# Speaking activities: five features

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*This article proposes that speaking activities for language teaching make use of a limited and describable number of features to make them interesting and relevant. The author suggests that by understanding these features, teachers can improve the speaking activities they use, and that they can create their own activities, based on individual features and on combinations of them.*

## Five features

Speaking activities in second-language learning usually involve language functions which are common in native speakers' use of the language outside the classroom. However, in most cases they differ from these 'outside' activities in that they contain features that are there to make them successful classroom activities. Here, these features are called *roles, outcomes, procedures, split information,* and *challenges*. They are seen as performing two tasks: they help achieve the learning goal of the speaking activity: and they motivate the learners and encourage them to join in the activity.

The following description of the various forms that each feature can take is intended to show how each feature can affect a speaking activity, and how teachers can make use of the descriptions in order to construct and improve their own speaking activities.

## Roles

The adoption of roles by learners has an effect on the learning goals of a speaking activity, and an effect on participation in the activity. It affects the learning goals, because it allows the use of language that might not normally occur in the classroom. Roles affect participation in an activity, because if each learner has a role to play, then each learner knows what to do in the activity, and others expect them to play their role. For example, in the *I say, waiter!* activity, learner A is a customer at a restaurant. He or she selects a complicated meal and gives the order to the waiter (learner B). The waiter tries to remember it and then gives the order to the chef (learner C). The chef writes down the order and sends the 'meal' (the written description) to the customer. It makes it more interesting if the waiter can 'forget' parts of the order; the chef can say that certain food is not available, or even send out the wrong food. The customer can change his or her mind.

So, in this single activity learners can practise the language functions of requesting, clarifying, correcting and complaining, as well as using vocabulary associated with restaurants.

If roles were not used, then the activity would be one of the 'What would you say if . . . ' variety, which would not be interesting for very long. Consider the effect of roles on the following activity. The topic is 'Safety in the home'. Instead of having a discussion about the causes of accidents in



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the home, the teacher has decided to make the activity more effective by having a role play. Here is a possible situation.

*Mr and Mrs Brown have no children. They live with Mrs Brown's elderly father in a two-storey house. Mr Brown's sister, Janet, has come to stay with them for two weeks. She has two children aged two and five who are very active. Janet is worried that the Browns' house is not arranged for young children and that the children might hurt themselves or other people.*

Can you think of individual role descriptions for each character? For example, Mrs Brown's father smokes and is rather careless about leaving things around. He thinks children are tough and do not need to be protected.

One variation of roles is to assign tasks to the learners. For example, in a discussion group all learners are expected to contribute to the discussion, but one learner can have special responsibility for actively seeking the views of the learners in the group about the topic, that is, encouraging each learner to speak. Another learner can have special responsibility for periodically summarizing the views of the learners who have spoken. Another has the job of keeping the learners on the topic. Another has the job of raising problems ('But what if . . . '), to keep the discussion going. These tasks may be known to all the learners in a group, or some of them may be hidden. That is, only the learner doing the task knows what his or her task is. Other tasks include criticizing the way the discussion is organized, disagreeing with what others say, and making others feel happy and confident. Because each learner has a task, he or she must contribute to the discussion.

### Outcomes

But speaking activities like describing, discussing, telling stories, and explaining do not necessarily lead to any observable outcome. Yet having a clear outcome can increase interest in the activity by giving learners a purpose. They can see what work needs to be done in order to complete the activity. The nature of the outcome affects the language functions that may occur, so it is useful and important to devise for students an appropriate range of outcomes. The limited amount of research in this area shows that specific language functions can be elicited by choosing suitable activities and outcomes (Staab 1983). A list of typical outcomes for speaking activities includes the following:

**a.** *Providing directions:* This involves giving a set of directions that others must follow in order to draw something, build a model, or follow a route on a map.

**b.** *Completion:* Typical activities include orally completing a picture or a picture story, and describing the consequences of actions, or the reasons for them. Learners can be required to use factual knowledge, opinion, or their imagination to do the completion.

