

Risk is often discussed in relation to teacher development as something teachers and students should assume rather than avoid. *'It's a good thing to take risks'*, we are told. While this is certainly true, it is just as certain that in many situations teachers need to find ways to minimise risks to increase their own and the learners' sense of

- the object of the task is unclear.
- learners are asked to stand out individually against the usual uncooperative attitude of the class.
- learners are asked to participate in a situation they feel is 'unreal'.

It isn't 'cool' to co-operate with teachers or to like school, and even students who want to learn are likely to succumb to peer pressure. They may feel exposed or threatened, so the situation can be risky for them personally. It is risky in another sense too. When students feel like this they are unlikely to learn.

In these terms, the traditional presentation-and-practice activities that abound in coursebooks can in fact be

Low-risk activities

Dick Edelstein identifies the real risk in the language classroom – the risk that the students are not learning.

security. As Earl Stevick said: *'The first task of the teacher is to provide security for the student ... in which he can take responsibility for his own learning.'*

The suggestion is that being able to avoid risks in some circumstances is a necessary condition for taking risks in others. What sort of risks might we want to avoid? Do you recognise any of the following scenarios?

- Students are not on task; they are somewhere in their own interior space, or else conversing with other students in their native language about unrelated matters.
- Students are on task, eg filling blanks in a gapped text, but to little effect, as they are uninvolved.
- Students are wondering why they should engage in an activity which they don't believe will help them learn English.
- Students are displaying an abstentionist or defiant attitude or are afraid to break solidarity with the similar postures of others.

Surely these situations (which I am sure all of us have come across at one time or another) expose the biggest risk of all, the risk that students are unmotivated, uninvolved and not learning. We need to identify the reasons and find ways of avoiding them.

Looking at the tasks we ask students to do, it seems that frequently:

- assigned tasks are either too trivial or initially too demanding.

fairly risky, even though they are commonly regarded as a 'conventional safe choice'. While such activities tend not to go awry procedurally, this does not guarantee engagement or learning, and therefore they entail the twin risks of poor yield and boredom. On the other hand, many innovative language learning activities which involve intrinsic motivation (eg games) are not particularly risky.

Many innovative activities are not particularly risky

The activities we should be looking to use are ones which keep learners on task and engaged in language interaction. They are easily managed by teachers, and they ensure that learners interact with the target language in an involved way, so as to minimise the risk of unpredictable or unwanted outcomes.

Resistance

Strangely the students themselves can often resist more 'fun' activities, because they do not perceive them as serious. Several teachers have reported that their students believe activities to be a waste of time *unless* they are boring, repetitious and narrowly focused on

Low-risk activities

problematic language points. Such feelings typically reach a peak in the run-up to final or university entrance exams. It is therefore important that teachers are sensitive to the needs of their students and keep a balanced approach. The following criteria would seem to be essential:

- involving students through procedures that require some clear, definite task to be performed.
- choosing tasks whose outcome in language interaction or skill development is evident to students.
- not asking students to invest more of themselves than they are prepared to give; as engagement builds, so can the demands made on them.
- taking account of the students' reality through choice of content, in a non-threatening way.
- constructing a classroom reality which involves games, jokes and stories.
- promoting group participation and support as well as attitudinal changes.
- taking the focus away from the language content through activities which are intrinsically motivating.

