

Information Gap in Communicative Classrooms

By Xiao Qing Liao (China)

Language students should be involved in as many situations as possible where one of them has some information and another doesn't, but has to get it-in other words, situations containing an information gap between the participants. Johnson and Morrow recognized the value of information gap activities in the language classroom 20 years ago, calling the concept "one of the most fundamental in the whole area of communicative teaching" (1981:62). Other researchers agreed, including Doughty and Pica (1986) who noted that information gaps can promote real communication and facilitate language acquisition. Given the importance of information gaps in communicative teaching, this article describes how teachers can set up situations in the language classroom so that information gaps occur and students can bridge them with genuine communication.

Rationale for information gap activities

In all too many English classes, teacher pupil exchanges have little communicative value because there is no real information being exchanged. In a traditional, grammar oriented class, for example, teachers often spend a large proportion of class time asking questions for which they and the students already know the answers; thus, there is no information gap to fill. Typically, a teacher asks a "display" question (that is, a question the teacher knows the answer to), an individual student answers, the teacher evaluates or corrects the answer, and then the cycle begins again with another student and another question that everyone already knows the answer to. It's an unrealistic use of language (Talebinezahd 1999).

Here are three examples of typical display questions:

1. When presenting the new word book, the teacher holds up a book and says, "This is a book. What is it?"
2. When teaching the sentence pattern for habitual actions, the teacher asks a student, "Do you sleep every day?"
3. When demonstrating the present continuous tense, the teacher performs the activity, such as walking to the door, and while doing so says, "I am walking to the door. What am I doing now?"

In each of these examples, the teacher has devised a situation that makes the meaning clear, but the situation also makes the question inappropriate in terms of the principle of information gap because the answer is already known. These display questions serve only to elicit inauthentic language practice to: present a new word (example 1), elicit a sentence pattern (example 2), or practice a grammatical structure (example 3). They are not communicative, and they have clear

limitations in terms of how much genuine communication practice the student receives. They demonstrate usage rather than use of the target language (Widdowson 1978).

Overuse of display questions is harmful to language learning because it leads learners away from the use of language for communicative purposes. There is no communicative need for students to learn display questions because they are rarely heard in real life situations except in such special places as courtrooms and hospitals. Display questions can only demonstrate knowledge of forms and structures, while neglecting communicative functions. Function is not always the same as the form. For example, saying "Why don't you close the door?" has the form of an interrogative, but functions as an imperative, as in "Please close the door."

Display questions do not encourage improvisation or creativity. Yet, using language creatively, without previous preparation or rehearsal, is part of the normal process of communication. Outside the classroom, students without improvisational ability tend to repeat only what has been learned or memorized in the classroom. For example, a student seeing a teacher going to the library, asked him a classroom sentence: "Are you going to the library?" thus making the puzzled teacher reply: "Why ask? You see me going there."

Finally, without information gap practice and genuine communication, the appropriate use of language in different contexts is neglected. Students without this knowledge may be able to compose grammatical sentences but still not be able to use them appropriately with other people. Without information gaps, classroom activities will be mechanical and artificial (Richards, Platt, and Platt 1992).

Creating information gaps

For genuine communication to occur in the language classroom, teacher-student (and student-student) exchanges must go beyond display questions and should be based on the gap that occurs between interlocutors when one does not know in advance what the other is going to say (Prabhu 1987). Teachers must thoughtfully prepare so that oral interaction involves a transfer of information from one person to another.

Teachers should begin by using appropriate questioning and conversational strategies, particularly, by asking referential questions (that is, questions they do not know the answers to). Most display questions can be avoided by reformulating the question. Here are three examples:

Display

1. Do you sleep every day?
2. Can you walk?
3. What's the weather like today?

Referential

- When do you sleep?
Can you walk on ice?
What will the weather be like tomorrow?

If you notice, for example, that one of your students got a haircut, exploit the gap in information by asking, "When did you have your hair cut?" instead of "Have you had your hair cut?" Likewise, when teaching the word book, since the students know what a book is as an object, encourage them to use their language skills by asking something about the book, such as, "This is my book. Where is yours?" or "My book is blue. What color is yours?"

