

3 Speaking and listening: imaginative activities for the language class

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Small-group activities that stimulate students to use their imagination and challenge them to think make them want to speak as well. Listening becomes more vital – students care about understanding what others have said. *Imaginative activities provide a crucial connection between skill-getting and full-fledged autonomous interaction or skill-using* (Rivers 1983a: 41–4).

In the past decade, student-directed small-group work has gradually made its way into the foreign-language curriculum. By now, most teachers have at least some familiarity with pair work, group work, and role play. Activities range from structured interviews to “happenings” and from dyads to whole-class simulations. The content of the activity may be taken from a textbook or from real life; for example, students simulate a restaurant scene (probably complicated by some difficulty) or try to find out if someone shares their birthday. Realistic activities have the advantage that they are relatively easy to formulate and can more or less replicate true-to-life experiences that the students might encounter in the target culture (shopping, asking directions, mailing books home). Depending on class level, these exercises can be prompted, written out beforehand, or ad-libbed. The effectiveness of these types of activities is limited, however, by the very realism that they try to promote. The repertoire of exchanges between a restaurant patron and a customer is quickly exhausted even when a series of minor crises complicates matters. When birthdays are matched, conversation ceases.

Imaginative activities work in a different way. Fantasy becomes more important, reality less. *Students are asked to solve a problem they would not normally have to face*, concoct a plan they would never have dreamt of on their own, reconstruct the missing parts of stories, and act in outlandish ways. In groups they must communicate to make things happen.

Although imaginative activities vary widely in theme and organization, they share a number of underlying qualities:

1. Students work from the known to the unknown.
2. The problem is deliberately ambiguous.
3. Any logical response to the problem is acceptable.
4. Role play is commonly used.

5. Listening skills are crucial at several points in the activity.
6. The teacher sets up the activity and then withdraws.
7. There is a summing up or debriefing following student discussions.

Imaginative activities work best when they are an integral part of a course. They are not intended to supplant skill-getting segments. Rather, there is an interplay between the two types of learning. They can be employed at all levels. Often, the difficulty of an activity can be adjusted by changing vocabulary or by adding or subtracting complications. To cite one example, the task of creating a beautiful face given to a group at a low level of proficiency becomes the “invention” of a movie star at a somewhat higher level and the promotion of a new line of makeup at a yet higher one. Although some activities, like finding the uses of an object, can be used at all levels, others, like reenacting a meeting of parliament in an unknown republic, clearly require more developed linguistic skills. Teachers should use their judgment but be free to experiment; they should not underestimate their students’ ability to cope.

Beginnings: activities for the elementary level

Imaginative activities can be introduced very early in the foreign-language curriculum. After only a few weeks of language study, students can begin to interact within a structure. Before they attempt a group activity, *students should first become accustomed to working in pairs*. A simple way to accomplish this is for them to practice with two-line question-answer exchanges. In these, part of the question and part of the answer are supplied. Students fill in the missing sections in any way that makes sense. As an example, students may discuss food (or anything else that comes to mind):

What kind of _____ do you like?
I prefer _____ but I also _____ .

Whimsy and humor (if not disruptive) are encouraged.

In a more widely used version of this exercise, students employ lengthy lists of questions to guide their interviewing of one another. Or, in a simple group activity, two or more students question one. Following their lists, the students probe personal histories, establish similarities and differences, and compare experiences. The questions generally do not call for imaginative replies, but may be laced with not-so-serious queries like “What is an Ork and what does it eat?”

Students may also work together on a grammar or vocabulary prob-

lem. Given a dialogue or very short story, students are told that the cast of characters has been altered. Males and females will switch gender; age and status will be changed radically. Working in pairs, students rewrite the material and make the necessary adjustments of gender, forms of address, clothing, and place in the community.

Once students begin to handle structured pair or group work with some confidence, they are ready to tackle imaginative activities. At the elementary level, the activities are usually tied closely to the material being presented in the course, the emphasis being on using the material in unexpected ways. After students have learned the parts of the face, for example, they may be asked to work together in groups to draw a beautiful face or a suspicious one or a very old one. Alternatively, they can design masks. With automobile vocabulary, students can design used cars that just cannot be sold, or oversized limousines. A unit on housing can prompt an exercise in which students must complete half-built houses. Even a unit on getting a job can lead students to invent the job interviewer they would most like to encounter. With only slightly more fluency, students can file missing-person reports, sell the furniture in the classroom, and compose simple news bulletins, or they can be asked to give directions for finding one’s way through subterranean caverns where dragons dwell.

