

Jeremy Harmer's

50

**Communicative
Activities**

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Harmer's 50
Communicative
Activities

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Jeremy Harmer's 50 Communicative Activities

Jeremy Harmer



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Text

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QBS Learning.

Why I wrote this book

A long, long time ago I wrote an article in which I suggested that activities could be described as either communicative or non-communicative (Harmer, 1982). I wanted to separate activities, *per se*, from all the other noise surrounding what was being called ‘The Communicative Approach’ and I suggested that communicative activities had six characteristics:

- The learners have a desire to communicate.
- The activities have a communicative purpose.
- The emphasis is on content, not language form.
- Learners use a variety of language.
- There is no teacher intervention (e.g., correction).
- There is no materials control.

Describe and draw, where one learner had to tell another learner what to draw, was an early example of this, and story reconstruction (Harmer, 2015) where learners work out a story from different pictures they have separately seen, is another.

The opposite end of the spectrum, in my realisation, was occupied by activities with no communicative desire or purpose, where the emphasis was principally on language form, the teacher intervened (with correction, etc.) and the language was often material-dependent. Thus a Present simple ‘presentation’ with the sentences, ‘She gets up at six o’clock. She has a shower. She drives to work. She works in a hospital,’ etc. fits the ‘non-communicative’ moniker pretty well.

This way of looking at activities as either one thing (communicative) or the other (non-communicative), has permeated much of our thinking about communicative language teaching. As Beaumont and Chang (2011) argue, it has created a ‘traditional/communicative dichotomy’ in overall approaches to classroom procedures.

But not always. Some language teaching suggestions such as Task-based learning (TBL) or Task-based language teaching (TBLT) (Willis, 1996, Nunan, 2004) incorporated communicative activities/projects in a methodological approach/procedure. Meddings and Thornbury (2010) argued for learner-generated dialogic interaction and Zoltan Dörnyei (2015) proposes a ‘principled communicative approach’ – a kind of mix and match philosophy absorbing activities from both ends of the communication continuum. Even though none of these suggestions have been widely adopted, we might all accept that ‘the main common denominator of communicative and task-based approaches in their various forms is that, even when they use form-focused procedures, they are always oriented towards communication’ (Littlewood, 2004). However, I now think that those original six characteristics ignored other qualities which effective communicative activities can and should exemplify. Good

communicative activities, I now suggest, are ‘non-dichotomous’ (see above) in that they wear both a learning-focus and a communicative face. They are effective as learning opportunities, even as the communication takes place. They share some or all of the following characteristics. They should:

- involve learners in deep processing;
- provoke purposeful repetition;
- encourage learners to process language for meaning, not just form;
- provoke learners to give attention to, and make connections between, the language they encounter and the context/discourse where it occurs;
- provoke interaction between the learners’ language processing and the texts and stories they are engaged with; *and*
- provoke communication between learners and promote group cohesion.

From Hyde and Jenkins (1969) and Craik and Lockhart (1972), to Chew (2011) and Kosslyn (2021), psychologists have argued that *deep processing* – where language is processed for meaning, context and, crucially, emotion – is better for memory retention than *shallow processing* – where language is only processed for its properties – how it is spelt or pronounced, for example. Nattinger (1988) quoted experts who argue, as Curran (1976) did, that people learn a language best when they have a strong personal stake or ‘investment’ in it. Chew claims, extravagantly, that with deep processing, people ‘learn whether they want to or not.’ However plausible this piece of old research strikes you as being, the underlying principle that we learn best when we are both emotionally and cognitively engaged is one that seems to me to be crucial to successful learning.

Repetition has always been beneficial for language learning. Claire Kramsch, for example, has suggested, ‘utterances repeated are also utterances resignified’ (2009). I gloss ‘resignified’ as ‘given new or newly nuanced meaning.’ Meaning-lite habit-forming drills by themselves may not let this resignification happen though, because they may fail to ‘allow for the human mind in learning, of consciousness, thought and unconscious mental processes’ (Hall, 2011). What a good activity needs, then, is *purposeful* repetition where the human mind *is* involved in learning.

A good activity will get learners to focus on meaning, not just on form. When they choose the words and phrases they wish to interact with or use, they should be doing so consciously so that effective learning takes place.

Good communicative activities encourage learners to give attention to the language they encounter and relate it to the context it occurs in – as well as allow them to see how it relates to other items of language around it. Thus, if learners come across a naturally-occurring lexical phrase in a powerful story they experience, for example, they will get information about when and where such a phrase can be used – which will help them when they come to use it themselves.

Finally – and typically – a good communicative activity will provoke communication between learners and promote group cohesion for, as so many commentators have argued over the years, ‘success depends less on materials, techniques and linguistic analyses, and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom’ (Stevick, 1980).

In many ways effective communicative activities exemplify the characteristics of what Merrill Swain called ‘the comprehensible output hypothesis’ (e.g., Swain and Lapkin, 1995) where teachers ‘push’ learners to speak or write in the target language.