Teachers should also help their students learn basic strategies for requesting information or feedback (Stubbs 1983). Such strategies include requesting further explanation, restating ideas, and giving additional information. In order to make classroom conversation more realistic, students need to learn and practice the following kinds of expressions with the teacher and among themselves:

- You mean...? I can't understand you. Please explain.
- Please sum up what you said.
- How do you say...? Will you please repeat it?
- You believe that...? I don't agree.
- Do you agree? Why or why not? (Ward 1984)

Communicative drills

Another type of information gap activity is a communicative drill, that is, "one in which the type of response is controlled but the student provides his or her own content or information" (Richard, Platt, and Platt 1992:223). In communicative drills the teacher controls the learners' speech primarily by ensuring that they produce short utterances. Here are three suggestions:

1. *Practical situations* Students can practice requesting and providing information in situations such as asking for directions in a city and ordering meals in a restaurant. For example, after mechanically drilling the question- answer pattern "Where is...? It is...." and prepositions of location, students work in pairs, with one asking for directions to a specific location and the other giving directions according to a map:

Student 1: Excuse me, where is the bank?

Student 2: It's opposite the post office.

Student 1: Excuse me, where is the book store?

Student 2: It's next to the theater.

2. *Guessing games* Students can do guessing activities in pairs or groups. There are many variations. For example, one student chooses a famous person, and the others ask yes-no questions until the identity of the person is determined. Or, one student draws a picture of a fruit or object and turns it over on the desk; the partner guesses what the item is by asking, "Do you have a...?" until the correct answer is found. Another variation is for the teacher to provide a short, incomplete story plot for students to discuss and guess the way it ends. For example:

A man has been found dead in a phone box. There is blood. We know that he was speaking to someone on the phone just before he died because the receiver is off the hook. How did the man die?

The teacher reveals the answer to only one student; the rest of the class must guess the answer by asking that student questions about the plot that can be answered only with *yes*, *no*, or *irrelevant*.

3. *True answers* Unlike typical substitution drills, these questions are related to the student's life. For example, after modeling a sentence, such as "My father is a doctor," the teacher asks students

to construct similar sentences, in this case, truthfully stating the occupation of someone in their family. If the class is noisy, the teacher can ask: "What are you talking about?", "Why are you not listening?", or "What are you laughing at?"

Communicative activities

According to Littlewood (1981), the communicative process consists of stages, with learners starting in a structural period and progressing to a social interaction period. At the final stage, students should be able to speak the target language appropriately in specific social situations. The drills suggested above are communicative drills with limited responses. In communicative activities, however, learners have opportunities to produce sustained speech with more variation in possible responses. Here are three examples of communicative activities that provide practice speaking in a social context:

1. A *Role-play* involves the teacher giving role cards to students for pair work. In the following role-play, paired students are asked to provide sustained speech for the specific purpose of persuading each other without causing offense.

Student A: You like dancing and going to discos. Suggest to your partner that you go out this evening. Try to persuade him/her to go where you prefer.

Student B: You don't like dancing and going to discos. You prefer going to the cinema or to a concert. Try to persuade your partner to go where you prefer. (White 1982:21)

2. An *Opinion gap activity* involves identifying and articulating a personal preference, feeling, or attitude. The activity may require using factual information, formulating arguments, and justifying one's opinions. For some topics, there may be no right or wrong responses and no reason to expect the same answers or responses from different individuals or different groups. For example, the teacher divides the class into several groups that will discuss or describe a common object from different perspectives. After all groups finish, the teacher asks the groups to report to the rest of the class. Example: Describe a television set from one of the following points of view:

Group 1: prehistoric people

Group 2: modern people

Group 3: people from the future

Group 4: people from another planet

3. A *Reasoning gap activity* involves deriving some new information from given information through the process of inference or deduction and the perception of relationships or patterns. The activities necessarily involve comprehending and conveying information. Here is an ancient puzzle as an example:

A man is standing by a river with a wolf, a sheep, and some vegetables. He wants to get everything across the river, but he has a small boat that cannot carry all three things at one time. The wolf will eat the sheep if the man goes away, and the sheep will eat the vegetables if the

man goes away. Discuss how the man can get across the river without losing any of his belongings.

Conclusion

Information gap activities to give students opportunities to use English appropriately inside and outside the classroom. Unlike teacher-initiated display questions, which do not reflect real life language use, information gap activities have genuine communicative value. When structural drills are necessary, after pattern practice at the mechanical level, teachers can use the structure in communicative drills and activities that rely on referential questions and establish a communicative need in the English classroom.

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Xiao Qing Liao, currently a doctoral student in second language acquisition at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, has been an English teacher and teacher trainer in China for 18 years.