

MAKE THEM THINK AND SPEAK IN ENGLISH

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Abstract

We can make our students think and speak in English; what we need are problems that present a challenge to them so that they feel impelled to listen, understand and express their ideas and opinions in English. This experience is two-fold: I want to provide 'comprehensible input' to my students, but at the same time I want to make them think in English.

Resumen

Para que nuestros alumnos se sientan interesados por el contenido de la clase de inglés, éste debe ser un reto para su inteligencia. De este modo "mataremos dos pájaros de un solo tiro": les haremos atender y expresarse en inglés y a la vez les haremos desarrollar su inteligencia y creatividad.

The theoretical base underlying this experience, carried out for the last two years with the higher levels of English, is what Krashen (1988) describes as 'problem solving activities': *"The primary characteristic of these sorts of activities is that the students' attention is focused on finding a correct answer to a question, a problem or a situation. Language is used to present the problem and solve it .../... These sorts of activities are only successful if the students find them interesting, either because they are useful in some way or simply because they are an enjoyable activity"*.

I have tried to choose a bulk of exercises (see Appendix 1) which are **motivating** for the students in such a way that they feel impelled to understand what we are talking about and then to participate orally in the class giving opinions, asking questions, suggesting possible answers, being very active while in class. As

Krashen (op. cit.) says, in our classes we must create the kind of atmosphere which enhances pupils' participation and impels them to learn English by 'lowering the affective filter'.

This type of exercises tries to foster fluency and pretends to activate the students' linguistic knowledge through a natural and spontaneous use of English. It makes the students develop their strategic competence which was defined by Canale (1983) as the series of verbal and non-verbal strategies used by the speaker to compensate for interruptions in communication and to increase the effectiveness of the communicative act. These communication exercises are like the ones defined by Nunan (1989) as those which "*involve the learner in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form*". On the other hand, these activities are connected with what Long (1983) described as *interaction hypothesis*. According to this hypothesis the students acquire new structures when the input is comprehensible to them through negotiation and interaction in the classroom.

These are my aims for this sort of exercise:

- * Give the students reasons to listen while in the English class.
- * Motivate them with appealing activities which make them willing to use English as a means of expressing ideas and opinions.
- * Activate their natural curiosity.
- * Foster their fluency more than their accuracy.
- * Use English as a vehicle of communication.
- * Build up their confidence in speaking English.
- * Increase the use of two skills: listening and speaking.

The procedure to follow is:

1) The teacher designs, outside the classroom, a series of problems based on mathematical questions, geometry or logic reasoning which will be posed to the students. This material will be the base of the **input** the students will be listening to in the class. It is important that the problems we design or look for are not too difficult and can be easily explained in English. They should also present the students with a challenge they feel impelled to understand and solve.

2) With these creative activities the teacher provides them with 'comprehensible input' by using structures and vocabulary of the kind 'i+1': data which is a bit

beyond their current stage of interlanguage. Communication will be based not only on oral language, but gestures and mime as well as drawings will help to send and decipher messages.

3) The activity must be interesting for the students so that they are motivated to pay attention to what the teacher is saying and later will be willing to talk in English, asking questions, giving opinions, etc. As Chang Yi (1989) states: *"Every teacher knows that interesting material can activate and stimulate students' learning"*.

4) Every student will be able to exchange opinions, interact with the rest of the class commenting on possible answers. The role of the teacher is to provide input, helping students with their expressive needs as well as creating a low anxiety atmosphere.

The teacher must avoid immediate correction because of the high number of mistakes the students may make in this kind of practice and increase students' self-confidence. A mental or written note can be made and a time can be found, maybe at the end of the class, to deal with those mistakes as a group activity fostering a conscience of correctness. What I am personally interested in is providing my students with a feeling of success in their ability to understand and speak English which will lead to higher accuracy. As Di Pietro (1987) states: *"In an interactive classroom (...) the factor of intelligibility comes into play. Learners who are called upon to express personal desires or views and to negotiate with classmates will develop enough accuracy of pronunciation and grammar to be understood"*.

The teacher must be a dynamic force in the class: he must be able to transmit to his students the wish to discover new things, to find possible answers and to put them forward. The teacher is the one who inspires his students, stimulates their curiosity, raises their interest and encourages them to speak in English.

The sort of language the students may use, as mentioned before, will be concerned with fluency rather than using linguistic forms correctly (accuracy). It will be close to what Richards (1985) defines as 'survival level' where *"...the learners' immediate priority is to work out a way of performing such operations as stating, affirming, denying, or questioning propositions, as economically as possible, using only a partial knowledge of the vocabulary and syntax of the target language"*.