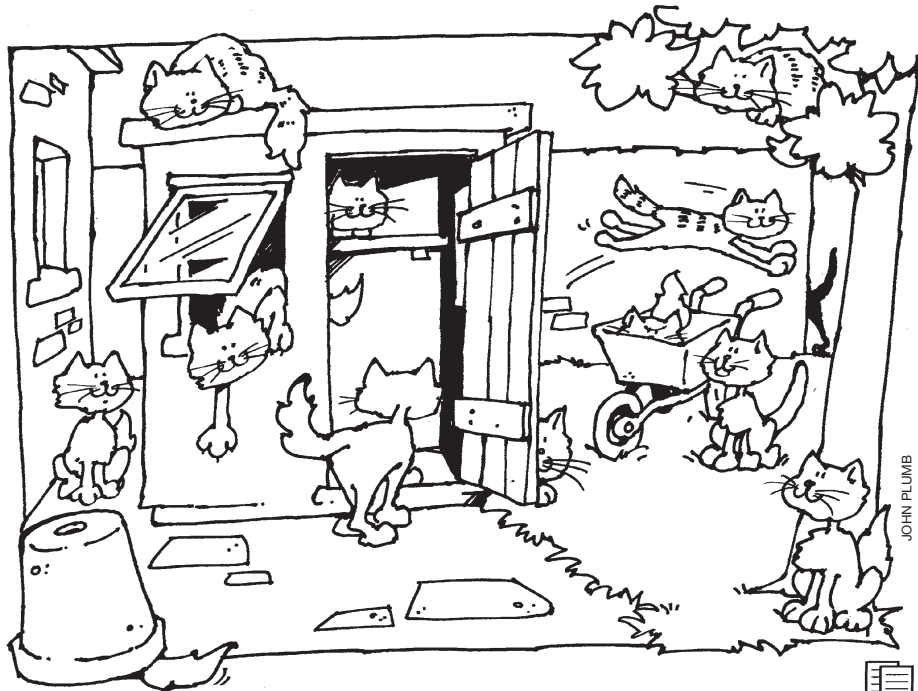
Modern resource books provide a wealth of activities that teachers can incorporate into even the most conventional classroom. Please be clear, however. I am not advocating the use of games per se. The 'fun' activities we might use to teach language to our students should be subjected to the same criteria of suitability as those we think of as 'safe'. Having said that, here are some that you might like to consider.

Kim's Picture Game

Students look at a picture for a timed 30 seconds and remember as many details as they can. In pairs, students then question one another about the picture. This can also be done competitively in groups. (You might like to try the activity with the cat picture on this page.)

It is important here that the language point is somewhat defocused because students may be at different stages of language development, and

will therefore use language which is relevant to them, rather than a specific point (eg prepositions) to suit the grammatical progression imposed by the coursebook. Even those using the 'target' language might be at different stages: some may be working to implant a new ability while others are consolidating it. Regardless, the



attention is on the game. The game provides the stimulus and motivation, and the language becomes the means of communication.

Second-word Dictation

The teacher or a student reads a short text, and learners write down only the second word of each sentence.

The procedure is low-risk in that it is not too demanding, requiring students to do little, yet giving them a reason to listen so that any student with a minimal desire to participate in class should do the task. The defocused (or 're-focused') listening task does not require learners to pay close attention to the text itself, yet they may be surprised at how much of it they take in without

the pressure of being required to concentrate and without the threatening possibility of failure. The 'dictation' can be self-corrected by students checking their answers against the text, which involves reading and possibly some thought and analysis. So a minimal and non-threatening demand on the student yields a fair degree of language interaction. An interesting text will heighten motivation and involvement, and a number of activities could be spun off from its content or language. Some teachers use this activity to practice aural discrimination of unstressed forms, which often turn up in the second position in the sentence.

Dictation Race

In this slightly more chaotic activity, one member of a pair shuttles back and forth between their partner and a text posted on a nearby wall, memorising manageable chunks to dictate from memory to the writing partner. The competitive element keeps up the pace. Although teachers often seek to avoid classroom chaos, the procedure of this activity (physical conditions permitting) helps keep learners on task as they practise a series of integrated skills.

Spot the Difference

This activity works best in small groups. Students look at two very similar pictures (see next page) for a short time

and then list all the differences they can remember.

Alternatively, students work in pairs and each has a copy of one of the pictures only. By describing their pictures to one another, they have to discover all the differences. They compare their answers with other pairs before everyone looks at both pictures together – which leads to much of the language being used again.

Spot the Lie

In this simple listening activity, the teacher tells a story incorporating several lies, inconsistencies or false details. Students try to spot them.