**c.** *Ranking, ordering or choosing:* Learners are given a list of items and they have to order them or choose from them as a result of agreement among the learners. Nation and Thomas (1979) give suggestions for such exercises.

**d.** *Listing implications, causes or uses:* These activities often make use of 'brainstorming', where learners think of as many possible answers without being critical about the suggestions. Here is a typical exercise.

You are on a desert island and have a paper clip. How many ways can you make use of this paper clip?

The outcome is as comprehensive a list of possibilities as the students can come up with.

**e.** *Matching, classifying, distinguishing:* These involve the search for similarities and differences, and then decision-making based on the results. For example, the learners are given ten or more pictures and have to make pairs from them, i.e. match them, and justify the matching. Another possibility is that the learners arrange several pictures into three or four groups, using classification criteria that they decide on themselves. Distinguishing exercises involve deciding if two items are substantially the same, or if they are different. Locating the differences in two pictures is another version of distinguishing.

**f.** *Data gathering:* Learners seek information from other learners or other people. The most typical exercises are the interview (Nation, 1980) and the oral questionnaire (Ladousse, 1983).

**g.** *Problem solving:* The problem may be presented either in written or spoken form, for example, *Stop thief!*

You see one of your classmates put something in his/her pocket in a shop. It is clear that s/he intends to take it out of the shop without paying. You think that his/her action has been seen by a store detective. What should you do?

The problem could also be in the form of a diagram. For example, the learners are given a diagram showing the layout of a piece of land containing four houses, several trees, a small lake, etc. They are told that the land must be divided up amongst four people so that each will feel that they have been given a fair share. The learners have to draw the dividing lines on the diagram.

**h.** *Producing material:* Speaking activities of this type include preparing a radio programme, preparing to perform a play, preparing for a debate, and producing some written work. The speaking activity occurs as a means to achieve a goal which may also involve speaking, but need not do so.

***Procedure***

A procedure divides the speaking activity into steps. It increases the amount of speaking involved in the activity, and in some cases makes sure that each learner in the group will participate in the activity. In this way a procedure is like tasks, except that all learners follow all steps of the procedure.

One of the most useful procedures is the movement from individual to pair to group to whole class activity. In a ranking exercise this involves learners working on their own for five minutes to make their own personal ranking. This ensures they bring some definite ideas to the later group discussion. Then learners join together in groups of four or five members to reach a single rank order for the group, on which each member more or less agrees. Finally, all the learners come together and try to reach an agreed ranking for the whole class. This procedure can be applied to a very wide range of activities, such as doing written exercises where learners do them individually, compare their answers in pairs or small groups, and then decide on the correct answers as a whole class.

There is an added benefit if a procedure is a formalization of a learning or speaking strategy. For example in the *You said ...* procedure, two learners talk to each other, but before a learner can respond to what was said, he or she must paraphrase what the previous speaker just said. This is a formalization of a negotiation strategy, namely seeking confirmation. It not only increases participation in a speaking activity, but also gives practice in a valuable communication strategy.

Other procedures include giving short answers and extra information to questions (Nation, 1980), using De Bono's (1973) thinking procedures like considering the Plus, Minus and Interesting aspects of a topic, and classroom organization procedures (see for example Danserau, 1987).

### Split information

Most definitions of communication include the conveying of information that the receiver does not have. In teaching activities this is often called an information gap. One of the most effective kinds of information gap occurs where each person in an activity has information that the others need but do not have. That is, the information needed to reach an outcome is split (evenly or unevenly) between the participants.

This splitting of information has several effects. First, it gives each person a reason to participate. Second, it makes it important for each person to understand what the others say. Third, it gives a strong feeling of group cohesiveness, because each is dependent on the others. The splitting of information can be easily introduced into many speaking activities and is particularly effective for increasing the amount of negotiation of meaning in an activity (Long and Porter, 1985). Here is an example. In *Complete the chart,* two learners are each given a different report on the same incident. The reports could be taken from rival newspapers. The learners tell, but do not show, each other what is in their reports and complete a chart by filling in the information. The chart is prepared by the teacher so that any one of the reports does not have enough information to complete all the chart.

