

When selecting activities for students, as teachers we are required to make assumptions not only about the material but also the students. The assumptions can be broken down into three areas which can be called *schematic*, *systemic* and *interpersonal* assumptions. Briefly, they refer to the following.

## Schematic Assumptions

In order for the students to successfully complete a task, they need to be able to draw on a knowledge of the world that relates to the task area. Taking *Activity One*, for example, the students need to have first-hand experience of different kinds of food, cars and so on. Without this world knowledge the task becomes, if not impossible, then at least extremely difficult to complete. Whether or not they have the language to complete the task becomes irrelevant. To further exemplify the point, try this discussion activity for yourself. How far can you get? If you are not from the UK or a Commonwealth country, attempt Question #1. If you are, then try #2.

*Question #1: Who is the better Number 3 batsman, Viv Richards or Brian Lara?*

*Question #2: Who's the better batter, McGuire or Dimagio?*

Lack of background knowledge then, prevents successful communication.

## Systemic Assumptions

To perform a task, students need a specified level of knowledge about the language system; vocabulary, grammar, syntax, phonology. Taking *Activity One* as our example again, students need, as a bare minimum, to be able to do the following: express likes, dislikes and preferences, make comparisons, talk about past experience, know the adjective form for countries. If they lack that level of English, then the task, no matter how interesting, will fall flat. Again, to exemplify the point, try this task:

*A friend calls you from the station for directions to your house. Explain how to get to your home in a second language.*

Depending on your level of competency, this 'straightforward' task will be anywhere between impossible to very easy.

## Interpersonal Assumptions

A great many EFL tasks and activities require students to exchange highly sensitive information. Now, while this can lead to a lot of language use, if the students are uncomfortable sharing certain ideas or opinions, the activity will eventually be diffused by an unspoken group consensus. Our most strongly held beliefs are, after all, not available to anyone who simply

asks. As users of language, we are all aware that we choose what we say selectively, depending on who we are talking to. (It would, for instance, be a braver man than I who would tell his mother-in-law what he really thinks of her new dress). So, interpersonal assumptions refer to how comfortable the students feel engaging in the subject matter with the other students in the room. One of the strengths of *Activity One* lies in the fact that it is reasonably interesting and can be done without being threatening. There is, for example, nothing wrong with preferring French wine to Italian, or an American car to a German one. Now consider the following discussion topics. Which are appropriate for your classroom? Which are subjects you reserve for intimates?

- The first time you made love
- Your hometown
- Japanese experiments on POWs during World War Two
- Same-sex marriage
- A favourite relative

Activities are becoming a cornerstone of the modern classroom. Careful selection of activities is vital for a successful lesson. The three criteria outlined above may serve as a useful guide when assessing materials and their appropriacy for your students.

### Activity One:

To give practice in expressing likes, dislikes and preferences.

- A \_\_\_\_\_ house
- A \_\_\_\_\_ economy
- A \_\_\_\_\_ husband/wife
- A \_\_\_\_\_ education
- A \_\_\_\_\_ car
- A \_\_\_\_\_ watch
- \_\_\_\_\_ food
- \_\_\_\_\_ wine

• Tell Ss that they can choose a dream lifestyle for themselves selecting the best from any country in the world. Which country would they choose for each of the categories at left?

1. In pairs, Ss discuss and select. NB: They can only choose a country once (so if they go for French food, they can't have French wine as well).

2. Monitor/assist as required.

3. Feedback: Have one or two pairs tell the class their choices.

## Activities

### Activity Two:

To practice talking about families

Listening: The Teacher's Family

1. Tell Ss about four people in your family: their names, jobs, hobbies and their relationship to you.

2. Ss listen and draw your family tree noting down the information.

3. Ss check their work with a partner.

4. Retell Ss. Ss check again.

5. Feedback: Get two Ss to come up to the board and write their answers.

Speaking: The Students' Families

1. Put Ss into groups of 4: A, B, C, D.

2. SA tells SB about his family, SB tells SA.

3. Change partners: SA joins SC, SB joins SD.

4. SA tells SC about SB's family. SC takes notes. SB tells SD about SA's family. SD takes notes. Ss then change roles.

5. SA and SD join up. SB and SC join up. They check the information they got about their new partner's family from their old partner.

### Activity Three:

To practice storytelling/narration

1. Hand out one piece of paper to each student.

2. Tell them you're going to describe a scene to them. They are to listen and draw a picture.

3. Describe a scene to the Ss. Try to include some interesting details and some unusual action. Below is one I have often used with good results. You can adapt this or make up one yourself.

4. Ss listen and draw a picture, then check with a partner.

5. Tell Ss again. Ss (try to) improve their work.

6. Draw the correct picture on the board.

#### Use this if you wish

In the background are some rolling hills. It's a beautiful sunny day with the sun shining in the left of the picture. There are three birds flying from left to right across the picture. At the foot of the hills is a small cottage, the sort of house you might find in the English countryside. There is smoke coming from the chimney and there's a cat sitting on the roof. The house has four windows, two upstairs, two downstairs. The

upstairs right-hand window is open and a small girl of about seven or eight is looking out at something. In front of the house is a small pond. The water is quite shallow and there are three large stones in the pond touching the surface of the water. On one of the stones a frog is sitting with his tongue shooting out. He's about to catch a fly for his lunch. Next to the pond is a group of three people all of whom are dressed very formally, two men and a woman. The woman is sitting down in the center and is playing the cello. The man to her right, an older chap in his sixties is playing the accordion. The man to her left is much younger, about twenty five. He's playing the trumpet.

#### Speaking And Listening: The Students Drawings

1. Ss turn over the page.

2. In pairs, SA describes a scene of his own, SB draws it then vice-versa.

3. Ss then check each others' drawings.

4. Ss then draw their partner into the picture doing something. Stress to Ss that they can be as cruel or as kind as they like! Ss then give the picture to their partner.

5. Ss change partners. The follow-up task is for Ss to explain what they were doing/why.