued whole-class discussion. The smaller groups are seedbeds for a variety of ideas and opinions; if we jumped in the deep end with the whole-class stage, we would probably get silence or possibly just one or two students dominating.



See *Pyramid discussion* teaching technique on the DVD

Board games

Many commercially available board games lead to interesting speaking activities, though you do need to check them out and ensure that they represent 'good value' in terms of how much useful language they generate. It's also quite easy to create new board games specially designed for your class and their interests. I find it very useful to have one blank board game template (there's one in the *Small-group discussion* resource on the DVD). It is then relatively quick to write in a number of interesting questions or statements in each square round the board. Learners play the game in groups, moving their pieces and either giving a monologue or discussing squares they land on.



Puzzles and problems

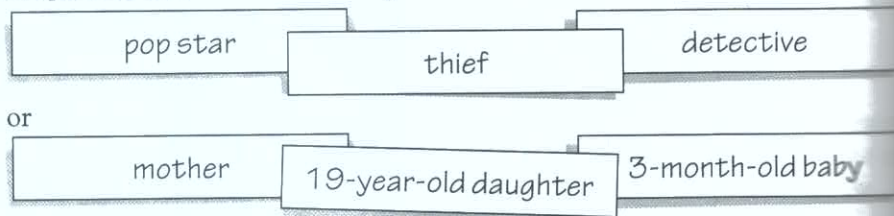
There are many published books nowadays filled with logic puzzles and problems. Many of these make interesting discussion tasks, maybe following a structure of (a) letting learners spend a little time individually considering the problem, then (b) bringing students together in a group to try and solve the puzzle together. Alternatively, some puzzles work well with the same stage (a), but then for the second stage having a full class 'mingle' (all learners walking around, meeting and talking), during which learners can compare their solutions with others.

3 Role play, real play and simulation

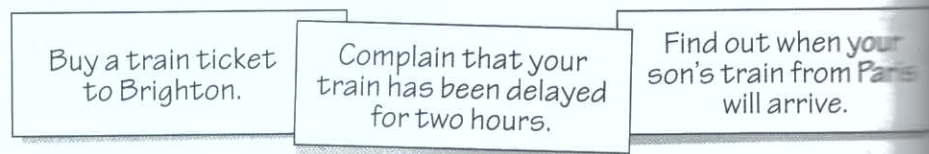
Role play

In role play, learners are usually given some information about a 'role' (eg a person or a job title). These are often printed on 'role cards'. Learners take a little preparation time and then meet up with other students to act out small scenes using their own ideas, as well as any ideas and information from the role cards.

A simple role card could do nothing more than name the role,



or they could offer guidance as to what to do rather than the role itself,



Role cards often contain some of the following information:

Background information about the role (name, job, sex, age, personal appearance, character, interests) as well as points relevant to the task (pieces of information you know (that maybe others don't), your opinions about the issue / problem / situation / people, what you want to happen, be decided, etc and items of language you may need).

A good set of role cards is often designed so that the participants will have distinctly different points of view and natural disagreements. They can lead to excellent discussions – and arguments – without anyone having to feel bad at the end because they got angry.

Role cards can be designed to offer students opportunities to practise specific pieces of language (maybe grammatical points, functional areas, lexical groups, etc). They can allow shyer students to challenge or disagree with other students with much less risk of offending them. The following set of cards is designed to give pairs of in-company business students a chance to practise using modifiers with adjectives (eg *quite big*, *rather fast*, *extremely intelligent*). Students will certainly need a good amount of time to prepare both ideas and language before tackling role play such as this. (As role card 1 requires more preparation time, you could ask both students in a pair to prepare role card 1, then do the role play twice, swapping roles after the first, so both students can take both roles.)

Role card 1

Your company has designed a range of revolutionary new products, completely different from your usual ones.

You are having a meeting with one of your best customers. Describe the new product to him / her.

Role card 2

You are having a meeting to hear about some amazing new products from an important supplier.

Ask a lot of questions and find out as much as you can about the products.

As well as initiating general discussion on issues, role plays can also be set in specific contexts, providing a starting point for speaking practice and also for practice of specific language items.

Task 9.8 Writing role cards

Here are three role cards that very briefly set out particular viewpoints in order to encourage a small group discussion on vegetarianism and meat-eating. The fourth and fifth cards are missing. Write them.

- 1 You believe that meat-eating is natural for humans and that vegetarians are missing out on an important part of their diet.
- 2 You have been vegetarian for six years because you believe it is healthier.
- 3 You like the taste of meat, but don't eat it for moral reasons, as you feel it is wrong to kill animals.

Commentary

There are many possibilities. The extra cards could represent a vegan, a religious viewpoint, a scientific view, a 'they're all crazy' view, a chef, a butcher, etc.

Role play also gives you the possibility of introducing some more bizarre or interesting variations to a discussion, eg 'You are a chicken. You feel very strongly that you are being exploited by the meat industry.' In a role play about pollution, you might have a card saying 'You are the planet Earth. You don't think people are listening to you.'