As for content I have followed Cook's (1983) advice when he says: *"The final type of real content I will mention can be called 'interesting facts'. This includes any kind of real-world information the students might be interested in (...) These 'interesting facts' are not taken from any subject area, but from areas that are presumed to be of interest to the student. Again, students are acquiring real information in the English lesson (...) A measure of success is whether students feel that they have learnt something that is not just 'English' in the lesson, something they might talk about or use for themselves later".*

And now, let me share with you some of these exercises. I hope you will find them as useful and interesting as my students do.

* * * *

Appendix 1:

LISTEN AND SPEAK IN ENGLISH

- 1.- How many times does number "9" appear between 1 and 100? Think about it. You cannot use a pencil and paper.
- 2.- Look at these letters: **O T T F F S S** ?, can you discover which is the next one? Why?
- 3.- You've got six buckets. Three of them are full of water and the next three are empty. How can you make that the full and empty buckets alternate by moving just one of the buckets?
- 4.- Is there anything else worse than finding a worm while eating an apple? Why?
- 5.- Two American Indians, a child and an adult, are sitting on a big log. The little Indian is the adult's son, but the adult is not the little Indian's father. How is that possible?
- 6.- It takes a snail ninety minutes to go from A to B, but it takes it one hour and a half to return from B to A. What is the difference due to?
- 7.- A plane is flying from Madrid to Paris. Just over the Pyrénées it falls down and crashes on the border between Spain and France. Where would you bury the survivors? In France or in Spain? Why?
- 8.- (Before you begin tell your students that they cannot use pen or paper. They have to think about the problem).
My mother gave me 83 pesetas and I spent them all except 17 pts. How much do I have left?

- 9.- Maybe this problem is too easy for such an intelligent boy or girl as you, but let's see anyway. How many faces has an hexagonal pencil got? Why?
- 10.- Remember a spider has got 8 legs and a beetle 6. A boy caught several spiders and beetles and kept them in a box. The total number of insects in the box was 8. We know that the total number of legs was 54. How many spiders and beetles did he catch?
- 11.- A man was looking at a photograph and somebody asked him, 'Who is the one in the photo?'. He answered, 'I have no brothers or sisters, but this man's father is my father's son'. (By 'this man's father', he meant the father of the man in the photograph). Who was the one in the photograph?
- 12.- How much grammar do you know? A lot? Let's see. Must we say 'the yolk is white' or 'the yolks are white'?
- 13.- If I give you this series of numbers, which one will correspond to "?" ? Why?
5 - 3 - 2 9 - 4 - 5 11 - 3 - ?
- 14.- Let's play with words now. Think of a word which can make two new ones with the letters below. All the three words must have their own meaning in English.

RE (.....) ER

- 15.- Are you good at correcting mistakes? Let's see:
There is three mistakes in this sentence. Can you find them?
- 16.- How many pairs of animals did Moses take with him into the Ark?
- 17.- Do you know an English word that has **9 letters** but which is a monosyllable?

ANSWERS:

- 1.- Although some students say 11, they do not take into account the existence of 91, 92, 93, etc. In fact, **9** appears **20 times** between 1 and 100.
- 2.- The next letter is **E** (eight). These letters correspond to numbers: **One, Two, Three**, etc.
- 3.- Pour the content of number 2 onto number 5.
- 4.- Yes, finding **half a worm**, because it means you have already swallowed the other half.
- 5.- Because the adult is the little Indian's **mother**.
- 6.- There is no difference at all: 90' = 1h 30'.
- 7.- Neither in Spain nor in France. You don't bury **the survivors**.
- 8.- Some students may say 66 pts (83-17=66); but, of course, they have got 17 pts left.

- 9.- If they are too quick to answer they will probably say 6, but that's wrong. It may be 7 or 8.
- 10.- Solution: $8.s+6.b=54$
 $s+b=8$; $s=8-b$
 $8.(8-b)+6.b=54$; $64-8b+6b=54$;
 $-2b=10$; **b=beetles=5**; $s=8-5$; **s=spiders= 3**
- 11.- The man is looking at a photograph of **his son**.
- 12.- Neither of them is correct. The yolk **is yellow**.
- 13.- The answer is **8**. ($5-3=2$; $9-4=5$; $11-3=8$).
- 14.- There are several right answers. One of the easiest ones is '**replay, play, player**'.
- 15.- One: *'There is' followed by plural.
 Two: *'sentence' should be spelt 'sentence'.
 Three: There are only **two** mistakes in the sentence.
- 16.- It was not Moses but Noah who brought the animals into the Ark.
- 17.- **stretched**.

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