Teaching productive skills – speaking and writing (including games)

We have previously looked at the importance of integrated skills in the classroom, and also examined receptive skills in more detail. Now we take a look at the productive skills: speaking and writing. While speaking and writing are substantially different in many ways, they both are used for the same purpose – to communicate.

In many ways, writing is the most neglected skill in the TEFL world, as many teachers don’t like to see classroom hours being devoted to what is often ‘quiet time’. Writing, therefore, is often relegated to homework, which in turn is frequently not done and so the skill is never developed. It is true to say that most students prefer to focus on their speaking skills but that doesn’t mean that writing should be ignored. In many ways writing is the more difficult skill, requiring a greater degree of accuracy. When speaking, any misunderstandings can be cleared up ‘on the spot’, whereas this is not possible with writing. Speaking, on the other hand, requires a greater degree of fluency as the speaker will rarely have time to think and plan an answer.

Communication between people is a very complex and ever changing thing. But there are generalisations that we can make which have particular relevance for the teaching and learning of languages.

When two or more people are communicating with each other, we can be sure that they are doing so for one of the following reasons:

- They have some communicative purpose
- They want to say something
- They want to listen to something
- They are interested in what is being said
Therefore, if a teacher wishes to introduce a communicative activity to the students, he or she should bring in a number of the above factors. The teacher must create the need and desire, in the students, to communicate. If these factors are not present, it is far less likely that the activity will be the success that the teacher had envisaged. If the students don’t see the point in doing something, they’re far less likely to want to participate!

**What is the difference between accuracy and fluency activities?**

Accuracy activities (usually part of the study phase) are concentrated on producing correct language. Such activities are usually controlled to ensure accurate reproduction of language.

Fluency activities (usually part of the activate phase) are concentrated on allowing the students to experiment and be creative with language. We are less concerned with accuracy and more concerned with the effectiveness and flow of the communication.

**Which is more important?**

Accuracy and fluency carry equal importance. As mentioned above, both come into different stages of a lesson. Accuracy activities will check that the students can understand and use the language in a controlled way before being expected to try to use it creatively in a fluency activity.
Speaking activities in the classroom

**Controlled activities** – accuracy based activities. Language is controlled by the teacher.

- Drilling (choral and individual listening to and repetition of the teacher's model of pronunciation). You should always try to use a ‘3 by 3’ drill where possible, i.e. say the word, ask the whole group to repeat (this gives a safe environment for them to practice pronunciation, and any mistakes made by individuals will not be apparent to each other). Do this 3 times. Follow this by calling on 3 individuals by name, in turn.

- Prompting (pre-planned question and answer is the most obvious example).

**Guided activities** – accuracy based but a little more creative and productive. The output is still controlled by the teacher but the exact language isn’t.

- Model dialogues

- Guided role-play

**Creative communication** – Fluency based activities. The scenario is usually created by the teacher but the content of the language isn’t.

- Free role-play

- Discussions

- Information gap (this is where different students have different pieces of information and they have to share this information to get the complete picture/solve the task, etc).

- Debates

- Simulations

- Communication games
Encouraging students to speak

Many students can seem reluctant to speak in the classroom. This can be for a variety of reasons, including:

- Lack of confidence
- Fear of making mistakes
- Peer intimidation
- Lack of interest in the topic
- Previous learning experiences
- Cultural reasons

The teacher must try to overcome these hurdles and encourage student interaction. The aim should be to create a comfortable atmosphere, where students are not afraid to speak or make mistakes, and enjoy communicating with the teacher and their fellow students.

Techniques to encourage interaction

- Pair-work
- Group-work
- Plenty of controlled and guided practice before fluency activities
- Make speaking activities purposeful (create a desire and need to communicate)
- Change the classroom dynamics
- Careful planning
- With certain activities you may need to allow students time to think about what they are going to say
**A typical free/creative speaking activity lesson:**

The learner objective would be for the students to be able to use the language involved with weather and weather forecasts.

**Engage** – Ask students about the weather in their countries and discuss how it changes throughout the year. Discuss weather variations in other countries. Ask them if they know what a weather forecast is and where they can find them.