In these activities, the procedures are straightforward, and student interaction takes place on a rudimentary level. Normally, students are divided into groups of three or four. The instructions, given verbally, can be as simple as “Design the perfect student apartment” or “We have to sell all of this stuff quickly!” or “Draw a billboard to advertise _____, but don’t use any words on it!” Where necessary, you can give the students drawing paper. Once they know the problem and have a list of relevant vocabulary (most likely from the text), students can proceed, discussing among themselves what they will do. Some teachers may prefer to hand out lists of questions to guide the discussion. After ten minutes, the conversation ends. The groups show what they have drawn, or they read aloud their descriptions. The teacher may correct a few glaring errors and then return to another part of the lesson, preferably one related in some way to the activity.

In *Caring and Sharing in the Foreign Language Class*, Moskowitz (1978) suggests another type of small-group activity that is applicable to the elementary class: humanistic exercises. These encourage students to explore their feelings, memories, values, and fantasies. In one, students are shown a series of shapes and are asked to draw the one they like best. Each explains to the group why this particular shape was chosen. Then the students redivide according to the shapes picked and compare their reasons for making these choices (Moskowitz 1978: 62–3).

Think it over! Activities based on problem-solving

With intermediate and advanced students, *intellectually challenging problem-solving activities can be used on a regular basis to promote interaction and divergent thinking*. Role play is commonly part of the procedure. Listening skills become very important, for if students cannot understand a task they cannot perform it. To come up with a group answer, students must fully comprehend each other. In *Discussions that Work*, Ur (1981) suggests a variety of problem-solving exercises. In one, the teacher tells the class that they are extraterrestrials who, for the first time, are coming into contact with earthly objects, such as toothbrushes, watches, lightbulbs, and keys. Without reference to human civilization, the participants must draw conclusions about the objects' functions (Ur 1981: 45). Other activities in this collection deal with ranking lists of food, colors, or heroes according to preference, or choosing candidates for Man or Woman of the Year.

The activities in Maley and Duff's (1982) *Drama Techniques in Language Learning* differ from those proposed by Ur in that they often call for pantomime or acting. In one, students are told to invent a ball game with its own rules, which are then written down. One pair or group demonstrates its game to the others, who try to work out the rules by watching the game. The players can answer questions only with their bodies – not verbally. Different groups can try to play each other's games (Maley and Duff 1982: 148–9). Maley and Duff also have students create a new language, invent a machine, or dream up new meanings for well-known acronyms.

Imaginative activities based on problem solving can be built around almost any theme. The wheel can be reinvented again and again. Students can dream up new pets; design new money; develop a name, trademark, and slogan for a new organization; plan a banquet for a prince; renovate (or sell) a transit system; sell a local river, monument, hill, or desert; plan voyages of discovery; or control the fog. In *Idea Bank*, Sadow (1982) suggests that students be told to describe the people in a very old family portrait, decipher the information locked in a woven cloth, invent a new animal or hobby, or publicize the study of a nonexistent language. In one activity, the teacher, haggard from overwork, asks the class to plan a vacation.

Other activities may focus on listening skills. Using a tape recorder, the teacher can develop a problem around part of a news broadcast, an ad in the target language, a bit of folk music, or a snatch of dialogue. The students must add to what they have heard with what they have not – that is, they must elucidate the story behind the segment.

For the time span of the activity, *the students become experts of some sort*, for how otherwise could they solve the problem being posed? Their expertise may be somewhat nonsensical, as in the cases of the “fog director” or “ferry-riding expert.” The activities themselves often involve fictitious countries or outlandish coincidences.

In all such activities, *the teacher begins by telling the class of the problem that faces them*. Presented as a script, the problem-posing is, in effect, a listening-comprehension exercise. The script should be adapted to class level. The teacher may say:

I just received a message from the government of Fisherland. It seems that during the months of October and November, which is Spring there, there are no holidays. Each year the people become bored and restless. The Fisherlandic leaders ask that you, experts in celebrating holidays, invent a new holiday. You should be sure to describe the customs that will be practiced.

The teacher may need to state the problem twice. For an activity of this type, speaking directly to the class is more effective than reading aloud from the script. With a few short questions, comprehension is checked. Relevant vocabulary can be introduced at this point. The teacher may want to mention phrases that students can use to manage their discussion. For instance, students of English can practice using phrases such as “Yes, but . . .” or “That’s a good idea, but . . .” to express a reservation without being insulting, or ask for a clarification with “I’m sorry, I didn’t understand that.”

