

PERHAPS SOME STUDENTS IN YOUR CLASS
ARE ABLE TO ACHIEVE COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

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INTRODUCTION

The teaching of English as a foreign language in our state schools is highly criticized by both students and parents. The majority feels every student should graduate from secondary school speaking at least one foreign language. Most teachers of English in secondary schools, though, are sure that this goal is unrealistically ambitious. The vast number of students per class (35-45); the lack of massive audio facilities; the limited class time (three weekly, 45-minute periods of English); all combine to create a teaching situation that cannot provide enough English background to students living in a Spanish-speaking country.

Teachers often feel discouraged and have simply decided that oral communication in English is a utopia in their classrooms and have quickly chosen a text which will facilitate their work in overcrowded classrooms. We feel, however, that in every classroom there are some students who deserve a broader perspective in their English class. I am referring to those highly motivated students who, either because they know they have a 'good ear' for languages, or because they have some sort of personal experience in the language, feel they would like to speak in English instead of reading a page from a text and then answering written exercises. Through the experience described in this article we are simply suggesting that teachers organize groups within the class and display extra efforts for those highly motivated students who will welcome an emphasis on their oral skills in English.

It is not the aim of this article to go into the depths of 'language aptitude,' 'language ability,' 'motivation,' and so forth. We know the readers of this journal will look for theoretical orientation in the specialized literature. Here we are simply describing an actual classroom experience.

DESCRIPTION OF THE EXPERIENCE

The general idea of the experience was to organize working units which exploit the four language skills in different sequences of instruction and according to oral abilities divide the class into groups which will cover the sequences of the unit at their own pace.

The first sequence was developed in general by all groups and covered the essential parts of the unit, structures and functions, aiming preferably at the oral skills. The second and third sequences were independently covered by the groups. Hence, some of them took more time in those activities of the sequence, emphasizing oral production of the language. On the other hand, those highly motivated students whose oral abilities were better developed, easily reached the higher sequence and thus acquired some degree of competence in oral communication in English.

ORGANIZATION SCHEME

In general teachers know fairly well the linguistic background of their students. However, the students themselves felt more confident with this new experience since groups were to be organized according to their actual linguistic abilities. Therefore, a simple two-part placement test like the one presented below was used.

The first part of the test checks oral comprehension of the language. It was designed with oral stimulæ provided through a tape recorder in the classroom or in the lab, and with written responses that students registered on their answer sheets. The second part aimed at evaluating students' ability to speak and was designed in the interview form. In this case teachers felt the personal contact was better and did not use tapes or the lab. The students' responses were judged according to the scale printed below.

SAMPLE TEST

PART I : LISTENING COMPREHENSION

ORAL STIMULAE	WRITTEN RESPONSES
<p>1. A simple eight-line dialogue is presented twice by the teacher or model.</p> <p>Type of dialogue:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Where are you going, Paul? - To the supermarket - May I go with you? - Of course. You can help me carry a few things. - What are you going to get? - Eggs, milk, sugar, tea and biscuits. - I'm going with you. <p>2. A ten-line letter is read twice by the teacher or model.</p> <p>Dear Ted,</p> <p>Thank you so much for your nice letter. It was good to hear of your Summer holiday. Do you always go camping? Last year I went camping with some friends from school. We went to a very nice place in the South near a lake. I enjoyed it very much but we did not have very nice weather. It rained and it was a bit cold. We spent a lot of time playing cards and writing letters. I sent you a post-card of one of the lakes in the South. Did you get it? I'm sure you would like the South of my country!</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Write soon,</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Bob.</p>	<p>2. The students answer a T/F or a multiple choice type of exercise on their answer sheet.</p> <p>Type of T/F exercise:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. ... Paul is going to the greengrocer's. 2. ... His friend does not want to go with him. 3. ... Paul wants him to buy a few things too. 4. ... Paul is going to buy some vegetables. <p>2. The students answer a multiple choice/ completion sort of exercise:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Bob went camping with some friends... <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. this Summer b. last year c. in Winter 2. The weather was.... <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. very nice b. very cold c. not too good 3. Bob and his friends... <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. played cards b. wrote post-cards c. visited farms

3. A descriptive text is read twice by the teacher or model

Ballet is the interpretation of a dramatic or musical theme by means of formal dancing. It is a composite art, made up of dancing, music, painting and drama.

Dancing is the result of a fixed technique which is the basis of the ballet dancer's technique. However, many present-day ballets do not make use of ballet technique.

3. Students complete some sentences in Spanish on their answer sheets.

1. El ballet es un arte _____

2. El bailarín profesional tiene como base _____

3. Algunos ballet Modernos _____

PART II : ORAL PRODUCTION

Instructions for the teacher: You will have to interview students one by one. You can ask them to record their answers in a cassette, or you can interview them personally. Ask each one of them the following questions. Register their answers in the observation chart provided below, using the appreciation scales suggested.

