

## Fluency Practice and the Value of Games and Activities

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A major problem confronting the foreign language teacher in charge of large speaking classes is how to provide opportunities for fluency practice, especially when the students have a common native language. Inter-student activities and games are an effective way to increase speaking practice because they motivate the students with their communicative or entertaining aspects and can be limited to the structural and lexical levels of the students. Two authors, Penny Ur and Jill Hadfield, analyze respectively the motivating forces of activities and categorize various types of communication games. Taken together these authors' ideas provide a basis for judging whether or not the existing tasks will work and for creating new ones appropriate to the particular class needs.

By fluency practice I mean using pre-learned language to increase oral fluency. This can occur naturally in the form of conversation for those lucky enough to live in the country where the target language is spoken or in an area where many speakers of the target language reside. Unfortunately, most students have to learn a foreign language outside the country where it is spoken and among people of their own age and background who share the same mother tongue. Somehow foreign language teachers must provide students with an opportunity to practice speaking under these circumstances.

What kind of speaking practice is effective? For pronunciation, repetition without reference to meaning can be used so that students learn how to make and distinguish between the unfamiliar sounds of the target language. Because pronunciation is a mechanical skill rather than a cognitive skill, meaning is irrelevant. After all, many opera singers can't actually speak the languages they must sing in, and yet they still learn to use the correct pronunciation. In public speaking the meaning cannot be ignored, but dramatic presentation is as important as the message, and, more importantly, the relevant speaking practice is done individually.

While speaking is one-way communication when someone gives a speech or a lecture, this is a situation in which our students seldom find themselves. Speaking in our daily life involves a process of constantly taking in information (listening or reading) and responding to it (speaking). Because speaking of this kind is cognitive as well as mechanical, meaning is essential to its practice. Substitution drills, although they can give students practice in newly-introduced forms, quickly become disembodied and meaningless because they lack context. The teacher has to rely on the students' interest in the language as object, rather than as means of communication, in a speaking class that in its essence should be communicative.

Think for a second about our motivation for talking. Either we have to get some information across (there is an information gap to be filled), we enjoy talking either about a particular subject or to a particular person (we are motivated through interest), or the situation demands it (we have

to socialize in a business situation, at a party, etc.). Why don't we talk at other times? Because the other person talks too much (one-way expression but little or no communication), we aren't interested in what they are talking about (lack of motivation and/or lack of an information gap), or we are shy and don't know what to say (lack of a comfortable framework for discussion). What is needed for the foreign language classroom are materials that combine the following aspects: information gap, interest, and a comfortable framework.

An obstacle to fluency practice in many educational institutions is the size of the class itself. It's evident that the teacher himself can't be the sole interlocutor to a large number of students. I reached the conclusion, after trying to ask questions of every student in my class of 50 in a 1-1/2 hour period, that the only way in which communication of any useful duration could take place was between the students themselves, simultaneously.

How do we provide the students with a suitable opportunity to use the target language among themselves in the classroom, bearing in mind that they share a common native language? And how do we ensure that a student's speaking is free of major mistakes that would render it incomprehensible to the average native speaker? Expecting the students to converse without guidelines cannot be the answer: even in their mother tongue the majority of students cannot find a subject that will make them talk to whoever happens to be sitting next to them. How can they do this in the more difficult medium of a foreign language when they lack some of the grammatical structures and vocabulary that may be necessary to communicate their ideas? Confronted with the impossibility of communicating in the target language, most will turn to their common native language to get their point across.

If our aim is to provide the students with opportunities to communicate in the target language, we must provide motivation and a comprehensible framework for them to do this in. Activities and games are one solution. The enjoyment and the communication that come with games and activities provide the students with strong motivation, and because these games and activities are restricted in their grammatical focus, they also provide a framework for the communication to take place in. They can be used either to reinforce previously learned vocabulary and grammar or, in some cases, to introduce new material. Finally, these activities and games are designed to be used among the students themselves, so the amount of fluency practice is maximized in the classroom.

Most of the literature on this subject has been practical, but there have been some attempts to analyze how activities and games work. In her book, *Grammar Practice Activities*, Penny Ur looks at possibilities for fluency practice in activities because, as she states, "If we design our task in such a way that it has clear linguistic and non-linguistic objectives and obliges learners to engage repeatedly with the structure that is being learnt in the process of achieving them, then we have the basis for a good grammar practice activity." The way these tasks affect student motivation is also important to her as she points out in a continuation of the previous quotation. "But it is only the basis. Learners may still not do it very well if they find it boring."