Task 9.9 Adding a missing role card

Same task again. Here are some role cards. What do you think the missing card might have on it?

- 1 You are a store detective. You can see a suspicious-looking person at a clothes rail who appears to be putting something into her bag. Go over and firmly but politely ask her to come to the office.
- 2 You bought a sweater from this shop yesterday, but you have brought it back because it is too small. You want to go to the assistant to return it and get your money back, but before you do, you start looking at the other sweaters on the rail and comparing them with the one you got yesterday, which is in your bag.

- 3 You are a shop assistant. You have just noticed a customer coming in who was very rude to you yesterday. She wanted to buy a sweater, which you told her was the wrong size, but she insisted was right. Finally, she bought the sweater and stormed out of the shop. You hope she isn't going to cause more trouble.

Commentary

Possibly:

- 4 You are the manager of a large department store. The police have just phoned you to warn that a number of shoplifters are operating in this street. You decide to have a walk around your store and warn the assistants and the store detective to keep their eyes open.

This role play provides scope for use of functional language (apologising, refusing, disagreeing, denying, etc) as well as practising 'shop' vocabulary in a useful and interesting way. The potential for dramatic conflict is built into the cards, though the participants could, if they wished, avoid this completely.

Running a role play: some guidelines

- Make sure the students understand the idea of role play. Do they know what's going to happen? Do they know what is required of them? Are they comfortable doing that or not?
- Make sure the context or situation is clear.
- Do they understand the information on their own card? Allow reading / dictionary / thinking time (during which you go round and help if necessary).
- Give them time to prepare their ideas before they start – maybe encourage note-making – but when the activity starts, encourage them to improvise rather than rely on prepared speeches and notes. The preparation work they have done will inform their role play, but could simply get in the way if they over-rely on it. It may help to take away the cards when the role play starts.
- At the end of the role play, make sure that you give some feedback on how well (or not) the students completed the activity. Remember to comment on the language used as well as the appropriacy of what was said. Students will need to feel that they have achieved something.

Real play

A powerful variation on role play is **real play**. In this case, situations and one or more of the characters are drawn not from cards, but from a participant's own life and world. Typically, one of the learners plays himself / herself, but in a context other than the classroom. This person explains a context (eg from his / her work life) to other learners, and then together they recreate the situation in class. The real play technique allows learners to practise language they need in their own life. It is particularly useful for business and professional people.

For example, in a Business English class, a receptionist at a company said that she found it difficult to deal with foreign visitors who wanted to ask a question rather than just be directed to a person's office. She described a recent time when this had happened and then real played this with another student (who played her, while she played the part of the visitor). She found it helpful to watch her colleague playing her own role, as he did some things quite differently from her and used some interesting expressions. The teacher was also able to suggest some

ideas and language. Then they repeated the real play (with her playing herself). She said afterwards that she felt a little more confident about such situations.

Rather than a set of role cards, the most useful tool for real play is a blank framework – in effect, a card that allows learners to create their own real play role card. In class, I start by asking learners to choose a problem or situation that they might want to work on, and then guide them how to fill in their cards. Some frameworks will need to be worked on individually, some (if they are mutually dependent) in pairs or groups.

The following framework is for a two-person real play (A and B). Each learner needs one framework card. They start by agreeing which person's situation they will work with first (eg A's), and then A (the initiator) will explain a work situation to B. Both will fill in their own framework role card as appropriate.

Real play: work situations involving two people	
Who are the two people?	
Where are you?	
What are you talking about?	
Why are you talking?	
What happened just before this?	
Is any other information important?	
What are some points that will come up in the discussion?	
What would be a good result?	

When they are prepared, learners improvise a conversation as if it was a normal role play, quite possibly with someone else playing the role of the initiator (rather than playing it herself). When it's finished, it may then be useful for the initiator to give feedback on how the characters and events seemed, to 'fine-tune' it (eg 'My mother used to speak much louder than that'), in preparation for a second go at doing the role play, possibly – and revealingly – with swapped roles. You can also provide helpful feedback and language help, perhaps suggesting some typical phrases that might be used. After the second role play, it may be useful to review the task using a form like this:

Real play: review
Was the discussion like the real thing?
What were some interesting things that happened / that you said?
What have you learned from this? Will the task help you in real life?

Simulation

Simulation is really a large-scale role play. Role cards are normally used, but there is often quite a lot of other printed and recorded background information as well – newspaper articles, graphs, memos, news flashes, etc – which may come at the start of the simulation or appear while the simulation is unfolding, causing all participants to take note of the new data and possibly readjust their positions. The intention is to create a much more complete, complex ‘world’, say, of a business company, television studio, government body, etc.

This is a brief description of an example simulation:

The participants are all members of a UFO-spotters society at their annual meeting. They are deciding how they could better publicise their cause to the public. At the start, they have some facts about UFO incidents and some government statements (collected from magazines and the Internet). At an appropriate point in the simulation (probably about one-third of the way through), you introduce a news flash that a UFO has landed in Siberia. This obviously changes the direction of the meeting! Later interventions include a request to interview members of the society and, at the end, news that the UFO was another fake.