Sufficiently prepared, the students break up into groups of from three to six; each group chooses one member to be a recording secretary. The group knows that it will have to report its conclusions. The groups work together for about 20 minutes. The teacher may act as a “walking dictionary” but otherwise allows the groups to proceed at their own pace. Groups may become quiet, especially at the beginning of an activity, but they usually begin again spontaneously. Teachers should interrupt a group only when it is clearly doing something other than the assigned task. When the allotted time is over, the teacher calls the class together, all the while maintaining the pretense that the students are the experts. The secretaries report their group’s responses. The teacher corrects only when comprehension is threatened.

Problem-solving activities lend themselves to follow-up. First, the activity may be repeated in the same or a slightly altered form. Second, a sequence of activities can be developed. After inventing new kinds of pets, for example, students may design the layout of a pet store or run a competition for best pet. Third, the activities can lead to writing assignments, such as making up laws for a new country or composing newspaper accounts of a recent archeological discovery.

Fictions: narrative forms that provoke interaction

When working in groups, *students can “build” stories and other literary forms from the constituent parts of each type.* Most students will recognize that genres like mysteries, romances, children’s stories, or TV situation comedies always contain certain elements that may vary in detail but are clearly present. Gothic horror stories, for example, tend to contain, among other things, a decaying mansion, an elderly caretaker, a ghost or other such mysterious force, an innocent visitor, and a surprise ending. A class aware of these components can write horror stories.

This type of activity works best when the class has just read a story of the type to be practiced, though this is not absolutely necessary. The class, as a whole and with the teacher’s guidance, establishes the “story skeleton.” The teacher may first ask, “How does a mystery story usually begin?” About eight elements are required. They should be generic – “an old man” rather than the specific “Peter Jones.” In groups, the students fill in the details. The versions are then compared.

Similarly, other types of narrative can stimulate interaction. Fables, folktales, fairy tales, legends can all be recreated by language students. If the class were to compose a biography for the founder of a make-believe nation, they might have to resolve whether the leader, in childhood, lived in a hut or a palace.

The myth of the hero or heroine is an ideal model to use in this sort of activity. This myth, known in some form to many cultures and familiar to younger students through adventure movies, has the advantage of being inherently interesting and capable of being expanded or contracted as the situation requires. In one version the hero or heroine is born in mysterious circumstances. Left as an orphan, the child is brought up by uncaring relatives. The adolescent runs away from this “home” and for years wanders and completes difficult tasks. The youth encounters evil enemies as well as true love. The hero or heroine learns of his or her royal birth and returns to the place of origin to be welcomed as leader and protector. Elements can of course be added or deleted. A less advanced class can deal with a shorter list. An effective way of dealing with an extended literary form is for the students to begin developing the story while they are in small groups and then complete it individually outside of class. At the next class meeting, the students compare their endings. These myths will have several beginnings and as many conclusions as there are students in the class. Members of the original groups will be curious to find out how “their” stories diverged.

Rewrite! Activities based on incomplete narratives

In another variation of the story-writing activity, *students add to incomplete portions of stories, simple plays, or even newspaper accounts.* At the advanced level, the seed material used should be taken from anthologies or recent newspapers. With less proficient groups, teacher-produced materials work well. Many activities that would be appropriate for writing practice may be adapted to small-group work. Not only can students be supplied with the beginning of a story and told to complete it, they can also be given the end and told to compose a story that would lead to this point. Or, they may receive both the start and finish and be asked to dream up the “long-lost” middle section. The story section that is presented can be as long as five hundred words or as short as: “The rain had finally stopped. The young man, well-dressed as he was, paced nervously.” or “Exhausted, filthy, but feeling proud, they began the long trip home.”

Readings from a text or anthology known to the students can also lead to interactive activities. First, students can look for unexplained but potentially significant details in the narrative being studied. A locked door, an unnamed messenger, a missed appointment, a letter on the table in the vestibule will do. In groups, students explain the “real” meaning of these details. Second, students make up prologues, epilogues, and sequels to the stories being studied. Third, they can illustrate scenes from the stories or design book covers or advertising flyers.