She proceeds to describe eight important motivational aspects of such activities. 1) "Topic" will be a deciding factor so students' interests should always be kept in mind. 2) Something to see gives the class a "visual focus" which will keep students' attention from straying. 3) No class is composed of students with perfectly equal abilities, so the typical homogeneity of a coursebook ex-

ercise may be inappropriate for both the lower-level students and the higher-level students. “Open-endedness” gives all the students in a mixed class a chance to make the most of the activity. 4) “Information gaps”, by hiding information, give students both a reason to ask questions and an interest in the answers. 5) As long as it doesn’t demand embarrassing frankness, “Personalization”, relating the topic to the students’ own lives, is an effective motivator because it automatically gives students a stake in the activity and natural curiosity excites the partners to listen to the answers. 6) “Pleasurable tension” increases with the competitiveness of an activity. Ur points out that limits on the amount of time spent and quotas on the number of sentences the students have to make create tension in what might otherwise be an uninteresting exercise. She also mentions the “unexpected”, not knowing what is coming next, or the challenge of whether or not the student will be able to do it, as another source of pleasurable tension. 7) Other activities derive their interest from “Entertainment”. Either the material itself is amusing or the students amuse each other with their incongruous answers. Finally, 8) “Play-acting” allows students to forget their real selves and become someone else. In their new roles they learn new expressions that they would not encounter in their everyday lives.

Ur also discusses 9 learner activation techniques (how teachers get students to participate in class) in her book. Not all of these involve interaction between students, but each has its own purpose and value in class. 1) “Reception with no overt response” is how any activity which is lecture-like, one-way communication from teacher to learner is received. A new text is often presented successfully this way. 2) “Reception with minimal response”, where a small amount of feedback confirms that learners have understood the teacher’s input, can be important in teaching the distinctions between similar sounds, e. g., “15” and “50”, and is the kind of learner activation found in a game format such as “Bingo”. 3) “Teacher-student exchanges” are what usually go on when teachers talk to students and elicit individual or choral responses. The teacher remains the center of attention and can control mistakes, but, as I said earlier, students won’t have the time for fluency practice of a useful duration. 4) “Student-teacher exchanges” give students the initiative, but they are more open-ended and the typically large number of students in each class and the slow pace of questioning make this technique difficult to use. This technique could be useful, however, in a relatively small class where students come with prepared questions with which to interview the teacher. 5) “Brainstorming” gives the students “a stimulus which serves as a cue for a large number of responses”. Observing and remembering games are one type of activity which uses this technique; activities where students are given half-finished sentences to complete fall into this category as well. One advantage of this kind of activity is its open-endedness which allows for greater creativity among the different levels of students. In a class studying the second conditional, I divided the students into groups of four and gave each group a list of 10 half-completed sentences. With a completed sentence modeled on the board, this activity could be done among many small groups simultaneously. One example, “If I had 5 children . . .” elicited a simple “. . . I would be busy” and a much more complex “. . . I would have four more so that I could make a baseball team.” 6) Using a “Chain” is similar to “Brainstorming” in that it’s open-ended, but here the stimulus changes from one student to the next. Typical activities include “Telephone,” the whispered message game, and making up a story sentence by sentence, student by student. As long as stu-

dents are divided into small groups for such an activity, they can be speaking simultaneously. 7) “Fluid pair” activities give the students a rationale for repetitive questioning, using either a survey or a sheet on which students are asked to “Find someone who . . .” + whatever verbs and tenses the teacher wants to practice. Here the students find themselves repeating the same questions, but in a communicative manner. Ur intends this as an exercise in which students must move around from student to student, but pairs could remain seated as long as the content of the questionnaire dealt with only one grammatical form which was used repeatedly, e. g., asking about experiences with “When was the first time you. . . ?” 8) With “Semi-controlled small group transactions” the activities are more open-ended. One example given by Ur is called “Describe and Arrange” where one student puts Lego blocks together and then describes the arrangement so that his partner, who can’t see the combination, can put the blocks together in the same way. As Ur notes, in an open-ended situation such as this the students must have a good grasp of the grammar likely to be used. For better understanding the task should probably be rehearsed once before the students are asked to do it. 9) “Free group discussion” restricts the teacher’s participation to choosing the task and maximizes student participation. Any task based on decision-making would fall into this category. Ur gives as an example a grid with 5 different things: macaroni, water, yoghurt, curry and arsenic on one side and 5 adjectives across the top: cheap, tasty, healthy, fattening and essential to life. It is up to the group (of whatever size) to decide which thing is the cheapest, the most essential to life, etc. and rank the others behind it. In an exercise such as this the situation dictates the use of comparatives and superlatives even though the teacher never specifies the language to be used.