**Study** – Elicit weather forecast vocabulary and complete various matching and gap-fill exercises.

**Activate** – Students write a country (not their own) and a month on a card in pairs, which is collected by the teacher to be redistributed to another pair. They then have to prepare a typical weather forecast for the country on the card that they now have, at that time of the year.

**Guidelines for a free / creative speaking activity**

**Before the lesson**

- Decide on your aims: what you want to do and why.

- Try to predict what the students will bring to the activity and any problems they might have. Will they have something to speak about? Are they capable of doing the activity successfully? Do they have the necessary language? Will the students find the activity interesting, useful, fun?

- Work out how long the activity will take and tailor it to the time available.

- Prepare any necessary materials.

- Work out your instructions.
During the activity

- Arouse the students’ interest through visuals, a short lead – in talk, a newspaper headline, etc. Try to relate the topic to the students’ own interests and experience.

- You may want to remind students of any structures or vocabulary that might be useful – perhaps leaving them on the board for reference.

- Set up the activity so that the students know the aims of the activity and what they are to do. This means giving clear instructions and checking that they have been understood.

- Make sure the students have enough time to prepare, perhaps in pairs or groups, before asking them to tackle the main activity. Do not be tempted to cut down on the time needed for this. Do not forget that the students are probably getting useful speaking practice at this stage too.

- Make the activity even more ‘process’ rather than ‘product’ - based by encouraging rehearsal if appropriate, particularly with role-plays.

- Monitor the activity: do not interrupt except to provide help and encouragement if necessary; try to keep a low profile. Watch the pace – do not let the activity drag on and remember to leave time for feedback.

- Evaluate the activity and the students’ performance in order to provide feedback later but don’t jump in with instant corrections. Wait until after the activity has finished before correcting. Don’t over-correct. Free speaking activities are more concerned with fluency than accuracy.
After the activity

Provide feedback:

- Indicate how well the class communicated; comment on how fluent each was, how well they argued as a group, and so on. Focus on what they were able to do rather than on what they couldn’t do.

- Sometimes you might want to record the activity on audio or videocassette and play it back for discussion. Focus on possible improvements rather than mistakes – in fact if it is taped, sometimes they can be asked to do a rough version first, then discuss improvements and then re-record.

- Note down glaring recurrent errors in grammar, pronunciation and use of vocabulary. Individual mistakes might be discussed (in private) with the student(s) concerned and you might recommend suitable remedial work to do at home. Mistakes which are common to the class can be mentioned and then practised another day when you have had a chance to prepare a suitable remedial lesson.
Writing Skills

Written text has quite a number of differences which separates it from speaking. Not only are there differences in grammar (for example usage of contracted forms in speaking are often not applied in writing), vocabulary (usually more formal in written English) but also in spelling, handwriting, layout and punctuation.

Despite these differences many of the same factors as those for a speaking lesson need to be considered and incorporated.

Handwriting

For a great number of students, particularly those whose native language uses a different alphabetical system from the English language, forming English letters will present a major challenge. Such students may well need special training in the formation of individual letters. Handwriting is very much a personal issue and we don’t wish to try to make students all write in exactly the same way. However, poor handwriting may influence the reader in a negative way and so the teacher should always encourage the students to improve it.

Spelling

Incorrect spelling can not only create misunderstandings but can often be perceived, by the reader, to reflect a lack of education. Spelling in English is made very difficult by the fact that many words that are pronounced the same are written differently (waist/waste, etc) and some words are written the same but pronounced differently (read/read).

A single sound in the English language may be written in many different ways. This is because English is not a phonetic language (as we will see in the unit on teaching pronunciation). As teachers, we need to draw the students’ attention to the different ways of pronouncing the same letters (or combinations of letters) and have them do exercises to discover spelling rules. Spelling differences between British English and American English don’t exactly help either (colour/color)! A new kind of ‘slang’ spelling has also emerged through the internet and e-mail. One of the best ways to help students with spelling is through extensive reading.
Layout and punctuation

Once again, this can present the students with major problems if the rules of their first language are significantly different from those of English. Some languages have completely different punctuation and some have none at all! Some languages write from right to left, while in some others words aren’t even separated by spaces. In reality (despite the many rules) punctuation is frequently a matter of personal style but totally incorrect usage can lead to rather awkward and difficult looking pieces of writing.

