

## Some Techniques to Improve Speaking and Writing Skills

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Through the years, English teachers have often expected their students to be able to use English fluently both orally and in written form. This of course, sounds like a very real and practical goal to reach. In fact, not in vain have linguists called speaking and writing the productive skills of the language as it is through them that learners can demonstrate how much English they have readily available at their disposal to interact with people in a real context. Nevertheless, learners not always succeed in their endeavor of using English fluently when speaking or writing in this foreign language. In some cases, students are well able to reproduce with spirit what has been taught in class but lack the skills to make a free and creative use of said material. As a result of this, they end up reproducing the conversations or texts printed in their learning material. This shows that something needs to be done to enable them to make the transition from the language examined in class to that required to cope with unpredictable conversations or pieces of writing which is what happens in real life.

With the following techniques I pretend somehow to give students a good opportunity to make an active and thoughtful use of their speaking and writing skills. Before actually getting involved with the techniques themselves, first I would like to describe briefly how to carry them out.

Each strategy consists of the following aspects: Materials. In this part the elements needed to execute the contrivances are

described, mainly cards and hand-outs. The former should be made of brown paper and should be 10 by 12 centimeters in size. The latter are described precisely whenever necessary. Procedure. This section encompasses the moment to moment actions, groupings, etc. called for, to develop the techniques. I also present some questions for conversation practice. Naturally, these are just mere suggestions, the students may very well come up with their own examples to suit their needs, wishes, etc. In the language items part, I list the grammar points that may be tackled in each exercise. Naturally, as was stated above, the purpose of the techniques is not the teaching of grammar. This may be touched on briefly as a reminder of what has been covered in previous classes. In the follow-up part I suggest two exercises, one to give further opportunity for conversation practice and the other to strengthen the writing skill. Of course, the teacher needs not develop the two, he may choose the one that suits his objectives, students' needs, time allocation, etc.

### LETTERS CARDS

#### a. Materials

A set of cards per group. Each card is to contain a letter clearly printed on one side, i.e., a, b, c, d, etc.

#### b. procedure

The teacher asks students to form groups. Then each team receives a card. Next, the students are told to write on their cards as

many words as they can think of. All the words provided should start with the letters printed on the cards, i.e. the following words were written on a card which included letter a: ago, Anserma, Armenia, alter, are, all, air.... After this, a student from each team is asked to go to the board to write some of the lists they came up with. When all the groups have written their words, the teacher asks them to classify the lexical items in related categories, i.e. cities, jobs, things, etc. depending on the words supplied. They are also told to make a statement about each category, i.e. "Anserma and Armenia are both cities. Anserma is in Caldas ( a state in Colombia) and Armenia is in...." A student from each group should read the categories along with their statements.

#### Possible Questions for Conversation:

- . Why do you think people should travel?
- . Is travelling interesting for you? If so, why?
- . Do you think people should travel alone or with their friends or relatives?. Why?.
- . In your opinion, what are the best cities in Colombia that people should visit?. Why?.
- . What places in your city and department would you recommend a tourist to visit?

#### **c. language items.**

Use of both; prepositions in, to and for; the do auxiliary; wh question words; the modals would and should; the superlative form of adjectives; passive voice; present perfect tense; embedded questions; that as a relative pronoun.

#### **d. Follow-up.** First Option.

The students are split into pairs. Then they

are told to select a word from the lists provided in the procedure stage so that they can develop a conversation about it, i.e.

- SA: Do you know where Armenia is located?  
SB: Sure, it's in Quindío.  
SA: Have you ever been there?.  
SB: Well,.....

#### Second Option.

The students are split into pairs. Then, they choose a word from those supplied in the procedure stage and write it vertically. Next, they make a sentence with each initial letter of the word so that they can roughly define the word selected, i.e.

Although you cannot touch or see it it gives you life, it gives nature life, and it revolves around towns, cities and countries.

### **ASSOCIATED WORDS**

#### **a. Materials.**

A card per group. Each card is to bear a word, on one side.

#### **b. Procedure**

The class is split into groups. Then, they receive a card. They are told to write on each card as many words as they can. The words supplied are to have a close relationship with the lexical item provided. The word building, included on a card elicited the following items

Architect, masons, carpenter, glass installers, electricians, plumbers, workers, drivers, cement suppliers, painting suppliers...

It should be noticed that the items listed above, are not parts of the lexical item given, in this case building, they are rather words that refer to the people who have to do with the construction of a building, in this particular case.

When the groups are through with this stage, a representative of a group goes to the board and writes the words they came up with. Next, students from other groups go to the board and add new items to the original list. The purpose of this task is to have the students furnish as many words as possible.

Questions for Conversation:

- . How many kinds of buildings do you know of?
- . Do you think that buildings in Colombia are fireproof and earthquake proof?
- . In which areas of your city are buildings generally constructed?
- . What is the maximum number of floors that buildings in your city can have?
- . Do people in your city prefer to live in houses or in apartment buildings? Why?

**c. Language items**

There is and there are; passive voice, the expression to be made of; wh question words; position of attributive adjectives; how many in questions; prepositions of, in and at; nouns as modifiers of other nouns, as in fireproof; possessive adjectives; manner adverbs ending in ly; that as a connector.

d. Follow up

First Option.