Ur’s book not only explains the reasoning behind games; it is an anthology of activities listed according to specific grammatical points. One of her activities that I’ve used successfully is called “Are You a Good Witness?” It practices the past progressive tense with a picture “depicting a large number of things on - a scene from a street, for example, . . . . Tell the students you are going to give them a test to see if they are good witnesses or not. They will have to look at a scene and then recall details in response to questions. . . . ‘Which way was the old woman facing-left or right?’ etc.” As it is described here, this is what Ur calls a “teacher-student exchange”, but if the students tell each other what they’ve just seen in the picture, this will become a “brainstorm” with a large amount of fluency practice. The problem of how to show such a picture to a large class can be solved by either using an overhead projector and a line drawing, or by passing out copies of a picture to each group. There is visual focus, and the topic can be made interesting depending on the picture. In a suggested variation, the students can provide more material by setting up a “living tableau” using themselves as different people doing different things which gives this open-endedness and more than a hint of play-acting. The first part of this activity could even be used to introduce to a class the past progressive so that the students would see how this tense is used naturally.

Questionnaires for pairwork between partners such as are found in the recently-begun quarterly, “Prism”, provide visual focus in the questionnaire itself, an information gap because the interviewer doesn’t know the answers, and personalization (the questions are about the students themselves). An important advantage of this format is the security this gives weaker students. The

questions have already been prepared for Student A and the answering sheets for Student B give hints on how to phrase the answers, so little time is spent in hesitation. The students use the same forms over and over again and interest is maintained through personalization, so this kind of exercise fits Ur's requirements for a good activity.

One of Ur's main themes in her book is how mix "interest" and "repetition" so that students will continue practicing a certain form until it is learned. Jill Hadfield, author of several communication game books, agrees on the value of activities as practice. Games ". . . provide, in many cases, as much concentrated practice as a traditional drill and, more importantly, they provide an opportunity for real communication, albeit within artificially defined limits, and thus constitute a bridge between the classroom and the real world."

Hadfield defines a game as "an activity with rules, a goal and an element of fun. There are two kinds of games: competitive games, in which players or teams race to be the first to reach the goal, and cooperative games, in which players or teams work together towards a common goal." Hadfield categorizes games in the following way: (1) guessing games, (2) search games where each student has a different piece of information and must obtain information from other students to complete a questionnaire, (3) matching games in which one student must find the student with the corresponding card, (4) matching-up games where players are given preferences and must come to an agreement, (5) exchanging games in which students try to make an exchange satisfactory to both sides, (6) exchanging and collecting games which are an extension of # 5, (7) combining activities in which students try to combine themselves into families, etc., (8) arranging games where the students use their information to arrange things (or people) in a specific order, (9) board and card games where interest arises mostly from competition, (10) puzzle-solving activities where students pool their information to solve a mystery, and finally (11) simulations where the students take a particular role to perform a task. The games are organized into pair, small group, and whole class activities.

All of the games in Hadfield's books come complete with copiable materials and rules, so the teacher only needs to put the materials together. Before the materials are made, the teacher should look into the question of complexity. New lexis should always be pre-taught. The teacher should consider how difficult it is to explain the rules to the students. If the explanations take longer than the game itself, it may be a waste of the students' time, but there are other ways to deal with complicated directions: explain the rules in the students' native language, or give the rules out to students in the target language to do as homework.

I'd like to describe one of Hadfield's games and show how it can be used in the classroom despite the difficulty of the rules. "Do Me a Favor" is a card game for small groups. The rules resemble those of the children's game, "Go Fish", where the first player to get rid of his cards wins. The forms being practiced are the "Can you / could you . . . ?" request form and the response, "Yes, of course." OR "Sorry, I'm busy . . ." followed by an open-ended excuse. A large number of words for household chores such as "sweep the floor", "empty the ashtray", "clear the table", and "answer the telephone" are introduced to the students, but they are practiced over and over again in the course of the game. The forms are simple and unexciting, but because of the game's competitive aspect the students are highly motivated to communicate in the target language. From the

point of view of fluency practice this is a very effective game.