Not all the activities in this book necessarily prioritise spoken English with learner-learner interaction, however. It is my contention that an individual learner’s own internal *intrapersonal* engagement and interactions with language can, and rightly should, be included in what gives an activity both learning and communication potential as well as the *interpersonal* face-to-face interactions which are normally the ones described.

How this book works

Activities are grouped into six categories: *Engaging communication*, where the learners’ enthusiastic participation is the main driving principle; *Practising communicatively*, that slightly uneasy blend of language practice and free speaking; *Interacting with text*, because we communicate ‘about’ something; *Making decisions*, because negotiation is a crucial part of communication; *Presenting and performing things*, because speaking, in particular, is often a kind of performance; and *Activities in sequence*, showing how communicative activities can fit in with other things. Most of the activities hover around the A2–B2 level – I will comment where this might be problematic and make suggestions – or even higher, where the communication inevitably becomes more extensive. They are for any age, just about, though topic and sophistication will limit some of them, of course. I detail a procedure for using each activity and give examples. I then say why it ‘works for me’ as a communicative activity before suggesting alternatives.

The Coronavirus pandemic – and the extended lockdown quarantines it necessitated – provoked a renewed interest in, and practice of, online instruction. Accordingly, where appropriate, suggestions for online adaptation are given.

It is worth reiterating that the activities in this book do not constitute a method. However, they share an underlying core belief that language is learnt best through emotional, cognitive and human engagement.

The publications/videos I have referenced are below. They represent a mix of work that varies in its level of ‘academica’ and as such represent the kind of range of opinions which influence the practice of English language teaching.

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A: Engaging communication

Activities in this section are designed to provoke enthusiastic engagement in the process of communication whilst, at the same time, ensuring some focus on the language being used. They are intended to make learners as comfortable as possible with the creative use of English.

-
- 1 Everybody up**
 - 2 Personal interviews**
 - 3 Space station speed dating**
 - 4 Experts**
 - 5 What's my line?**
 - 6 Portrait interviews**
 - 7 Musical stories**
 - 8 Fishbowl improvisation**
 - 9 Wordless conversation**
 - 10 Drawing happy dreams**
 - 11 Mystery objects**
 - 12 Discussion cards**
 - 13 House rules**
-

1 Everybody up

Learners stand up and, where possible, move to the centre of the room. They are organised in small groups of about five. They discuss topics suggested by the teacher or by themselves so they can report on their conversations later.

Everybody up is a term I have borrowed from Jane Revell (2015 and elsewhere). It is, of course, similar to other ‘walkaround’ activities such as *Find someone who* and other ‘mingle’ suggestions.

- 1 Ask all the learners to stand up and move the furniture so that there is a space in the middle of the room.
- 2 Separate learners into small groups – from three to seven people. Tell them that they should complete the following task:

Find out who in the group plays or played a musical instrument. Find out why they started and if they still play. If so, find out how often and where they play, how often they practise and how they learnt. If no one in the group plays a musical instrument, find out what instrument they would like to play and why.

(Harmer and Revell, 2015)

Tell learners that you will be asking for a report from some of the group members when the task is over. While they are doing the activity, move around monitoring them, making sure that they are on task. Be available to help with words and phrases they need, if necessary.

- 3 If possible, make a space so that the next stage of the activity takes place whilst everyone is standing up – it makes listening more ‘immediate’ and active. Ask a representative to tell the rest of the class about the musicians – or would-be musicians – in the group. When this is done, invite everyone in the class to ask the people they have heard about any more questions.

- 4 Get members of each group to tell you what they learnt. Use what has been said as an opportunity to focus on some of the language you heard, pointing out where things could have been said differently or better.

Why it works for me

Because learners move into a different ‘space’ and work in small groups rather than, say, pairs, the activity modifies the usual pattern of the lesson and provokes a very life-like communication atmosphere and experience. This activity is genuinely communicative in a content, language and very human way.

Alternatives

I chose the topic of music – playing a musical instrument – because almost anyone can relate to it, musician or not. Nearly all non-instrumentalists wish they could play music in some form, and most are more than happy to talk about it. But, of course, there are many other topics like this – ones with universal human appeal. We could substitute sport, signature dishes that people cook, hobbies we have, places we regularly visit, people’s attitudes to the names they were given, etc. The main thing to have in mind is that we want learners to talk about areas of universal interest.

Online/virtual variations

Using a ‘hands up’ protocol (previously agreed with the class) where people indicate when they want to speak/ask a question, learners can interview each other. But that doesn’t match the advantages of the face-to-face version. Better, maybe, to put learners in breakout rooms in groups and have them report back after a set time.

Harmer, J. and Revell, J. (2015). *Jetstream Intermediate Student’s Book*. Helbling Languages.

2 Personal interviews

Students interview each other based on questions that are suggested by an initial learner contribution.

Personal interviews are especially appropriate at the beginning of a new semester with new learners. At the A1 level they can be as simple as having learners ask, ‘What is your name?’ ‘Do you have a pet? What is its name?’ ‘What is your favourite food?’ However, the version I am going to use is more like a B2 level activity and closely follows one described by Rachael Roberts (see the reference below) as, ‘one of my favourite speaking activities because it is flexible and can be used at any level’. The beauty of it is that after a short stimulus from the teacher, it is the learners who make all the language and meanings.