“The gang’s all here!” Activities involving the whole class

Activities in which all class members participate at once provide for a constant and varied interaction. They are appropriate at the intermediate level and above. *Activities of this type mimic real-life events while maintaining the protection of role play.* Students can practice language that is close to what they might actually use. These activities can lead naturally to discussions of forms of address and politeness or ways of managing a discussion. In one type of activity, the class provides an audience as each class member proposes a toast, gives a mock eulogy, or makes a patriotic or rabble-rousing speech. The teacher might say:

Beloved Mr. Filmore, chemistry teacher at our school for forty years, is retiring. A banquet is being given in his honor. All of you were his favorite students. Therefore, it is fitting that each of you has been asked to give at the banquet a short speech in his honor. In your talk, please tell how Mr. Filmore influenced your life.

Similar activities can be built around the reminiscences of internationally known philanthropists or champion athletes.

After the script has been read aloud, the teacher checks comprehension and suggests vocabulary words or forms needed in speech-making. Then the class members prepare their speeches. This may be done in class or, more efficiently, they can compose their talks for the next class meeting. They can write notes or the whole speech. Where possible, the chairs should be arranged to resemble a banquet hall or auditorium. One of the students acts as master or mistress of ceremonies. With more mature students the situation can be complicated by having one student, as an interloper, revolutionary, or someone with a complaint, give a talk that contradicts what the others have said. The class members listen to one another and, where appropriate, they applaud. When the last student has finished, the teacher sums up and may correct errors made by some of the students.

In another type of activity, students move around the room and try to make deals with one another. The whole class is involved, with students interacting in a series of pair arrangements. They trade antiques or cars, arrange trips, or seek unusual means of employment. In one activity, the teacher begins:

As some of you know, *Would-Be Television Studies* is looking for a number of little-known actors and actresses to feature in its new series "Beyond Beauty." Half of you here today are agents for the studio; each is looking for an actor or an actress for a specific role in the series. The others here are agents for aspiring actors and actresses who are seeking stardom and fortune. After you have taken a few moments to think about the part you want filled or the artist you represent, the agents for the studio will have a chance to meet with the agents for the performers. Speak to one and try to make a deal; if you can't make a deal, move from one to another until you've found what you are looking for. If time remains, try to agree on a contract.

In another example, students bring to class the most outlandish object they own – large feathers, wood carvings, wicker room dividers, or any unusual object. In class, they write a description of a gift they need to buy. A flea market is set up. Students take turns buying and selling. If buyers cannot find what they are looking for, they must compromise. The sellers, of course, will try to convince the buyers that their articles are suitable substitutes.

During the dealing session, the teacher can monitor the activity by walking among the students, answering their questions and, where necessary, suggesting that they move on to other partners. These activities work best in a room with furniture that can be moved to suggest a market or car dealership; however, they can be managed in more rigid arrangements by having students repeatedly change places. After the deals have been made, the pairs report them to the class.

In a third style of all-class activity, students attend mock birthday parties, garden parties, reunions, inaugural balls, political caucuses and rallies, picnics, graduations, and international conferences. Activities of this type have limited structure. Students are given or choose new identities; often these identities border on the absurd. Depending on the situation, students can be sea captains, millionaires, candidates for political office, famous sculptors, chewing gum manufacturers, or sky divers. Before proceeding, the class members spend a few minutes thinking about their new identity.

In these activities, the situation itself leads to conversation. At times, it is necessary for the teacher to remind students to talk with a number of others. In some scenes, it is possible for one participant to act as the catalyst, making introductions and spreading rumors. Requiring that the students ask set questions like "How do you feel about the new city center?" to at least four classmates is a more artificial way of making sure that the conversation flows.

You are there! Reenactments of history

In advanced classes, students can recreate scenes from history. These scenes may be selected from world history, but are more effective when they come from the target culture. Treaty negotiations, summit meetings, political party meetings (at a particular moment in history), state visits can all provide the structure for an activity. Events in which debate and controversy play a role work well, but outright hostilities can be difficult. Before doing an activity of this sort, students should be very familiar with the moment, period, and personages involved. Students can prepare themselves through textbook readings, pamphlets (where available), and documentary films. An intensive study of clothing, mannerisms, or dialect is not necessary. Historical reenactments are neither dramatic productions nor full-fledged simulations. (See Jones 1982: 55–63 on simulations.) At most the teacher may give a few pointers about the rhetoric of the period or about formalities (or insults) used at political meetings.