On the other hand teachers don't always get what they want. Hadfield has a game called "Chit-chat" which doesn't demand enough of the students. Students are each given a sheet of people to find (a married teacher, an electrician who plays the guitar, etc.) and a card outlining one of these identities: name, age, occupation, where they live, family make-up, and hobbies. Each student must find all the people on his list. Ostensibly the students must ask various kinds of questions, but in fact the question "What do you do?" is sufficient (and was used exclusively by several students in my class) because no two people have the same job.

Both Ur's and Hadfield's games and activities provide practice on specific grammatical points so that the teacher can easily pick one and have the students practice a certain form. There are, however, many games that provide abundant fluency practice without a clear grammatical point. The old game of "Twenty Questions", a standard back-seat time-killer for me and my sister on long, boring drives, serves the language teacher's purposes admirably because it is open-ended (any yes / no question is possible) and yet not too demanding for the weaker students who always have a certain number of stock questions to choose from. There's an information gap as with any guessing game, and the competitive element (to discover who the mystery person is within 20 questions) provides pleasurable tension.

Special board games can provide many opportunities for motivated fluency practice because the speaking is perceived by the players as a necessary part the "fun" game. A modified Snakes and Ladders game board, with squares color-coded so that players must take either a question card, a command card, a spelling card, or a break if they're lucky, provides students with chances to use a special kind of vocabulary associated with games as well as whatever structures the teacher would like to incorporate in the cards. With an element of chance involved, this kind of game also encourages those students who would lose in a true match of skill.

Format alone, however, does not make a game. Once, using the Snakes and Ladders game idea, one of my peers drew a board on which they wrote questions just as they had appeared in the textbook. Rolling the dice, advancing and answering questions they'd already answered in the previous class didn't give the students a sense of pleasurable tension because 1) there was nothing unexpected, 2) there was no "chance" to avoid answering, and 3) there was no personalization: all the questions were about the characters in the textbook. Without motivation, the students only took part grudgingly.

"Bottle Roulette" is a group game taken from an excellent book called *Games For All Reasons*. The purpose of this particular game as described in the book is to "practice having conversations". A mixture of role play situations, information requests beginning with "Tell us about . . ." and some simple questions are suggested in the book, but the teacher can choose the questions and situations for any level. These should be written on cards and dropped into a bag. One player spins a long object, a bottle for example, and the person it points to must respond to the card the spinner pulls out of the bag and reads. There is no competition in this game, but there is the tension of wondering where the bottle will point to when it comes to a halt and what the question/request will be. Cards can be made very personalized and topical for almost any level. As with any game, the structures being used must be pre-taught.

“Tell The Truth” comes from one of the older game books on the market, *101 Word Games*. In its original form this is a teacher-student exchange with an entertaining aspect and the personalization that comes from guessing what’s true or false about someone in the class. By dividing the students into small groups and giving them the initiative (making it an open-ended, small group transaction), speaking opportunities within the group can be greatly increased. Instead of the teacher, a student makes three to five statements about himself OR another student. If this is too open-ended for the students, the teacher should be ready to give hints about what to say. The other players in each group must guess whether or not these statements are true. The speaker (or his subject) then tells the truth and a point is given for each correct answer. Here competition serves to enhance the intrinsic interest of a guessing game.

“The Weather Game” is a board game for small groups that comes from *The Card Book*, a book of activities based on picture cards. This particular game gives the students practice in the 2-clause simple present using “When”, and the use of the “go . . .ing” form for leisure activities versus the “play” + the name of a sport form. With a board, a die, and a clear goal, that the one who reaches finish first wins, this game has the feel of a real store-bought game, and this alone seems to provide substantial motivation for students. Because this game also requires the other players to decide whether or not a particular player is making an accurate statement, e. g., whether or not the statement “I can go fishing when there is a thunderstorm” is accurate, there is an open-ended element that provides motivation and encourages more student interaction.

To summarize, fluency practice is an essential part of learning the spoken language. Games and activities provide students with one of the best chances to dispense with their native language and communicate entirely in the target language despite the handicap of studying in large groups with their peers who share a common mother tongue. Maintaining interest is a key factor in the use of games and activities. They must be carefully chosen for and introduced to each particular group with the more imaginative classes getting the more open-ended games and the weaker classes getting the more visual and structurally straightforward ones. Activities and games will never usurp the position of pre-teaching strategies such as TPR and the Direct Method, but they provide a valuable addition to the tools of the foreign language teacher.

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