

Adapting Activities to Specific Teaching Situations

By Maurice Jamall

In this issue, I would like to expand upon the framework for task selection presented in the Spring ETJ tour to include ways in which we can adapt materials to suit individual classes and teaching situations. To briefly review, three key factors (assumptions) that need to be considered by teachers are: The *Schematic*, the *Systemic* and the *Interpersonal*; specifically:

1. What background knowledge does the material assume the students have?

Can they choose Frank Zappa's all-time band or not?

2. What knowledge of the language system do the students have?

How well can they explain how to get from the railway station to their home?

3. How do the students relate to each other and the teacher?

To what extent are they willing to discuss intimate and/or private matters openly?

If we are to orchestrate meaningful learning events in the classroom, then appropriacy of materials and the tasks placed on them is essential. Rarely does the materials writer provide us with activities that fit our classes to a tee and therefore almost every activity requires at least a little tinkering. Since failure at this planning stage will almost certainly guarantee an impoverished learning experience it is vital to adapt activities carefully always keeping your students (and not your own hopes for the lesson) in mind.

Steps For Adapting Activities.

I would like to illustrate the steps to take in order to successfully adapt an activity with reference to the "dream lifestyle" one used in the training sessions. To remind ourselves, this is the activity where students select their dream lifestyle from countries of the world and then discuss their choices with a partner. The

items to choose are:

.....food
clothes
 A(n)car
 A(n)watch
 A(n)house
 A(n)education
 A(n)husband/wife
wine

Step #1: Study the Material and its Aims Objectively

Before you can chop and change, it is necessary to consider what the writer had in mind when s/he wrote the activity; what was it designed to do? To answer this question, we need to strip the activity down to its bare bones which means a careful examination of the aims, (both explicit and hidden (underlying)). It is essential too that you not be distracted by the "fun" factor. While an activity may appear appealing (perhaps only to you), it has no chance of success if the assumptions that the writer made are not true for your class. With the "dream lifestyle" activity among the aims are the following:

- a) **Skills:** Speaking/Listening; in the context of talking about countries.
- b) **Functions:** to give practice in discussing likes, dislikes and preferences.
- c) **Vocabulary:** to review adjective forms of countries and a range of nouns.
- d) **Grammar:** to review present simple in the positive and negative, closed (*yes-no*) and open (*Wb-*) questions, conjunctions.
- e) **Affective:** to encourage students to get to know each other a little better.

Step #2: Assess Your Students Objectively

Once you are clear about what the material is intended to help happen, you need to think carefully about how appropriately it matches

the class with which you are planning to use it. This will almost certainly require you to adapt, or in many cases, discard the activity altogether. If we refer back to our three-point framework, (*schematic, systemic, interpersonal*) we can begin the task of adapting the task.

Adapting The Task:

a) *Schematic:* There are two primary schematic assumptions in the "dream lifestyle" task. They are:

1. Students will know what countries around the world are good at/famous for.
2. Students will be able to apply this to the particular items presented.

If Assumption One is not true, then it's probably best to throw the task out and move on! However, it would be possible to preserve the functional and systemic aims by perhaps having students choose from different regions in their own country or part of the world. If Assumption Two is not true, then this is a less serious obstacle since items can be changed quite easily. If you are teaching a junior high-school class, then replace the items economy, car, spouse with something more suitable, something they know about, perhaps weather, music and girl/boyfriend (NB: see *Interpersonal*).

b) *Systemic:* The systemic aims listed above may be easily within the grasp or too challenging for your group. To compensate you will have to:

Adapt the task (questions/instructions) you place on the material.

Well-written material is welcoming of adaptation to local circumstance, designed with flexibility built in. The questions/instructions that accompany the material can usually be changed with a little thought, to make the task

less or more demanding. For the “dream lifestyle” activity, we could play with difficulty level by asking the students to do different things.

Systemically Easiest: “Tell your partner your ideas”. This task requires only reporting and listening. Students do not need to be able to form questions. They are required simply to produce statements in the present simple and need only a fairly small (productive) vocabulary. To make this slightly more challenging, add the following two words: “Ask questions”. Now we have question forms and simple justification in the mix, requiring conjunctions and a larger (productive) vocabulary.

Systemically Harder: “Decide your choice together with your partner”. With this task students need to have some mastery of the functions for giving and asking for opinions, agreeing and disagreeing, comparative and superlative adjectives, possibly the present perfect aspect and discourse markers such as right, okay (then), now.

Systemically Most Difficult: “Try to change your partner’s mind”. Now the students will require not only all of the above, but also functions of negotiating, persuading, challenging, and possibly the ability to chide with humour, even be sarcastic! A substantial vocabulary will be required and a richer schematic background.

As you have no doubt noticed, the more complex the task, the less easy it is to predict with certainty the exact systemic resources the students will need to draw upon. It is therefore a good idea to assume lesser ability than greater. If the students are finding the task easy, you can always ratchet it up a notch or two. In fact, in some ways this is preferable and can be done in the context of a game/playful task chain. “Dumbing” down (“oops, this isn’t working. I’d better make it easier”) almost always demotivates the students since they are invariably well aware of what you’re having to do.

c) *Interpersonal:* Japanese classrooms are rarely the place where lively debate and open discussion occur. Many (mostly foreign) teachers find this situation lamentable. Moaning about it however, will not change this reality. The only choice open to us is to provide students with language-learning opportunities in which they can meaningfully engage. This means they need to feel comfortable about what they are doing. For instance, some students may equate the “dream lifestyle” activity with racism. Rare, but it has happened. To defuse this, simply

Rarely does the materials writer provide us with activities that fit our classes to a tee and therefore almost every activity requires at least a little tinkering.

knock your own country: English food? No thanks!. Give them “permission” to say what they think by modeling it first. Illustrate (rather than explain) that it’s okay to have preferences, the holding of which does not necessarily imply a seething hatred for all things... French?

Predicting the *interpersonal* dynamic is a difficult task since it requires that the teacher possess both knowledge of the relationships that the students have with each other as well as being able to intuit how those relationships will be manifested when faced with various task types. Here are a few questions to ask yourself about the group and the material when adapting the activity:

a) How long has the class been together?

- b) Are they friends or just friendly with each other?
 c) Is the class comprised of subordinates and supervisors? (Is this a potential problem?)
 d) Are they used to communicative activities that require some sort of commitment to a position?
 e) Does the material presuppose:
 i) a “group that gets on well”?
 ii) a “group that has been studying together for quite a while”?

Returning to the “dream lifestyle” activity once more, here are some changes that should be made depending on the interpersonal dynamic of the class.

Group A

A class of middle-aged housewives who have been studying together forever. Primarily a social thing, (before/after class they go shopping together or go for coffee). In this case:

Replace “husband/wife” with *lover*

Group B

A class of high-school kids on the cusp of adulthood. Interested in the opposite sex but terribly shy about talking about it. In this case:

Replace “husband/wife” with *anything at all!* (or simply remove it from the list).

What I have endeavoured to present here is a guideline to adapting activities and materials for specific groups of students. There will always be anomalies, variables and doubts since the fundamental currency we are dealing in is people. We cannot apply the rigours of objective science to the process nor the subjectivity of fanciful artistic creation. What we do is craft and this is a trade that is best learned on the job, at the chalkface.

I do hope however, that the guidelines I have outlined will serve you as a starting point, a stepping-stone towards better meeting the needs of your students.