For the reenactment, each student should have a new identity. A student can impersonate a specific historical figure such as Bolívar, Cartier, Nehru, Queen Elizabeth I, or Truman, but the scenes are simpler to stage if students simply assume a generic role, such as the leader or ideologue of a political party who advocates terrorism, a leader who urges cooperation with the colonial power, or a representative of the party in power. Reenacting a conference on multiculturalism held in Ottawa, for instance, the students are representatives of the Ministry of State, the Canadian Conference on the Arts, Radio-Canada, Université

de Montréal, and Hudson Bay Oil and Gas. More than one student can play each role.

After preparing their roles, the students improvise discussion and debate and may even shout at one another. If called for by the situation, one student can act as moderator. A large class can be subdivided. In an activity of this type, a debriefing is helpful. With teacher direction, the class recapitulates what went on and where they strayed from the historical model.

Conclusion

Imaginative activities do not dominate any foreign-language curriculum. In themselves, they do not constitute a methodology. For that reason, *they can be used alongside many other techniques and in conjunction with many styles of language teaching and at all levels.* As has been shown, a willingness to suspend disbelief, the ability to associate freely and easily, and a good sense of humor help in carrying out these activities. Not all students have large doses of these qualities, but in a relaxed and confident classroom most students can be inspired to use what they do have. The injection of more standard drills, readings, and tapes can quiet the objections of those seeking “serious study.” A few students will use their native language from time to time, but this will fade away as they become accustomed to the activities. With practice, interaction and imagination increase. Fluency outruns exactness, but communication grows.

Let's act on it

1. How can imaginative activities be integrated into a more traditional course? Where do they fit? Using a familiar textbook, find the points at which imaginative activities could be developed.
2. Make up a script for a problem-solving activity. Be sure to include an ambiguous situation and a role play. Rewrite this activity to make it appropriate for a more elementary level. Then rewrite it again to make it appropriate for an advanced level. Practice one version with a group of teachers.
3. What nonliterary forms (newspaper articles, for example) can be melted down to their “skeleton” features? What literary ones? Pick one form and identify at least eight components. Based on these, try composing your own version. Then make up a sequel to what you have written.

4. List ten situations (not mentioned in the text) where people give short speeches. Develop an activity around one of these situations.
5. List types of parties, get-togethers, and meetings not mentioned in the text. Pick one that would provide an inviting forum for communication at the intermediate level. Invent numerous roles. Prepare ways to adjust the situation if conversation flags.
6. Prime your own creativity by writing down all the activity concepts you can think of in twenty minutes. (You may borrow ideas from textbooks or the references in the Annotated Reading List.)

Annotated reading list

- Birckbichler, D. W. 1982. *Creative Activities for the Second Language Classroom*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics. A collection of activities taken from many sources, including popular textbooks in French, Spanish, and German.
- Jones, K. 1982. *Simulations in Language Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. A comprehensive guide to adapting complex situations to language classes; it provides one complete simulation. Best suited for advanced classes.
- Keller, E., and Warner, S. T. 1979. *Gambits 1: Openers; Gambits 2: Links; Gambits 3: Responders, Closers and Inventory*. Hull, P.Q.: Public Service Commission of Canada. A three-volume set of exercises for the teaching of phrases useful in opening, directing, interrupting, and closing a conversation. For French and German, see C. J. Kramsch, 1981, *Discourse Analysis and Second Language Teaching*, Language in Education, Vol. 37, Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics; and 1981, “Teaching Discussion Skills: A Pragmatic Approach,” *FLA* 14: 93–104.
- Maley, A., and Duff, A. 1982. *Drama Techniques in Language Learning*. New ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Very varied communication activities, many based on mime and other nonverbal techniques.
- Moskowitz, G. 1978. *Caring and Sharing in the Foreign Language Class*. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House. A guide to the application of humanistic education to foreign language teaching. Contains many exercises intended to provoke affective as well as linguistic responses. Appendixes give lengthy lists of words and expressions indicating feelings, emotions, and qualities in English, German, Latin, Spanish, French, Italian, and Hebrew.
- Sadow, S. A. 1982. *Idea Bank: Creative Activities for the Language Class*. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House. Activities intended to provoke divergent thinking as well as language use; each is presented in a lesson-plan format. Examples in English with translation of key sections into Spanish, French, and German.
- Ur, P. 1981. *Discussions that Work: Task-Centred Fluency Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. A set of relatively simple small-group activities; includes guessing games, picture interpretations, detecting differences, and putting things in order.