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Some Communicative Activities Based on Overhead Projectors

Creating a productive atmosphere and sense of community in language classes is essential for students to use the target language communicatively. As Schaetzel and Ho (2003, 16–17) note: "Without community there can be no communication." Joyful communicative activities provide students with positive reinforcement and motivation in the foreign language learning process.

Educational technology is one tool for creating joyful, communicative activities. Teachers must, of course, decide how best to integrate devices such as the overhead projector (OHP) into construction. As Harmer (2001, 136) states: "Overhead Projectors…are extremely useful pieces of equipment since they allow us to prepare visual or demonstration material. They require little technical knowledge, and usually are easy to carry around." Furthermore, OHPs are simpler to understand and operate than other types of educational hardware such as computers. There is little risk of being confused when something goes wrong with them, even for a technology-challenged teacher. Moreover, OHPs are more affordable than other projector technology such as LCDs.

With an OHP we can create unusual and stimulating images on the screen that grab the attention of students, making them wish to communicate in English. Simply by placing transparent boxes holding liquid or removable objects on an OHP, teachers can create meaningful, communicative activities. In such activities students can be involved in discussions based on the images reflected on the screen and thus activate their communicative skills in the target language. While some students are expressing their thoughts, others have the opportunity to listen to them with the visual support of the image on the screen.

Students make use of their linguistic and communicative competence and show their performance by participating in communicative activities and their structural, functional, and communicative language knowledge is activated. As a result, they realize that they are able to use the target language. They can participate in an enjoyable event by creating their own sentences, either simple or complex or compound. The atmosphere in the classroom and the teacher's attitude will encourage them.

The activities that follow aim to increase students' enthusiasm to speak in the target language and to recall previous knowledge without feeling exhausted or bored. The background music improves the atmosphere, making students feel secure and relaxed and increasing their desire to join in.

Sample activities

The following activities are quite flexible; learners of different levels will produce different types of language. The examples I have provided are for the late beginners' level, by which time the students have already learned most of the basic English tenses and the modals, as well as the prepositions of place.

Activity 1: Clouds

Purpose: The aim of this activity is to create cloud-like images on the screen, and to have students discuss the images by making use of their own structural, vocabulary, and communicative language knowledge.

Materials needed: OHP, a transparent box (for example, a food container made of plastic), water, ink, oil, detergent, and a tape recorder.

(Play soft music as you do this activity.)

1. Place the transparent box on the OHP and pour some water into it.
2. Move the box forwards and backwards. This creates strange and interesting patterns.
3. Students describe the image on the screen.
4. Drop some ink in the water.
5. Students describe the new images.
6. Repeat with oil and detergent without changing the liquid in the box. While the students are expressing their opinions, the teacher may ask questions to focus attention.

Example:

Teacher: What do you think the image on the screen looks like?

Student 1: It looks like a bird.

Teacher: What is the bird doing?

Student 1: It is flying in the cloudy sky.

Teacher: Is there only one bird?

Student 1: Yes. And there are a lot of clouds.

Teacher: What else? Does anybody else want to talk about the image? (Another student volunteers.) Do you agree with your friend? Does it look like a bird in the sky or something else?

Student 2: I think it looks like…(etc.)

As is seen, in this activity the students use their imagination, real life experiences, and linguistic knowledge to create meaningful and communicative utterances in the target language.

Activity 2: Hidey-hole

Purpose: This activity aims at having students practice structural items, such as prepositions of place, and recall some vocabulary.

Materials needed: OHP, a transparent box, leaves, some small figures (of animals or objects such as come in a pack of chewing gum or chocolate), a tape recorder.

(Play soft music as you do this activity.)

1. Place the transparent box, which contains some small figures covered with leaves, on the OHP.
2. Students say what the image on the screen looks like.
3. Gradually remove the leaves from the figures.
4. When all the leaves are removed, the students are asked to answer questions about the locations of each figure in contrast to the other(s).

Example:

Teacher: What do you think the figure on the screen looks like?

Student 1: It looks like a forest.

Teacher: (Removes one of the leaves) Can you see any particular figures now?

Student 2: Yes. I can see an airplane.

Teacher: Good. (Removes another leaf) What about now?

Student 3: I can see a ship.

Teacher: Right. (Removes one more leaf) What can you see now?

Student 4: I can see a car.

Teacher: Where is the car?

Student 5: It is next to the ship, above the airplane. (The activity goes on until all the leaves are removed and the locations of the objects are discussed.)

This activity allows students to practice the linguistic items communicatively in a productive atmosphere.

Activity 3: OHP Town

Purpose: This activity enables students to work in groups to create a scenario and dialogues based on some contextualizing images.

Materials needed: OHP; cut-out shapes of people; transparencies with thought and speech balloons, background scenes, and space for the figures to move in.

1. Cut out the human shapes, with arms and legs detachable so their positions can be changed, giving the figures extra life and movement in different directions.
2. Place one or more of the human shapes on the transparency with the background scenes and speech or thought bubbles.

3. Form working groups of five or six and ask students to create their own scenarios and dialogues.

4. Invite each group to present and act out their scenario using the materials and the OHP. Remind students that they may put the characters in any position they need.

Example:

Teacher: There are some cut-out figures and transparencies for various situations. I will place the figures in a particular transparency. Please try to write an original scenario for the situation. If you want, you can change the position of the figures. Remember to fill in the speech or thought bubbles. You have ten minutes to complete your scenario.

(After ten minutes, ask for volunteers to share their scenario.)

Teacher: Group 1, the stage is yours. We are looking forward to hearing and watching your scenario.

(Narrator of the group tells their story and the other members help him/her represent it on the OHP).

Narrator: Once upon a time there was a lazy man. He was a farmer and he had a big family … (etc.).

In this activity, the students use various tenses in real-life situations and activate their creative thinking skills.

Activity 4: Unscramble

Purpose: This activity aims at guiding the students to create a meaningful sequence of events. Moreover, group collaboration motivates students to activate their creative thinking.

Materials needed: OHP, transparencies with the pictures of a story/event, chalkboard.

1. Place the pictures on the OHP one at a time—not in the right sequence—and ask students to discuss what each image represents for them.

2. Once the students have discussed each picture, divide the class into groups of five or six, instructing each group to select a narrator, an illustrator, a secretary, and contributors. Tell students they have ten minutes to create a story of their own, using the pictures they have seen and discussed.

3. Finally, invite each group to tell their story by presenting it on the OHP and writing on the board. The narrator of the group tells the story while the illustrator places the transparencies on the OHP and the secretary writes the story on the board.

In this activity, as in Activity 1, the students use their imagination, real-life experiences, and linguistic knowledge to create meaningful and communicative utterances in the target language. Moreover, teachers can continue to enrich lessons by reintroducing these silhouette characters and designing dialogue-based shadow plays in which students make the shadow characters talk, using the target structure and vocabulary in the syllabus.

Conclusion

The activities presented in this article develop the communicative skills of the students. They provide opportunities to practice the range of language skills from listening to speaking, reading, and writing. The activities last as long as the motivation of the class and the desire of the students endure. The end result, in my experience, is a happy and productive lesson.

References

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