1. What's your name?
2. Where do you live?
3. Have you studied English at a private institution?
(e.g., American or British Institutes)
4. Do you like to speak English?
5. Do you think that English is important for your future life?
6. Say why.
7. etc., etc.

OBSERVATION CHART

Name of Student	Conveys meaning	Structure of Sentences	Intonation and Pronunciation

APPRECIATION SCALE

	Conveys meaning	Structure of Sentences	Intonation and Pronunciation
GOOD.	All answers do.	Most statements are correct.	Clear English sounds.
AVERAGE.	Some answers do.	Some sentences OK. A few problems in others.	Many interferences from Spanish.
POOR.	No meaning in most answers.	Gross errors interfere with meaning.	Almost no English sounds.

THE MATERIALS

In order to accomplish this experience teachers were given suggestions for organizing their own class materials in progressing sequences of instruction and in choosing topics which suit students' interests. The idea behind the whole experience was to give these highly motivated students working in one group the chance to communicate in English their personal needs and experiences using as their starting point materials presented in class.

The following unit was used as part of our experience with 14-year-old students who had had three years of basic English but were not able to communicate orally in the language.

The teacher had the opportunity to continuously check the oral performance of the groups using the charts suggested after every sequence of instruction.

SAMPLE UNIT: CHANGING PLANS

OBJECTIVES: At the end of the unit the students should be able to hold a simple conversation related to the topic of the unit, adapting it to personal situations.

Given a simple basic dialogue of at least 8 exchanges, plus a set of illustrations connected to each one of them, the students should be able to demonstrate their comprehension by means of matching exercises.

Given several dialogue variations, similar to the basic dialogue, plus a set of illustrations, the students should be able to associate the lines of the dialogue with the corresponding illustration.

Given several dialogue variations, the students should be able to substitute, transform, or adapt them to new situations in connection with written or visual cues.

Given a suggestion about an imaginary situation, plus a set of illustrations, the students should be able to produce a dialogue conversation similar to the ones presented in each sequence of instruction, expressing their own personal interest or preferences.

FUNCTIONS: Invite } people to do things
 Ask }
 Say what you {want} to do
 {plan}

Agree to do something

Apologize for not being able to do something

Accept } invitations to do things
Refuse }

Express your wishes to do things

Express agreement/satisfaction about something

SEQUENCE OF INSTRUCTION No. 1

BASIC DIALOGUE

- * What are you doing this evening, Joe?
- I'm going to the science exhibition. Would you like to come?
* Sorry, I'm afraid I can't. I have tickets for a musical show.
- A musical show? Where?
* At the Palladium! My favourite group is playing.
- Really? May I go with you?
* Sure! Let's go!

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

1. Presentation of the dialogue by means of some illustrations.
2. The class is divided into groups. Each group is asked to repeat a section of the dialogue according to a given model, till the whole class can repeat the complete dialogue.

3. Then each group is asked to memorize a different part of the dialogue; so that the whole dialogue can be said by the groups.
4. Each group presents two students who are able to dramatize the whole dialogue for the rest of the class.
- 5.*The whole class is asked to copy the dialogue. Students who did not have a chance to dramatize the dialogue are asked to read it.

EVALUATION

Students are asked to dramatize the dialogue within their groups. The teacher observes them and registers their performance in the following chart, marking ✓ for GOOD; + for AVERAGE; and 0 for POOR.

Group No. ..	Name of Student	Pronun. & Inton.	Stress & Rhythm	Fluency

SEQUENCE OF INSTRUCTION No. 2

DIALOGUE VARIATION

- What are you doing on Saturday, Pete?
- * I think I'm going to an art exhibition with some friends. Would you like to join us?

(* Teachers can develop this activity after activity # 3 if the level of the students exhibits the ability to do so.

- Sorry, I'm afraid I can't. I bought tickets for the car races.
- * Car races? Where?
- In Viña! Some friends of mine are running for the National Cup.
- * Really? I'm going with you!
- Great!

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

1. Presentation of the dialogue variation by means of illustrations. The teacher displays a series of post cards, magazine pictures, newspaper clippings, etc., which will clarify the differences between the basic dialogue and the variation of it.
2. Students are asked to repeat the matching exercises developed in the previous sequence of instruction to make sure they understand the variation.
3. Once the groups are organized the same activities of the previous sequence are used to have all students repeating the dialogue variation.
4. Once the students have copied the dialogue they are asked to complete the following one in their own groups.
 - What are you
 - I'mWould you
 - Sorry
 - A? Can I
 - Sure!

 EVALUATION

1. The teacher displays a series of illustrations which correspond to the basic dialogue and to the variation and asks students to write a question or statement for each one of them.
2. Students are asked to dramatize the dialogue in their own groups. The teacher checks their performance using the following chart:

Group No. ..	Name of Student	Inton. & Pron.	Fluency & Rhythm	Accuracy of lines

A three point scale is suggested: GOOD ✓; AVERAGE +; POOR ○.