To help students learn the different layouts of writing (for example how business letters differ from e-mails, etc), they need to be exposed to, and be given the chance to practise with many different styles.

After students have completed a piece of written work we should get them to check it over for grammar, vocabulary usage as well as punctuation, spelling, layout and style of writing (is it too formal/informal?). As with speaking activities, students will often require planning time for written work.

Creative writing

Many of the same principles need to be applied to writing activities as speaking activities. If they have no desire or need to write the result is likely to be somewhat less than spectacular. Creative writing should be encouraged, as it engages the students and the finished work usually provides them with a sense of pride. Typical creative writing tasks may include poetry, stories and plays.

Although most writing in the ‘real world’ is done individually, there is nothing to stop teachers putting the students into pairs or groups, particularly for creative writing where the input of ideas from different sources may be helpful or necessary.

A typical creative writing activity lesson:

The learner objective would be for the students to be able to use appropriate language for completing speech bubbles in cartoons, and produce a story themselves.

Engage – Show students a picture from a newspaper or magazine without any text. Ask the students to come up with some ideas to say what is happening in the picture, along with what happened before and after, etc.
**Study** – Show students an example of a cartoon strip with speech bubbles for dialogue and rectangular boxes for description/action, etc, and elicit the difference. Give them a cartoon strip, in pairs (real or prepared) with either the speech text or descriptions removed. Discuss ideas from the students for the situation, what the people might be talking about, etc. Get them to fill in the missing material with their own ideas.

**Activate** – Get together enough cartoon strips with a minimum of 5 boxes to give to each pair of students. Remove both the dialogue and the descriptions Cut and paste the strips into a vertical sequence of 5 pictures. Draw a dotted line between each set of pictures.

Demonstrate with the students that they will fill in the missing information for picture one only. They then fold the paper over along the dotted line so that it is not visible.

Pass the paper to the next pair and repeat for picture 2. Repeat this process until the sheet is complete.

Get each pair to read out their sheets to the rest of the group.

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**Games in the Classroom**

A game is an activity with rules, a goal and an element of fun. Many conventional, and unconventional, games can be adapted to language teaching.

There are two kinds of games: competitive games in which players or teams race to be the first to reach the goal, and co-operative games, in which players or teams work together towards a common goal. These activities can be further broken down into communicative and linguistic games; the former being activities with a non-linguistic goal or aim.
Games are popular with children, teenagers and adults alike. They should, therefore, be regarded as an integral part of the syllabus and not just an amusing diversion on a Friday afternoon. They can provide useful controlled practice and free practice material.

There are many books full of creative communication games specifically devised for the English language teacher. Some of the most popular were stated in the introductory unit. A good language school will have a wide variety of such books in its resource centre.

However, we don’t have to buy these books in order to incorporate games into our teaching. Many of the games that we played as children or play as adults can be incorporated into our classrooms.

All of the games below have been used for EFL teaching. Where known, the differences between American and British English names have been given.

Have a look at the games and see how many English language uses you can find for each one, for teaching English:

- Twenty questions
- Noughts and crosses/tic-tac-toe
- Hangman
- Twister
- Story boards
- Clue/Cluedo
- Snakes/chutes and ladders
- Connect 4
- Mime/charades
- Jeopardy
- Crosswords
- Tongue-twisters
- Pictionary
You should have found a number of different applications, ranging from spelling to pronunciation to grammar and vocabulary teaching. If you enjoy such activities, the chances are that your students will as well. These can be used as warmers, or activate stage activities. If you’re not familiar with any of the games here, please ask your course tutor.

Try to think of other games that you enjoy and how they could be used in the classroom. Try to be as creative as possible and everybody will benefit.