Working singly or in groups, learners then generate their own stories containing lies for others to identify.

The chance of slyly catching classmates out with a clever falsehood lets students display their knowledge instead of worrying about language production, and the listening task heightens involvement for the speaker as well as the listeners.

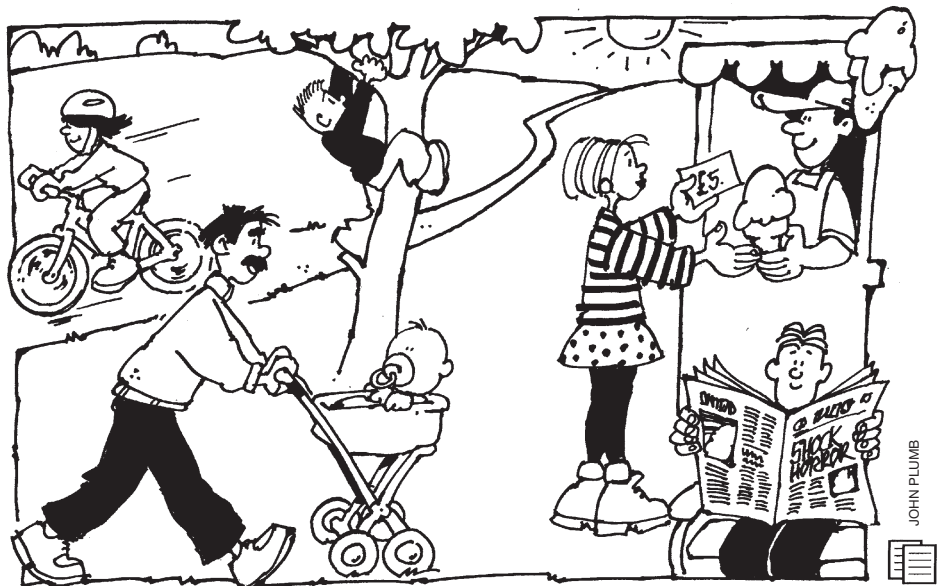
True Stories

In another simple story-telling activity, the teacher tells the class three stories, only one of which is true. Students identify the true story. Nothing could be less demanding, and yet the use of the activity is more realistic and engaging than many taped listening practice activities.

In a more ambitious variant of this activity which involves creativity and writing practice, students invent their own stories in groups and put them on the wall for the rest of the class to judge. The greater risk of creative language production is counteracted by the safety of working in a group.


The next step, if appropriate, is to ask each group to decide on which of its members will tell the stories. This allows learners to take a speaking role in front of the whole class, when they feel ready for it, with the encouragement of their group. This clearly involves greater risk, but the story-tellers are backed by the rest of the group, they are telling the group's story not their own, and the listeners are listening within the game, not to them.

When more confident students, who are accustomed to taking a leading role, eventually encourage their more reluctant classmates to speak for the



group, they are beginning to take responsibility for the learning experience of the entire class.

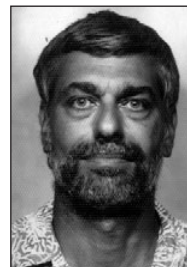
Building the degree of risk in this way allows both teacher and students to keep a degree of control and allows students' confidence to build gradually. Teachers can control the risk by choosing not to do the next step, or by choosing a less risky version of the task.

Identifying low-risk activities mainly relates to the conditions affecting engagement and motivation. These factors are crucial. If they are not taken into account, then considering further problems, such as necessary language, skills and abilities, may well be relatively pointless. 

Morgan, J and Rinvolucru, M *Once Upon A Time* CUP 1983

Stevick (1977) indirectly quoted in LaForge, P *Counseling and Culture in Second Language Acquisition* Pergamon 1983

Stevick, E Summary Statement on Counseling-Learning and Community Language *The Journal of Suggestive-Accelerative Teaching and Learning* 2 1977



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