4 Fluency, accuracy and communication

Imagine a switch inside your head – it swings between two settings: ‘working mainly on accuracy’ and ‘working mainly on fluency’ (see Figure 9.1).

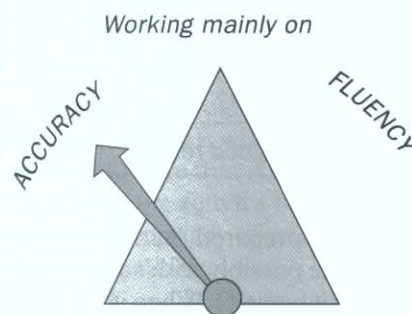


Figure 9.1 Accuracy / fluency switch

It's probably a huge simplification, but I suspect that something like this is at work in my head through most of my language teaching, changing its setting from activity to activity, stage to stage – and, in some teaching, changing moment by moment in response to things happening in class. And I think that initially getting that switch installed and working may be a key skill for anyone learning to be a language teacher.

Certainly there are activities in which you are arguably working on both accuracy and fluency in relatively equal measure, but many everyday language-teaching lesson stages are focused on one more than the other, and at any one moment, in any one activity, it is likely that you will be aiming to focus on accuracy rather than

fluency, or fluency rather than accuracy. The danger of correcting students in the middle of a mainly fluency task is that you interrupt their flow and take the focus off their message. Students often find it hard to continue after a correction, whilst others in class may become more reluctant to speak for fear of similar interruptions.

It is therefore important for you to be clear about what is involved in accuracy-focused work as compared with fluency-focused work. And it's especially important to be clear about the differing aims – and consequently different classroom procedures – of the two.

Task 9.10 Student views on speaking tasks

Here are some things you may hear your students say (or imagine them thinking!). Take sides. Rehearse your arguments and replies to some or all of the comments.

- 1 But I don't want to talk to other students. They speak badly. I just want to listen to you speak.
- 2 I speak a lot, but what is the point if you never correct me? I will never improve.
- 3 You should be teaching us – not just letting us talk. That's lazy teaching.
- 4 I don't need to speak. Teach me more grammar. I will speak later.
- 5 There's no point doing this task if we use bad English to do it.
- 6 This is just a game. I paid a lot of money and now I have to play a game.

Commentary

There are times in class when a focus on accuracy – and therefore a greater use of instant correction – may be appropriate.

There are other times when the focus is on fluency. At these times, instant correction may be less appropriate and could interfere with the aims of the activity.

You need to be clear about whether your main aim is accuracy or fluency, and adapt your role in class appropriately.

Having said all that, there may still be a kind of correction that fulfils the 'non-interfering' aim of fluency activities, yet offers substantial concrete help to the learner who is coming to terms with language items. We will look at this under the heading of 'scaffolding' a little later in this section.

Running a fluency activity

If the main aim is to get the students to speak, then one way to achieve that would be for you to reduce your own contributions. Probably the less you speak, the more space it will allow the students. It could be useful to aim to say nothing while the activity is underway, and save any contributions for before and after. In an activity mainly geared towards encouraging fluency, you are likely to monitor discreetly or vanish (see Chapter 3, Section 5).

The activity route map from Chapter 2, Section 2 (see Figure 9.2) works well for a fluency activity, and we can add a column for likely teacher involvement:

Stage	Teacher involvement
1 Before the lesson: familiarise yourself with the material and activity	-
2 In class: lead-in / prepare for the activity	Teacher centre-stage
3 Set up the activity (or section of activity), ie give instructions, make groupings, etc	Teacher centre-stage
4 Run the activity (or section): students do the activity – maybe in pairs or small groups – while you monitor and help	Teacher out of sight, uninvolved
5 Close the activity (or section) and invite feedback from the students	Teacher centre-stage again
6 Post-activity: do any appropriate follow-on work	?

Figure 9.2 Activity route map

A useful thing for you to do during Stage 4 above is to take notes (unobtrusively) of interesting student utterances (correct and incorrect) for possible use later on (at the end of the activity, the next day, next week, etc).

Ideas for correction work after a fluency activity

- Write up a number of sentences used during the activity and discuss them with the students.
- Write a number of sentences on the board. Ask the students to come up to the board and correct the sentences.
- Invent and write out a story that includes a number of errors you overheard during the activity. Hand out the story the next day and the students, in pairs or as a whole group, find the errors and correct them.
- Write out two lists headed 'A' and 'B'. On each list, write the same ten sentences from the activity. On one list, write the sentence with an error; on the other, write the corrected version. Thus the correct version of sentence 3 might be on either list A or list B (the other list has the incorrect version). You divide the students into two groups, 'A' and 'B', and hand out the appropriate list to each group. The groups discuss their own list (without sight of the other list) and try to decide if their version of each sentence is correct or not. If it is wrong, they correct it. When they have discussed all the sentences, the groups can then compare the two sheets (and perhaps come to some new conclusions).

For more ideas on correction work, see Chapter 12, Section 1.