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Jeremy Harmer's 50 Communicative Activities

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Thanks

This book wouldn't have happened if Scott Thornbury had not invited me to become part of such a lovely series. His attention to the material as it progressed, as with his contribution to our thinking about English language learning over the years, was as provoking and enjoyable as it was stimulating. I owe him a lot.

I was fortunate to move from Scott's interventions to the expert care of Karen Momber, a wonderful and challenging shepherd. I am grateful for her questions, her suggestions and above all her encouragement. Alison Sharpe edited *50 Communicative Activities* with wonderful creativity and cheerfulness. The process was a pleasure.

Thank you Jo Timerick for enabling the whole thing with such grace and for keeping it all going.

It's been real fun putting this collection together with such expert guidance from such a great team. I feel very lucky.

Acknowledgements

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

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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.

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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 *intra*personal 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 *inter*personal 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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