The students are divided into pairs. Next, one student in each pair receives a blank card. He is then told to write as many related words as possible. After this, he is to read them to his partner who is to supply the lexical item which has to do with the words supplied by his peer. The reading should be done a few lexical items at a time so as to allow a dialogue to occur, ie.

SA: Well, I wrote the words....

SB: Are you referring to....

SA: Not exactly, but....

SB: I think....

Second Option.

The students are split into pairs and receive a sheet like this:

Instructions: Below is a list of words which have to do with two items. Classify them accordingly and write on top of each group the item to which it refers. You can write some words in the two groups if necessary. Then write a paragraph about each category. You can use the following guidelines as model. They are based on the example given in the procedure stage. "There are a lot of people involved in the construction of a building, for example: architects design the plans for the building, masons lay the bricks, carpenters.....".

editors  
publicists  
programmers  
translators  
binders

reporters  
sound engineers  
sellers  
news presenters  
switchboard operators  
printing machines  
announcers  
secretaries  
writers

## POSSIBLE INTERPRETATIONS OF DRAWINGS

### a. Materials

A hand-out which includes various drawings per group. They are to depict people who are happy/sad, people and/or animals doing different things, i.e. a man running, swimming, jumping, etc.

### b. Procedure.

The class is arranged in small groups. Then they receive a handout like the one previously described. At this point, the groups are asked to think of as many interpretations as possible about the pictures being examined. Each team is to come up with at least two stories about each drawing. When the groups have finished this, a student from each team is

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to read out loud for the whole class the stories they made up. The picture which appears below elicited reactions like the following.

-We think that this drawing represents a girl who is sad because she lost her wallet with her money.

-We think this drawing represents a girl who is sad because she couldn't buy a bike to come to school.

### Additional Questions for Conversation.

-Do you become sad easily?

-Do you become happy easily?

-Have you ever lost your wallet with your money?

-In your city or country is it easy to get something back after losing it?

-What should people do when they lose something?

### c. Language items.

That and who as relative pronouns; the past tense of certain irregular verbs; the modals can and could; prepositions to, with and for; present progressive; future with going to; indefinite pronouns.



d. Follow-up.

First option.

The students are organized in pairs. Then each student receives two cards. On one of them he draws a picture, or anything that comes to his mind and on the other he writes what his drawing represents for him. He then gives his peer his 'picture card' and keeps his description. He asks him to look at it carefully to see what it represents for him. After listening to him, he gives his own version and the two try to come to an agreement about the drawing being examined.

Second Option.

The teacher organizes his students in groups and gives them a hand-out which is to include a series of drawings. All the hand-outs should be the same. The students are to think about the possible situations depicted by the pictures. Then, they are to write them down. Next, a student from each group goes to the board and writes their work. Finally the students discuss the stories and correct mistakes if any.

The following picture was included in a hand-out. Two groups came up with the following ideas:



-The three boys are waiting for the bus to go to school because they have classes.

-Some boys are going to take the bus to go to school because they have to study English.

**WORD CARDS**

a. **Materials.**

A card per student.

b. **Procedure.**

The class is split into two's. The teacher gives each student a card and asks them to write on it as many nouns as they can. When they have finished doing this, they are to read out loud to each other the words they came up with. After this, they are told to begin discussing with each other the reasons they had, to choose the words they wrote. If a student wrote the word house, a conversation would look like this:

SA: Why did you write the word house?

SB: Well, .....and what about you, why did you decide to write the word.....

**Additional Questions for Conversation:**

-When did you buy your house?

-What are some of the most common materials used in the construction of a house?

-How many kinds of houses do you know of?

-Houses are generally expensive all over the world. Why do you think this is so?

-What are some of the differences between a house and an apartment?

**c. Language items**

Wh question words; the do auxiliary; passive voice; the preposition between; the expression made of; vocabulary regarding such words as house, book, pencil, bicycle, etc.

**d. Follow-up.**

First option.

The students form pairs. Then each student receives a card with a word clearly printed on it. Then student A reads his word for student B who is to ask as many questions as possible about the item read. The questions may deal with size, shape, color, etc. In other words, the idea is to get additional information about the items dealt with. The following is an example of a dialogue based on the word house.

SA: What color is your house?

SB: It's .....

SA: What kind of.....

SB: Well, it's.....

SA: How many.....

SB:.....

Second Option.

The students form small groups. Then the teacher gives each team a hand-out like the following.

Instructions: On the left column is a list of nouns. On the right column is a list of items. You are to match the noun on the left with the items on the right which has something to do with the noun under discussion. Some nouns may be matched with various items. An example is given to you for the sake of illustration. Then make sentences like the following: (You can look up some more words in the dictionary to complete your ideas.)

Example: "A house is generally made of bricks, cement, wood, ....."

Words	Items
book	hinges
house	bricks
bicycle	paper
pencil	clutch
ball	wheels
door	cement
car	handle
	chapters
	saddle
	introduction
	steering wheel
	girder
	brakes

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