The information in an activity can be split in several ways. The most balanced ways involve splitting the text or pictures that the learners are working with. Here are some examples.

**a.** The learners describe a picture to their partners. The information in this activity can be split by giving one learner a picture with some parts blanked out, and the other learner has the same picture with different parts blanked out. By describing their pictures to each other they complete their picture or locate the differences.

**b.** The information can be split by getting learners to read different parts of the same text. Learner A also has questions which relate to Learner B's text. Learner B has questions which relate to Learner A's text. Instead of questions, an information-transfer diagram may be used.

### Challenges

Challenges are added to teaching activities in order to make it more difficult (and as a result more interesting) for learners to achieve the outcome of the activity. However, the challenge must be carefully thought out, so that the learners can see that it is possible to achieve the outcome although special effort may be necessary. Here are four kinds of challenges, each of which gives activities some game-like features, thus resulting in a high degree of interest and involvement by students.

**a.** *Competition:* Some activities involve competition between pairs or

groups. This is an essential part of activities where groups compete to bring buyers or listeners to their point of view.

**b.** *Limitation of time or quantity:* In *4/3/2* learners repeat the same talk to different listeners with one minute less each time to say the same ideas.

**c.** *Memory:* In a chain story, or activities involving a messenger, learners hear quite a long story which they must remember in order to retell it to other learners.

**d.** *A hidden solution:* Many questioning activities, like *Twenty questions* or *What am I?* involve one person knowing the answer but not giving it directly. The questioners must therefore use the clues that are provided, such as the answers to Yes/No questions, to work out the solution. This kind of challenge has some of the features of a split-information activity, in that the clues to find a solution are spread equally amongst the learners, and must be combined.

### Using the five features together: one example

The following activity contains examples of most of the five features—roles, outcomes, a procedure, split information, and challenges. It comes from *Nine Graded Simulations* (Jones, 1984), and is called *Front Page*. The learners work in groups of four people. Their job is to prepare the front page of a newspaper. They are given stories, each consisting of two to five paragraphs. They must choose the stories they want to put in the limited space on the front page, decide which will be the main story, decide on the number and order of the paragraphs in each story, and write headlines for each story they choose. The headlines have to fit within given restrictions on the total number of letters allowed, and the preparation of the front page must be completed by a certain time to meet the printing deadline.

In essence, the activity involves a discussion based on the speakers' opinions. To some degree, the speakers adopt *roles* as newspaper editors. As in true simulations these roles do not involve a change in attitude and character, but nevertheless during the activity the learners are pretending to hold a job they do not really have. Besides the feature of role, the activity also has an *outcome*. That is, the learners have to produce a complete front page. So, their discussion has a purpose. They discuss in order to agree about choosing and ordering the material they are working with. The third feature present in the activity is a *procedure*. This is not very strongly defined for this activity, but the learners receive instructions, before the editing process begins, telling them that they have to (1) choose the most suitable news items, (2) decide where these items will appear on the front page, (3) choose and order the most useful paragraphs for each item, and (4) write the headline. This provides steps for the learners to follow to reach a successful outcome and to encourage participation. The activity does not however involve *split information*, because all the learners in a group have equal access to all the information. (It would be possible to divide the stories amongst the learners of a group and make each of them the sole source of information about a story, but that could prove irritating in practice.) Finally, the activity involves several *challenges* for the learners. The most important challenge is the time restriction. The front page must be produced by a certain time. Another challenge is the restriction on the number of letters (including between-word spaces) allowed in the headlines, and the number of paragraphs allowed on a page.

The best way to see the effects of these features on the activity is to think

what the activity would be like without them. Perhaps the activity would be like this: 'Discuss the kinds of stories you would expect to see on the front page of a newspaper. How do editors decide which stories to give prominence to?' An interesting discussion might result from this topic, but that would depend largely on how the learners feel, their relationships with each other, the success of the grouping, and the way the teacher has prepared the learners for the topic. By adding features to the activity the teacher can be more certain about its success. □

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