- 1 Think of a few questions (say ten) about yourself which you would be happy to answer in public.

Where do you live?

Who – if anyone – lives with you?

Do you have any pets and if so, what are they?

What’s your favourite thing in the house/apartment?

Or for a higher level:

What is the scariest thing you have ever done?

Who would you most like to meet and what would you say to them?

What music would you like to hear/did you hear at your wedding?

Then write the answers to your questions on the board (without telling the learners what the questions were).

- 2 Learners now work in groups to try and work out what the questions might be for the answers on the board (see also 12). While they are doing this, go round the room helping them with language problems, etc. But again, do not confirm what the questions were.
- 3 Now learners get into pairs and use the questions they have come up with in stage 2 to interview each other. They do this in turns.

- 4 Learners can now either tell the class about their partner or they can write a short paragraph about them which might go up on the classroom wall.

Why it works for me

What do some people like talking about best? Themselves! And as a genuine piece of communication – especially at the beginning of a course – this has to be included here. Couple that with attention to language and its predictable interactions and this classic activity has its place in any effective teacher’s repertoire.

Alternatives

Klippel (1984) has an activity called *Identity cards* where learners have to fill in a form about their partner and then tell the class about them. She suggests the task can be varied by not using cards and saying instead, ‘Find out three things about your partner that are important or interesting,’ or ‘Find out five things about your partner that one could not find out just by looking.’

We can add a playful element by having learners pretend to be someone else (a celebrity, a historical figure, etc.) and the interviewer has to find out who they are.

There is a much more extensive job-based interview sequence in 49.

Online/virtual variations

This activity works perfectly well in an online context with a little bit of adaptation. We can share the screen to show learners the answers to our own questions (see stage 1 above) or we could put the answers in the chat box. We can then discuss with all the learners on the screen what the questions might be. If we can – and if it is not too organisationally complicated – we then put the learners in pairs. If that doesn’t seem plausible then we can have the class interview one learner after another. We will have to manage the conversations well – who speaks next, etc.

Klippel, F. (1984). *Keep Talking*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Roberts, R. <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/blogs/rachael-roberts/rachael-roberts-a-favourite-speaking-activity>. Accessed 02/02/2021

Learners have to choose who they want to accompany them for their year in a space station hovering above the earth.

In the USA in the 19th century, there was a custom where women, looking for a husband, would invite eligible young bachelors on 1st January for fifteen-minute-maximum visits. Was that the origin of speed dating in which couples try and see if there might be any attraction and compatibility between them in structured three-minute interviews?

ELT classrooms should not be dating environments (!), though Laura Hayward uses an enjoyable activity of this kind on the video to accompany Harmer (2007), but the short, structured interview is a naturally effective communicative activity at almost any level and age.

- 1 Tell learners that they are going to spend a year in a space station 400 kilometres above the earth. They will take one person with them. They have to choose who that is.
- 2 Discuss ideal qualities for a companion in such circumstances. What kind of character should they have? What would make them easy to live with and reliable in the event of trouble? What should they be good at? The language of the questions will obviously depend on the level of the group. Prompt learners with suggestions to try and broaden the discussion.
- 3 Now ask learners to write a maximum of four questions (that's all there will be time for) to help them work out who their ideal space station companion is. This is not a romantic speed dating activity – it's more practical than that! They do this individually. While they are working on their questions, go round the class helping learners with language suggestions.
- 4 Tell learners they are about to start the procedure and that they will have a maximum of two minutes to interview each 'candidate'.

- 5 Learners now form ‘fluency circles’ (Bohike, 2013) where half the class stand in an inner circle facing outwards and the other half form an outer circle facing inwards. The outer circle learners must interview the inner circle learners opposite them. They should have notebooks with them to record their thoughts.
- 6 The interviews start. After two minutes (or three, if you think that is necessary) ask the outer circle learners to move one person to the left. Now they interview the new learners in front of them.
- 7 When the circle has been completed, it is now the inner circle’s task to interview the people opposite *them*. As before, they have two (or three) minutes for each interview.
- 8 When the activity is over, have a discussion with the class. Who would they choose and why? Which of their questions were the most effective? How useful have they found the activity, etc? This is the moment where you can clear up any language issues that may have arisen.

Why it works for me

Learners work together, building inter-group cohesion. They have to make a choice and this demands deep processing. There is purposeful repetition, obviously. The activity is dynamic and fast-moving.

Alternatives

Some teachers do actually role play a speed dating session (with no need for a space station!), but it has to be done in an appropriately light-hearted way (see also 2 and 48).

Online/virtual variations

It would be difficult to create fluency circles online. However, we can create an interview panel for a space station team. Groups (the whole group, or groups in breakout rooms) can design their questions and then interview members of the other groups one by one (with everyone looking on). With smaller classes we wouldn’t need to form breakout groups, of course.

Bohike, D. (2013). ‘Fluency-oriented second language teaching’ in Celce-Murcia, M., Brinton, D. M. and Snow, M. A. (Eds). *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language: Fourth Edition*. Heinle Cengage Learning.

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