

Real Life Problem Solving: A Collaborative Learning Activity

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LASSROOM ACTIVITIES THAT EMPHASIZE INTERACTION HELP STUDENTS to use language. The give-and-take of message exchanges enables them to retrieve and interrelate a great deal of what they have encountered in the target language (Rivers 1987). Interaction allows students to practice being effective speakers by developing two needed sets of skills (Bygate 1987). The first is managing an interaction, including sub-skills such as knowing when and how to take the floor, how to invite someone else to speak, and how to keep a conversation going. The second set of skills is negotiating meaning, that is, making sure that the person you are speaking to has understood you correctly and that you have understood the other person.

Interaction involves not just expressing one's own ideas, but comprehending those of others. Using communicative tasks in the classroom is preferred because they involve the learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form (Nunan 1989). As a teacher of EFL, I have sought activities that put interactive tasks in the forefront.

As a teacher committed to teaching adults because of the world knowledge they bring to the classroom, I think of myself as a pedagogical activist. Like Freire (1970), I reject the so-called "banking" concept of education in which knowledge is viewed as a gift bestowed by those who are considered knowledgeable upon those whom they consider ignorant, and education becomes an act of "depositing" in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Rather, I am a proponent of a collaborative pedagogy that embraces the notion of interaction among students.

As defined by Reagan, Fox and Bleich (1994), collaboration is an underlying social orientation in which the participants share a general sense of purpose and orientation, and a discernible set of roles. Under this definition, a class of adults, such as the ones I teach, becomes a community of people who bring vast experience to the classroom in order to interact about things that really matter. In the words of Tompkins (1990:658) I wanted to "forge a connection between whatever we were talking about in class and what went on in the lives of the individual members."

Interaction and collaboration among students complement the affective factors in foreign language learning. Self-esteem, empathy, reduced anxiety, and improved attitude and motivation are all fostered when students are engaged in genuine interaction (Shumin 1997). Also, real life communication in the classroom is intrinsically interesting and useful to the students. They talk in order to get information they want, reach a decision, or solve a problem.

Not surprisingly, interactive and collaborative activities require the teacher to step out of the limelight and to cede to each student a full role in developing and completing activities, accepting all kinds of opinions and being tolerant of errors students make while attempting to communicate (Rivers 1987). A classroom activ-

ity that integrates these high demands is a joy to teach. For this reason, I would like to share the activity I've called "real life problem solving."

Real life problem solving

The first time I do a real life problem-solving activity with a class, I put a list of stages and time limits on the board. Then I divide the students into groups of four to six. Five seems to be ideal, but I aim for a consistent number of group members. The activity is not explained in detail to the students at the beginning because to do so would overwhelm them with excessive detail. Instead, after I ring a small bell to end each stage, I explain what they are to do in the next one. I point out that this activity has strict time limits, with seven stages totaling 27 minutes, and that I will use the bell (or anything that can be heard above the myriad conversations going on at the moment) to signal the end of each stage. The stages are:

State the problems and choose one	5 minutes
Analyze the problem	5 minutes
Brainstorm solutions	5 minutes
Choose two solutions	2 minutes
Think the solutions through	5 minutes
Identify a report-back date	1 minute
Follow up on the report-back date	4 minutes

State the problems and choose one

Each student in the group talks about a real problem he or she is having. It could concern anything, for example, school, home, or work, but it should be a recurring problem rather than an isolated incident. My students have discussed problems as varied as a neighbor who repeatedly blocked the driveway, a woman who suspected her husband was having an affair, a woman who hated her mother-in-law smoking in the house, and a student who feared an entrance exam looming in his future. It should be a problem that concerns the student, not a friend of the student, and not a broad societal problem unless it touches the student directly. After each member of the group states a problem, the group chooses one to focus on.

Analyze the problem

There is more than one approach to analyzing the problem. Of the four approaches outlined below, one is chosen. The group

members ask the relevant questions, and the person with the problem answers as honestly as possible. I have written the following four approaches on index cards for the groups to use during the activity.

1. Find the pattern behind the problem. Does it happen with certain people? Does it happen to other people as well? Is it institutional?
2. Analyze the motives and goals of the participants. What do/did you want? What do/did the other person(s) want? Were your desires in conflict? If so, why? What are the advantages and disadvantages to the other people if they change their behavior?
3. Get more information. How have you tried to solve the problem? Did the solutions work or not work?
4. Use a metaphor. If this were a game, what would you name it and how would you score? What are the rules? If this were a war, which countries would be involved? How would the winner be determined? If this were a movie, which roles would you and the others play? What would be the turning point in the plot? How would it end?

Brainstorm solutions

The person with the problem is silent and takes notes. The group members brainstorm as many solutions as possible, however wild and innovative. Not every idea has to be a new one; elaboration and variation are encouraged.

Choose two solutions

The person with the problem reviews the notes taken during the brainstorming session and identifies two that are worth exploring. Generally, solutions that foster prevention rather than punishment are preferred. The student tells the group which two solutions were chosen.

Think the solutions through

With the help of the group, the student anticipates how the chosen solutions would actually be implemented. For example, what steps are necessary and what people are involved? What additional help may be needed? It is helpful to have a group member, but not the student with the problem, take notes during this stage. The two possible solutions should be detailed.

Identify a report-back date

The student with the problem sets a date when s/he will report back to the group what

happened. This commitment to the group seems to make the difference between a classroom activity and a real life event. At this point, I make a chart of groups and their report-back dates and post it for future reference. I give students an opportunity to discuss the nature of their problems and chosen solutions with the whole class if they wish. They are not required to do this. Some choose to discuss it, others don't.

Follow up on the report-back date

On a particular group's report-back date, four minutes of class time is given for them to meet while the rest of the students do the regular class activity. I usually have them leave the room and sit together in the hallway or break area, and the student with the problem reports on what occurred. If no action was taken, they discuss what the obstacles were, then they brainstorm new solutions and think through two new ones, then set a new report-back date.

Conclusion

The joy of this activity is the student response. I've heard, "Oh, this is real," "I can really use this information," and "I've really learned a lot from my classmates about how to solve my situation." Such feedback makes the effort put into the activity worthwhile. Invariably, when we move through the activity, the outcome is consistently positive.

A caution: there may be resistance or delay during the first stage when students must state the problems and choose one. Groups often take up to 15 minutes the first time they do the activity. This situation requires guidance from the teacher to direct the students' attention away from the general and toward the specific. For example, students ruminated on drug use in society today and needed to be redirected toward thinking about the issue's impact on their lives. This led one student to talk about how she dreaded the return of her uncle to the household after he dropped out of another drug rehabilitation program.

This problem-solving activity can be integrated into various syllabus designs. For content-based instruction, learner's lives become the focus. For a functional syllabus, practice in brainstorming, supporting, advising, clarifying, agreeing, and disagreeing is the focus. For a structural syllabus, students get practice in using conditionals, modals, and past, present,

and future tenses. After the first implementation of the activity, the teacher becomes simply a time-keeper, allowing interaction to occur among the group members.

Throughout the semester I try to be mindful of the requirements outlined earlier: that an activity use real life communication and that it be collaborative. I have found these criteria are more likely met if each time we undertake the activity during the semester the group members remain constant. Student collaboration is fostered by the growing satisfaction of addressing issues that matter in their lives and solving some actual problems together.

References

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KAREN ENGLANDER teaches at the Autonomous University of Baja California in Mexico.