 SEQUENCE OF INSTRUCTION No. 3

DIALOGUE VARIATION

- What are you doing this weekend, Jim?
- * I guess I'm going to see a play. The University Players are pulling on a musical comedy.
- A musical comedy? Where?
- * At the Palace. Not too far from my home.
- Really? May I go with you?
- * Of course. Let's go and get the tickets right now.
- Super!

 SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

1. The same procedure used in the previous sequence is developed with the groups.
2. By means of magazine pictures, theatre programs, photographs, newspaper clippings, etc., the class is provided with a number of alternatives to the places, entertainments or activities included in the dialogues already presented.
Examples:
 - watch a TV program
 the Davis Cup
 - go to a Film Festival
 Music "
 - go to a theatre rehearsal/performance
 choir " / "
3. Each group is asked to complete the following dialogue in writing:
 - What are you doing this afternoon, Pat?
 - *
 - Oh, really? Where?
 - *
 - May I go with you?
 - *
4. Each group selects two students who will perform the dialogue they have prepared in front of the class.

 EVALUATION

1. The teacher organizes a display of some illustrations in front of the class. The students are given an answer sheet with the following incomplete dialogue. They are supposed to fill in the blanks with the visual cues provided.
 - What
 - * I think
 - May I
 - *! Let's
 -

2. Students are asked to dramatize the dialogues they have prepared in their groups. The teacher observes their performance and registers it in the following chart.

Group No. ...	Name of Student	Intonation and Rhythm	Meaningful situation conveyed

The same three point scale is used. A description of each level is provided.

	Intonation and Rhythm	Meaningful situation conveyed
GOOD ✓	portrays foreign lang. rhythm and intonation	conveys meaning into a new situation
AVERAGE +	many interferences from Spanish	there is a sequence of ideas within a situation
POOR ○	poor intonation and no English rhythm	no ideas; just repetition of previous models

SEQUENCE OF INSTRUCTION No. 4

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

1. The groups receive a set of illustrations, magazine pictures, post cards, etc., and are asked to prepare questions and answers similar to the situations which appeared in the dialogue.
2. Each group is asked to present its work. Pairs of students from each group read out small conversations related to the visuals provided.
3. The groups exchange visuals and prepare dialogues or conversations about them. Each group presents a team of students who is able to perform a conversation including given visuals or their personal preferences.

4. Pairs of students from different groups are asked to go in front of the class. Students from other groups give them visual cues or oral suggestions for them to have a brief conversation similar to the ones presented in the dialogue

EVALUATION

The teacher observes the students' performance in front of the class and registers it on the following chart. The same three point scale suggested before is used: GOOD ✓; AVERAGE †; POOR ○.

COMMUNICATION OF GENERAL IDEAS		NAME OF STUDENTS: (initials)			
		A.B.	B.C.	C.D.	etc.
	a. can communicate ideas in a simple and direct way.				
	b. is able to include personal opinions, interests, etc.				
USE OF STRUCTURES AND EXPRESSIONS	a. can use all structures presented in the unit				
	b. is able to use the structures presented in this unit and in previous ones				
USE OF LEXICAL ITEMS	a. is able to use all the items presented in the unit				
	b. can also use items presented in previous units				
FLUENCY	a. is fluent enough to carry on a conversation				
	b. his fluency allows him to go beyond the level of the class				

THE PROCEDURE

Most students were pleased with the idea of working in groups. They felt at ease talking and discussing the different situations with their peers and they appreciated the fact that they were not pressed with time. Little by little all groups developed the activities included in every sequence of instruction without paying much attention to what the other groups were doing.

The teacher moved around from group to group trying to encourage students to speak and helping them out when they were in trouble. The teacher obviously had to play some sort of leading role at the beginning of the unit for the general presentation of the basic dialogue and sometimes for the dialogue variations. However, the presentation of the dialogue variations had to be reinforced in almost every group.

When a general activity was needed sometimes the teacher asked the whole class to simultaneously perform some of the written activities. This gave all students a chance to check their personal work with the general version presented on the blackboard.

THE PROBLEMS

The organization of groups caused some problems. For some teachers the organization of groups according to abilities was a real disadvantage. Some students whose oral skills had been definitely postponed were not able to carry out the oral activities. So the groups had to be re-shuffled in order for all of them to include at least one group member who could develop these activities and take some sort of leading role.

THE ADVANTAGES

For those highly motivated students who are really interested in the development of communicative skills in the foreign language, the organization of a 'top' group in the class was certainly beneficial. They could very easily work out all the communication activities involved in every sequence and did an excellent job in the last sequence.

Once the complete unit was successfully accomplished by the 'top' group, they were asked to perform a personal situation in front of the class, thus motivating other groups to reach such high performance in English.

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